



IDSS COMMENTARIES (42/2004)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

How to Avoid a Nuclear Arms Race in Northeast Asia

Bernard Loo*

13 September 2004

The recent revelation that South Korea had been conducting research into enriched uranium, purportedly for peaceful purposes, has thrown open the possibility, however slight, of a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia. Understandably, this revelation has raised several alarm bells. It is of course too early to make any concrete assessment of the likelihood of such an arms race developing, but it is important to understand the motives behind and the dangers posed by such a development.

South Korea's Nuclear Programme – Motives

In reality, this is not the first time concerns about the nuclearisation of South Korea have emerged. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the conventional military balance on the Korean peninsula still seemed unequivocally tilted in favour of North Korea, Seoul apparently considered acquiring a nuclear arsenal as a quick and relatively cheap means of cancelling out North Korea's apparent conventional military advantages. This flirtation with nuclear weapons occurred against the backdrop of what seemed then to be a gradual US disengagement from the Asia Pacific. Seoul had then considered the prospect of losing its primary security guarantor as a result of the Nixon Doctrine and the winding down of the US military involvement in the Vietnam War. However, US was quick to both warn Seoul against such a course of action, and to reassure Seoul of its continuing commitment to the defence and security of South Korea.

South Korean policy makers have always maintained a somewhat schizophrenic attitude towards its security relationship with the US, with at least four facets. They recognise that this mutual security relationship has allowed it over the years to maintain defence spending at very manageable levels.

On the other hand, Seoul has always resented a certain American high-handedness in managing the security environment of the peninsula. Since Seoul remains almost solely dependent on the US for high-end weapons systems and platforms, the US is the main driver in determining what South Korea needs for its defence. For instance, the US has always been wary of selling to Seoul its most advanced air combat systems because of concerns that it might provoke North Korea into resuming the war on the peninsula.

At the same time, Seoul has never taken the continuing commitment of the US to its defence and security for granted. South Korean policy makers have always been aware of the possibility – however slight – of the US eventually dismantling the South Korea-US mutual

security relationship. Finally, there has always been a certain level of disgruntlement – at least tacitly – with this security relationship, which taps into a broader socio-cultural and historical wariness of the outside world.

Against this backdrop, there are three possible motives for South Korea's aborted nuclear research programme, assuming that this programme could have been adapted to military purposes. One, South Korean policy makers might see this nuclear research programme as a means of countering a nuclear-armed North Korea, in the event the US security umbrella is removed for whatever reason. A related motive might be that South Korea sees a nuclear capability as one way by which it can rid itself of this dependence on the US for its security and defence. Certainly, if Seoul wanted to dismantle the mutual security relationship, it would have to find some way of countering a nuclear-armed North Korea. Three, this programme might be an attempt to secure one of two possible objectives, both of which are not necessarily inter-related: either ensure that the US security umbrella remains in place in more or less its existing shape and form, or to squeeze from the US more concessions in terms of weapons sales, and in particular gaining access to high-end US weapons systems and platforms that it has been hitherto denied.

This last possible motive encapsulates everything that is schizophrenic about the South Korean attitude towards its security relationship with the US. The research under question clearly began several years before the current plan for downsizing US military forces was even conceptualised. The timing of Seoul's confession, however, is interesting, coming shortly after the US announcement of its detailed downsizing plans. It underscores the point made earlier – about Seoul wanting to retain the US-South Korea security relationship in more or less its current shape and form. The proposed withdrawal of over 30 000 US military forces from South Korea apparently changes both the shape and form of that relationship.

Wider Implications

This entire episode serves to highlight a concern about the planned changes in the global US military deployment.

US military commitments to the Asia Pacific, in terms of sheer numbers of manpower and deployed capabilities, were at its height during the Vietnam War. Since then, while gradually downsizing its forces in the region, Washington has constantly reiterated its continuing commitment to the security of the Asia Pacific. These reassurances from Washington notwithstanding, countries in the region who see this US commitment as a positive security feature have always voiced misgivings about the periodic US downsizing of its military deployments in the region.

Underlying this unease is a potential disjuncture between words and deeds. The US continues to insist that it remains committed to the security of the Asia Pacific, but its reassurance does not necessarily square with its actions, particularly the occasional downsizing of its military forces in the region. Actually, the latest US redeployment plan does not fundamentally reduce the military power that the US can bring to bear in the event of a regional contingency. This is because of the overwhelming technological and capability superiority of US forces over any potential challenger. It is, in other words, a case where the messages the US is sending (and the messages that regional policy makers are receiving) are potentially contradictory. The US says overtly that its interests in the region have remained unchanged, but its actions appear to belie these official statements.

Nevertheless, this apparent disjuncture seems to have missed the attention of policy makers on both sides of the Pacific. The countries of the region see the wider security environment as inherently unstable, with apparent potential flashpoints in the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Straits, and the South China Sea. Under such conditions, security assurances are necessary.

Given that most of the countries of the region cannot afford to adopt a truly independent defence stance (that is, without the US military presence), the US military commitment to the region assumes greater importance, and indeed becomes fundamental to the security of the region. The US can continue to reassure the region of its commitment, but the proposed downsizing of US military forces seems to belie these assurances. Military power – often gauged in terms of military hardware and weapons platforms – remains the most potent security assurance to policy makers in this part of the world. A dwindling US military presence therefore does not always reassure, especially when the US military is beginning to focus its attention less on hardware and more on software.

Policy Options

Obviously, the best-case scenario is one where there is no nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia. It would be an alarming prospect for the countries of the region if South Korea and Japan both engage in nuclear weapons programmes. In the unlikely event that Japan decides to militarise its nuclear programme, there can be little doubt that it can very quickly generate a significant amount of nuclear military power.

In the remote event that South Korea does become a nuclear military power, however, the main focus will have to shift from preventing nuclear proliferation (which would have clearly failed by then) to managing nuclear proliferation. Countries in the region will have to accept the emergence of a nuclear balance on the Korean peninsula.

Attention will then have to shift towards the creation of crisis management regimes – such as hotlines between Seoul and Pyongyang, advance notification of military training exercises that can be inspected and witnessed by each side, and mutual declarations of no first use. Secondly, what would have to be put in place for both Koreas would be sophisticated and redundant command and control systems that can minimise, if not totally prevent, the prospect of accidental or unauthorised launch of nuclear weapons.

The good news, of course, is that this is crystal-ball gazing of the worst-case scenarios. In reality, it is not clear that South Korea's nuclear programme had a military function to it. South Korea was quick to reassure the region that its programme was for peaceful purposes only. It is reassuring that it was Seoul who informed the IAEA of this aborted research programme. What is needed is to reinforce the IAEA inspections of South Korean nuclear facilities. Only then can the countries of the region be reassured of Seoul's continuing non-nuclear military posture, and that a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia remains an unlikely prospect.

* Bernard Loo is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.