

Is a Nuclear-free East Asia Possible? Opportunities and Constraints

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Is a Nuclear-free East Asia Possible? Opportunities and Constraints

Report from the 6th Jeju Forum Panel, May 28, 2011

By Peter Hayes

July 5, 2011

This report was prepared for [Global Asia](#) and is also available on their web site.

Nautilus invites your contributions to this forum, including any responses to this report.

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I. Introduction



Peter Hayes, Professor of International Relations, RMIT University, Melbourne, and Director, Nautilus Institute, San Francisco, writes “The issues involved in abolishing nuclear weapons are profoundly complex and apparently intractable. What is the status of nuclear deterrence? What is China’s interest in strategic nuclear arms talks? How would nuclear abolition affect Korea and Japan over time? What to do about North Korea’s nuclear weapons? Is a nuclear weapons-free zone desirable and useful? And, how do we deal with the threat of non-state nuclear proliferation?”

Hayes’ report summarizes the special panel, 'Is a Nuclear-free East Asia Possible? Opportunities and Constraints' held at the 6th Jeju Forum, where five distinguished experts from Australia, China, Japan, and Korea were asked to examine these issues.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on significant topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Report by Peter Hayes

- Is a Nuclear-free East Asia Possible? Opportunities and Constraints

Report from the 6th Jeju Forum Panel, May 28, 2011

By Peter Hayes

Since President Obama declared the abolition of nuclear weapons to be the overarching goal of American policy, security analysts and ordinary people have been grappling with the implications of this declaration for the East Asia region.

Quite reasonably, they are asking simple questions. Can one imagine ever living in a world in which nuclear weapons have been abolished? Should one worry about the threat of nuclear war these days? Or has this threat receded so much that most days, one forgets about it?

In reality, the issues involved in abolishing nuclear weapons are profoundly complex and apparently intractable. What is the status of nuclear deterrence? What is China’s interest in strategic nuclear arms talks? How would nuclear abolition affect Korea and Japan over time? What to do about North Korea’s nuclear weapons? Is a nuclear weapons-free zone desirable and useful? And, how do we deal with the threat of non-state nuclear proliferation?

Each of these questions in turn can be parsed out into separate issues, each of which would have to be resolved before abolition would be possible. In relation to Korea and Japan, for example, why doesn’t it make sense for these two non-nuclear states to declare their own nuclear weapon free zone, recognizing that nuclear extended deterrence really amounts today to no more than existential nuclear deterrence, and therefore, they do not gain from having nuclear weapons in their territory under any circumstances? Can Japan and South Korea ever trust each other enough to forego the latent threat of nuclear proliferation, currently restrained and hidden from view by their nuclear alliances with the US?

The 6th Jeju Forum asked five distinguished experts from Australia, China, Japan, and Korea to examine these issues at a special panel on the potential for a nuclear-free East Asia on May 28, 2011 spoke at the panel, which I was privileged to moderate. [\[1\]](#)

The panel ranged over many important issues and readers may listen to the whole session. Here, we draw on their verbatim and written remarks on three key issues that emerged at the panel.

Seoul Nuclear Security Summit and North Korea: Ambassador Kim emphasizes the addition of a new and significant post-Fukushima theme to the agenda of the Global Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul in March 2012, for which he is the official “sherpa.”

“While the damage to the Fukushima power plant was caused by an earthquake and tsunami,” writes Kim, “the possibility that the same consequence can be incurred by non-natural causes of malicious intent calls for nuclear safety to be addressed within the framework of nuclear security. This could be complemented by discussions on baseline safety measures and the interface of nuclear safety and security.” As he stated at the panel, “When a terrorist tries to disconnect electricity supply to nuclear power plant, the consequences will be the same as a nuclear bomb. Therefore, we have to address this issue as seriously as the nuclear bomb issue. Therefore the spent fuel issue can be discussed in the NSS next year.”

Professor Choi Kang explains that in the thinking of officials preparing for the Seoul Nuclear Security Summit, this safety issue is to be added to the list of eight nuclear material security topics that were “deputed” to different states at the Washington Global Nuclear Security Summit in 2010 for follow-up in 2012. “These are,” he noted, “information security (U.K.); HEU guidelines (France); transportation security (Japan); illicit trafficking (Jordan); nuclear forensics (the Netherlands); security culture (Russia); radioactive source security (Germany); treaty ratification (Indonesia); and international coordination (Pakistan).”

According to Professor Choi, a key implication of the Fukushima disaster is the need for “a regional cooperation mechanism dedicated toward the enhancement of nuclear safety.” The Summit, he suggests, could facilitate the creation of such a mechanism that would “involve better and safer design of nuclear power plant, operation/ management including human resources, and crisis/consequence management. It would be possible to introduce a kind of nuclear safety monitoring and oversight mechanism or group of experts. This would also possibly increase transparency of and confidence in nuclear power industry.”

From Seoul’s perspective, the nuclear safety-security nexus as a co-equal theme in 2012 is linked closely to the DPRK nuclear issue. Although it recognizes that nuclear proliferation issues such as the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program are not on the Global Security Summit’s agenda, the issue of the security of the DPRK’s fissile material, its nuclear facilities, and post-Fukushima, the safety of its nuclear fuel cycle, are an integral part of the 2012 agenda. Whether best handled in a side-meeting or simply by having the DPRK participate at the Summit having re-committed in a substantive manner to denuclearization, or both, is still an open question.

Ambassador Kim is explicit that “the problem of the physical protection of nuclear facilities and materials within DPRK should be included in the discussions at the Seoul Summit in the general context of nuclear security, taking into account the emphasis put by the first Summit on the state’s responsibility for physical protection.” Professor Choi is equally forceful, arguing that all three themes of the Summit—security, safety and safeguard—apply to the DPRK and should be considered at the Summit from a nuclear security perspective.

Nuclear and Conventional Deterrence: Professor Gareth Evans began the discussion of deterrence at the panel by averring that: “The two US allies in the region have an important role to play because of the long tradition of sheltering under the US nuclear umbrella. That is perfectly understandable, but what is less understandable, acceptable, and helpful in the present age is continuing to rely on the US nuclear deterrent for general security purposes. By all means,” he said, “keep the concept of extended deterrence because if countries like Japan and Korea, and Australia for that matter, don’t feel comfortable about the US willingness to back us with conventional support, then that will be very destabilizing to the region.”

“But let’s move away from reliance on the extended nuclear deterrent. Let’s get away from the perception that nukes are somehow an important part of the deterrence that we need against other

forms of WMD biological or chemical or that we need nuclear weapons to deal with conventional assault. If we keep that mindset, you are really going to be stuck for a very long time with the reality of nuclear weapons.”

Professor Evans concluded in his written paper, “What really matters for the region is US extended deterrence, not extended nuclear deterrence—that is, ability to rely on US conventional military capability, which for the foreseeable future will be amply sufficient to deal with any non-nuclear threat contingency (and indeed probably any nuclear threat contingency as well).”

General Pan outlined the Chinese perspective at the panel. “We think that nuclear deterrence has never been a good idea,” he said. “In the cold War years, nuclear deterrence has been the source of nuclear arms race between the two nuclear superpowers. We saw huge nuclear arsenals on each side. Since the end of the Cold war, we don’t say any positive value for nuclear deterrence. Now Japan could argue they need nuclear deterrence because they fear for example the attack from North Korea or China. But North Korea could also say that because they are faced with kind of nuclear threat from the United States, therefore they must be prepared. So nuclear deterrence in this region continues to the source of mistrust, of actions and reactions.”

General Pan then called for Japan to choose between reliance on nuclear deterrence versus calling for nuclear disarmament. “To be realistic, I think almost everyone knows that nuclear weapons indeed cannot be used in this region. So I would argue as soon as nuclear deterrence be changed, then this region would be far better off. On that score, I would argue that Japan seems to be particularly ambivalent towards nuclear weapons. On the hand, Japan has become the champion for nuclear disarmament, claiming that they are the only victims of nuclear bombing. That’s true. But on the other hand, we keep hearing about some ambiguous activities in that country, and very ambiguous remarks about whether they should develop their own nuclear weapons. Therefore, I think there is also a need for strategic transparency on the part of Japan—what’s really their attitude towards nuclear weapons?

Ambassador Abe made a similar point about abolition of nuclear weapons, noting that “the American and our perception that nuclear reduction is possible today is derived from the realization that we have a lot better conventional defense capability. This is a lot better option than depending on nuclear weapons because once they are used, they bring about catastrophic consequences, immediate and long, debilitating.”

Ambassador Abe told the panel that Japan and Korea rely on nuclear deterrence as “a last resort” to deter North Korean nuclear or chemical attack on Seoul. “People in South Korea and Japan feel today threatened with North Korean nuclear weapons. And honestly, North Korean broadcasting from time to time say, we will put Seoul in a fireball, we will make Tokyo in a fireball. People laugh at it: they are making stupid jokes again. But, for some people it’s a real threat. Therefore, they have to make sure that they never make any mistaken calculation on the Northern side. That’s why the deterrence has to be kept as a last resort.”

Professor Evans responded to Abe by asking: “Why do we make the assumption that we need nuclear weapons as a deterrent against the misuse of a North Koreans of nuclear device or for that matter, chemical and biological weapons. Isn’t the absolute certainty of massive conventional retaliation with all the gigantic destruction that US with its allies could wreak on North Korea, isn’t that in the real world a far more realistic deterrent than the will-of-the-wisp of the nuclear thing for all the reasons that Peter Hayes said, we know is not going to be used. Because we know even if the North Koreans were to use a nuclear weapon, the United States is not going to be barbaric enough or stupid enough in the eyes of the world opinion to do the same—particularly when it has a conventional capability to do anything that would be conceivably necessary. You are talking the realm of psychology here, maybe; but you are not talking the realm of reality in terms of real world deterrent calculation.”

Professor Choi make the opposite argument about the adequacy of a conventional deterrent in Korea

and Japan. “Unfortunately,” he asserted, “The US has failed to provide us with a reliable conventional deterrence capability up to now. Maybe in the near future, it is possible for the United States to show us a more credible and reliable deterrent posture vis a vis South Korea and also Japan. If that’s the case, it is possible for us to go for nuclear zero or nuclear free Northeast Asia.”

Wrote Evans with regard to North Korea, “The U.S. should not rule out in advance the possibility of nuclear retaliation against a nuclear attack by North Korea against itself or its allies: the Pyongyang regime would need to understand that any such behavior would be suicidal.”

“But,” he added, “in the (almost inconceivable) event of such an attack, it would be more likely, and well advised, to mount a massive conventional response of which it is well capable, focused on the regime and military targets, and limiting collateral civilian casualties to the maximum extent possible, rather than descend -- and be seen by the wider international community to be descending -- to the same barbaric level.”

However, so long as the DPRK nuclear threat remains, neither Evans nor Abe are willing to go to the next step—offering to end the nuclear threat to North Korea altogether by either creating a nuclear weapon free zone, or simply foregoing the nuclear option altogether, whatever the DPRK says or does with its nuclear weapons.

“Pending that outcome,” concludes Evans, “a strategy must be maintained of strict containment - employing mechanisms like the Proliferation Security Initiative, and seeking maximum cooperation from China - combined with strong deterrence, with the threat of massive retaliation by conventional, and if necessary nuclear weapons, should North Korea misuse its nuclear devices.”

Abe concurs, writing that “In so far as North Korea engages in what it claims the buildup of its nuclear deterrence, South Korea, Japan and the U.S. are obliged to keep credible deterrence to prevent any provocation, intimidation or worse aggression from the North. This will inevitably put a limit to the extent Japan and South Korea can realistically foresee U.S. nuclear reduction.”

For this reason, General Pan believes that “the ongoing nuclear crisis of North Korea has made the prospect of denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula very dim, let alone a nuclear free Northeast Asia.”

The Role of China in a Nuclear Free Northeast Asia: In addition to North Korea, General Pan asserted that “US extended deterrence in Northeast Asia has constituted another obstacle to the creation of [a nuclear weapons-free zone since Washington continues to rule out the possible use of its nuclear weapons in the region.” Also, he added, “lack of mutual trust among these major players indicates the lack of an adequate political basis for the building of a nuclear free Northeast Asia under current situation.”

From a Chinese perspective, therefore, General Pan argued that three changes must take place before the region can become nuclear-free. First, Korea must be denuclearized peacefully. Second, the “intensifying arms competition between major players in the region” must be supplanted by a “readjustment of the threat perceptions as well security strategies of all the nations concerned,” in order third, to overcome “the belief of these nations that nuclear weapons would continue to play a vital role in their security strategy.”

Professor Evans suggested that China should “freeze at present levels” and not “equalize up” its nuclear arsenal until the US and Russian stockpiles fall to similar levels. Meanwhile, he asserted that there “needs to be real transparency about numbers and deployment arrangements, especially from China”—a call echoed by Ambassador Abe who declared that “I would like to know how large the Chinese nuclear arsenal is and when it can join a nuclear disarmament negotiation.”

General Pan responded by noting that: “When [the United States and Russia] reduce the number of their nuclear warheads to a certain level, China is willing to participate in this kind of multilateral process. But what exactly that number is, that could be negotiated. China expressed its interest even today that it is willing to participate in this kind of consulting process. Mind you, even in the

Cold War years, in the late 1980s, China did participate in a kind of five nuclear powers exchange of views on the possible steps to be taken for nuclear disarmament. I don't think China is afraid of this. We are waiting for progress. We are waiting for US and Russia to take further steps for deeper cuts, and including ratification of CTBT. So I am not so sure to say that China is reluctant to participate in this; but the reality is that the two nuclear weapon powers, arsenals accounting for 95 percent of world total, how could you expect China to participate? And even if China does show interest, I don't think US and Russia would really welcome China's participation."

Conclusion: Overall, these papers suggest that countries in the region are beginning to view the nuclear security issue through a refractive prism that includes abolition concerns in many short, medium, and long-term dimensions.

As Professor Evans concluded: "There is no need for other countries in the region to wait for North Korea to disarm before declaring their own territories to be forever nuclear free, should they wish to join Mongolia in making this important, if essentially symbolic, gesture. It will be a very long haul before we can look to a completely nuclear free East Asia, including China and Russia, and difficult to imagine this occurring other than in the context of global agreement to go to zero. But it is not impossible to reach that destination, and the journey should certainly start now."

Asked at the end of the panel whether they thought East Asia would be nuclear free in 2077—as far in the future now as the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings are in the past—the panelists said:

- Professor Choi: Yes, by that time, we will see a nuclear free Northeast Asia.
- Ambassador Kim: I hope yes.
- Professor Abe: Yes, because there will be better weapons at that time.
- Professor Evans: Yes because I am a congenital naïve optimistic
- General Pan: Yes, I think the world is now getting consensus that nuclear weapons really have no value for the security of the world.

III. References

[1] The panelists were: Abe Nobuyasu, Choi Kang, Gareth Evans, Kim Bong Hyun, and Pan Zhenqiang. Panelists were sent twenty questions related to these six issues before they arrived to prepare for the panel (Attachment F).

IV. Attachments

Please refer to the attachments below for the prepared remarks from each panelist on 20 key questions in the session.

Attachment A: [Twenty Key Questions on Nuclear Abolition in East Asia](#)

Attachment B: [Responses from Bong Hyun Kim, Deputy Minister for Multilateral and Global Affairs, MOFAT, Republic of Korea](#)

Attachment C: [Responses from MG Pan Zhenqiang \(Retired\), China Reform Forum](#)

Attachment D: [Responses from Gareth Evans, Vice Chancellor, Australian National University](#)

Attachment E: [Responses from Ambassador Nobuyasu Abe, Center for the Promotion of Disarmament and Non-Proliferation](#)

Attachment F: [Responses from Choi Kang, Professor, Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, South Korea](#)

V. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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