



BULLETIN

No. 57 (510), 28 May 2013 © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Jarosław Cwiiek-Karpowicz • Artur Gradziuk • Piotr Kościński
Roderick Parkes • Marcin Terlikowski • Beata Wojna

U.S. Extended Deterrence Weakened? Lessons Learned from the North Korean Crisis

Łukasz Kulesa

The latest escalation of tensions by North Korea raises questions about the credibility and effectiveness of extended deterrence guarantees provided by the United States to its allies. The U.S. manifested its determination to protect South Korea against an attack through political signalling and the additional deployment of forces. While it may be claimed that extended deterrence worked well during the crisis, in future contingencies Washington's allies may need to rely more on their national capabilities and focus their efforts on persuading U.S. decision-makers and the public about the merits of U.S. involvement.

Despite many unique characteristics of the situation in Northeast Asia, the U.S. reaction to North Korean provocations offers hints about the way the United States may act in similar situations in other regions, including a crisis involving its European or Middle Eastern partners. Understanding the character of the U.S. response and assessing its effectiveness can be useful for Poland and other NATO countries concerned about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees.

Crisis Escalation. The latest crisis on the Korean Peninsula started with a series of provocative actions by North Korea, including the launch of a Unha-3 rocket in December 2012 and a nuclear test on February 2013, and was followed by the adoption of two UN Security Council resolutions imposing additional sanctions on the regime. In response, Pyongyang announced it was withdrawing from the 1953 armistice, severing all contacts with South Korea, including the closure of a joint industrial zone at Kaesong, and stepping up preparations for war. Pyongyang explicitly threatened a “pre-emptive nuclear strike” not only on targets in the region but also on U.S. territory, despite doubts over its actual capabilities. Amidst the crisis, North Korea relocated its medium-range Musudan missiles (up to 4,000 km) close to their launch areas. While a Musudan missile test has not been carried out yet, between 18 and 20 May North Korea launched a number of short-range missiles and rockets.

Extended Deterrence During the Crisis. The U.S.–South Korean response to the DPRK's actions involved a set of measures. At the political level, a number of U.S. officials, including National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, Secretary of State John Kerry and Deputy Secretary of Defence Ash Carter, reassured Seoul of U.S. protection and support and issued warnings to the North. These statements were synchronised with South Korean officials' declarations expressing confidence in U.S. guarantees as well as statements pointing to the South's own defence and retaliatory potential.

At the height of the crisis, the allies also revealed that they had agreed on detailed contingency plans to counter limited-scale, armed provocations by North Korea. The lack of such planning prevented the South from a more decisive military response to the 2010 North Korean provocations (the sinking of the corvette *Cheonan* and an artillery attack on the island of Yeonpyeong). The announcement of the plan was meant to show that this time both countries were prepared for a scenario in which the North may conduct a limited attack under the cover of its nuclear arsenal.

To underline the allies' readiness to resist North Korean pressure, the U.S.–Republic of Korea exercises “Key Resolve/Foal Eagle” were conducted as planned during March and April of 2013, despite accusations from the DPRK that they would aggravate the crisis. Additionally, the U.S. decision to publicise the participation of nuclear-capable

B-52 and B-2 strategic bombers in the exercises served as a clear signal that the United States would not rule out retaliatory use of nuclear weapons. At a practical level, these flights served as a reminder that the U.S. has the means to deliver nuclear weapons stored on U.S. territory to any targets in the world (because unlike Europe, there are no U.S. forward-deployed nuclear weapons in the Korean Peninsula region).

In reaction to the possibility that North Korea may use ballistic missiles, the U.S. decided to send two additional Aegis-equipped destroyers with missile interdiction capabilities to the region, deploy a THAAD missile defence battery to Guam, and move to the Western Pacific an X-Band radar system capable of tracking missile launches. In parallel, Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel cited the North Korean threat in announcing wider changes to the U.S. Missile Defence system, aimed at strengthening the protection of U.S. territory.

Effectiveness. It is not clear whether the latest actions and rhetoric of North Korea constituted a direct danger to the security of South Korea and the United States. Kim Jong-un might have been aiming primarily at strengthening his position internally and earning leadership credentials. North Korea also wanted to be recognised as a nuclear weapons state. It may therefore be claimed that since North Korea never intended to resort to armed provocations, it was not influenced by the U.S. response.

However, taking into account the dynamics of the crisis, there was a possibility of further escalation and provocation through the use of force or medium- or long-range missile tests by the North. The U.S. actions may have persuaded Pyongyang that such an escalation cannot be controlled and that any retaliation would seriously weaken the regime. In that sense, the manifestations of extended deterrence fulfilled their main objective by contributing to the prevention of an armed confrontation.

Conclusions and Recommendations. For U.S. allies worldwide, the North Korean crisis can serve as a demonstration of the continued ability of the United States to signal its resolve to defend them during a crisis. At the same time, the United States and South Korea were taken by surprise by the North Korea's actions. This calls for more frequent consultations between the U.S. and its regional partners regarding the decision-making process, the strategy, preferred tactics, and a cost-benefit analysis of potential opponents, which in the NATO context should impact the work on contingency planning.

There was a widespread conviction in the United States that Pyongyang bears sole responsibility for the initiation of the crisis. Such clarity could be absent in some future conflicts, especially in cases in which an opponent may try to conceal its involvement (e.g., through the use of proxies or such tactics as cyberattacks) or provoke a U.S. ally into a response. The U.S. decision-makers and the public may need to be persuaded that the stakes for the country are high enough to justify military engagement.

Given the political and budgetary trends in the United States, Washington will be wary of conducting extensive shows of military force in regions less important to its core security interests, Europe included. The North Korean crisis can serve as an argument that extended deterrence can be done from a distance, without committing military assets on the ground. While the United States can rather quickly activate extended deterrence at the political and strategic assets level, it would need more time to beef up forces for protracted operations.

These considerations must be taken into account by U.S. allies, including Poland. Such allies will be expected to behave responsibly, i.e., avoid creating or unnecessarily aggravating a security crisis which may force the United States into action. In this context, the actions of Georgia (though not a formal U.S. ally) in the run-up to the August 2008 war may be recalled. Stationing U.S. forces on the ground closer to a conflict zone may not be sufficient to "activate" extended deterrence actions if the U.S. concludes that the ally's own policies or actions contributed to the crisis.

The military capabilities of the allies will become an increasingly important factor for the viability of extended deterrence. U.S. partners would need to acquire assets to add to the U.S. part of the "deterrence mix" in areas such as air and missile defence, cyberdefence, or countering limited territorial incursions. Strengthening national capabilities does not need to be seen as a no-confidence vote regarding the U.S. security guarantee, but rather as a complementary measure.

The main bone of contention in the years to come would be the extent to which U.S. allies should acquire offensive capabilities for independent retaliatory actions, for example, ballistic missiles or long-range cruise missiles. From the U.S. perspective, the interest of the allies in such cases would be confronted with the danger of upsetting regional balances of forces or causing a negative reaction by major powers such as China or Russia.