

Policy Forum 10-053: A Northeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Is Unrealistic

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A Northeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Is Unrealistic

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Masashi Nishihara

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I. Introduction

Masashi Nishihara, President of the Research Institute for Peace and Security in Japan, writes, "Should Japan and South Korea declare a nuclear weapon-free zone? My answer is: "No, not without a substantial change in the regime in North Korea." Certainly the idea of such a zone is intriguing, but it is just not realistic."

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II. Article by Masashi Nishihara

-“A Northeast Asian Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone Is Unrealistic”

By Masashi Nishihara

North Korea sees nuclear weapons as a vital tool to press the international community into supplying it with economic aid, to intimidate South Korea into treating it gently and to give it bargaining power with China. So the idea of a nuclear weapon-free zone aimed at bringing North Korea into the fold is interesting but ultimately unrealistic.

Should Japan and South Korea declare a nuclear weapon-free zone? My answer is: "No, not without a substantial change in the regime in North Korea." Certainly the idea of such a zone is intriguing, but it is just not realistic. A fundamental question that must be asked before considering such an idea is whether or not Japan and South Korea would be safer under a nuclear weapon-free zone while North Korea retains its nuclear capability.

The concept of a Northeast Asian nuclear weapon-free zone (NWFZ) commonly refers to Japan and the two Koreas as the core of the zone, with three nuclear weapons states, the United States, Russia and China, pledging to refrain from using nuclear weapons inside the zone. The countries in the zone would be bound by treaty to refrain from producing, possessing and testing nuclear weapons. The concept also includes the possibility that North Korea may join the zone at a later stage. Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada has talked about such a zone, but not yet as official Japanese policy.

Will North Korea Ever Give Up Its Nuclear Weapons?

Advocates of the zone advance their argument on the assumption that North Korea would abandon its nuclear programs if the three nuclear weapons states mentioned above would commit to no nuclear attacks, and that the North would eventually join the zone. Are these assumptions realistic? North and South Korea in 1992 signed a declaration to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. And then in October 1994, the US and North Korea worked out the so-called Agreed Framework, under which the North promised to halt operation and construction of nuclear reactors that were suspected of being part of a covert nuclear weapons program. The six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the US, Japan, Russia and China, which started in August 2003, were aimed at negotiating with North Korea to scrap its nuclear programs altogether in three stages. What happened? Pyongyang secretly continued to develop nuclear weapons and first tested them in October 2006.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and his military advisors must have felt the only way for them to survive was to keep trying to develop nuclear weapons, something which they began doing in the 1980s, or perhaps even earlier. For whatever reason, the simple fact remains that North Korea cannot be trusted. It has defied and fooled us many times. In 2005, the administration of US President George W. Bush promised not to launch nuclear attacks on North Korea — an assurance that the North had long sought. But Pyongyang did not respond positively to this so-called negative security assurance (NSA). For North Korea, nuclear weapons are indispensable in extracting economic aid from the international community and coercing South Korea into taking a softer stance toward it. Nuclear weapons also are a useful leverage against China. We cannot assume Pyongyang will ever abandon its nuclear weapons.

Unhelpful Comparisons with Other Zones

Advocates of the zone also propose that the door should be left open for North Korea to join at a later period. This means that the North would be in a privileged position to intimidate Japan and South Korea until it joins the zone. Zone supporters refer to the 1967 Latin America Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, which Argentina and Brazil only joined 18 years after its inception. However, we cannot really compare Latin America to Northeast Asia. In this region, North Korea is already a nuclear power, and moreover, it frequently directs hostile words at its neighbors and often acts accordingly. Latin America had no such aspiring nuclear power. If we knew for sure that the North Korean regime would undergo drastic change in the near future, we might have the luxury of waiting. However, if the regime is likely to survive, or if we assume that the present regime will not give up nuclear arms for some time to come, Japan and South Korea would not feel safe.

The situation in Northeast Asia is more comparable to the Middle East than to Latin America. There, you have Israel, a suspected nuclear power, and Iran, a suspected aspirant, as well as a couple of other potential nuclear powers (Syria and Egypt). Northeast Asia, meanwhile, is surrounded by three nuclear powers. In both the Middle East and Northeast Asia, it is highly difficult to establish an NWFZ because of the presence of nuclear states either inside or next to the proposed zone.

The US Nuclear Umbrella

Japan and South Korea are already a nuclear weapon-free zone to the extent that they neither manufacture nor possess nuclear arms. Both are signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Japan has three non-nuclear principles (no manufacturing, no possession, no permission for nuclear weapons on Japanese territory). Its Basic Law on Atomic Energy of 1995 also bans the use of nuclear energy for military purposes. South Korea is a signatory to the 1992 North-South joint declaration on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In addition, since February 1992, the US has had a declared policy of not deploying tactical and theater nuclear weapons on its naval ships in the region.

Both Japan and South Korea, however, are beneficiaries of the US extended nuclear deterrence. That deterrence helps guarantee the security of the two countries, but does not mean that the US would use its nuclear forces at an early stage of a conflict. However, if the establishment of a Japan-South Korea NWFZ meant the removal of US nuclear protection, it would make the two US allies less secure. Both Japan and South Korea prefer an option that would allow the US to maintain its policy of neither confirming nor denying the status of its nuclear weapons.

In addition, once an NWFZ is established, North Korea would likely demand that all US bases in Japan and South Korea or US naval ships and aircraft be inspected to ensure there are no nuclear weapons. This would give North Korea an unfair advantage, because it would presumably not be subject to inspection under the NWFZ treaty.

China and Russia might welcome a Japan-South Korea NWFZ, because it would likely weaken US influence in East Asia. Japan and South Korea, on the other hand, certainly would not welcome it. The role of the US's extended nuclear deterrence for regional security has declined. While the US still maintains the right to first use of nuclear weapons, it is not likely to resort to them in the early stages of a conflict. Conventional deterrence, with ballistic missile defense and precision-guided missiles, for example, would probably play a larger role. Nonetheless, extended nuclear deterrence is perceived as a last important resort for defense and retaliation.

North Korea possesses chemical and biological weapons. In the highly unlikely event that North Korea should agree to abandon its nuclear weapons, it can still use other weapons of mass destruction. This capability by North Korea justifies the US's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, which upholds the US right to first use of nuclear forces against any weapons of mass destruction, not just nuclear weapons. In this way, US nuclear deterrence is generally effective in dissuading North Korea from staging large-scale military actions.

The Six-Party Talks Are a Failure

The six-party talks have failed to contain North Korea's nuclear development programs, as the country's latest nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009 amply demonstrated. In order to enhance regional

security, we need an alternative scheme to achieve a non-nuclear North Korea. Yet the idea of a NWFZ cannot be the answer for the reasons given above.

China would like to hold on to its chairmanship of the six-party talks, because this enables it to retain its influence over North Korea. But China's continued chairmanship should be questioned, because it did not act as an honest broker in the recent sinking of the South Korean naval ship, the Cheonan, by a North Korean torpedo. How serious China is about a denuclearized North Korea remains uncertain. China seems more concerned about a collapse of the North Korean regime that might cause a massive outflow of North Korean refugees into its own northeast region. China therefore appears more interested in seeing a stable nuclear North Korea than a denuclearized but unstable North Korea.

A Northeast Asia NWFZ is not feasible because there is no way to bring North Korea into a treaty when there are no diplomatic relations between North Korea on the one hand, and the US, Japan and South Korea on the other.

It should be noted that a Northeast Asian NWFZ would also have a negative impact on the possibility of a Middle East NWFZ. If North Korea were allowed to enter the zone "at a later period," as many advocates of the concept propose, Iran would demand a similar arrangement for itself in a Middle East NWFZ.

North Korea will likely only give up its nuclear arms when it undergoes drastic regime change. A non-nuclear North Korea, resuming its membership in the NPT, would then have an opportunity to reform its economy and achieve sustainable development that boosts the welfare of its people — with the full support of the international community. In the meantime, a better alternative to a Northeast Asian NWFZ, one that provides greater security for Japan and South Korea, resides in a closer partnership among the US, Japan and South Korea. Strengthening that partnership will also help eliminate historical ill feelings between Japanese and Koreans. It will continue to provide the basis for regional stability, eventually including North Korea.

III. 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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