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Reality Checking: Nuclear Deterrence

The US nuclear umbrella remains reasonably credible as a deterrent to possible nuclear attack on its North East Asian allies, and is not in the slightest dependent on the presence of US weapons on regional soil. But it's just as well that it is never likely to be tested by any such attack, because Tokyo, Seoul or Taipei (or Sydney for that matter) could not be totally confident that the US would be prepared to risk San Francisco for any of them.

What really matters for the region is US extended deterrence, not extended *nuclear* deterrence -- i.e. 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). Regional allies could live more comfortably than they now think they can without nuclear protection, but it would certainly be uncomfortable for them, in the more uncertain environment now evolving, to not have US conventional commitment -- and it would no doubt be destabilizing (triggering a scramble for new capability) if the US were to walk away from the region. But Washington shows no signs of doing so.

It is important, in its own and everyone else's interest, for China as soon as possible to become party to serious bilateral - and multilateral - talks about stabilizing nuclear weapon numbers at their present levels, and ultimately reducing them. There needs to be mutual understanding and acceptance among the nuclear weapon possessing states as to what constitutes a minimum credible deterrent for each of them -- but for that to happen there needs to be real transparency about numbers and deployment arrangements, especially from China. The internal debate in Beijing is moving slowly in that direction, and needs to be encouraged. It is not realistic to expect China -- or any of the other nuclear weapons powers -- to start reducing their stockpiles until US and Russian stocks get down to the low hundreds (from their present 9,000 and 13,000 respectively!), but it is realistic to seek a freeze at present levels, and certainly no 'equalizing up'.

Japan and South Korea

The vision of a plutonium-fuelled energy security strategy may be somewhat at risk in Japan and the ROK as a result of the Fukushima catastrophe, but it is unlikely to impact one way or the other on

the prospects for a nuclear weapon free zone in the region. That will depend on a completely different dynamic: the judgment each country makes about what it needs for its own security, with or without the US nuclear umbrella, or US conventional deterrence support.

Even without US support of any kind, it is not to be assumed that either country would rush to acquire nuclear weapons (as distinct from dramatically increasing conventional capability): there is a very strong international taboo against such weapons in the contemporary age, and a growing consensus among military specialists that for all practical purposes they are unusable for that reason alone. The most likely scenario is that each would adopt a hedging strategy (of the kind Iran probably has) - developing capability to the point they could weaponise at very short notice, and have delivery systems ready and available, but not actually crossing the weaponisation line.

North Korea Related

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 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. Of course any 'limited' war with the North is difficult to contemplate because of its capacity to cause huge artillery damage to Seoul, and the name of the game remains conflict prevention rather than war-fighting.

It is not unreasonable to continue to work and hope for a negotiated denuclearization settlement through the Six Party Talks mechanism. A combination of credible guarantees of regime security, economic support and an end to diplomatic isolation must remain a rationally attractive option to Pyongyang, and its irrationality should not be assumed. Not too much should be assumed from the collapse of the Agreed Framework -- the fault was not entirely on the DPRK side -- or the provocations and brinkmanship that have been characteristic of North Korean negotiating behavior throughout. Only time will tell whether an acceptable settlement is possible, and the door should never be closed to negotiation.

Pending that outcome 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.

A Nuclear Free East Asia?

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.