STUDY NOTES · BASIC CONCEPT

What Is Nuclear Deterrence, and Why Does It Shape Tensions on the Korean Peninsula?

International Relations

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1. Meaning of Nuclear Deterrence

Nuclear deterrence is a security strategy in which a state seeks to prevent an adversary from attacking it by maintaining the capability to inflict unacceptable damage in retaliation.

It is based on the belief that an adversary will avoid initiating conflict if the anticipated costs outweigh the potential gains.

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Key elements of nuclear deterrence

1. **Capability:** Possession of weapons and delivery systems that can threaten an adversary.
2. **Credibility:** The adversary must believe that the state could use its capabilities under certain circumstances.
3. **Communication:** The state signals its capabilities and resolve through declarations, military posture and strategic actions.
4. **Survivability:** The ability to retain retaliatory capacity even after an initial attack.

Deterrence aims to prevent war rather than necessarily win one. However, it can fail because of miscalculation, inaccurate intelligence, accidental escalation or irrational decision-making.

2. Why Is the Korean Peninsula a Flashpoint?

The Korean Peninsula has remained divided since the Second World War. The Korean War (1950–1953) ended with an armistice rather than a permanent peace treaty.

North Korea and South Korea remain separated by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), while the United States maintains a security alliance with South Korea.

The principal sources of tension include:

- North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes.

- US–South Korea joint military exercises.
- International sanctions imposed in response to North Korea's weapons programmes.
- Competing security perceptions and the absence of a permanent peace settlement.

North Korea argues that nuclear weapons protect it from external aggression. The United States and South Korea view North Korea's weapons development and missile tests as threats to regional and international security.

3. The Security Dilemma

A **security dilemma** occurs when one state's measures to improve its own security make another state feel less secure, prompting countermeasures.

This cycle can continue even when each side claims to be acting defensively. Military exercises, missile tests and threatening public statements may reinforce the opposing side's fears.

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4. Role of Military Exercises

Joint military exercises improve coordination, operational readiness and interoperability between allied armed forces.

For the United States and South Korea, they are an important part of combined defence planning. North Korea, however, often interprets these activities as preparations for an attack.

Military exercises can therefore have two simultaneous effects: they strengthen defence preparedness but may also increase tensions if communication and confidence-building mechanisms are weak.

Measures such as advance notification, military hotlines and clear communication about exercise objectives can help reduce misinterpretation.

5. Economic Sanctions and Their Limitations

Economic sanctions restrict trade, financial transactions, access to technology or dealings with designated individuals and entities.

In North Korea's case, United Nations Security Council measures and unilateral sanctions have targeted activities associated with nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development.

Potential benefit	Limitation
Restricts access to certain technologies and resources	Enforcement and evasion can weaken effectiveness
Raises the economic cost of prohibited programmes	May not change the leadership's strategic priorities
Signals international opposition to proliferation	Can complicate negotiations if diplomatic channels remain closed
Creates leverage for negotiations	Humanitarian safeguards are needed to protect civilians

Sanctions are most useful when their objectives are clear, implementation is coordinated and diplomatic pathways remain available. Their effectiveness depends on enforcement, international cooperation and the target state's willingness to negotiate.

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6. Role of the United Nations and Regional Powers

The United Nations provides a framework for collective action on nuclear non-proliferation and international peace and security.

Important actors include:

- **United States:** A key security partner of South Korea and an important participant in regional deterrence.
- **South Korea:** Seeks to deter attacks while protecting its population and maintaining regional stability.
- **North Korea:** Pursues nuclear and missile capabilities that it describes as essential to regime security.
- **China:** A major regional power with significant diplomatic and economic influence over North Korea.
- **Japan:** Faces security concerns arising from North Korean missile development and supports regional deterrence and non-proliferation efforts.

Coordination among these actors is important, although their strategic interests and policy approaches differ.

7. Measures to Reduce Tensions

Diplomatic engagement: Maintain communication channels even during periods of heightened tension.

Confidence-building measures: Establish reliable military hotlines, improve notification procedures and develop protocols to prevent accidental clashes.

Arms control and non-proliferation: Pursue verifiable agreements that limit dangerous weapons activities and reduce the risk of escalation.

Humanitarian safeguards: Ensure that sanctions do not unnecessarily obstruct essential food, medical supplies and humanitarian assistance.

Regional cooperation: Encourage dialogue involving both Korean states and relevant regional powers, with international institutions supporting negotiations.

Conclusion

Nuclear deterrence remains central to the Korean Peninsula's security environment, but it cannot by itself produce lasting peace. A sustainable approach must combine credible defence, risk reduction, effective non-proliferation measures and sustained diplomacy.

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