

Achieving an International Environment to Enable a Reduced Role for Nuclear Weapons

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by Abe Nobuyasu

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This report was originally presented at the [East Asia Nuclear Security workshop](#) held on November 11, 2011 in Tokyo, Japan. All of the papers and presentations given at the workshop are available [here](#), along with the full agenda, participant list and a workshop photo gallery.

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I. Introduction

Abe Nobuyasu assess the possibility of creating an environment in Northeast Asia that could

facilitate the withdrawal of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence to Japan and South Korea. Achieving such a goal mandates that several outstanding regional issues are addressed. These include: the territorial disputes over the Takeshima/Dokdo and Senkaku islands, the long-standing tensions across the Taiwan Strait, and North Korea's continued nuclear weapons program. Were these issues to be addressed, Abe asserts that a regional security framework—such as a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone—may be possible. He warns, however, "for this Nuclear Weapons Free Zone to materialize, North Korea has to give up its nuclear program...the chances of its realization are equal to that of denuclearizing North Korea."

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II. Report by Abe Nobuyasu

"Achieving an International Environment to Enable a Reduced Role for Nuclear Weapons"
by Abe Nobuyasu

President Obama set the goal of achieving a world without nuclear weapons in his historic speech at Prague in April 2009 [1]. The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review of 2010 reaffirmed this goal stating, "The long-term goal of U.S. policy is the complete elimination of nuclear weapons"[2] and set the goal of achieving an international environment that enables the U.S. to adopt a policy that the sole purpose of nuclear weapon is to deter the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons by the other side.[3]

For the goals of a world without nuclear weapons and an international environment to enable the sole purpose of nuclear weapons and for a "sustainable security in East Asia beyond nuclear extended deterrence" to be realized, there has to be a significant reduction of military tension and an atmosphere of peace has to be generated in the region. Such reduction of tension and the generation of peaceful atmosphere will also help realize the reduction and elimination of the dependence on extended nuclear deterrence and eventual achievement of a world without nuclear weapons. To this end the countries in the region have to work on many fronts. This paper will address three of the most urgent and prominent issues that have to be dealt with to achieve these goals. A major portion of this paper, however, is devoted to the issue of the Korean Peninsula since the workshop where this paper was presented very much focused on that issue.[4]

1. Korean Peninsula

The first front is the Korean Peninsula. For a sustainable security without extended nuclear deterrence to be achieved on the peninsula the nuclear issue of North Korea has to be settled. The best case scenario here is for North Korea to come to a decision to give up its nuclear program as a consequence of either fundamental regime change there, fundamental policy change while the regime is maintained, or achievement of comprehensive rapprochement between North Korea and the U.S. (and South Korea and Japan). This scenario is looking more and more unlikely to be realized any time soon in view of the recent developments. After the death of Kim Jong-il, the utmost priority

for the succeeding regime headed by his son, Kim Jong-un, seems to be the establishment of its legitimacy and consolidation of its power within North Korea. Kim Jong-un seems to be doing this by declaring he is the legitimate successor/inheritor of his father's policy. The regime has already declared it will stay the course of military first policy and outsiders should not expect it to change its course.^[5] It is not hard to imagine that a young inexperienced heir such as Kim Jong-un would first try to win the support of the military, by far the largest organized administrative machinery in the country. It is not hard to imagine either that after seeing what happened to Muammar Gaddafi, the North Korean power elite considers the maintenance of its "nuclear deterrence" vital for its regime survival both militarily and politically.

The question, then, is if there is any way to reduce tension on the Korean Peninsula, to slow down the North Korean nuclear program or to restrain WMD proliferation in North Korea. Recent diplomatic overtures from the U.S. seem aimed at attaining a certain limited degree of success on these objectives. Taming the North Korean urge to carry out the kind of provocative actions conducted in the year 2010 by offering limited food assistance, generating an atmosphere of improved relations and raising the expectation that the 6-Party Talks could resume serves a number of political purposes in the U.S. and South Korea as neither wants to have a political surprise that may detract the ruling party's campaign efforts during an election year.

Such an attempt can easily draw criticism from the conservatives that the political opportunists are trying to appease North Korea again and risk falling in the North Korean trap. It is certainly true that the illusion of achieving a comprehensive breakthrough lured many American negotiators to the trap. The trap occurs when North Korea raises tensions through provocative actions or by revealing its WMD activities. Americans and South Koreans rush to offer rewards if the North Koreans calm their behavior or slow down their WMD activities. Thus, North Korea receives rewards to alleviate its economic difficulties while it continues to carry out its WMD activities behind the scenes. By repeating this process North Korea has succeeded in developing its WMD projects over the past two-decades. They now have a nuclear device that can explode and a long-range ballistic missile that can fly over 1,500km. It is a matter of time for North Korea to attain miniaturization of a nuclear warhead that can be mounted on a ballistic missile and that can reach Guam, Hawaii and eventually the U.S. mainland. The same horse has been bought again and again and during the process the horse has kept growing.

There is always a temptation to appease North Korea thinking this time it may turn out differently. The kind of food and economic assistance to entice North Korea to engage in dialogue, 6-Party Talks, or attenuate its behavior can still be useful if it leads to a genuine dialogue that firmly leads to North Korean abandonment of its nuclear and missile projects.

The wall separating appeasement and successful engagement is very thin and which side one is on is not known at the time of engagement. This may be comparable to the situation of Charlie Brown in the Peanuts comic strip. Charlie Brown is always called by Lucy to come running and kick the football she is holding. He is repeatedly deceived by her. She withdraws the ball and he flips over falling to the ground. He knows that he is very likely to be cheated again but he tries again and again.

For the overtures to North Korea not to end up in an appeasement, there are a number of precautionary steps that may be taken.

The first step that needs to be taken is to assure that food and economic assistance reaches the neediest and does not end up strengthening the regime or the military in North Korea. Providing, for example, baby food instead of hard grains that can be stored for a long time, seeds and fertilizers instead of foodstuff, sending a verification mission to ascertain that aid is reaching the needy, are

some of the steps to this end. To the extent, however, that aid replaces the foodstuff and agricultural material that may have to be provided otherwise, the assistance will end up helping the overall management of the economic crisis in North Korea and the regime may advertise it as a successful attempt to win international assistance for the regime in an attempt to strengthen its legitimacy. This much of a tradeoff has to be accepted beforehand.

Second, if North Korea agrees to any limitation of its nuclear or missile program, it has to be verified. Apparently, most of, if not all, the negotiators acknowledge this is an important requirement. However, when North Korea resists accepting rigorous verification, some negotiators backed down or were forced to back down when their political superiors asked them to be accommodating so that a political show of grand negotiating success can be displayed. North Korea may resist intrusive verification simply because it wants to conceal hidden nuclear and missile projects. It may resist it more because it does not want outsiders to see their militarily sensitive facilities and find out that its military infrastructure is tattered and crumbling.

North Korea may be resisting intrusive verification because showing foreign inspectors going around the country inspecting here and there may be taken by its people to mean that the country is being subjected to foreign supervision which would end up weakening the regime's credibility. North Korea does not want to re-introduce IAEA Safeguard verification. This may be due to one of the reasons mentioned above or some combination of them.

For the purpose of verification, one logical step is to re-apply the IAEA Safeguard verification and include an Additional Protocol to supplement the standard Safeguard system. Without an Additional Protocol, the effects of the Safeguard verification are limited. It, for example, will not be able to seek out any hidden enrichment plants if there are any. According to the standard procedure, however, the IAEA has to negotiate provisions of an Additional Protocol with North Korea. This may take time and North Korea may use it as a way to prolong the introduction of verification.

Definitely, the IAEA Safeguard with the Additional Protocol is the first priority. But, if this cannot be done for some reason, and during the negotiation of an Additional Protocol, some method of verification has to be brought in to fill the gap. There are a number of conceivable ways that are worth exploring. They are basically national technical means of verification carried out by the U.S., South Korea and possibly Japan. They may include some international arrangements as well. Some ideas follow.

National Technical Means

The U.S., South Korea and Japan carry out a number of intelligence operations to verify North Korean activities, including photo and other surveillance by satellites, signal intelligence and air sample collection.

Aerial Surveillance

It is reported that the U.S. is preparing UAV reconnaissance flights around North Korea's borders. This may be expanded by an agreement with North Korea to allow the overflights of the UAVs above certain altitude and under a certain time and zone restrictions. This is something reminiscent of the Open Sky Agreement. This can still add to the verification by allowing photo and air sample verification at closer range. This may be further expanded to cover both Koreas once a comprehensive agreement is reached for the denuclearization of the entire Korean Peninsula.

A Fixed or Mobile Monitoring Station

By a mutual agreement North Korea and the U.S. (and South Korea) can establish fixed but inconspicuous monitoring station(s) in North Korea. Another agreement may be made to allow inconspicuous mobile monitoring station(s). They are to be made inconspicuous so that they are more acceptable to North Korea, which is concerned about its own regime survival. Detection of sensitive nuclear activities is a challenging task. Plutonium separation may release certain radioactive nuclides such Xenon gas. Uranium enrichment does not release any radioactive nuclides. Collection of aerial and soil samples for radioactive nuclides, monitoring of seismological waves and air vibrations, and radio monitoring at those monitoring stations can help detection efforts without being overly intrusive.

Nuclear Test Moratorium

A moratorium on nuclear tests can have certain effects to limit the development of a nuclear weapons program. If North Korea is allowed to break the moratorium from time to time to test its nuclear bombs when they are ready for the next round of tests, the moratorium virtually does not have any value except for a temporary psychological relief. If North Korea can commit itself to a legally binding permanent nuclear test moratorium, it has significant value. This is almost synonymous to signing up to the CTBT. However, North Korea has never expressed any readiness to sign the treaty. Still, if North Korea, by any chance, accepts a nuclear test moratorium, it has to be verified. The above-mentioned verification steps would be useful for this purpose. The CTBT International Monitoring System will indeed be of a great help.

Ballistic Missile Test Moratorium

Restraints on nuclear weapons development may be accompanied by restraints on ballistic missile development. Again, one basic restraint is a ballistic missile test moratorium. This does not make much sense if it is allowed to be broken from time to time. It has to be a permanent commitment not to test ballistic missiles at least beyond a certain flight range. Missile tests are relatively easy to monitor by radars, satellites, and seismological and atmospheric vibration sensors. Some of the CTBT International Monitoring Stations can also be useful for this purpose.

Verifying Non-proliferation

Even if North Korea commits itself not to proliferate its nuclear and ballistic missile components and technology, verification of such commitment is another difficult challenge. Even today, the U.S. and other countries have difficulty effectively enforcing the Security Council mandatory resolutions demanding the U.N. Member States to apply strict export and import restrictions on North Korea. Unless North Korea accepts inspection of its ships and airplanes or China agrees to a third party verification of its borders with North Korea, rigorous enforcement of non-proliferation commitments will remain elusive.

Allegations have been made of North Korean proliferating its nuclear and/or ballistic missile technology to Pakistan, Iran and Syria, but none of them has been pinned down. When the U.S., for example, wins a commitment of non-proliferation from North Korea, it might do well winning a companion concession from North Korea to accept for itself some method of verification to confirm its compliance. If, for example, North Korea can accept an offer to provide radiation detection monitors at all the transshipment ports and airports for counter-terrorism purposes that would be a good indication it is serious about its commitment. The radiation monitors will be able to detect not only incoming radioactive devices but also outgoing ones as well.

Reducing the Role of Nuclear Weapons

Beyond the immediate steps to win temporary relaxation of the tension on the Korean Peninsula, the issue of nuclear deterrence and security has to be addressed if a longer-lasting regional security is to be established in Northeast Asia. From the U.S., South Korean and Japanese perspectives, if they are to renounce extended nuclear deterrence over South Korea and Japan, one definite prerequisite is the dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear weapons program. Then, the question rises whether deterrence can be limited to the sole purpose of countering enemy nuclear weapon use. Japan and South Korea cling to the possibility, at least residual, that nuclear deterrence is used for deterring massive conventional offensives and the employment of chemical and biological weapons by North Korea. Arguments are made that the U.S. would not dare to use nuclear weapons to counter conventional, chemical or biological attacks and risk the use of nuclear weapons by the other side. Arguments are also made that the current combined conventional military strengths of the U.S. and South Korea are sufficient to repel any conventional, chemical or biological offensive from North Korea. This seems to be a prevailing view among military and security experts. But, this means the allied forces prevailing over North Korean forces after South Korea suffered a devastating damage to the highly populated industrial area around Seoul. It is quite natural that South Korea wants to retain the assurance of extended nuclear deterrence to stop any North Korean offensive in the first place rather than prevailing over North Korea after suffering devastation.

A straightforward answer to the issue of chemical and biological weapons is to have North Korea sign and ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention and to comply with the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention it has already adhered to. Experts may say this is a tall order. However, all the countries around North Korea have already adhered to these conventions and those countries should not be give up on the issue if they are to seek an environment conducive to enabling a reduced role for nuclear deterrence. Verification of compliance with the conventions will be quite challenging. Chemical weapons should be verifiably dismantled in accordance with the provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention. But when it comes to biological weapons, even the Convention itself has been struggling with the idea of having a system of verification for many years. So, the challenges may be formidable. However, the challenge should not be given up if sustainable security without extended nuclear deterrence is to be achieved.

Further argument for the reduction of the role of nuclear deterrence is to strengthen conventional deterrence to compensate for the loss of nuclear deterrence. The irony here is that efforts by the U.S., South Korea and Japan to strengthen their conventional defense and deterrence may be taken by the other side as a rising threat to its security. In order to avoid such a dilemma the U.S., South Korea and Japan may seek a number of tension reducing steps in the meantime.

Force Disengagement across the DMZ

This may be another tall order, but given the current high tension across the DMZ and the concentration of North Korean forces to the north the DMZ, this is a goal worth pursuing. The devastation that may be brought by a massive onslaught of North Korean forces poised across the DMZ has been one of the major deterrence against any military action by the U.S. and South Korean forces. The reverse of this is that North Korea may consider the forces across the DMZ is an important deterrent vis-à-vis the U.S. and South Korea and thus object to any disengagement agreement. If that is so, a trial disengagement exercise may be started from the eastern portion of the DMZ, strip by strip, gradually building up confidence. The strip may be de-mined and supervised by a team of U.N. observers as in the case of the UN-assisted disengagement on the Golan Heights. Eventually, the disengagement can be extended to the western end and help reduce the tension across the West Sea reducing the chance of such provocative actions as the shelling of the Yongpyong Islands.

Initiation of a dialogue on NLL

In order to reduce the tension on the seas around the NLL (Northern Limit Line), a dialogue between both Koreas (and the U.S.) either in the form of resumption of the previous discussions or as a new initiative, specifically focusing on the disputed NLL may be initiated.

2. Territorial Issues

The second front is the number of territorial issues in the region, including the Northern Territories between Japan and Russia, Takeshima/Dokdo between Japan and South Korea and Senkaku Islands between China and Japan.^[6] As long as these territorial disputes exist, they remain as trigger points for physical confrontation that may raise regional tension and, worst comes, lead to military confrontation.

First, there should be a regional understanding to be established that the disputes should be settled through peaceful process. The next step may be a set of bilateral agreements to bring the disputes to the International Court of Justice or any other mutually agreed mediation so that the disputes can be settled in an impassionate way without inciting domestic political and emotional upheavals.

3. Taiwan issue

The third front is Taiwan. Leaving all the political and legal arguments aside, there is no denying that there is a military tension across the Taiwan Strait and both sides are competing to strengthen their military capabilities there. It is also true that China with its fast growing economy can now afford to devote significant amount of financial and military resources and Taiwan has difficulty matching it. In a way, therefore, the cards are very much in the hands of China now. I know that any kind of formal arrangement here is difficult to attain given the political and historical context. But, if China shows a degree of self-restraint, that will definitely help reduce the tension across the Strait. If China keeps on building up its military capability across the Strait, Taiwan will have to meet it desperately and the tension is bound to rise.

In terms of nuclear weapons issues, a concern was raised recently by the emergence of a new Chinese thinking that as far as Taiwan is concerned its no first use policy might not apply. Another lingering concern is that Taiwan may be tempted to revive its nuclear weapons program in view of the rising Chinese military might and the tacit international acceptance of North Korean *de facto* nuclear status. Morton H. Halperin proposes in his recent article ^[7] an idea to include Taiwan as a part of proposed Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone offering negative security assurance to Taiwan in return for its commitment to stay nuclear free. This idea can be pursued even as a stand-alone arrangement as a confidence-building, tension-reduction measure.

This is the dilemma we face. A defensive measure one side takes is sometimes taken as an increased threat from the other side and contributes to raising tension. This may also apply in the Korean context and in other places. Therefore, a prudent and deliberate pace of defense modernization may help bring better security environment regionally. The U.S.-Japan effort to build a theatre missile defense is taken by China as a threat to it. The Japanese intention remains to be very much defensive, i.e. defense against the missile and nuclear threats from North Korea. But from Chinese perspective it may be seen differently. That is one reason why the kind of missile defense build-up should be at a deliberate and modest pace. Given the technical challenge and the growing budget constraints in Japan and the U.S., there will be unintended constraints on the missile defense buildup by Japan and the U.S. anyway.

4. Regional Security Framework

There have been many suggestion of a regional security framework for East Asia ^[8]. A typical idea is

the proposal to establish something similar to OSCE or its precursor CSCE in East Asia because that seemed to be the overall framework for Europe to ease the tension and stabilize Europe during the Cold War. Such a regional framework may help provide a framework to generate the kind of efforts to work on specific sources of tension mentioned above. But an analogy has its limitations. There is nothing comparable to the Korean or Chinese situation in Europe; a nation that fought such a bloody war and is still divided and a nation that had such a complex history of division. A limit of such an organization also has to be remembered that a framework for the sake of just having dialogue does not by itself guarantee firm security. There have been cases of former Yugoslavia, and Georgia and other former Soviet Union Republics. It should be also reminded that the original Helsinki Accord had a human rights basket in it. From the Japanese and Korean perspectives the human right aspect is definitely something that cannot be overlooked in the context of a regional dialogue.

Another idea about a regional security framework is the idea of Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone. Now there is a new perspective and possibility that is different from the past. The concept of Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone had been regarded by Japanese conservatives and realists as a naïve leftist idea that lacked the balance and reality check. This is because the idea only suggested for Japan and South Korea to commit legally to denuclearizing themselves while only asking North Korea to accept the same commitment leaving the nuclear weapons of China and Russia untouched. This seemed to be one-sided from the Japanese point of view. The only thing that Japan was supposed to receive in return from China and Russia under this concept was “negative security assurance” from them, i.e. not to use nuclear weapons against Japan. Again, this is an idea that conservatives did not appreciate because there was a general mistrust about the concept of a mere verbal commitment not to use nuclear weapons. They preferred physical evidence of extended nuclear deterrence to such a non-verifiable commitment.

Now that North Korea has shown to have nuclear devices that can detonate, the scene has changed. For the kind of Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone to be achieved, now North Korea has to dismantle its nuclear weapons program and the nuclear devices it has produced so far and commit itself to denuclearize while Japan and South Korea only need to legally commit their non-nuclear status. So, now the bargain may not be so bad from Japanese or Korean perspectives. Therefore, at least theoretically, it is now an idea even the conservatives can consider endorsing.

Indeed, for this Nuclear Weapons Free Zone to materialize, North Korea has to give up its nuclear program. Therefore, the chances of its realization are equal to that of denuclearizing North Korea.

III. References

[1] http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/

[2] US Nuclear Posture Review 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/> p. 48.

[3] US Nuclear Posture Review 2010, Op. cit. p. 16.

[4] This paper is based on the further reflections on the issues discussed at the workshop organized by Nautilus Institute and the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament in November 2011 in Tokyo, where the author made an oral presentation.

[5]

http://www.washingtonpost.com/todays_paper/A%20Section/2011-12-28/A/10/34.1.3805930998_epaper.html

[6] Reference to the issues as 'territorial disputes' is indeed without prejudice to the merits of the issues involved. This paper limits itself to narrow 'East Asian' issues excluding such issues as Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

[7] Halperin, Morton H., "A Proposal for a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone in Northeast Asia", *Global Asia*, Vol. 6, No. 4, Winter 2011, pp. 80-87, Seoul, ROK.

[8] One such idea was exhibited in the article written by Morton H. Halperin, op. cit.

IV. Nautilus invites your reponses

The Nautilus Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please leave a comment below or send your response to: napsnet@nautilus.org. Comments will only be posted if they include the author's name and affiliation.

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