

## “Rethinking Extended Deterrence”

By Brigadier General Kim Seung Taek, ROK

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On the night of March 26, the South Korean Navy corvette *Cheonan* on patrol operation sank off the west coast of the Korean Peninsula in the Yellow Sea. The ship was split in half, and 46 South Korean sailors ultimately lost their lives. The South Korean government immediately salvaged the sunken ship and launched an international investigation team to determine the cause of the sinking. After examining fragments collected from the wreckage, the investigation team reached the conclusion that the *Cheonan* sunk not because of an internal explosion but because of a torpedo fired by a North Korean submarine. The South Korean government declared this incident a “grave national security issue” and that it will make North Korea pay. The international community also saw this provocation as a severe violation of international law and similarly emphasized an “appropriate” response to the incident.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States are allies that signed the Mutual Defense Treaty. The primary mission of the Mutual Defense Treaty is to prevent war and maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The experience from the past sixty years shows that this security alliance has successfully served its purpose. For the U.S., it has effectively dissuaded and deterred North Korea from taking overt military actions on the Korean Peninsula by providing the ROK with “extended deterrence, including the nuclear umbrella” and displaying its overwhelming military force and political will to defend its ally from the North’s aggression. The ROK, confident in U.S. extended deterrence and security commitment to its defense, has also been assured of its security and has believed that the deterrence would hold effective. Such belief has been affirmed as the relative peace and status quo on the Korean Peninsula has lasted over the past sixty years.

However, the *Cheonan* incident revealed both the limit and vulnerability of the U.S. extended deterrence. It may have been able to prevent North Korea from launching a full scale attack on South Korea, but it has not been nearly as effective in preventing such limited local provocation as the *Cheonan* incident. Since the current extended deterrence policy can only be invoked to authorize punitive measures to be taken in response to a military offense, it is almost impossible to invoke the extended deterrence to a limited local provocation like the *Cheonan* that is a small-scale, one-time incident. It appears as if North Korea has discovered this loophole—and successfully used it to its advantage. After all, there is yet to be a case in which the United States responded forcefully to such

provocations, despite the fact that a number of similar incidences preceded the *Cheonan* that resulted in skirmishes between the South and North Korean navies near the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea.

A reevaluation of the “extended deterrence” policy is necessary. Just as America’s nuclear arsenal consisting of thousands of warheads have failed to dissuade and deter Al-Qaeda from committing acts of terrorism, so too has the extended deterrence policy of the United States been ineffectual in deterring North Korea from engaging in limited local provocations and escalating tensions on the peninsula. What is more concerning is that the probability of a full-scale war between North and South Korea may essentially be nil today, but the frequency of local provocations can be expected to surge in the coming years.

If the nature of a country’s primary security threat changes, then the means of dealing with that threat must also change. As a result, this demands a new tailored deterrence strategy that better fits the Korean Peninsula’s unique security situation and is aimed at preventing limited small scale provocations. In order to send a clear message to the North Korean leadership that any North Korean provocation would invite a corresponding countermeasures, this new extended deterrence strategy should detail a specific course of action to be taken by both South Korea and the U.S. in the case of such an incident in the future. In light of the fact that the purpose of the U.S.-ROK alliance is to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, developing a new extended deterrence is critical in the viability of the alliance since not many South Koreans will support an alliance that cannot deter North Korea’s provocations. Now is the time for the United States and South Korea to cooperatively devise this new deterrence strategy. And both sides should regard the handling of the *Cheonan* incident as a first step toward that goal.