Nuclear Order in Northeast Asia: The Role of Nuclear Weapons in the Region, Nonproliferation, and the Tension between Disarmament and Deterrence

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History Matters

Policymakers and scholars in the fields of security studies and international relations often neglect historical lessons, draw the wrong historical inferences, or select the wrong historical cases in their efforts to understand current policy issues. In contrast, historians are prone to argue history explains everything, but that approach is not useful for policy. Path dependence is undeniable, and the history of the nuclear age has had a tremendous impact on nuclear doctrine. However, the historical lessons are not universal, and nuclear policy varies widely across the region. The task for scholars and policymakers is to understand the relevant historical lessons along with other variables that impact the regional nuclear landscape.

Northeast Asia is the only place where nuclear weapons have been used in conflict. Chemical and biological weapons were also used in the region, and memories of imperial aggression and colonialism—although fading—still affect Northeast Asian political leaders today. However, the U.S. atomic bombings of Japan left dissimilar psychological effects. The horror of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki led to the development of
a “nuclear allergy” in Japan, but at that time, many believed the bombings demonstrated the utility of nuclear weapons in achieving political objectives. After the indiscriminate aerial bombings of civilian targets by both the allied and axis powers in World War II, many had expected a low threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. Superpower military planners believed they could be introduced into the battlefield like any other weapon—except that nuclear weapons could reduce or eliminate the need for protracted wars.

The international and regional security environment changed when the U.S. nuclear monopoly was broken in 1949. That year also ushered in a dramatic structural shift when the Chinese Communist Party defeated the Kuomintang in the civil war and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland. As the PRC aligned with the Soviet Union, Northeast Asia became deeply enmeshed in the emerging Cold War. Korea and the Taiwan Strait were on the fault line of the Cold War in Northeast Asia, and the Korean and Taiwan issues have yet to be resolved.

The literature on nuclear weapons, deterrence, arms control and disarmament focuses extensively on the U.S.-USSR rivalry during the Cold War, but the world has changed significantly. The political, economic, and technological changes at the global, regional and domestic levels have introduced new challenges and opportunities that were not part of the bipolar Cold War structure. Is the literature on the superpower nuclear rivalry still relevant now? Is it relevant for Northeast Asia? If so, how? Are the relevant nuclear lessons from the Cold War universal? Or do different powers and nuclear aspirants have different interpretations? Will those interpretations change over time? Can we predict how or why?

Nuclear weapons have been part of the Northeast Asian security environment since 1945. The U.S. implicitly and explicitly threatened to use nuclear weapons to end the war in Korea, which motivated the PRC to pursue its own nuclear deterrent. The U.S. deployed nuclear weapons to the region during the Cold War as part of its global security strategy and to
deter the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea). Despite several close calls, the region has remained relatively stable; no war has broken out since the Korean War Armistice was signed in July 1953.

Have nuclear weapons been the source of this stability? Or has something else stopped us from going over the brink? Scholars and policymakers have divergent views on nuclear weapons and their effects on strategic behavior. Under conditions of strategic balance and credible second strike capabilities, nuclear weapons only appear to be useful when they are not used. Some believe nuclear weapons induce caution, but others believe we cannot rely on the rationality of those who command and control nuclear arsenals.

The U.S. and Japan particularly were concerned when China joined the nuclear club in 1964, and after a serious internal debate Japan decided against the nuclear option. However, Japan has a large nuclear power industry and full fuel cycle capabilities. The Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) had an active nuclear weapons program in the early 1970s, but abandoned that program under extreme U.S. pressure. The Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan) also pursued a nuclear weapons option following the PRC’s nuclearization, but the ROC program was abandoned under U.S. pressure in the 1970s as well.

U.S. extended deterrence has kept Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan non-nuclear, but North Korea appears to have achieved a nuclear breakout that will be very difficult to reverse and will have serious implications for regional security, nonproliferation, deterrence and disarmament. In 1961, the DPRK signed treaties of “friendship and mutual cooperation” with the PRC and the Soviet Union. Those treaties included security clauses providing for the signatories to assist the other in case of a military attack by a third party. The treaty with the Soviet Union has lapsed, but the DPRK-PRC treaty has been renewed and the security clause is still in effect, although many question its credibility, particularly if the DPRK were to start a military conflict. Nevertheless, the treaties and their security assurances could not
dissuade North Korea from developing nuclear weapons.

Should we be worried about nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia? Do leaders and military strategists in Northeast Asia believe nuclear weapons have uses or utility other than deterrence? Can they be used for coercive bargaining? What do leaders in Northeast Asia think about nuclear capabilities and their impact on conventional posture and doctrine? Can we estimate or make generalizations about regional leaders and risk, and how nuclear weapons might change their calculations? Are they risk averse? Risk neutral? Or risk accepting?

**The Security, Political and Economic Environments in Northeast Asia**

**History and Institutional Landscape:** Northeast Asia has a historical legacy of violent conflict, colonialism, decolonization, intense ideological rivalries, revolution, great power rivalry, and mutual suspicion. Analysts in the tradition of the realist school believe this legacy of acute security dilemma dynamics and mistrust will spoil the development of regional cooperative or collective security institutions, especially in the realm of nuclear security. The San Francisco Treaty system of U.S. bilateral alliances in East Asia is quite dissimilar to the collective security arrangement constructed in Europe after World War II, but the insecurity and mistrust in Northeast Asia during the last century is not incomparable to the western European experience prior to 1945. During the period of the two world wars, probably no one could have imagined the security cooperation and economic integration we see in Europe today. We could be pleasantly surprised in Northeast Asia as well.

Institutional development started much later in East Asia, and compared to Europe and the West, institutional initiatives initially were driven by smaller states in Southeast Asia. This contradicts the realist view that institutions are created by the great powers and serve great power interests. The regional institutional environment is still developing and the future
remains uncertain. Economic issues are creating strong incentives for regional actors to cooperate and create regional institutions in order to reduce transactions costs. Greater progress has been made in the economic realm, but whether similar results will follow in the political or security dimensions remains to be seen.

The rise of new institutions has coincided with the rise of China, which already has influenced institutional design and effectiveness. About two decades ago the PRC reversed its distrust of international institutions and has joined them in earnest. Beijing realized membership increased the credibility of China’s expressed commitment to a “peaceful rise.” Regional actors and the West welcomed this development in the belief that institutions constrain powerful states and reduce uncertainty and mistrust.

Beijing’s strategy was very successful, but recently has been undermined by Chinese posture and statements on: the South China Sea; U.S.-ROK combined military exercises in the Yellow Sea (West Sea) after the Ch’ŏnan sinking in March 2010 and the artillery attack against Yŏnp’yŏng Island in November 2010; and the recent spat with Japan over the Diaoyu Islands (釣魚台群島) or Senkaku Islands (尖閣諸島). Currently, there is an internal debate in China on China’s appropriate role in a changing global environment. Some believe U.S. power is in irreversible decline and that China should challenge the U.S. in East Asia. However, many Chinese realize that Beijing’s recent actions have been perceived as hostile or belligerent abroad and ultimately can damage China’s interests. While Beijing will adjust its approach, we should not expect China to remain passive on foreign policy issues. China will continue to pursue its national interests abroad with greater confidence and assertiveness as China becomes more powerful.

The constructivist school in international relations argues that socialization affects the identities and interests of agents, but outcomes are indeterminate. Greater social interaction or “dynamic density” can accelerate the construction of common identities and reveal common
interests. But socialization can also expose divergent interests and enmity and conflict can result. The constructivist school is agnostic about the final result, but social interaction is a necessary condition for the establishment of a community with shared identities and common interests. Northeast Asia has a long way to go, but the institutional foundation arguably is being built for the eventual establishment of a regional community.

**Geography:** U.S. and Soviet interests were global and their allies or client states confronted each other in several regions. However, the superpowers did not share significant borders, and they are geographically large countries. In Northeast Asia, geographic proximity can exacerbate crises, especially when nuclear weapons are involved. Confidence-building, transparency, and the establishment of crisis management mechanisms could be critical in avoiding violent conflict. While China and Russia have huge land masses, Japan, the Koreas, and Taiwan do not have the strategic depth to withstand even limited nuclear attacks. This could exacerbate a crisis on the Korean peninsula, for example, if ROK leaders felt they had to use extensive force in a quick preemptive strike to eliminate the possibility of DPRK nuclear retaliation.

**Power Asymmetries:** Northeast Asia is also characterized by significant power asymmetries. The region has both nuclear powers and non-nuclear powers, and significant differences in conventional military capabilities as well as other general elements of national power. North Korea once again is the outlier. Although the DPRK allocates an extraordinary proportion of national resources to the military, the country continues to fall behind in the conventional realm. Most of the military hardware is 1950s or 1960s vintage, and the country is having difficulty feeding its one-million-man conscript army. The North Korean military leadership recognizes this conventional weakness, but the country does not have the economic or technical resources to modernize its military, so Pyongyang emphasizes the development of asymmetric capabilities, including nuclear weapons.
Domestic Politics: The region varies in terms of domestic politics as well. Japan is a democracy based on a cabinet system of government, and the ROK is a democracy with a strong presidential system. The ROC is a democratic presidential system, but the PRC and DPRK are one-party states. All countries in the region except the DPRK have outward oriented economies. North Korea is an authoritarian and “personalistic” system based on the Kim family dynasty. The country has only known two leaders and the country is now in the process of transferring power to Kim Jong-ŭn, the third son of Kim Jong-il.

The succession process was formalized during the Korean Workers Party (KWP) Third Party Conference in September 2010, the first major party meeting since the KWP Party Congress in 1980. However, plans and institutional arrangements for succession were underway in 2009, shortly after Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke in August 2008. North Korea, apparently as part of succession plans, tried to reassert state control over the informal economy with its currency reform that was announced on 30 November 2009. Over the last year, the DPRK government has tightened restrictions on market activities and has been reversing even very modest economic reforms that were implemented in July 2002. This effort to revive the economy by turning more towards orthodox central planning was designed to give the ruling elite greater control over resources and thus greater control of political supporters as well as opponents.

Domestic political orientation can also help explain why some countries have renounced nuclear weapons or abandoned weapons programs. Etel Solingen argues that liberal democracies with outward economic orientations are much less likely to pursue nuclear weapons than inward-looking authoritarian regimes. Japan, the ROK, and Taiwan economies would be vulnerable to international sanctions in the case of nuclear breakout, and furthermore, they are dependent upon uranium imports for nuclear fuel. It’s difficult to imagine the citizens of these developed economies being willing to forgo the electricity provided by their nuclear power reactors.
**Threat Perceptions:** Sources and degrees of insecurity also vary greatly in the region. The most acute problems are associated with the zero-sum national division issues of China and Taiwan, and the two Koreas. While the U.S. and its alliance partners view the U.S. military presence and extended deterrence as public goods for the region, China is ambivalent and North Korea is vehemently opposed to the U.S. presence. China is most suspicious of U.S. intentions regarding Taiwan and fears U.S. support could lead to Taiwan’s independence. On the other hand, most Chinese recognize the constraining effect the U.S.-Japan alliance has on Tokyo, but Beijing believes the overall security architecture is suboptimal.

As China continues its rise, Beijing likely will continue to probe and challenge the U.S. and its allies in the region. China’s recent words and actions regarding the South China Sea, the Diaoyu Islands, and U.S.-ROK combined military exercises are prime examples. Although China would prefer to see a regional security arrangement under Beijing’s influence or control, the withdrawal of the U.S. from the region and movement towards such an arrangement could trigger a regional arms race contrary to China’s interest.

North Korea consistently has demanded the withdrawal of the U.S. from the region, but Pyongyang never has suggested it would support or participate in any regional collective security institution even though the vague concept is one of the commitments in the Six-Party Talks. Pyongyang generally views the world as hostile and is suspicious of multilateralism, particularly as a provider of national security. North Korea’s increasing reliance upon asymmetric threats such as weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles is perceived to be the greatest regional threat by Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

North Korea’s economic autarchy based on *chuch’ě* (主体) makes it difficult to modernize the economy and society, but it also makes it difficult or impossible to modernize the military even though Pyongyang has adopted a “military first (先軍)” doctrine. Greater reliance upon WMD has resulted
in international sanctions, which has affected the ability of the regime to earn foreign exchange and consequently has increased incentives for Pyongyang to engage in illicit activities including WMD proliferation.  

The U.S. and international community consider the DPRK’s nuclear proliferation activities the most serious security threat emanating from the region. In the early years of North Korea’s nuclear development, Pyongyang was a recipient of materials, components, and technology, but in more recent years North Korea has emerged as a supplier as well. Nonproliferation and counter-proliferation actions require multilateral cooperation to succeed, and in the DPRK case, China’s commitment to active participation is critical. However, China’s perception of the proliferation threat diverges from that of Japan, the ROK, and the U.S.

**Ideology and “Strategic Culture or Military Culture”:** The DPRK is the outlier here once again as it adheres to an ideology of sŏn’gun or “military first.” Sŏn’gun was developed in the mid-1990s following the collapse of Marxism-Leninism in the former Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. Sŏn’gun places the soldier before the worker, but it retains the Leninist view of the international system, describing it as exploitive and unjust. An assumption is that the major capitalist power, now the United States, must be exploitive as it cannot control the greed to expand and earn profits abroad. Other countries and their citizens are doomed to become “slaves of the imperialists” unless the nation and people have strong military power to resist. In this sense, it is very “realist” in orientation, but according to sŏn’gun, the military and the people need a strong leader to maintain unity and survive.

This distorted lens is dangerous because of the concentration of power in one person and the disproportionate influence of the military. Military leaders are more prone to turn to force as a solution to problems since it is what they are most familiar with and most adept at implementing. The leader must establish his credentials to be recognized as a great commander, so this raises the likelihood of military adventurism. This
is particularly the case if Pyongyang feels it has a military advantage, the U.S.-ROK alliance is fragile or not credible (the U.S. is distracted or disengaged), and when the DPRK is experiencing leadership transition. That was the case in the 1960s and early 1970s when the DPRK had a conventional military advantage over the ROK, the U.S. was preoccupied with Vietnam, and Kim Il-sung was starting to pave the way for a transfer of power to Kim Jong-il. History could be repeating itself now as the North Korean leadership could believe it has acquired military superiority with its WMD arsenal, the U.S. has been stretched thin in Iraq and Afghanistan, and succession to the next generation is underway in the DPRK.

Brian Myers argues that North Korea is organized around an extreme racist ideology that extols the genetic purity of the Korean people, who must be protected by a “maternal” Great Leader from global decadence. In The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters, Myers never answers this question as it applies to international relations. While Myers’ thesis is another perspective on the mythmaking surrounding the Kim family cult, there is no evidence to suggest that North Korean racist views are similar to those of Nazi Germany or imperial Japan whereby the nation-state had to expand in a system of geo-political Darwinism. On the contrary, North Korea prefers to be left alone and “clean” except on the issue of national unification. However, the national ideology sometimes shows signs of satisficing and settling for a “clean” half of the Korean peninsula based on Koryŏ traditions rather than be contaminated by the “globalized” or “bastardized” south.

While North Korea could try to use its small nuclear arsenal for blackmail or coercive diplomacy, carrying out the threat to use its nuclear weapons unless its demands are met is not credible under conditions of robust extended deterrence by the U.S. The DPRK nuclear arsenal has little use except for deterrence, but unauthorized or accidental use, or a nuclear accident cannot be ruled out.
Outstanding Issues: Korea and Taiwan present extraordinary challenges, and their disposition can cut both ways. A peaceful resolution satisfactory to all parties would be very positive in achieving the goals outlined in this project; or they could escalate with very bad consequences. In the interim, the best we can hope for is smart management to avoid bad outcomes. Transparency and communication regarding preferences over outcomes is important. Respect for differences is critical and the commitment to seek peaceful resolution of differences must be clear. Growing regional economic integration and the cost of conflict create strong incentives to cooperate, but it cannot happen on its own.

Nonproliferation, and the Tension between Disarmament and Deterrence

The paradox in Northeast Asia is that extended deterrence has both positive and negative effects on nonproliferation. U.S. extended deterrence reassures U.S. allies in the region who otherwise could be highly motivated to develop nuclear weapons. However, U.S. extended deterrence is not reassuring to North Korea, and China is often suspicious or sensitive about the posture of U.S. forces in the region.

If the U.S. continues to reduce its nuclear stockpile while China modernizes and increases its nuclear forces, Japanese security planners are worried that the U.S. and China could conclude an arms control agreement that somehow neglects Japanese security concerns. Tokyo and Seoul are also concerned that Washington could acquiesce and accept a small DPRK nuclear arsenal that is capped with assurances of no proliferation. These worries are probably exaggerated, but some form of these scenarios certainly would lead Japan and the ROK to reconsider their nuclear options.

Another fear is that if North Korean nuclear and missile development is not checked, an ICBM capability could expand North Korea’s options in the region as it could deter U.S. intervention. The “decoupling” would raise insecurity in Japan and the ROK, with uncertain ramifications.
To enhance the credibility of extended deterrence, the U.S. and its allies will have to remain closely engaged on deployments, doctrine, operational planning, command and control, the rules of engagement, etc. The institutional mechanisms for this coordination are in place, and they should be sustained despite domestic political changes in Japan, the ROK, and the U.S. until there is a fundamental change in the region’s security environment.

Nonproliferation will require multilateral cooperation, but it does not apply only to the DPRK. The peaceful use of nuclear energy is expanding in the region, and China and the ROK aggressively are seeking foreign markets for their nuclear suppliers as demand for nuclear energy increases in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Nonproliferation and export control compliance will require the enforcement of international rules, standards, regulations and norms—which must keep pace with emerging technologies. This will require international cooperation, but also cooperation among governments, private firms, industry associations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs).
References


Chapter Endnotes

1. The U.S. withdrew its nuclear weapons from the ROK in 1991.

2. Many people underestimate the timeline for a Japanese nuclear breakout. While Japan certainly has the advanced technical capabilities to produce nuclear weapons, the large inventory of plutonium from spent fuel is reactor grade and not usable for weapons. Also, Japan would have to develop a delivery system, and any breakout would almost certainly be observable.


5. After the collapse of the USSR, soldiers in the KPA were told in indoctrination sessions that it was because the USSR did not have a “great leader” and that Gorbachev and the leadership had become corrupted by personal profit and sold out the country. However, “the DPRK was not so unfortunate.”