

Redeploying Tactical Nuclear Weapons Can Prevent Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula Crises

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Last August, following a call between President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping, President Trump said “He (Xi) told me, ‘I will never do that (invasion of Taiwan) as long as you are president.’” Then, when asked about the possibility of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan at a press conference after meeting with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on October 20, President Trump again dismissed the prospect, saying that “China does not want to do that.” He added that no one would dare to confront the United States, which possesses the world’s strongest military power. While confidence in U.S. military strength is good, such statements underestimate China’s obsession with the “One China” principle. This could be interpreted to mean that while China may not invade Taiwan during Trump’s presidency, it might do so after 2029.

In 2022, William Burns, the then-director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), revealed that “President Xi has instructed the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the Chinese military leadership to be ready by 2027 to invade Taiwan.” The year 2027 marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PLA. At the 20th Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2023, which marked the beginning of his third term, President Xi emphasized that resolving the Taiwan issue is a matter for the Chinese people and declared that he “would not give up the use of force and reserve the option to take all necessary measures against external forces and a very small number of Taiwan independence supporters.”

President Trump is confident that China will not challenge U.S. military power. But Beijing has long employed an “anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy” that leverages its geopolitical advantages within the Indo-Pacific to prevent the United States from

occupying or accessing key strategic points in the region. It has also steadily built up its military capabilities to support this.

At the Victory Day parade held in Tiananmen Square last September, China showcased supersonic anti-ship missiles, long-range cruise missiles, and hypersonic missiles. These weapons systems can directly threaten Taiwan and U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups that would be deployed to the region in a contingency, as well as U.S. bases such as Guam. President Xi needs to showcase achievements as he seeks to extend his rule indefinitely beyond his third term. For this reason alone, he has strong incentives to take military action against Taiwan.

Some argue that the likelihood of China actually invading Taiwan is low because an amphibious assault on Taiwan would not be easy and China would have to suffer massive casualties. However, from China's perspective, it does not necessarily have to launch a full-scale invasion to effectively seize Taiwan. A May 2024 study by the Brookings Institution in the United States found that the share of Taiwanese respondents who worried about a cross-strait conflict rose from 57.4% in 2021 to 64.8% in 2023—a 7.4 percentage point increase. Similarly, those who believed President Xi was more likely to use force compared to the past exceeded a majority at 57.6% (compared to 46.1% in 2021). This indicates that a growing number of Taiwanese are concerned about a Chinese invasion. China could exploit this anxiety among the Taiwanese people by striking Taiwan's key points with missiles and blockading the island, followed by large-scale psychological warfare to compel Taiwan to surrender without a direct invasion.

Whatever scenario China chooses, it will try to weaken U.S. resolve to intervene or otherwise restrict the deployment of U.S. forces to the Taiwan Strait in order to minimize the damage that could result from a military conflict with the United States. It is vital to note that in this case, North Korea could become a very useful asset and partner for China. If North Korea starts a war on the Korean Peninsula first, the forces the United States might deploy to the Taiwan Strait will inevitably be limited. Even if North Korea conducts a military provocation while a Taiwan Strait crisis is already happening, the United States will face the dilemma of having to disperse and operate its forces across two simultaneous theaters of war. It should be understood that such calculations by China are embedded behind the recent North Korea-China rapprochement. Recent examples include President Xi Jinping inviting Kim Jong Un to stand by his side and treating him with special courtesy through banquets and summit talks, as well as dispatching Chinese Premier Li Qiang to the October 10 celebration of the Korean Workers' Party 80th founding anniversary.

Even from North Korea's perspective, cooperation with China has significant value. A Taiwan Strait crisis would present Kim Jong Un with a golden opportunity to achieve "the complete territorial conquest of the Korean Peninsula" under the doctrine of "two hostile states" between North and South Korea. Even without a full-scale war, North Korea would likely attempt to maximize the use of its "nuclear shadow" by occupying parts of South

Korean territory, such as islands in the West Sea, then declaring a ceasefire and threatening to use nuclear weapons if South Korea refuses. In this case, even if not the entire territory were occupied, South Korea would be reduced to a hostage to North Korean nuclear weapons, lose all initiative in inter-Korean relations, and face an existential threat to the survival of its society.

A failure to deter or defend against war in either the Taiwan Strait or the Korean Peninsula would lead U.S. allies and partners to interpret it as the failure of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and a loss of strategic primacy vis-à-vis China. This would erode trust in Washington's security commitments, accelerating the decline of U.S. influence in the region. Authoritarian powers, including China, Russia, and North Korea, would pursue more aggressive and coercive policies throughout the Indo-Pacific. The Trump administration's ambition to "Make America Great Again" would also ring hollow.

The way to prevent this worst-case scenario is to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula and establish an Asian version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Redeploying several dozen of the tactical nuclear weapons, which were withdrawn in 1991 by the United States, would send a clear message to Pyongyang that any use of nuclear weapons would trigger immediate and devastating retaliation, guaranteeing the collapse of the Kim regime. This would not only block North Korea's "nuclear shadow" but also weaken its willingness to provoke conflict linked to a Taiwan Strait crisis.

Deploying tactical nuclear weapons in the Indo-Pacific could reduce the likelihood of a Taiwan Strait crisis by concretely reaffirming U.S. security commitments to regional allies. This is because if the North Korea–China–Russia axis pursues both conventional military cooperation and nuclear-armed alignment, redeploying tactical nuclear weapons will demonstrate U.S. willingness to strengthen its means to counter this.

Considering that the United States has no troops stationed in Taiwan and also that Japan firmly rejects the redeployment of nuclear weapons as the only country to have suffered atomic bombings, the most optimal location in East Asia to host tactical nuclear weapons is South Korea. South Korea already possesses the necessary military infrastructure, including multiple air force bases and F-35A fighter jets capable of being converted into dual-capable aircraft (DCA) to deliver B61-12 tactical nuclear bombs. It could also pursue the option of mounting low-yield nuclear warheads on South Korea's Hyunmoo ballistic missiles.

If "nuclear sharing" between the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies were achieved backed by the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula, it would also serve as valuable groundwork for establishing an "Asian NATO." An Asian NATO consisting of South Korea, the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and India would become a safeguard to deter authoritarian powers' ambitions

and aggressive actions. Only when such an environment is established can regional countries cooperate and coexist, and only then can the United States truly “become great.”

It is necessary to persuade the United States that redeploying tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula is vital not only for peace on the Korean Peninsula but also for preventing a crisis in the Taiwan Strait and for the stability of the entire Indo-Pacific region. South Korea must also actively demand firm guarantees for the U.S. extended deterrence commitment. South Korea should steadfastly maintain its posture for deterrence and defense on the Korean Peninsula, while clearly expressing its determination to expand its contribution to regional stability and secure the capability to realize it. Only when these conditions are met can both stability in the Taiwan Strait and peace on the Korean Peninsula be achieved.