

## The Significance of Forming a ROK-US Extended Deterrence Policy Committee

**Cheon Seong Whun**

*Senior Research Fellow,  
Center for North Korean Studies*

Online Series CO 10-39

The ascendancy of the traditional ROK-US alliance was on display at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in Washington, where both countries reaffirmed their commitment to dealing with the new security environment on the Korean peninsula in the wake of the Cheonan tragedy. At this meeting, the defense secretaries of both countries affirmed and signed the following 3 important documents:

- Strategic Alliance 2015, which sets out the basic framework for transferring wartime operational control to the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff in the next 5 years
- The Guidelines for ROK-US Defense Cooperation, which lays out the vision for the future of the alliance based on the Mutual Defense Treaty.
- The Strategic Planning Guidance, which provides the ROK-US Military Committee with the strategic guidance and authorization necessary for the development of operational planning

In the Joint Communiqué, Defense Secretary Gates “reaffirmed the continued US commitment to provide and strengthen extended deterrence for the ROK, using the full range of military capabilities, to include the US nuclear umbrella, conventional strike, and missile defense capabilities.” In addition, both sides agreed to work to systematize an Extended Deterrence Policy Committee for the purpose of boosting the effectiveness of

strategic deterrence. As instabilities on the Korean Peninsula deepen due to North Korea's nuclear programs and power succession, the mutual decision to create a body dedicated to more effective extended deterrence has deep significance. This paper will cover the general theory behind extended deterrence and the present condition of extended deterrence provided by the US, followed by an examination of the meaning of the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee and the future tasks for its establishment.

## 1. The Concept and Objectives of Extended Deterrence

“Deterrence” (*okji*) is a core concept at the root of national security strategy. Deterrence commonly refers to the strategy of possessing sufficient capability to respond to an attack by an enemy country, through mobilization of one's own military or a military alliance, to not only retaliate but comprehensively defeat the enemy, thus eliminating the enemy's will to attack and preventing attacks before they occur. Recently the term “*okje*” has also often been used, in the sense of “applying a finite and limited degree of pressure to force an action to cease” but this term typically carries a nuance of suppressing individual desires, feelings, etc. “Dictionary of New Korean Language” (Seoul: Samsung Publishing Co, 1992), p. 2297. Thus the term “*okje*” is not really appropriate as an expression of a nation's military strategy; in writings on international security and military strategy “deterrence” is normally translated as “*okji*” in Korean. This paper avoids cases where “*okje*” has been used as the official term and uses “*okji*” instead. The author believes that this term most faithfully communicates the intended meaning of “deterrence.”

“Extended deterrence” is a strategic concept applicable to powerful nations which possess the capability to project military force abroad and which use this capability to protect their vital national interests. To take the example of the US during the Cold War, by threatening an irrecoverable degree of retaliation against the Soviet Union in the event that it threatened or attacked US forces stationed overseas or US allies, the US was able to preemptively prevent attacks on its allies and troops stationed in allied territories this concept formed the central pillar of US security strategy for guaranteeing the safety of its allies and overseas forces. Thus the extended deterrence policy adhered to by the US is intended to protect not only domestically stationed military forces but also the forces of allied countries and US forces stationed overseas, and the territory covered by the deterrent force includes both the US itself and the territories of all its allies. Even US allies which have no US troops stationed on their territory are protected by the extended deterrence policy. Because this deterrence strategy extends over such a broad range of territory, this concept has come to be called “extended deterrence.”

Extended deterrence, which aims to use one's national military force to protect not only one's own country but one's allies as well against enemy attacks, is a central concept in the defense strategies of great powers, and it forms the backbone of military alliances and security assurances between allies. In the US case, extended deterrence can be more concretely described by the following 3 elements:

- ① Elements protected by extended deterrence: All US territory, US troops stationed overseas, and US allies
- ② Targets of extended deterrence: Any attack by an enemy country using any form of weaponry, including conventional weapons and WMDs
- ③ Measures for use in extended deterrence: All weapons in the US defense arsenal, including conventional weapons, nuclear weapons, and missile defense networks

One element of extended deterrence is the “extended nuclear deterrence” strategy. The so-called “nuclear umbrella,” a phrase we hear often in our society, is another name for this. The inclusion of nuclear weapons among the possible deterrent measures is considered a basic tenet of extended deterrence. The concept of nuclear deterrence is based on the threat of inflicting terrible damage, through the awesome destructive power of nuclear weapons, in retaliation against any country which commits an act of aggression, and thereby achieving effective deterrence. The concept had its beginnings just after WWII, but it came to take on a variety of forms with the development of nuclear weapons systems and changes in the global security structure. In short, an extended deterrence strategy which includes the possibility of nuclear retaliation is known as extended nuclear deterrence or a “nuclear umbrella.”

## 2. The US Extended Deterrence Guarantee to South Korea

The US extended deterrence guarantee is based on the ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty which was signed on October 1, 1953. The Mutual Defense Treaty itself is the political symbol as well as the legal foundation of extended deterrence. If the Mutual Defense Treaty provides the basis for extended deterrence, then the various allied military exercises which have been conducted throughout the half-century-long history of the alliance, the system of ROK-US military cooperation through the Combined Command and other bodies, the annual ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting, the various summits and agreements between the two countries, and the various documents which stipulate the terms of the security guarantees, are all parts of its

practical implementation. Thus the ROK-US alliance itself is operated by the concept of extended deterrence.

Regarding the nuclear umbrella, at the 11<sup>th</sup> SCM in 1978 both countries affirmed the US provision of a nuclear umbrella over South Korea and signed an agreement to that effect. As the Carter administration at the time was pushing for the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea, there was pressure from the Korean side to reaffirm the US security guarantee in more concrete terms. The Combined Forces Command was founded along much the same lines during a similar period of uncertainty. Subsequently, the annual SCM has concluded each year with a specific expression of the US commitment to provide its nuclear umbrella. At present the US extends its nuclear umbrella over 27 nations, including all NATO member states as well as Australia, South Korea and Japan.

After the 2nd nuclear test by North Korea, the ROK government sought a way to make the US security guarantee more reliable. This resulted in the US nuclear umbrella being explicitly mentioned for the first time in a statement at a ROK-US summit meeting. At the ROK-US summit in June 2009, for the first time in the history of the alliance, the US extended nuclear deterrent was specified in the Joint Statement, as follows: “We will maintain a robust defense posture, backed by allied capabilities which support both nations’ security interests. The continuing commitment of extended deterrence, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, reinforces this assurance.” “Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Washington, DC, June 16, 2009. The explicit mention of the nuclear umbrella in a ROK-US summit agreement was necessitated by the changes on the Korean Peninsula brought on by North Korea’s nuclear program and reflected efforts to demonstrate the sincerity US defense assurances.

### 3. The Significance of Forming a ROK-US Extended Deterrence Policy Committee

The main purpose of the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee whose formation was decreed in the Joint Communiqué is outlined in Chapter 3 of the Guidelines for ROK-US Defense Cooperation (“Combined Defense of the Republic of Korea”). The defense ministers of both countries specified 7 measures they deemed necessary to construct an effective combined defense posture with the goal of fulfilling the comprehensive strategic vision for the alliance. One of these 7 measures states: “Institutionalize an Extended Deterrence Policy Committee,

which is to serve as a cooperation mechanism to enhance the effectiveness of extended deterrence.”

Forming an Extended Deterrence Policy Committee to improve the effectiveness of extended deterrence was an inevitable step in view of the urgent security situation at present. North Korea’s nuclear capability has been physically demonstrated by two nuclear tests, and the Cheonan tragedy has highlighted the need to develop measures to respond to the new military tactics which North Korea has begun taking against the South as its asymmetrical threat has become a reality. Meanwhile the US, which is embroiled in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been promoting a policy of “strategic flexibility” to allow greater freedom of operation for its troops stationed in South Korea, and since the start of the Obama administration it has made significant changes in its nuclear deterrent policy, such as reducing the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy. The combination of the growing threat from North Korea and the new policies being advanced by the US has led many South Koreans to feel concerned about the reliability of the US security guarantee and the nuclear umbrella at a time when the general threat perception among the South Korean public is rising.

The decision made at the 42<sup>nd</sup> SCM to create an Extended Deterrence Policy Committee appears to have been made out of consideration for this developing security situation on the Korean peninsula. Of course, it is impossible to foresee how this committee will function in the future or how much heft it will have. If it merely represents a grudging US acceptance of South Korea’s demands for stronger security assurances, we cannot expect much from it in the future. However if the US has sincerely understood South Korea’s concerns and interests, this committee may become a valuable tool for improving the effectiveness and dependability of the US security guarantee.

#### 4. Future Tasks

For the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee to play a pivotal role in system built upon the ROK-US alliance, it must be faithful to the basic principle of “Improving the effectiveness and reliability of extended deterrence” put forth by the US. To this end, the most important duty of the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee will be ensuring that the US extended deterrence guarantee remains as firm as ever, even after the OPCON transfer on December 31, 2015.

In terms of conventional strategy, there are 28,500 US troops stationed in Korea at present, and the standard term of service has been extended to 3 years (accompanied by families), which

demonstrates the unchanging continuation of the US security guarantee. However, with the transfer of OPCON and the retirement of the “unity in command” system through the dissolution of the Combined Command (reputed to be the most effective command system), an essential task for the governments of both countries will be the job of making up for the strategic losses incurred by these changes. The Extended Deterrence Policy Committee will have to be able to ensure that US extended deterrence is not weakened through the OPCON transfer.

Another area which this new committee will have to prioritize is the issue of the nuclear umbrella. As the Obama administration pursued its goal of a “world free from nuclear weapons,” it announced a new Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in April 2010 and adopted a new policy which reduces the role of nuclear weapons. Inevitably, reducing the role of nuclear weapons will also cause the effectiveness and dependability of extended nuclear deterrence to decline.

Japan has long expressed concerns about the weakening of the US nuclear umbrella, and it has recommended the formation of Japan-US consultations to increase the umbrella’s reliability. Significantly, in the US as well there is the opinion that Japan’s concerns must be addressed. For instance, in 2009 the US Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis founded a Deterrence Policy Group for dealing with the various threats faced by the Japan-US alliance, including the threat of nuclear weapons. The Institute proposed the following topics for discussion: 1) US nuclear policy and scenarios of Japan-US nuclear cooperation; 2) a Japan-US joint threat assessment; 3) joint research on deterrence strategies aimed at North Korea and China; 4) joint approaches to dealing with the proliferation of nuclear weapons and missiles; 5) cooperation on sanctions aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation. Kurt Campbell, on his first visit to Japan since being appointed assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, spoke of the need for sincere discussion between the US and Japan regarding elements of the nuclear deterrent issue.

We should note that not only have the US and Japan been discussing the issue of strengthening Japan’s access to US nuclear strategy in times of emergency, but Japan-US nuclear cooperation is relatively more advanced than that of the ROK-US alliance. For example, as part of the US Pacific Command’s efforts rid rogue nations like North Korea of their nuclear weapons, it formed a WMD Defense Working Group with Japan and developed strategies and plans to be followed in the event of a WMD attack by contrast, its cooperation with South Korea thus far has amounted to creating a Counterproliferation Working Group focused on eliminating WMDs.

Therefore one of the chief tasks of the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee formed by this latest SCM will have to be devising ways of increasing the effectiveness of extended nuclear

deterrence, which may weaken as a result of the reduced role of nuclear weapons in US defense policy. First, it must build a shared threat awareness through assessments of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and future nuclear threats that may emerge in neighboring countries. After all, it is unreasonable to expect a common approach when threat awarenesses differ. The next step is to identify measures for dealing with anticipated future threats. While South Korea adheres to its non-nuclear policy it has no choice but to rely on the US nuclear umbrella, and it must have discussions with the US on detailed measures and proposals for implementing a more concrete nuclear umbrella guarantee. South Korea should demand concrete measures for backing up the US nuclear umbrella, or at least the same level of discussion on nuclear strategy in the ROK-US alliance as exists in the Japan-US alliance.