

PANEL #1

THE GROWING DANGER OF NUCLEAR WAR - POTENTIAL FLASHPOINTS:
HOW A WAR MIGHT START

Northeast Asia

by

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POLLACK: That is chilling presentation and -- and rightly so. One of the first images that Dr. Mian showed us was the border or the line of control between India and Pakistan and the proximity of the city of Karachi with 20 million people.

The equivalent of that in Korea is the Greater Seoul metropolitan area with about 25 million people or half the country's population, within, oh, I don't know, 30 kilometers or so of the demilitarized zone or the military demarcation line to use the exact name for the de facto border between North and South Korea.

While South Korea is not nuclear armed and doesn't have American nuclear weapons in it any longer, hasn't since 1992, some of the dynamics are similar. And that's what I want to talk about today.

Dr. Mian laid out this process of step-by-step but rather rapid escalation in South Asia. And I think there is a poorly understood critically changing dynamic in Korea that now involves three actors not two.

One is North Korea, the other is the United States and both have nuclear weapons. We should not kid ourselves about that and pretend that the North Koreans have merely tested five devices and probably couldn't put them on a missile and, you know, no one knows for sure.

But I think the presumption should be once you've done three, four or five tests it can be safely assumed that you can put a warhead on a missile. To the best of my knowledge, every other country that has conducted a decade-long campaign of nuclear tests has had that ability. If I'm wrong about that I would be delighted to be corrected. But I just don't think that's a safe bet.

And then of course the third actor is South Korea. And while South Korea, as I mentioned, does not have nuclear weapons, and I don't think has any plans for that; they are quickly pushing ahead with advanced conventional capabilities.

So, as I see it, this is now a triangular dynamic, and it's difficult to stay ahead of its evolution. It's moving quite rapidly. I don't even know how to trace the exact processes for escalation. I would just say that the basic factors are the ones you see on this slide.

First of all, the United States is committed to the defense of South Korea. And its military presence in South Korea, in Japan and further afield in Guam and Hawaii and the American mainland as well as at sea and in the Pacific is a guarantee that North Korea is not in a position to launch a large or full scale war in South Korea -- 1951 is not going to happen, again.

And if it does, you know, Seoul will be captured. South Korea will be overrun. Probably the South Koreans could do as much on their own today. The North Korean Army is not considered a highly mobile or logistically prepared force for extensive maneuvers.

But the basic point is America is ready to fight in Korea. The unofficial slogan of U.S. Forces Korea is "Be ready to fight tonight," meaning fight without warning, fight without reinforcement. So, they are perpetually on high alert. Nevertheless, the North Koreans have shown themselves willing, especially since 2010 to attack the South Koreans on a small-scale basis.

There have been a series of skirmishes at sea over the years but what changed in 2010 is a return to a pattern that we hadn't really seen since the 1960s in Korea, which is the small-scale use of force in a planned and deliberate fashion -- ambushes and that sort of thing against a South Korean ship that was sunk without warning, against a populated island -- a fishing village basically with a South Korean Marine Corps base next to it. The South Korean Marines were doing an artillery drill and North Koreans attacked them and killed both civilians and military.

In 2010, there was the incident with ambush -- with landmines in the summer of 2015. And there have been a variety of forms of electronic warfare; GPS jamming against commercial flights going into Incheon Airport in Seoul, a variety of cyber-attacks in South Korean banks and other businesses.

So, North Korea is continually willing to harass the South Koreans including in what we now call kinetic ways, and in other words -- with violence, with deadly violence and deadly force. It is not difficult to imagine one of these incidents escalating -- in the case of the shelling of Yeonpyeongdo, which I mentioned just now, the South Koreans did fire back promptly.

It's called counter-battery fire. If you attack an artillery base, it will shoot back -- that certainly is the South Korean practice. Now, the North Koreans didn't respond to that. But the South Koreans since then have promised to expand the scale of their responses to any future incidents.

So, we have, in principle the ground laid for escalating conflicts starting from low level harassment if one side or the other miscalculates. So, at some point, in this process of escalation you have to ask what if the United States starts reinforcing the Peninsula or what if the United States gets involved in the fight?

Well the North Koreans -- and this is what most of the speech is about, have become increasingly blunt about how they plan to contend with the threat of American invasion. They judge the American war plans to involve overrunning North Korea and doing away with it once and for all. And I think they're basically correct about that if my understanding of what I have read about those plans in the media is correct.

That in the event of war the idea is to make sure it can't happen again and there's only one way to do that -- to end the regime. So, the North Koreans have made it increasingly clear that they will not allow that to happen and that they will destroy the bases, the airports and airfields that the United States would use out of South Korea and Japan to bomb targets in North Korea and to prepare to receive prudent support for the ground war.

So, they would employ nuclear weapons using short- and medium-range missiles -- that is how they talk about it. That is what they exercise. If you haven't seen it, I would recommend going to the Nuclear Threat Initiative website, nti.org and having a look at the exceptionally interesting [report](#) that some of my colleagues at Monterey prepared concerning the pattern of North Korean missile testing.

And it is starkly apparent what the pattern is. There has been a dramatic rise in missile tests in the last few years and all of them are theater missiles as we call them, -- not ICBMs. Those have never been flight tested.

The United States argues that when North Korea conducts space launches it is developing the underlying technology for an ICBM. I think that is correct. But when you look at their missile exercises they are all theater missiles, mostly short-range and medium-range.

So, that's bad enough -- that is the traditional approach but now comes the complicating factor, which is the South Koreans are not content to rely on American guarantees of protection. They would like a more independent defense posture in the process of negotiating greater autonomy and authority in the alliance with the United States.

At the same time, the South Koreans have developed their own extensive missile arsenal and conducted flight tests and discussed what their plans are. How they would plan to independently deter North Korean aggression.

Basically, they say that they would use missiles against North Korea's leaders to deter them from using nuclear weapons against South Korea's population but also to preempt them -- to kill them before they can relay the orders to missile units in the field. So, we can try to factor that into the escalation risks.

Now, I said that most of the presentation will be about North Korean war plans as they have explained them to us. I think this goes back to the crisis of 1994 when a North Korean military representative at Pyongyang warned his American counterparts, "We're not going to attack South Korea but if you are going to attack us then we will. So, this is not going to be like the Persian Gulf War. You're not going to have the opportunity to build up your forces around us. We'll hit you."

And similar warnings would occur often in the North Korean media in a very public way. In the years after when things got tense they would remind us that they have this plan. Now, this is before they acknowledged having any nuclear military capability so they didn't use the N-word but I think it's the subtext.

When the United States invaded Iraq on the day that Baghdad fell in 2003, the North Korean foreign ministry put out this statement where they

formally endorsed a policy of deterrence but the way that they described it was interesting.

They talked about a deterrent force powerful enough to repel -- to decisively beat back an attack. So they're not talking about deterrence by attacking American cities. They're talking about deterrence by attacking American forces near them so if it fails they can actually use it and defend themselves that way.

And again they said "This is a lesson drawn from the Iraqi War," meaning the 2003 war. But I think the 1991 war was also on their minds. Now, since they left the Nonproliferation Treaty in 2003 shortly before that statement and they tested their first nuclear device in 2006 and now have tested quite a few, they've become increasingly explicit about this. So in three instances and counting they have described exercises by their strategic rocket force as rehearsals for nuclear war.

The first time was March of last year, when they tested short-range missiles, Scud missiles, multiple ones in a ballistic setting, and said we are practicing attacking ports on enemy territory where the foreign armed forces of aggression are deployed. So in other words, there is this bottleneck in space and time -- as America flows forces into South Korea to prepare for war with the North, or to reinforce itself during early stages of a war, that's when the North Koreans can act to defend themselves by destroying the key nodes, the points where those forces could come in.

So then again, in July of last year, they did it again. And they talked about ports and airfields -- through which nuclear war equipment of the U.S. imperialists are brought in. This was a couple of days after it was announced that the USS Ohio, which is a former nuclear missile submarine that has been converted to fire conventional cruise missiles, visited the Port of Busan in South Korea, and a few days later, they conducted this test and described this in these terms.

Then this March, after the start of our March exercises, they did it again using medium-range missiles and describing an attack on bases of U.S. forces in Japan. Now, this is a look at the July exercise, where you see a handful of different missiles on a roadway in North Korea being tested as the sun is coming up. And this is Kim Jong-un's command post. You'll notice the map here, these maps are the plans for the exercise, they have been in these photographs, these mini photographs for a long time, but this one was interesting because it marked the first use of the map positioned in a way that it was really legible, purposefully legible to us. It was sending us a message.

If you turn it around and look at it, you see that thick line on the left that I have got the arrow pointing to -- that is the flight of the missiles. So the launch point is in the lower left and the point it hits out at sea is in the upper right, it connects to this ark, and that ark runs all the way down to the Port of Busan and stops there. So there's a little signal there that they are rehearsing an attack on Busan to destroy the USS Ohio.

So, just as we are rehearsing for a war against them, they are rehearsing for a war against us. In the March test of this year, they did the same thing but the ark went to Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni in

Southern Japan where the F-35s were participating for the first time in the combined exercises with South Koreans.

What do the South Koreans plan to do about it? Well, the South Koreans who have had a ballistic missile force for many years have been modernizing it rather aggressively. These are their Hyunmoo-2 ballistic missiles, if you are an aficionado of ballistic missiles, you may notice that it looks a lot like Russian systems, that's probably the origin of their technology. They are working on cruise missiles and they are threatening basically to annihilate not just North Korean nuclear missiles but large sections of Pyongyang to kill Kim Jong-un in the event that they think nuclear weapons might be used.

This is their cruise missile attacking a target, notice the shape of the target, that's Kumsusan Palace in Pyongyang where Kim Jong-un shows up to honor his ancestors. So they are not being that subtle about it. And so, my time is up, I will leave you with this. What happens if during a conflict, America starts following through on its pledges to South Korea and starts flowing forces in? What happens if the North Koreans attack South Korea with conventional weapons in this event? And if threatened, they've threatened back against those threats at Kim Jong-un by threatening to attack The Blue House, the presidential mansion in Seoul. What happens if they attack the bases that the Americans are using in South Korea and Japan? What happens after this? I don't know the answers, but I'm afraid this is the set of circumstances that are being setup. Thank you.