

Fixing the House of Dynamite – An SLBM Crisis in East Asia

By
Dr. Ju Hyung Kim

Netflix's *The House of Dynamite* dramatizes a nightmarish scenario that feels uncomfortably plausible. An unidentified ballistic missile appears mid-flight over the Pacific, while the time for decision-making is compressed and attribution is unclear. The U.S. responds by firing two ground-based interceptors (GBIs) from Alaska, but they fail. As a result, the president faces the most dangerous dilemma: whether to opt for escalation under extremely uncertain circumstances.

Although the technological details are simplified in the movie, its strategic intuition is right on point. A ballistic missile—possibly a Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) attributable to North Korea—creates a uniquely destabilizing crisis. The alert time is compressed, attribution gets ambiguous, and U.S. homeland missile defense becomes both the first and last line of defense. However, such a situation should not be a U.S. only issue especially in a West Pacific launch scenario, originating from the Sea of Japan or an adjacent maritime area. Both Japan and [South Korean](#) alliances present capabilities already in place or being actively pursued which could change the outcome.

Why SLBMs Create a Distinct Crisis?

SLBMs raise more profound challenges for interception than a land-based missile launched deep inside North Korean territory. The launch location is uncertain, early warning alerts could be delayed, while a credible trajectory may only be acquired after the boost phase. This compresses the U.S. leader's decision-making cycle and complicates attribution at precisely the moment when clarity matters most.

Japan's Role: Forward Maritime-Based Defense

Japan already fields many of the relevant capabilities to address . The Japanese Maritime SDF operates Aegis destroyers that are armed with SM-3 interceptors, including the SM-3 Block IIA variant that is co-developed with the United States. Under controlled experimental conditions, this interceptor has [verified its ability to intercept ICBM-class targets](#), indicating that its strategic relevance goes beyond regional missile defense.

More importantly, Japan is moving towards a maritime-oriented ballistic missile defense posture. The planned [Aegis System Equipped Vessels](#) (ASEVs)—built around the SPY-7 radar—are designed to provide continuous BMD coverage without diverting multi-mission destroyers. Expected to be deployed in the late 2020s, these vessels would function as constant BMD platforms.

In an SLBM launch scenario in the Sea of Japan, such vessels could be ideally poised to detect, track, and intercept an SLBM that is transiting the Northern Hemisphere. Such forward deployment expands the interception theater, creating an opportunity for an early engagement before activating the missile defense situated in the continental United States. Therefore, Japan's contribution is geometrical, not symbolic, shortening the initial time of engagement.

South Korea's Emerging Contribution

Similarly, South Korea is preparing to add the second crucial defense layer. [Seoul is proceeding with the procurement of SM-3 missiles](#), reflecting the understanding that missile defense can no longer be restricted to terminal-phase defense on the Korean Peninsula. While South Korea's existing air and missile defense system is centered on short- and medium-range threats, SM-3 introduces a new mission: sea-based midcourse interception.

South Korea's Aegis destroyers equipped with SM-3s can operate in partnership with the Japanese defense forces in a complementary manner, creating azimuth diversity in intercept geometry. Multiple engagement opportunities from different angles to complicate an opponent's countermeasures and lower the dependency on a single interception attempt. This is not mere redundancy, but resilience under uncertainty.

Another important element is [South Korea's push for a nuclear-powered submarine](#) (SSN). Although an SSN does not intercept a missile, it influences the very unstable factor in this scenario: The North Korean submarine

itself. While diesel-electric submarines rely on limited endurance and predictable operational patterns, SSNs can loiter, sprint, and conduct continuous operations across vast maritime areas. This makes it extremely difficult for North Korean submarines to reach actual launch areas undetected. In that sense, South Korea's SSN ambition represents a denial strategy that could prevent the crisis from emerging, rather than serving as mere prestige or a symbol of a blue-water navy.

A Trilateral Layered Response

Pre-crisis posture is decisive. Japan's ASEVs or Aegis destroyers should maintain BMD patrol points somewhere in the Sea of Japan, while South Korean Aegis destroyers could be operated near Korean waters in complementary sectors. Real-time information sharing through trilateral missile alert mechanisms should be a standing arrangement rather than an ad hoc measure.

At launch, forward sensors and shipborne radars could track earlier than what is portrayed in the movie—and if geometric conditions are met, Japanese naval vessels could attempt the first interception through SM-3 during early midcourse. Sequentially, South Korean destroyers could conduct a second round of engagement from different azimuths. To be sure, these attempts do not guarantee interception. Nevertheless, they reshape the problem from a terminal-phase gamble into a layered contest.

Only when these attempts fail would the engagement fall back to U.S. homeland defense; in this case, GBIs serve as the last line of defense rather than the sole response. At that juncture—when the U.S. must launch its GBIs—decision-makers would have more information, higher attribution credibility, and greater room for diplomacy to manage further escalation. The objective is not interception certainty, but the expansion of decision space under extreme uncertainty.

Policy Implications

If *The House of Dynamite* is a warning, the response should be concrete. Japan should recognize ASEVs as the backbone of regional BMD rather than as a peripheral capability. Meanwhile, South Korea should invest in the training, doctrine, and readiness required for sustained SM-3 operations. To be sure, together with the U.S., the three countries should institutionalize exercises that explicitly rehearse ICBM-class scenarios.

Although *The House of Dynamite* is a compelling drama, it is not destiny. The decisive factor is not technology itself, but alliance design, specifically whether Tokyo and Seoul are already in the fight when the crisis begins.

Dr. Ju Hyung Kim currently serves as a President at the Security Management Institute, in the South Korean National Assembly. He holds a doctoral degree in international relations from the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) in Japan, a master's degree in conflict management from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and a degree in public policy from Seoul National University's Graduate School of Public Administration (GSPA). The views of the author are his own.