

North Korea's Doctrine of Nuclear Preemption

—War Starting with Nuclear Weapons Rather Than Escalation to a Nuclear War

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North Korea's nuclear preemption is the doctrine that it is possible to start a war with nuclear weapons. This presents an even more threatening stance than Russia's first use, the policy of escalating to nuclear weapons before the enemy country at a time of war.

From first use to preemption

Preemption is not merely attacking first. It is the act of destroying in advance the means of attack when there are signs of an attack from the enemy country to ensure that harm to one's own country is not realized. It is a well-known concept, but examples in the real world are limited because it is not easy to make the judgment that an attack is imminent.

In a rare case, Israel in 1967 succeeded with preemption because it obtained intelligence that an attack by the Egyptian air force was imminent.¹ If North Korea also wants to make its doctrine of nuclear preemption realistic, it must be able to ascertain the movements of the U.S. military and others at the bases in areas like Japan, South Korea (the ROK, the Republic of Korea), and Guam. The reconnaissance satellites which North Korea is attempting to put into operation could contribute to that.

However, Israel's preemption was carried out with conventional weapons. Why is North Korea declaring that it will implement preemption with nuclear weapons? The hurdle to overcome for successful preemption is the judgment that an attack is imminent. That is not made easier by nuclear weapons. Presumably, North Korea's intention is to threaten to start a war with nuclear weapons rather than reliable preemption.

That doctrine is likely based on Russia's first use, and North Korea added preemption to it. Firstly, according to a document signed by President Vladimir Putin on June 2, 2020, Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of "conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy." Furthermore, Russia may respond with nuclear weapons to an "attack by adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions," even if the means of attack are not

nuclear weapons.² We can conclude that this is explicitly first use, and the doctrine formalized by North Korea two years later, on September 8, 2022, also declared first use under largely the same conditions. According to North Korea's doctrine, it will respond with nuclear weapons to "a nuclear or non-nuclear attack on the state leadership and the command organization of the state's nuclear forces" or "a fatal military attack against important strategic objects of the state."³ Yet, North Korea's doctrine is different from Russia's regarding the point that it is declaring preemption; that is, it is saying that it will use nuclear weapons if these non-nuclear attacks are imminent, even if they have not been realized yet. North Korea's doctrine states the following: North Korea will use nuclear weapons "in case an attack by nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction was launched or *drew near* is judged" (italics added).

Commencement of war using nuclear weapons

Why did North Korea not consider first use to be sufficient and instead go as far as preemption? Firstly, we should contemplate the point that when it is judged that an attack by an enemy country is imminent, the war has not yet started. If preemption is executed, it is the first attack in a war or conflict, and a nuclear preemption starts the war with nuclear weapons. In contrast, first use is a policy to use nuclear weapons first as an escalation in the context of continuing combat, so the war has already been commenced with weapons other than nuclear weapons.

Russia has adopted a strategy of achieving objectives such as securing territory by launching a military invasion with conventional weapons. For this reason, Russia has the opportunity to threaten first use of nuclear weapons in order to prevent intervention by the United States and other nations. However, North Korea's conventional forces are markedly inferior to those of the United States and the ROK, so a strategy entailing military invasion is difficult. Without war or military invasion, it is not possible to directly threaten first use. For that reason, the usefulness of first use is limited for North Korea.

On the other hand, the fact that North Korea is not conducting a war also means that it maintains the ability to threaten war. Putin is no longer able to threaten Ukraine with war since he has indeed gone to war with Ukraine. In contrast, Kim Jong Un can continue to threaten war by reserving the option to commence a war. At the end of December 2023, Kim Jong Un stated in a speech that North Korea would mobilize all means, including "nuclear weapons," to advance preparations to "subjugate the whole territory of the south."⁴ This too is a threat which is possible because North Korea has not commenced a war.

A doctrine which fully utilizes nuclear weapons to threaten to commence a war would be preemption, meaning starting war with nuclear weapons, rather than first use, which involves escalating to nuclear weapons after commencing the war. Threatening to commence a war with inferior conventional weapons is not very credible. With a preemption doctrine of commencing a war using nuclear weapons, it could create a sense of urgency on the South Korean side that Kim Jong Un might indeed take the action he stated.

Nuclear attacks on the military, threatening citizens

According to Kim Jong Un, the purpose of North Korea's military force is not only preventing war; the nuclear force also has a "second mission" in addition to "deterring war." Moreover, he said that North Korea's war "will terribly destroy the entity called the Republic of Korea and put an end to its existence." (January 15, 2024).⁵

Based on this statement, some people may conclude that the "second mission" which is not deterrence is fighting wars. However, the non-deterrence role of the military force also includes, instead of completing warfighting, coercion to convince the enemy country to submit to one's demands by using intimidation. The nature of the doctrine of nuclear preemption and North Korea's rhetoric are highly consistent with that approach.

Firstly, nuclear preemption is composed of counterforce attacks, strikes against military targets such as units and facilities. As a result, a nuclear war would begin while countervalue attacks, nuclear destruction of valuable places like cities, remained held in reserve. The option reserved is nothing more than a means of intimidation. North Korea can threaten South Korean citizens by saying that if South Korea continues the confrontation, they will be the next target.

Indeed, in April 2022, six months before the announcement of the doctrine of nuclear preemption, North Korea tried to spread the fear among civilians of South Korea that the reckless ROK military would invite a nuclear catastrophe and they would be drawn into the catastrophe. In its criticism of the South Korean military's kill-chain (preemption using conventional weapons) strategy, North Korea emphasized that this strategy would invite nuclear retribution.

The ROK army "must be crazy or silly to speak of 'preemptive attack' on the nuclear weapons state" and if it implemented such an attack North Korea would "mercilessly destroy" the South Korean army (Pak Jong Chon, secretary of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea [WPK] and former Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army).⁶ Or if the ROK military carried out a "preemptive attack" on North Korea, it would have to face "a miserable fate little short of total destruction and ruin" due to a nuclear attack, and "South Korea should not harbor such fancy as military provocation against a nuclear weapons state" (Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of the Central Committee of the WPK).⁷

Emotional rhetoric such as "mercilessly" and "miserable fate" is not required when explaining warfighting, which is the duty of professional militaries. These kinds of statements are directed at ordinary citizens rather than the South Korean military which would be the opponent when fighting a war. They give the citizens the impression that a nuclear catastrophe will occur in front of their very eyes.

Moreover, North Korea is creating the image that the nuclear catastrophe is getting closer to the citizens because of the South Korean military. Pak Jong Chon did not forget to mention that North Korea would "mercilessly destroy" not only the South Korean army but also "major targets in Seoul." Subsequently, Kim

Yo Jong said she wondered “why the South Korean people still remained a passive onlooker to the ‘government’ of Yoon Suk Yeol which continues to create a dangerous situation,” and she warned that “Seoul had not been our target” at least when Moon Jae In was in power.⁸

Counterforce attacks, which should be concentrated on destroying the military capabilities of the enemy country in the case of warfighting, play the role in coercion of threatening nuclear destruction of citizens for the next stage of the war. It is the aforementioned threats which demonstrate this, and in April 2022, the same month, Kim Jong Un made clear for the first time that his nuclear forces had a “second mission.”⁹

Conclusion

Now the threat of war has been replaced by the threat of nuclear war. The fact that North Korea is not conducting a war does not necessarily mean there will be peace; it is possible that the threat of war will continue. The doctrine necessary for this coercive strategy is preemption involving starting a war with nuclear weapons.

¹ Karl Mueller, Jasen Castillo, Forrest Morgan, Negeen Pegahi, Brian Rosen, “APPENDIX B: Israeli Preemptive and Preventive Attack Cases,” *In Striking First: Preemptive and Preventive Attack in U.S. National Security Policy*, 1st ed., 189–218. RAND Corporation, 2006. However, this does not mean that Israel was depending on satellite intelligence.

² The President of the Russian Federation, *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, Executive Order No. 355, June 2, 2020.

³ “joseonminjujuuinmingonghwagug choegoinminhoeui beoblyeong joseonminjujuuinmingonghwagug haegmulyeogjeongchaeg-e daehayeo [The law of the Supreme People’s Assembly of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea on the state policy on the nuclear forces],” *Rodong Shinmun*, September 9, 2022.

⁴ “joseonlodongdang jung-ang-wiwonhoe je8gi je9chajeon-wonhoeui hwagdaehoeui gwanhan bodo [Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th Worker’s Party of Korea Central Committee],” *Rodong Shinmun*, December 31, 2023.

⁵ “gyeong-aehaneun Kim Jong Un dongjikkeseo joseonminjujuuinmingonghwagug choegoinminhoeui je14gi je10chahoeuieseo ganglyeongjeog-in sijeong-yeonseol-eul hasiyeosdda [Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA],” *Rodong Shinmun*, January 16, 2024.

⁶ “Pak Jong Chon joseonlodongdang jung-ang-wiwonhoe biseo damhwa [Press Statement of Secretary of WPK Central Committee Pak Jong Chon],” *The Korean Central News Agency*, April 2, 2022.

⁷ “Kim Yo Jonf joseonlodongdang jung-ang-wiwonhoe bubujang damhwa [Press Statement of Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong],” *The Korean Central News Agency*, April 4, 2022.

⁸ “Kim Yo Jonf joseonlodongdang jung-ang-wiwonhoe bubujang damhwa [Press Statement of Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong],” *The Korean Central News Agency*, November 24, 2022.

⁹ “joseon-inminhyeogmyeong-gunchang-geon 90dolsgyeongchug yeolbyeongsig-eseo hasin gyeong-aehaneun Kim Jong Un dongjiui yeonseol [Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Speech at Military Parade Held in Celebration of 90th Founding Anniversary of the Korean People’s Revolutionary Army],” *The Korean Central News Agency*, April 26, 2022.

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