Political Prospects for a NWFZ in Northeast Asia

Recommended Citation

"Political Prospects for a NWFZ in Northeast Asia", NAPSNet Special Reports, September 21, 2010, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/political-prospects-for-a-nwfz-in-northeast-asia/

Political Prospects for a NWFZ in Northeast Asia

Special Report, September 21st, 2010

Leon V. Sigal

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

II. Article by Leon V. Sigal

III. Citations

IV. Nautilus invites your responses

This paper was delivered at the Australia-Korea Strategic Futures Workshop, funded by the Australia-Korea Foundation, and is part of the Nautilus Institute's Korea-Japan Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Initiative.

This initiative is working to create a nuclear weapon free zone in Korea and Japan that will devalue North Korea's nuclear weapons and increase pressure on the DPRK to disarm, deepen the non-nuclear commitments in Japan and Korea, and lay the foundations for a comprehensive security mechanism and long-term regional security institution.

A background paper on the Korea-Japan Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Initiative in available in English,

Japanese, and Korean.

Other papers in this series are available here.

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

I. Introduction
Leon V. Sigal, Director, Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council, writes, “While broaching the subject of a NWFZ runs political risks, conventional deterrence continues to operate on the Korean Peninsula. The South has long had conventional forces capable of defeating the North, with or without U.S. troops, and the North has long held Seoul hostage to its forward-deployed artillery. The North’s nuclear weapons affect the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula insofar as they could put U.S. forces and bases in Japan at risk.”
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 contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Leon V. Sigal
-“Political Prospects for a NWFZ in Northeast Asia”
By Leon V. Sigal
Nuclear-weapons-free zones (NWFZ) exist in various regions of the world. Those examples have not been lost on Northeast Asia, where ideas for a regional NWFZ have long been a subject of discussion in think tanks and academic circles, if not yet by policy-makers. This paper will examine what differences a Northeast Asian NWFZ or a Japan-South Korea NWFZ might make in the light of North Korea’s nuclear arming and other recent changes in the security environment in the region and the implications for the future role of nuclear weapons in the regional balance of power.
Three scenarios have dominated analysis of the nuclear future of North Korea, and in turn, the security of South Korea and Northeast Asia. One is a continuation of current trends for the foreseeable future, which might be called *containment*, in which North Korea remains nuclear-armed with a growing stockpile of nuclear weapons and gradually improving delivery capabilities. A second scenario is sustained engagement and gradual *rapprochement* between North Korea and its three life-long foes – the United States, South Korea, and Japan. A third scenario is that North Korea disappears. Despite the dearth of evidence for it, faith in *sudden collapse* or *gradual absorption* is especially captivating to policy-makers not only because it would rid the world of a hateful regime but also because it relieves them of the trouble of devising a North Korea policy.
Under a Northeast Asian NWFZ, the DPRK would carry out its commitment in the September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement to “abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.” When it does so, Japan and South Korea would forswear nuclear weapons and the United States, China and Russia would pledge not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against any of the other parties. As an interim step, negotiations might begin by focusing on a Japan-South Korea NWFZ in which the countries would agree to forswear nuclear weapons. Ideally that would be done bilaterally, but that may not be possible without pledges by China and Russia not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against any of the other parties. They, in turn, would likely require a reciprocal pledge from the United States.
This paper will examine the utility of a NWFZ – and negotiations to establish such a zone – in Northeast Asia or, as an interim step, in Japan and South Korea in all three North Korea scenarios.

Continued Containment
Containment – military, economic, and political – has been the default strategy of the United States

and its allies toward North Korea ever since the end of the Korean War – with intermittent deviations.

Militarily, the United States and its allies have long deterred North Korea primarily with a robust conventional capability, or conventional deterrence, including a U.S. troop presence on the ground in Korea, supplemented by a U.S. existential threat to use nuclear weapons, or extended deterrence. The United States has also imposed an economic embargo on North Korea ever since the Korean War. The U.S. embargo has been augmented in recent years by two U.S. programs, the Illicit Activities Initiative and the Proliferation Security Initiative, which enjoy limited support from a coalition of the willing, and by sanctions resolutions 1718 and 1874 enacted by the U.N. Security Council in 2006 and 2009 respectively. They have also been supplemented by unilateral sanctions imposed by Japan and, more recently, by South Korea.

In addition, the United States, South Korea and Japan have attempted to isolate North Korea politically. None of them have moved in a sustained way to engage Pyongyang diplomatically or to normalize political or economic relations with it. Indeed, the recent trend has been in the opposite direction.

Yet containment – military, economic, and political – has not proven to be much of an impediment to North Korea's development of nuclear weapons. Indeed, Pyongyang has long contended that containment has driven it to seek a nuclear deterrent, and there is some evidence for that contention.

The North's acquisition of nuclear arms has exposed a number of problems with the strategy of containment. It has proven incapable of preventing North Korea from expanding and improving its nuclear stockpile or means of delivery. Containment has also proven incapable of preventing North Korea from sharing its nuclear and missile know-how with others. Containment has impeded, though not halted, its export of missiles and missile technology. If North Korea were to generate enough nuclear material or weapons to consider exporting some, it is doubtful whether containment could prevent nuclear proliferation either.

If containment itself has been marked by little success in stopping proliferation, nuclear deterrence as part of U.S. containment of North Korea has been even more doubtful, if not downright counterproductive. Washington policy-makers have long held the belief that whatever the U.S. says about nuclear policy or does with its own deployments had no bearing on proliferation. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rightly challenged that conventional wisdom in October 2009 when she said: "The nuclear status quo is neither desirable nor sustainable. It gives other countries the motivation or the excuse to pursue their own nuclear options."[1]

North Korea, for one, has long drawn attention to the U.S. nuclear threat as part of its justification for its own acquisition of nuclear weapons. No state's motivation for building nuclear weapons can be known with certainty, but North Korea has been unusually explicit about why it sought to acquire nuclear weapons – insecurity. The prime reason for that insecurity is the United States and what Pyongyang calls U.S. "hostile policy." No country has been the target of more US nuclear threats than North Korea – at least seven since 1945.[2] Even when the United States did not expressly menace the DPRK, the U.S. military presence in the region posed an existential nuclear threat.

North Korea's concept of "hostile policy" encompasses more than that existential threat or occasional explicit threats of first use of nuclear weapons against it. It includes potential invasion by conventional forces, economic sanctions, political isolation, and attempts to suborn its government. A February 10, 2005 statement by its Foreign Ministry declaring North Korea to be a nuclear weapons state emphasized U.S. enmity:

> As we have clarified more than once, we justly urged the U.S. to renounce its hostile policy toward the DPRK whose aim was to seek the latter's 'regime change' and switch its policy to that of peaceful co-existence between the two countries. … However, the administration turned down our just request and adopted it as its policy not to co-exist

with the DPRK.

The statement did cite the U.S. nuclear threat but in the context of more generalized hostility from Washington: "The U.S. disclosed its attempt to topple the political system in the DPRK at any cost, threatening it with a nuclear stick. This compels us to take a measure to bolster [our] nuclear weapons arsenal."[3] In other public statements, as well as in discussions with U.S. officials, North Koreans drew attention to the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review designating the North as a possible target for nuclear attack and the Bush Doctrine of preventive war promulgated in the president's West Point speech of June 2002.[4] Yet North Korea usually framed the U.S. nuclear threat in the context of broader conventional military, economic and political threats posed by the United States, as well as Japan and South Korea, and characterized its own response as purely defensive. As the February 2005 statement noted,

> We had already taken the resolute action of pulling out of the N.P.T. and have manufactured nukes for self-defense to cope with the Bush administration's evermore undisguised policy to isolate and stifle the DPRK. [Our] nuclear weapons will remain [a] nuclear deterrent for self-defense under any circumstances.[5]

Whether the DPRK will change its approach in the aftermath of its second, more successful nuclear test and renewed U.S. talk of global elimination of nuclear weapons remains to be seen. A January 13, 2009 statement by the Foreign Ministry spokesman hints at a potential shift:

> > If the nuclear issue is to be settled, leaving the hostile relations as they are, all nuclear weapons states should meet and realize the simultaneous nuclear disarmament. This is the only option.

Although the statement contains a key qualifier, "leaving the hostile relations as they are," it did hint at an alternative path to the future – mutual disarmament. North Korean interlocutors have never proposed that in U.S. talks, but have dropped hints in informal conversations.

If North Korea is unwilling to live up to its commitment in the September 2005 six-party joint statement to "abandoning its nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs," a Japan-South Korea NWFZ might help to head off further proliferation in the region.

A NWFZ intrinsically raises the question of Japanese and South Korean reliance on U.S. extended deterrence for their security and would constitute another decision point for reviewing their own non-nuclear status, much as the N.P.T. did.

The outcome thus depends critically on Japanese and South Korean views of North Korea's nuclear arming and China's rise – and those views in turn depend on domestic political developments in both countries. It might be best to begin negotiations sooner rather than later, because a Japan-South Korea NWFZ could become a much more difficult proposition in Seoul and Tokyo if the North Korean arsenal grows.

Japan

The domestic political climate in Japan is critical to considering negotiations on a NWFZ. If Washington were to take the lead in proposing a NWFZ, that might revive doubts in some Japanese circles about relying on the United States for its security. It might also rekindle the urge to nuclear arm, which is prevalent on the right wing of the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). By contrast, the prospect of negotiating a NWFZ might strengthen the hand of an overwhelming majority within the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) who want to improve relations with South Korea and China and a sizable

minority within the party who want to marginalize and stigmatize nuclear weapons and promote a receding role for nuclear threats.

Both the DPJ and the LDP have moved to forge closer ties with South Korea in the past few years. Negotiating a NWFZ with Seoul might advance that prospect by easing fears in Seoul about any latent nuclear ambitions in Tokyo.

The one foreign policy stance that unites the DPJ-led coalition government is improved relations with China. On the eve of becoming prime minister, for example, Naoto Kan called for a more balanced foreign policy: *"The course we need to take is to maintain a trusting relationship with the United States and at the same time to consider China as equally important."*

Many in the DPJ also favor a reassertion of Japan's traditional opposition to nuclear weapons. A revealing incident occurred during U.S. deliberations over the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. After Japan's nuclear weapons establishment had lobbied behind the scenes in favor of retaining the TLAM-N nuclear-armed cruise missile, Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada wrote a letter to Secretary of State Clinton on December 24, 2009, favoring retirement of the TLAM-N. At the same, he called for "ongoing explanations of [U.S.] extended deterrence policy, including any impact this might have on extended deterrence for Japan *and how this could be supplemented."*[6] In May 2010 Okada told the Diet that "a norm not allowing at least first use, or making it illegal to use nuclear weapons against countries not possessing nuclear weapons, should be established."[7] In an interview shortly thereafter, Okada made it clear that he favored a NWFZ for Northeast Asia. He noted, however, that even with a NFWZ Japan could continue to rely on U.S. existential deterrence for its security:

> I believe that Japan should advocate the following three points: that the states possessing nuclear weapons, the United States in particular, should declare no first use; formation of an agreement that it is illegal to use nuclear weapons against countries without nuclear weapons; and, partly overlapping with these two, *the initiative of a Northeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone*.
>
> If the United States declares no first use, that does not mean that Japan will be completely outside the nuclear umbrella. In a situation where nuclear weapons actually exist in this world, it would be natural that people feel worried about the nuclear umbrella going away.
>
> I talk about going out of the nuclear umbrella halfway, where first use would not be exercised, but in the unfortunate case that Japan suffers a nuclear attack, we are not ruling out a nuclear response to it. We have such an assurance ultimately. So please understand that I am not just talking about an idealistic theory.[8]
>
> This policy reflects the prevailing view in Tokyo in recent years that a rising China does not pose a threat to invade Japan, and absent that threat, its limited nuclear capacity can easily be offset by U.S. extended deterrence. If Japan were to acquire nuclear arms, it is further believed, that could set off a regional arms race with China adding to its nuclear arsenal and South Korea reconsidering nuclear arming.
>
> That prevailing view is contested by conservative Gaullists and by right-wing nationalists in Tokyo. An unbridled North Korean nuclear program, if it strengthened the hand of those on the far right of Japanese politics who

favor acquiring nuclear arms, could overturn the prevailing view, with profound implications for the survival of the nonproliferation regime.
Japan has substantial quantities of plutonium and the nuclear know-how to weaponize it, as well as the missile technology to deliver nuclear warheads. Yet it has refrained from taking that fateful step.
Japanese leaders have publicly broached the issue of nuclear arming whenever the U.S. security commitment came into question. Prime Minister Eisaku Sato did so in 1965, as did DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa during a 2002 visit to Beijing. In 2003, Mitoji Yabunaka, director-general of the Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, did so implicitly when he urged James Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "to make sure the United States does not again promise not to use its nuclear weapons against North Korea if Pyongyang agrees to dismantle its nuclear development program."[9] Foreign Minister Taro Aso and LDP Policy Chief Shoichi Nakagawa did so in the immediate aftermath of North Korea's 2006 nuclear test.
On several occasions when nuclear diplomacy with North Korea was faltering, Japanese officials have also raised the possibility of nuclear-arming to prod the United States, and sometimes China, into getting serious about negotiations. In 1993, when North Korea gave notice of its intent to renounce the N.P.T., for example, Foreign Minister Kabun Muto said pointedly that "if North Korea develops nuclear weapons and that becomes a threat to Japan, first there is the nuclear umbrella of the United States upon which we can rely. But if it comes to a crunch, possessing the will that 'we can do it ourselves' is important."[10]
The risk that the Japanese might "do it" themselves was a major argument used by Secretary of State Colin Powell in trying to persuade China to arrange three-party talks in 2003 after North Korea resumed reprocessing plutonium at Yongbyon. One consideration for Japan in weighing whether or not to negotiate a NWFZ with South Korea is whether it would ease Beijing's concern about further proliferation in the region and thus reduce China's willingness to play a prominent role in trying to broker North Korean denuclearization.
One potential objection to a bilateral NWFZ is that it ignores potential nuclear threats from China and Russia. Of what value would nuclear assurances from them be? China already has a stated policy of no first use of nuclear weapons. Its small nuclear arsenal and its nuclear posture suggest that it means what it says. Yet China's nuclear capabilities are likely to grow in the coming years, driven by the accelerating arms race in South Asia. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is growing substantially and India is sure to match it. That, in turn, will drive expansion of China's stockpile. Meanwhile, Russia's nuclear capability is in decline, but it has moved in recent years to reemphasize the role of nuclear weapons in its defense posture. Without commitments from China and Russia to forgo nuclear threats or use, a NWFZ with South Korea will be much more difficult to sell in Tokyo.

South Korea

Like Japan, South Korea has the capacity and know-how to make nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them. Unlike Japan, South Korea has twice initiated a program to develop nuclear weapons, prompted by unease about the US security guarantee – first in response to the promulgation of

the Nixon Doctrine and later in response to President Carter's desire to withdraw U.S. troops from the peninsula. It was persuaded to call off those efforts, in the first instance, by adoption of a more aggressive U.S. operational plan for defending Korea with conventional forces and, in the second, by cancellation of the proposed U.S. troop withdrawal. In the early 1980s and again in the 1990s the South conducted enrichment experiments that it failed to report to the IAEA.[11] Now it wants to do pyroprocessing of spent nuclear fuel accumulating at its nuclear power plants.[12] These actions suggest that proposing a Japan-South Korean NWFZ might prompt Seoul to revisit the question of nuclear arming.

Yet the U.S. decision in September 1991 to withdraw all its nuclear weapons from South Korea, while it did occasion initial concern in Seoul, did not lead the center-right government of Roh Tae-woo to revive nuclear arming. Quite the contrary, it led Seoul to reach agreement with Pyongyang on a Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula banning reprocessing and enrichment, as well as the possession, testing, and storing of nuclear weapons. The declaration was stillborn, in part because hardliners in Seoul pushed back with very demanding inspections provisions which Pyongyang resisted. But North Korea did conclude a long-delayed safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency and took the first steps to implement it by providing an initial declaration of its nuclear programs and facilities, including its reprocessing to extract a contested amount of plutonium. More important, it did not move to shut down its reactor and remove spent nuclear fuel in preparation for reprocessing it from 1991 to 1994, thereby denying itself a number of bombs' worth of plutonium. Indeed, it did not resume reprocessing until 2003.

President Lee Myung-bak faces similar pressures from his right wing. In recent years, only a few politicians on the right in Seoul have openly questioned the U.S. commitment to South Korea's security and called for an indigenous nuclear weapons program to counter the North's, but others have expressed concern about Japan's nuclear intentions and suggested that the South hedge its bets.

South Korea might see advantages in negotiating a NWFZ with Japan if it felt that would help forestall a nuclear arms race in the region. A bilateral NWFZ would ease worries about nuclear arming by Japan and enhancement of China's capabilities. But again, commitments by China and Russia to forgo nuclear use or threats of use against them might prove essential to win political support from the right wing, and those commitments would, in turn, depend on a reciprocal commitment from the United States.

United States

Would Washington be willing to provide such a commitment? President Obama has lent strong rhetorical support to reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons in the world. As significant as the lofty rhetoric of his Prague speech, Obama has taken some practical steps, most notably, intervening to alter a draft Nuclear Posture Review that the nuclear priesthood in the U.S. bureaucracy attempted to foist on him. The new U.S. declaratory policy includes a firmer negative security assurance:

> With the advent of U.S. conventional military preeminence and continued improvements in U.S. missile defenses and capabilities

> to counter and mitigate the effects of CBW, the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks – conventional, biological, or chemical – has declined significantly. The United States will continue to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks. To that end, the United States is now prepared to strengthen its long-standing "negative security assurance" by declaring that the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.[13]

This assurance usefully jettisons the Vance exception, announced by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to the U.N. Special Session on Disarmament on June 12, 1978, which says, "The United States will not use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear weapons state party to the N.P.T. … except in the case of an attack on the U.S., its territories or armed forces, or its allies, by such a state allied to a nuclear weapons state, or associated with a nuclear weapons state in carrying out or sustaining the attack." The exception applied to members of the Warsaw Pact and, of course, to North Korea, then allied with the Soviet Union and China.
No longer will the United States plan for nuclear retaliation for other than a nuclear attack on itself or its allies:

> In making this strengthened assurance, the United States affirms that any state eligible for the assurance that uses chemical or biological weapons against the United States or its allies and partners would face the prospect of a devastating *conventional military* response – and that any individuals responsible for the attack, whether national leaders or military commanders, would be held fully accountable.[14]

This statement, while it marks a significant advance in U.S. declaratory policy, does fall short of no first use or an alternative formulation proposed by some, "The U.S. maintains nuclear weapons to deter, and if necessary, respond to nuclear attacks against itself, its forces, or its friends and allies." The Posture Review does not stop there, but prefigures further changes in policy:

> The United States will continue to strengthen conventional capabilities and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks, with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or our allies and partners the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons.[15]

That language will mean a receding role for nuclear arms in U.S. defense strategy if implemented as the result of a "follow-on analysis to set goals for future nuclear reductions below the levels expected in New START," to be

completed once the Senate ratifies the treaty.

Contrast the Obama language with the expansive view of nuclear requirement contemplated in the 2002 Nuclear Policy Review completed under President George W. Bush:

> In setting requirements for nuclear strike capabilities, distinctions can be made among the contingencies for which the United States must be prepared. Contingencies can be categorized as immediate, potential or unexpected. Immediate contingencies involve well-recognized current dangers … Current examples of immediate contingencies include an Iraqi attack on Israel or its neighbors, a North Korean attack on South Korea, or a military confrontation over the status of Taiwan.[16]
> The implications of the shift from Bush to Obama for North Korea were explicit. In the words of the Obama Nuclear Posture Review,
>
> > This revised assurance is intended to underscore the security benefits of adhering to and fully complying with the NPT and persuade non-nuclear weapon states party to the Treaty to work with the United States and other interested parties to adopt effective measures to strengthen the non-proliferation regime. *… In the case of countries not covered by this assurance – states that possess nuclear weapons and states not in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations – there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW attack against the United States or its allies and partners.*[17]
> > The language strongly implies that even in the case of North Korea, while the United States was not forswearing the use of nuclear weapons, it was not threatening to use them either.
> > North Korea's response to the Nuclear Posture Review was to issue a nuclear policy declaration of its own:
> >
> > > President Obama blustered that the U.S. will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that comply with the provisions of NPT but exception is made for countries such as the DPRK and Iran. This proves that the present U.S. policy towards the DPRK is nothing different from the hostile policy pursued by the Bush administration at the outset of its office

> during which it was hell-bent on posing a nuclear threat to the DPRK after designating it as a “target of preemptive nuclear strike.” By releasing the review the U.S. completely backpedaled its commitment made in the September 19 Joint Statement of the six-party talks that it has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear weapons or conventional weapons, and again chilled the hard-won atmosphere for the resumption of the talks. … The DPRK has so far sincerely implemented its international obligation as a responsible nuclear weapons state. The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is the invariable goal of the DPRK. If the peninsula and the rest of the world are to be denuclearized, the U.S. should stop such hostile acts as trampling down upon other countries' sovereignty and right to existence, pursuant to its policy of strength based on nuclear supremacy. What is most urgent is for the U.S. to roll back its hostile policy towards the DPRK in practice, not with an empty talk, and take a confidence-building measure. As long as the U.S. nuclear threat persists, the DPRK will increase and update various type nuclear weapons as its deterrent in such a manner as it deems necessary in the days ahead. The DPRK is fully capable of doing so. It is the U.S. that gives the former ground and justification to do so.[18]

What do Obama’s Nuclear Posture review and its withholding of a negative security assurance for North Korea suggest about the administration’s willingness to entertain a Japan-South Korea NWFZ? Washington has historically been decidedly unenthusiastic about NWFZs in other geographic areas, out of concern that they impair its freedom of action. For instance, when establishment of an African NWFZ was under negotiation, the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations balked at providing a negative security assurance to signatories. The Obama administration, to judge from its formal statement to the N.P.T. Review Conference last month, remains noncommittal.

President Obama's nuclear priorities are to gain Senate ratification of New START and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. To gain a two-thirds majority in the Senate, he needs Republican votes. In this context, he will be wary of taking on any other challenging nuclear initiatives like a accepting a NWFZ for South Korea and Japan, especially if that requires a U.S. commitment not to use nuclear weapons against China and Russia. Short of that, if Tokyo and Seoul were to take the lead in the negotiating a NWFZ, that might make it easier for Washington to go along.

Rapprochement

North Korean willingness to complete the disabling of its plutonium facilities by getting rid of its new nuclear fuel rods in return for resumption of energy aid might open the way to move from containment to rapprochement. That, in turn, might alter U.S. calculations about the utility of a NWFZ.

As of now, nothing short of a fundamental change in the U.S. relationship with the DPRK – political, economic, and military – is likely to induce a rollback of the North's nuclear programs.

What difference would a Northeast Asian NWFZ make for rapprochement under these circumstances? A NWFZ, by itself, is unlikely to promote denuclearization. North Korea might be persuaded to accept a NWFZ and roll back its nuclear programs, but only if the United States undertakes a comprehensive effort to end enmity.

One part of that effort would be for the United States to address North Korean concerns about its nuclear threats by providing Pyongyang with a negative security assurance. In return for North Korean abandonment of its nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs, the United States has promised both in the 1994 Agreed Framework and in the September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement that it would pledge not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against North Korea. Such a commitment would best be put forth as part of a multi-party reassurance in which South Korea and Japan would reaffirm their N.P.T. obligations not to acquire nuclear arms and China and Russia would assure all their neighbors not to use or threaten the use of nuclear weapons against them.

Starting negotiations now on a Japan-South Korean NWFZ might usefully prefigure that reassurance. Yet, unless Washington is willing to participate along with Tokyo and Seoul, the attempt might backfire. Tokyo might prove more amenable that Seoul

because a DPJ-led government may be more willing than its predecessors to pursue normalization with Pyongyang.
The current South Korean government may prove inhospitable to a NWFZ if it were intended to promote U.S. reconciliation with North Korea. Since Lee Myung-bak came to power in 2008 he has been wary of negotiations with the North and moved away from the engagement policy pursued by his predecessors. The Lee administration has impeded six-party talks and has resisted the start of parallel negotiations on a peace regime for the Korean peninsula.[19]
While broaching the subject of a NWFZ runs political risks, conventional deterrence continues to operate on the Korean Peninsula. The South has long had conventional forces capable of defeating the North, with or without U.S. troops, and the North has long held Seoul hostage to its forward-deployed artillery. The North's nuclear weapons affect the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula insofar as they could put U.S. forces and bases in Japan at risk.

Sudden Collapse or Gradual Absorption
Collapse and absorption scenarios raise uncertainty about the fate of North Korea's nuclear weapons. A scramble to search for and seize its weapons, nuclear material, and nuclear facilities could lead to conflict among regional players, especially if they concluded that South Korea was determined to inherit the North's nuclear legacy.
A Japan-South Korea NWFZ would have considerable utility in that event. It might provide reassurance that a scramble could be avoided. The negotiations might also provide a venue for broaching the hitherto unbroachable subject of cooperation to collect North Korea's nuclear wherewithal. Chinese and U.S. participation in the negotiations would be essential.

III. Citations
[1] Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks at the United States Institute of Peace, Washington, October 21, 2009.
[2] Barry M. Blechman, et al., *Force without War: US Armed Forces As a Political Instrument* (Washington: Brookings, 1978), 2, 48, 51, 128; Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington: Brookings, 1987), 31-47; Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 238-41; Roger

Dingman, “Atomic Diplomacy During the Korean War,” *International Security*, XIII, 3 (Winter 1988-89), 60-66, 72, 75, 79-86; Rosemary Foot, “Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict,” *International Security*, XIII, 3 (Winter 1988-89), 98-101; Peter Hayes, *Pacific Powderkeg: American Nuclear Dilemmas in Korea* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1991), 60-62, 127-28, 131-33; and Leonard S. Spector and Jacqueline R. Smith, “North Korea: The Next Nuclear Nightmare,” *Arms Control Today*, XXI, 2 (March 1991), 10.

[3] KCNA, “DPRK FM on Its Stand to Suspend Its Participation in Six Party Talks for an Indefinite Period,” February 10, 2005.

[4] US Department of Defense, Special Briefing on the Nuclear Posture Review (January 9, 2002); White House, President Bush Delivers Graduation Speech at West Point (June 1, 2002).

[5] KCNA, “DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesman on Its Stand,” op. cit.

[6] An unofficial translation of the text is appended to Hans Christensen, “Japanese Government Reject TLAM-N Claim,” FAS Blog, January 24, 2010. (Emphasis added.)

[7] Masa Takubo, “The Role Nuclear Weapons, Japan, the U.S., and ‘Sole Purpose,’” *Arms Control Today*, 39, no. 9 (November 2009), pp. 14-18.

[8] *Ibid*. (Emphasis added.)

[9] *Yomiuri Shimbun*, “Govt. Wants U.S. to Keep North Korea N-Deterrent,” August 23, 2003.

[10] Quoted in James L. Schoff, *Realigning Priorities: The US-Japan Alliance and the Future of Extended Deterrence* (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, March 2009), p. 2.

[11] I.A.E.A., Report of the Director-General to the Board, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement to the ROK,” November 11, 2004; Pierre Goldschmidt, “Safeguards Noncompliance: A Challenge for the IAEA and the UN Security Council,” Arms Control Today, January/February 2010); Jungmin Kang, Peter Hayes, Li Bin, Tatsujiro Suzuki, and Richard Tanter, "South Korea's Nuclear Surprise," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January/February 2005, pp. 40-49.

[12] Frank N. von Hippel, “South Korean Reprocessing: An Unnecessary Threat to the Nonproliferation Regime,” *Arms Control Today*, March 2010, pp. 22-27.

[13] Ibid., p. viii.

[14] Ibid.

[15] U.S., Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture*

Review Report, April 6, 2010, p. ix.
[16] U.S., Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, December 31, 2002, p. 16.
[17] U.S., Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 6, 2010, p. viii. (Emphasis added.)
[18] KCNA, "Foreign Ministry Dismisses U.S. Nuclear Plan," April 9, 2010.
[19] Leon V. Sigal, "North Korea Policy on the Rocks: What Can Be Done to Restore Constructive Engagement," *Global Asia*, 4, No. 2 (Summer 2009), pp. 8-12, and "Sinking Strategy," *International Herald-Tribune*, May 29, 2010, p. 6.

IV. 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.

View this online at:
https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/political-prospects-for-a-nwfz-in-northeast-asia/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org