



Policy Forum 05-52A: Should Nukes Bloom in Asia?



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By Walter Russell Mead

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I. Introduction

Walter Russell Mead, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author, most recently, of "Power, Terror, Peace and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk", wrote: "A nuclear arms race across East Asia would be hugely dangerous and destabilizing. Far better that the Bush administration convince China that the wiser course is to prevent a nuke race by telling Pyongyang the time has come for a deal."

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II. Essay by Walter Russell Mead

- Should Nukes Bloom in Asia?
by Walter Russell Mead

With North Korea inching toward returning to talks over its nuclear weapons, the U.S. is using the tension over Pyongyang to lay the foundation of a new strategic design in the Far East.

It begins with Japan. The combination of North Korea's nuclear program, China's steady rise and anti-Japanese rioting in China has enabled Japan's conservative nationalists to align the country more closely than ever with U.S. military and political goals across Asia.

By the glacial standards of Asian foreign policy, Tokyo's shift has been breathtaking. Not only does Japan have troops in Iraq. Not only is it cooperating in U.S. efforts to develop anti-missile defenses in Asia. For the first time, Japan has indicated that it would back the U.S. and Taiwan against any attempt by China to take the island by force.

There is another shift underway: The U.S. is moving closer to India. Relations between the two countries could turn out to be more important than U.S. ties with virtually all its Cold War allies. Nicholas Burns, the third-ranking official at the State Department, recently said, "If you look at American foreign policy worldwide, the greatest change you will see in the next three or four years is a new American focus on South Asia, particularly in establishing a closer strategic partnership with India."

Some observers thought that the traditionally anti-U.S. Congress Party's return to power last year would slow rapprochement between the world's two largest democracies. But that's not happening. The U.S. recently offered to support India's drive to become a "world power," and India's prime minister will no doubt discuss the offer of closer security and economic cooperation during his visit to the White House next month.

Japan and India are likely to deepen their ties as well. With Chinese mobs rioting against trade with "unrepentant" Japan, India looks increasingly attractive as a strategic partner for Japan. Japanese capital and technology could significantly accelerate India's growth, thereby stabilizing the Asian balance of power.

Washington is making other moves. After recent high-level U.S.-Vietnamese military discussions, Vietnam's Prime Minister Phan Van Khai will meet with President Bush on June 21. The U.S. wants the Vietnamese to more aggressively patrol vital and pirate-plagued sea lanes in the region, an area where Japan is also becoming more active.

In part, this is a long-term strategy. From Washington's view, hooking a stagnating and increasingly anxious Japan to a rising India would counterbalance China's growing power in Asia. Australia also shows signs of a heightened interest in India as China's influence expands, and Indonesia has historically been wary of China. The Bush administration is weaving a strategic net that it hopes in time could persuade China to keep its ambitions within reason.

Short term, the dizzying diplomatic activity in Asia aims to alter China's calculations about North Korea's nuclear program. Beijing doesn't welcome nukes in Pyongyang, but it is reluctant to use sanctions to raise the pressure on North Korea that could cause its next-door neighbor to collapse.

That would send waves of refugees into Chinese territory and might be a pretext for a U.S. military presence on its borders. In China's eyes, the risks of instability in North Korea may be greater than the costs of the status quo.

The wild card in Washington's new Asia strategy is South Korea, where some opinion polls rank the U.S. as a greater threat than Pyongyang. Like China, Seoul is more fearful of North Korean instability or a clash with the U.S. than nukes to its north. Any sign of resurgent nationalism in Japan is likely to drive South Korean public opinion closer to Beijing. Keeping South Korea on board is crucial for Washington.

The pressure on China continues. "If you had a nuclear North Korea, it just introduces a whole different dynamic," the U.S. ambassador to Japan recently said. "It seems to me that that increases the pressure on both South Korea and Japan to consider going nuclear themselves."

Vice President Dick Cheney has made similar comments, as have prominent Japanese officials, including a former foreign minister.

The idea - not yet a threat - is that unless North Korea dismantles its nuclear program, Japan, South Korea and even Taiwan might go nuclear in the not-so-distant future. The United States has intimated that although it would not aid or support any nuclear proliferation, it would be unable to control its allies' ambitions, just as China can't restrain North Korea's program.

Bush officials have repeated this message. China is the only country that can pressure North Korea to give up its nukes. Only China has the carrots and sticks that the North Koreans respect. Without China, no progress is possible. If North Korea stays nuclear, the region will respond in ways that China will hate.

With China's and India's power growing, North Korea rattling its nukes, Japan becoming more nationalistic and South Korea reconsidering its relations with the U.S., this once-stable part of the world is in flux.

A nuclear arms race across East Asia would be hugely dangerous and destabilizing. Far better that the Bush administration convince China that the wiser course is to prevent a nuke race by telling Pyongyang the time has come for a deal.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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