

Stability and Instability in the Asia-Pacific

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There is a very energetic arms race occurring in Northeast Asia, one marked by the rapid development of ballistic and cruise missile capabilities. Looming in the background are the nuclear capabilities of countries in the region – nuclear weapons programs in China and North Korea, and significant civil nuclear programs in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

There is no reason to think that the arms race underway in Northeast Asia will be inherently stable. In particular, there is some evidence that a nuclear-armed North Korea has become more aggressive. China's neighbors, especially Japan, are also worried about China's increasingly assertive claims to maritime possessions in the East and South China Seas. Although North Korea represents the most obvious path to a conflict in the region, resolving tensions on the Korean Peninsula is vastly more difficult as long as China's role in the regional security dynamic is unsettled.

While the most direct route to reducing tensions in Northeast Asia would be to resolve the long-standing conflict on the Korean Peninsula and address maritime territorial disputes, these disagreements have proven difficult to resolve. As a result, arms control might again be a useful tool to try to manage tensions and improve stability, as regional states are rapidly modernizing their military capabilities amidst a deteriorating regional security environment.

Arms control can improve security in a number of ways. Arms control offers an escape from the classic prisoner's dilemma, particular in cases where the parties would be better off in refraining from deploying military capabilities that reduce decision time and create incentives to use military forces first. Arms control can also create mechanisms through which states reduce the tension caused by military exercises and improve transparency and predictability of new military developments. In Northeast Asia, creating a regional arms control mechanism that involves China is probably the most valuable near-term step, with a long-term hope that such structures might be extended to deal with the security challenges on the Korean Peninsula.

The Regional Dynamic

This is a region dominated by two analytically separate problems, each of which vastly complicates the other.

The first problem arises from the dramatic improvement in living standards, an improvement unleashed by economic reform that has not always been accompanied by political reform. While the first wave of economic growth occurred among societies that transitioned to political democracy – Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan – China's institutions remain authoritarian in nature. China has also invested heavily in

modernizing its military capabilities and engaged in a number of behaviors that have given rise to concerns that it is willing to use these capabilities to achieve favorable settlements regarding disputed maritime territories.

The second problem relates to the division of Korea and the continuing enmity between South and North Korea. North Korea has long been unusually willing to stage provocations, such as the 2010 sinking of the ROK ship *Cheonan* and shelling of Yongpyong-do, provocations that are increasingly difficult for democratic South Korea to ignore.

The problems complicate one another, as the United States, Japan, and South Korea seek Chinese help in restraining North Korea at the same time they must attempt to manage growing Chinese military power. Some decisions that the United States and its allies make to respond to North Korea's provocations, responses such as the deployment of missile defenses, also deeply alarm China, which believes these systems are directed at its own military capabilities.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the US-led alliance system in Northeast Asia is a system of bilateral alliances, rather than a NATO-like institution to provide for collective security. This reflects both the continuing problem of "historical" issues between South Korea and Japan, as well as the post-war limits on Japanese participation in collective defense efforts.

Northeast Asia is undergoing a period of rapid proliferation. At the moment this proliferation is largely centered on the growth of missile forces. All of the major countries are developing new ballistic and/or cruise missiles, with the exception of Japan. This competition also, however, has a nuclear character. China and North Korea possess nuclear weapons. Interest in conventional strike capabilities in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan reflects a growing worry about how to respond to conventional provocations by nuclear-armed China and North Korea. While South Korea and Taiwan ended nuclear weapons programs in the 1980s, both countries retain the technical capability to restart those programs. In recent years, there have been mainstream political voices in South Korea arguing that the country should seek the redeployment of US nuclear weapons or withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. While Japan appears to be the country least likely to acquire nuclear weapons, it also has one of the most technically advanced nuclear energy programs in the world. At the moment, however, the proliferation of missile capabilities is the most visible form of the growing animosity in the region.

North Korea's missile program is perhaps the most well known. Over the past few years, North Korea has created a series of long-range missiles based on the Soviet Scud missile, including the Nodong, Taepodong and Taepodong-2 missiles – the latter being a three-stage missile with a first stage of clustered Nodong engines. North Korea has also displayed other missiles, including the medium range Musudan missile, which appears to be based on the Soviet SS-N-6 submarine launched ballistic missile, and the KN-08 road-mobile ICBM. North Korea is also developing a submarine launched ballistic missile,

also based on the SS-N-6, and an extended range variant of the short-range Soviet SS-21 solid-fueled ballistic missile.

China is modernizing its missile capabilities, including both conventional and nuclear-armed missiles. Over the past few years, China has introduced a series of solid-fueled ballistic missiles, including new variants of the DF-21, DF-26, DF-31, and DF-31A, and is now testing the DF-41 ICBM. China has developed a large number of short-range missiles, including the DF-11, DF-15, and DF-16. China's short-range missiles appear to be armed with conventional warheads, while its medium range missiles, such as the DF-21 and DF-26, can be armed with either conventional or nuclear warheads. China has also retained its force of older liquid-fueled ballistic missiles, the DF-3, DF-4, and DF-5, and recently paraded a new variant of the DF-5 that is armed with multiple warheads.

The other Northeast Asian powers are responding to these developments with missile programs of their own.

South Korea has developed both new ballistic and cruise missiles under the name of the Hyunmoo-series. The Hyunmoo-2 is a 300 km range ballistic missile. The Hyunmoo-3 series of cruise missiles have ranges up to a reported 1,500 km, although the real range remains unknown. South Korea also won US agreement to relax missile guidelines that had limited the development of long-range ballistic missiles. South Korea is expected to test an 800 km-range ballistic missile by 2017. The total number of South Korean missile launchers is believed to exceed 60.

Taiwan, too, has developed a new 600 km-range cruise missile, Hsiung Feng IIE (HF-2E). Although this missile is rarely discussed, Taiwan has deployed at least three launch brigades since 2010. There have been press reports suggesting that Taiwan is developing a follow-on cruise missile, known as Yun Feng or Cloud Peak, with a range of 1200 km.

Japan alone appears to have remained outside the race for offensive strike capabilities. Yet the debate continues in Japan, with periodic reports that the Abe government will seek such a purchase. In 2009, Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) completed a position paper that said Tokyo should acquire cruise missiles and long-range, solid-fueled ballistic missiles to deal with the threat of missile launches from North Korea. The LDP lost that election, but the Abe government has now resumed discussions with the United States about the possibility of acquiring offensive capabilities to respond to the missile threat from North Korea – although those discussions have not reached the hardware stage.

Finally, the United States is modernizing its strategic forces. Not only is the United States in various stages of replacing each leg of the triad of nuclear weapon delivery systems, as well as its fleet of dual-capable aircraft, it also has a number of other programs under development to modernize command-and-control capabilities and develop conventional strike systems and missile defenses.

Challenge for Strategic Stability

These modernization programs, which are being undertaken for many reasons, including technological imperatives and bureaucratic prerogative, pose two challenges for strategic stability.

From the perspective of the United States and its allies, the greatest challenge is that a nuclear-armed China or North Korea will be emboldened to use its nuclear weapons to change the status quo. China and North Korea, of course, view the situation differently. To differing degrees, both countries remain worried about the ability of their political systems to endure. Although there are important differences – the Chinese are quite critical of the North Korean refusal to follow China’s path of partial reform – both countries see US alliances as offensive in character.

Despite the similarities, the two scenarios offer distinct pathways to catastrophe. In North Korea, the fundamental danger is that North Korea will push South Korea too far. North Korea has shown a distressing willingness to conduct what Narushige Michishita has called “military diplomatic campaigns” – limited uses of force in search of idiosyncratic diplomatic gains. These uses of force, such as the sinking of the *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeongpyong-do, have resulted in South Korea developing new ballistic and cruise missile capabilities for the purpose of being able to target the North Korean leadership.

The possibility that a nuclear-armed adversary might be emboldened to conduct limited conventional military campaigns is an old idea in the literature on deterrence and stability. But where Glenn Snyder saw a paradox involving stability and instability, I would argue that North Korea, Pakistan, and other states are choosing to spend the security gains from nuclear weapons on a more aggressive military-diplomatic posture. India and South Korea, in response, have emphasized doctrines in which advanced conventional capabilities might be used to target their adversary’s nuclear capabilities, with decapitation offering the most promising counterforce strategy. If South Korea has little hope of being able to neutralize North Korea’s many artillery and missile capabilities, it might be able to decapitate the relatively small North Korean leadership.

To underscore that point, South Korea has released videos of its cruise missile hitting a target shaped like North Korea’s Kumsusan Palace and, to drive the point home, noting that it is accurate enough to be seen flying through Kim Jong Un’s office window. The North Koreans have been extraordinarily alarmed by such talk, both out of apparent fear of the capabilities deployed by South Korea and pique at the direct talk of assassination. North Korea has responded to such South Korean displays with its own hints that it too could target South Korea’s leadership. Western observers are sometimes deaf to the trading of assassination threats, apparently unaware of the multiple attempts by North Korea to assassinate Park Chung Hee during the 1970s.

The situation with China is a variant of this, although China's nuclear capabilities are vastly more sophisticated and its behavior somewhat less provocative. Unlike North Korea, the United States views China as it does Russia. Although some Japanese observers have expressed concern that the United States should not recognize "mutual vulnerability" – a highly prejudicial term – the United States has offered a number of assurances to China that emphasize the shared interest in strategic stability, and indicated that the United States does not seek to negate China's deterrent.

Despite these assurances, Chinese leaders continue to express concern that the United States might use nuclear weapons against China. For their part, Japanese and Taiwanese observers are concerned that China's growing military might is manifesting itself in a more bellicose posture toward disputed maritime territories.

One might expect stable deterrence to be easier to achieve with China, but there are a series of problems that remain unresolved. First, the United States and China are both modernizing their strategic forces. Although their respective modernization programs are largely driven by technical factors, they are justified in terms of one another, resulting in a sort of slow-motion arms race. Many of these systems, including multiple warheads, antisatellite weapons, long-range conventional strikes systems, and missile defenses create incentives to escalate conflicts. The deployment of these systems is beginning to produce what John Steinbruner called "operational entanglement," where the alert postures and types of capabilities drastically reduce the decision time available to leaders and yield perverse incentives.

This is complicated by how Chinese and Americans think about alert postures. Chinese leaders are increasingly focused on the use of alert rates to signal to the United States, discussing the value of placing some forces on alert at all times and raising the alert status of others. Moreover, China's heavy reliance on conventionally armed offensive missiles raises challenges of distinguishing nuclear and conventional forces, particularly regarding DF-21 and DF-26 missiles, which can be deployed in either nuclear or conventional variants. Some Chinese experts believe that if China were to raise the alert status of its rocket forces in a crisis, the United States would stand down from what Chinese experts call "nuclear blackmail." But American analysts are far more likely to interpret an alert, at best, as a form of coercion and, at worst, as evidence that China is preparing to use nuclear weapons early in a conflict.

Reviving Arms Control

The issues at stake are, in principle, resolvable. North Korea is a serial abuser of human rights; China disputes the sovereignty of a number of maritime islands. These are foreign policy challenges, but they are not the sort of thing that ought to result in a nuclear war. The status of Taiwan alone remains a major flashpoint, but the Chinese reaction to the democracy protests in Hong Kong suggests that China can act cautiously when it comes to issues relating to Chinese sovereignty. Simply put, it would be a terrible mistake for

policymakers in the United States and Asia to let any of these issues escalate into a major war.

Having said that, policymakers are human. They are prone to error and these issues are intractable in part because they touch on deeper issues of the legitimacy of governments in Beijing and Pyongyang. The stakes in a particular crisis may loom unusually large if leaders in Beijing or Pyongyang worry that backing down will result in either their personal loss of position or the collapse of their government.

The United States and China must find a way to establish a dialogue on strategic stability that is commensurate with the danger posed by the growing operational entanglement of their respective strategic forces. The current dialogue is far too limited to address the challenges that are emerging, particularly with the increasing dependence on space and the development of antisatellite weapons. The United States and China have no experience with bilateral arms control. And the US-Russian bilateral arms control process has never been able to move beyond the narrow area of reductions to deal with issues like the development of antisatellite weapons. I have, in other contexts, proposed measures short of arms control which might help strengthen the bilateral US-China dialogue. In particular, I have long advocated that the two countries seek to develop a joint statement on strategic stability in which the United States states that it does not seek to negate China's nuclear deterrent and China states that it does not seek to undermine US security commitments in the region. Although such an agreement would require the two parties to agree to disagree on a number of vital issues such as missile defense and conventional strike, it would at least open the possibility of discussing the impact of these developments. Over the long run, however, formal arms control will be essential. One of the most important lessons of China's participation in the negotiations for the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty is that a formal arms control negotiation forced the creation of an interagency process within China which surfaced disagreements and allowed the Chinese leadership to resolve them. US officials have argued that efforts to assure China seem to fall on deaf ears. I would argue that this results from the fact that, absent a formal negotiation, there is no interagency process to process and act upon the result of meetings.

A second approach is to attempt regional arms control. The natural analogue in this case is not the bilateral US-Soviet arms control process, but the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe/Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE/OSCE) process that grew out of the Helsinki Final Document. That process, including the development of confidence and security building measures, offers a number of potentially useful precedents. In particular, the parties in Asia might benefit from increased transparency on military deployments, particular in this period where countries are deploying large numbers of new offensive missiles.

Improving stability with China would help address the North Korean situation. But Americans are far too willing to believe that China has some sort of magic wand that could resolve the issues on the Korean peninsula. In the past, some in the United States have believed that North Korea might be willing to bargain away nuclear or missile

programs in exchange for an end to its isolation. While those people may have been right, the past decade of strategic neglect has allowed North Korea to vastly expand its nuclear and space programs. North Korea has not only developed capabilities that would need to be verifiably eliminated, but it has placed them at the center of its propaganda about the legitimacy and vitality of the Kim's *Juche*-inspired regime. The task for arms control on the Korean peninsula is much harder now that North Korea is being asked to abandon real capabilities instead of to forgo future ones.

That said, there is an enormous value to attempting to negotiate moratoria on the testing of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. Like China in the 1950s, North Korea is seeking to develop thermonuclear weapons that can be deployed with intercontinental-range ballistic missiles. Like China in the 1950s, we may view such ambitions as absurd – but the North Koreans do not. In fact, it is the juxtaposition of these capabilities with our view of them which has motivated North Korea to demonstrate its technical capabilities. While it will likely remain a tenet of US policy toward North Korea that we do not recognize them as a nuclear power, the reality is that the United States has a growing interest in constraining North Korea's programs even short of totally eliminating them.

These proposals would not be politically easy to implement in the United States. Moreover, if handled carelessly, they could alarm US allies, who will naturally worry that the United States is acquiescing to the geopolitical demands of China and North Korea. Managing the challenges posed by those two countries will require a significant investment with allies who, as I noted at the beginning of this essay, are developing their own capabilities that might undermine stability of the region. A major policy choice is likely to be whether and when to accede to what may be growing demands from South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan for longer-range offensive missiles. In this, there may be echoes of NATO's double-track decision in the 1970s to pursue both the modernization of select theater capabilities and the negotiation of an arms control agreement with the Soviet Union.

All of this depends on a single evolution in policy within the United States. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a declining willingness on the part of the United States to engage in formal arms control arrangements. This reflects both hubris on the part of the American intellectual community and a pragmatic concession to the domestic politics of the United States. While we can imagine a number of interim steps to help manage these problems that do not require formal arms control treaties, ultimately the United States must be able to agree to legally binding agreements.