

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email your feedback to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Managing a Nuclear North Korea: More Is Not Better

By Bernard F.W. Loo

Synopsis

Given North Korea's nuclear ambitions, is the best way to manage security and stability in Northeast Asia to encourage both Japan and South Korea to acquire their respective independent nuclear arsenals? Or will this proposal more likely encourage greater instability and bring the region closer to nuclear cataclysm?

Commentary

IF WE accept that North Korea's nuclear ambitions will continue, and that the reclusive state will eventually possess a working nuclear weapon that can be delivered by the ballistic and cruise missiles that it is also developing, the question is how a nuclear-armed North Korea can be managed such as to maintain stability in Northeast Asia?

One argument that has been forwarded is that deterring North Korea from using its nuclear capabilities will be to encourage both Japan and South Korea to acquire their own independent nuclear arsenals. This is the phenomenon of horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons, paralleling the argument forwarded by the pre-eminent scholar Kenneth Waltz in 1981 that "more may be better".

Will the Waltz Scenario Work?

This argument recognises that Japan, in particular, will face an especially difficult transition towards its own nuclear arsenal. China will surely object as strenuously as possible, and attempt to marshal regional opinion in support of its position by raising the spectre of Japan's World War II history. South Korea is the most likely candidate, given its well-known position on Japan's World War II history.

Furthermore, if China succeeds in mobilising South Korea to support Beijing's opposition to a Japanese nuclear arsenal, this can have the added consequence of unravelling the United States-South Korea security relationship.

Nevertheless, as the argument goes, such attempts will likely fail. A nuclear-armed Japan and South Korea can comfortably remain within the ambit of a security partnership with the US. And in the long run, a Northeast Asian version of mutually assured destruction (MAD for short), the doctrine that allegedly kept the Cold War from tipping over into a nuclear war, will ensure that North Korea is deterred, that it will not commit any rash acts with its own nuclear weapons. However, the argument is fatally flawed, for the following reasons.

MAD as a Uniquely US Doctrine

Firstly, it is doubtful that the stability of superpower relations during the Cold War was due to the doctrine of MAD. To begin with, MAD was a doctrine promulgated by the US to address the situation of nuclear parity with the Soviet Union. The US then patently structured its nuclear forces into a strategic triad, dividing its nuclear arsenal more or less equitably between air-launched nuclear weapons, land-based and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

This was to ensure that even if the US was targeted by a massive Soviet nuclear attack, the former would have enough survivable second-strike capability that could bring upon the latter unacceptable levels of damage.

However, the Soviet Union's nuclear force structure, based principally on its land-based ballistic missiles and retaining only a small proportion of nuclear weapons in strategic bombers and submarines, suggested that it did not subscribe to MAD.

Rather, this force structure suggested that the Soviet Union believed in a doctrine whereby in the event of a superpower war, it would launch a massive attack against the US designed to completely destroy the latter.

In other words, MAD might have plausibly persuaded the US that it did not need to initiate nuclear war; the same cannot be definitively said of the Soviet Union.

From MAD to a Mexican Standoff in Northeast Asia?

Secondly, for MAD to work, the Soviet Union and the US required sufficient early warning of a land-based nuclear launch, the principal arm of the strategic triad – given their relative accuracy – that would have been used to attack each other's nuclear forces. The early warning systems that both superpowers maintained provided them with a reaction time of approximately 30 minutes.

Presumably, this would have been sufficient time for sufficient numbers of strategic bombers to deploy for a retaliatory strike against the adversary. Further retaliatory capability was maintained in the ballistic missile submarines that were already deployed in the vicinity of their respective launch areas.

In other words, it is precisely the mechanics of MAD that preclude such a doctrine from being fruitfully applied to a scenario of a nuclear-armed Northeast Asia. To begin with, the likely nuclear forces of these countries will be so small as to preclude the existence of a retaliatory capability that can survive a nuclear pre-emptive first strike and still possess sufficient capacity to punish the aggressor for its pre-emptive nuclear attack.

Thirdly, the region is simply too compact, such that warning times of a pre-emptive first strike will be virtually non-existent. In November 1979, a computer glitch led US defence officials to believe that the Soviet Union had launched 250 land-based ballistic missiles. In this instance, the US President had between five and seven minutes to make a decision to launch retaliatory forces.

US land-based ballistic missile crews and B-52 bombers were readied, and it took about six minutes for the computer error to be recognised as the source of the problem. Given the significantly shorter distances separating the states of Northeast Asia, such time to ascertain and verify will be virtually non-existent.

Preemptive Strike Increasingly Attractive?

Finally, and stemming from the preceding observations, this will then generate significant pressures on policymakers in Pyongyang, Seoul and Tokyo to “use them or lose them”. Pre-emptive strikes will become an increasingly attractive, even necessary, policy option at the slightest hint of a political crisis that might result in nuclear devastation if one side hesitates.

Of course, the preceding observations include the worst-case scenarios. Nevertheless, even if the worst case does not eventuate, horizontal proliferation will create a Mexican standoff, where none of the states involved can afford to back down. Tension becomes a more or less permanent feature of the relationship.

However, in such a standoff, the actors involved have to have cool heads, they have to want to maintain the standoff without recourse to shooting. They cannot cough, cannot make any sudden movements; otherwise, disaster may happen.

Bernard F.W. Loo is Associate Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
