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Nuclearised Northeast Asia: Why Including Japan, South Korea May Work

By Graham Ong-Webb and Nah Liang Tuang

Synopsis

While provoking energetic debate, Bilahari Kausikan's idea advocating the possible nuclear armament of South Korea and Japan is fundamentally grounded in sound nuclear deterrence doctrine.

Commentary

IN A recent commentary in the Washington Post, Bilahari Kausikan, Singapore's ambassador-at-large and former permanent secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, wrote a thought-provoking piece entitled 'To deter North Korea, Japan and South Korea should go nuclear' (10 October 2017). The article's title completely captures Mr Kausikan's core proposal.

In fact, his analysis actually stands on firm intellectual ground, demonstrating his grasp of not only nuclear deterrence scholarship as expounded by thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz but the implications of the nuclear weapons revolution itself.

Possible Resistance and Misunderstanding

Yet, his article is very likely to create uproar amongst significant quarters of the global public on the grounds of moral abstention. As buoyant support for the international non-proliferation agenda regarding nuclear weapons indicate, such technology is seen as abhorrent – including by the Japanese and South Koreans. As Mr Kausikan himself wrote: "I don't think Japan and South Korea are eager to become nuclear-armed states".

There will also be the problem of his proposition being misunderstood by those unfamiliar with the mechanics of nuclear deterrence. Indeed, several online responses have compared such deterrence to the argument that civilian ownership of firearms deters criminal violence.

This analogy is at best, uneducated; there is a severe mismatch between gun-related violence in the United States, and the deterrent effect of gun possession championed by American firearms ownership advocacy groups. While this is so, applying this analysis about conventional weapons in a civilian setting, to the stabilising concept of more countries having nuclear weapons, easily becomes untenable.

Nuclear Deterrence Stability

The invention of nuclear weapons constituted a fundamental shift in the nature of warfare, and conceivably in international relations itself. As scholars of nuclear deterrence observe, while the past purpose of conventional wars was to fight and win them, the chief purpose of nuclear wars -- in an age where several states own them - is to *avoid such a conflict entirely*.

Put simply, the only reason why one state chooses to possess nuclear weapons is to stop another nuclear-armed state from using them. Here, it is another doyen of international politics, Kenneth Waltz, who masterfully applied the implications of the nuclear revolution to the topic of nuclear deterrence in a 1981 paper entitled "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better".

Firstly, he argued that "Nuclear weapons...make the cost of war seem frighteningly high and thus discourage states from starting any wars that might lead to the use of such weapons". Secondly, he observed that "Nuclear weapons have helped maintain peace between the great powers and have not led their few other possessors into military adventures".

Indeed, beyond the cases of nuclear brinkmanship now familiar to us, there has not been a single nuclear war between nuclear-armed states embroiled in significant tension.

Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) Revisited

As such, Waltz himself saw public condemnation of mutually assured destruction as an "oddity" despite its stabilising effects. He argued that if "[t]o deter literally means to stop someone from doing something by frightening him" then with nuclear arms, "A deterrent strategy makes it unnecessary for a country to fight for the sake of increasing its security, and this removes a major cause of war".

Waltz suggests that the increase in the number of nuclear-armed states creates a cancelling effect of nuclear threats. This is exactly what Mr Kausikan is proposing for the stabilisation of the regional standoff between North Korea, South Korea, and Japan when he wrote: "However difficult the process of getting to a six-way balance of mutually assured destruction may be, once established, it will be stabilising."

What about differences in strategic culture, especially if a country is known for having a belligerent historical record? Barry Buzan noted that the immense destructive power of nuclear weapons is “great enough to transcend the differences of culture and values”.

Writing in the 1980s, he argued: “The differences between ‘soft’ cultures like those in the affluent West, that were thought to be rather sensitive to the human and material costs of war, and ‘hard’ cultures like those in the Soviet Union, and even more so in China, that were thought to be insensitive, would disappear when the threat was the rapid and almost total vaporisation of society.”

Extended Nuclear Deterrence?

As Mr Kausikan has pointed out, the regime in Pyongyang has shown itself to be “ruthless”. Because North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un has chosen not to cease deploying nuclear weapons, the governments in Tokyo and Seoul have little choice but to arm themselves with similar weapons.

To reiterate Mr Kausikan's point, the window for pre-emptive kinetic action against North Korea's nuclear weapons capabilities has passed because the country has had enough time to make its missile firing platforms mobile, making it difficult to knock out all of them. It takes just a few warheads to annihilate almost all of Tokyo or Seoul.

What about the American nuclear guarantee to Japan and South Korea? Historical precedence set by both the United Kingdom and France in doubting US nuclear coverage indicates that assurances of ‘extended nuclear deterrence’ are impossible to be taken seriously. As such, if Japan and South Korea nuclearise, it would be in their self-interest to do so, and if any country were in their shoes, its government would likely do the same on the basis of national survival.

Nuclearised Northeast Asia: Revolution of Its Own

Technically, a nuclearised Northeast Asia, comprising China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea and Russia apart from the United States as a Pacific power, is most likely to generate relatively robust regional ‘nuclear deterrence stability’. The challenge ahead is not technical but social and political.

Accommodating a nuclearised Northeast Asia will require a ‘revolution’ of its own -- the re-education of current perceptions and the adjustment of present geopolitical and institutional arrangements. Additionally, to ensure the durability of the status quo, Pyongyang needs to be told in no uncertain terms that nuclear proliferation beyond its borders will not be tolerated.

Just as importantly, its present nuclear arsenal will not be recognised as a shield excusing military adventurism or state sponsored terrorism, and that either of these actions will constitute “red lines” which justify military action leading to mutual assured destruction. Getting the Kim regime to believe this will be a perceptual and political challenge.

At the end of the day, the international community cannot undo the nuclear revolution. A nuclearised Northeast Asia, should it happen, is still a better outcome than the current prospect of a nuclear attack against a non-nuclear-armed Japan and South Korea. While a nuclearised Northeast Asia is definitely tricky, it is an option to avert a regional disaster having global repercussions.

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