

Heather O'Connell
East Asian International Relations
7 July 2016

What is North Korea's Nuclear Strategy? Response

This article is about various ideas concerning North Korea's possible nuclear strategies and the reasoning behind their strategies. First, the article explains that, according to Vipin Narang, there are three types of nuclear strategies: catalytic, asymmetric escalation, and assured retaliation. Apparently, many people believe that North Korea is using an asymmetric escalation strategy in peacetime and a catalytic strategy for wartime. However, the author believes that this idea is incorrect and makes no sense. Instead, the author believes that North Korea's actual strategies are more likely to be a peacetime assured retaliation strategy and wartime asymmetric escalation strategy.

Firstly, the idea that North Korea is employing an asymmetric escalation strategy in peacetime is difficult to accept because of a lack of credible evidence and the fact that it might lead to a regime change. Additionally, North Korea would be unlikely to use a wartime catalytic strategy due to its ethos of self-reliance, so being dependant upon China is probably undesirable. Instead, it is more likely that North Korea would use an asymmetric escalation in times of war because they would not have to restrain their use of nuclear weapons and would have two main incentives: "use or lose" and their inability to sustain a military campaign.

As for how the United States should react to North Korea's nuclear strategy, the author suggests contingency planning and scenario-based analyses. Although it appears that North Korea is only in the initial stages of testing for most of their weaponry, they give of time impression that they are serious about building up a true deterrent in the name of self-protection. While people like to believe all the crazy rumors that come out of North Korea, it is best to keep in mind that the information may be deliberately shaped to present a certain image and keep other countries from attacking.

What I found interesting is the connection between the location of Seoul, South Korea in relation to the North Korean border. I have wondered in the past how it is that the country is cleanly divided between North and South—wouldn't one want control of the other? But if the geographical locations are taken into account, as written in this article, then the location of Seoul means that any physical conflict at the North Korean border would likely bring harm if not destruction to Seoul (which obviously would want to be avoided). Additionally, the fact that North Korea is using that reluctance to gain time and build up their military capabilities works well in their favor.