

North Korea's Nuclear Weapons: Implications for the Nuclear Ambitions of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan

Christopher W. Hughes



CHRISTOPHER W. HUGHES (PhD University of Sheffield, 1997) is Reader/Associate Professor, University of Warwick, UK. He is the author most recently of *Japan's Reemergence as a "Normal" Military Power (2004)* and *Japan's Security Agenda: Military, Economic and Environmental Dimensions (2004)*. He can be reached at <c.w.hughes@warwick.ac.uk>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article evaluates the nuclear intentions of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in the wake of North Korea's October 2006 nuclear test.

MAIN FINDINGS

Even in the event of an unstoppable North Korean nuclear program, none of the four principal drivers of nuclear proliferation are sufficient or confluent enough to shift Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan toward active nuclear weapons programs:

- *National security* \approx The national security dilemmas vis-à-vis North Korea are not yet strong enough; Japan and South Korea still see opportunities for diplomatic engagement and conventional deterrence; and—most crucially—Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan do yet fear sufficiently the alliance dilemmas of U.S. entrapment or abandonment.
- *Prestige, identity, and norms* \approx National prestige and identity create temptations for nuclear proliferation, which however are also countered by domestic pressures for conformity with norms and regimes for non-proliferation.
- *Domestic political economy* \approx Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have only a minimal vested economic interest in nuclear weapons development, and the overall international economic costs militate against nuclear armament.
- *Technological capability* \approx All three countries may have the eventual technological capacity to develop nuclear weapons, but this capacity would be slow in coming and would constitute a poor substitute for U.S. extended nuclear deterrence.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Washington still has the capacity to prevent further proliferation by revisiting U.S. policy toward the four principal nuclear drivers.
- Of benefit would be for the U.S. to move through diplomatic efforts and the upgrading of its alliances both to control security dilemmas involving North Korea and to reaffirm its extended nuclear guarantees. The U.S. would need, however, to assert deterrence more than pre-emption so as to avoid entrapment and alliance dilemmas.
- Also beneficial would be if the U.S. would show a re-adherence both to international and regional expectations for minimizing the role of nuclear weapons in regional security and to norms and regimes of non-proliferation.
- Furthermore, of benefit as well would be for the U.S. to continue to provide technological and economic incentives and disincentives to nuclear proliferation.

North Korea's first nuclear test on October 9, 2006 has sent security shockwaves across Northeast Asia. Although the test was not wholly unexpected, and the international community led by the United States had been struggling with declining effect to contain North Korea's nuclear program for a decade and half, the test has still forced the regional powers to scramble to find a response in the form of sanctions and attempts to restart the six-party talks. At the forefront of regional policymakers' minds is the concern that any potential window of opportunity to either roll back or at least stop further North Korean nuclear proliferation may be closing. Pyongyang's ability to flout bilateral, six-party talks and Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) agreements regarding North Korea's nuclear program can only work to reinforce the assumption that U.S.-led efforts (whether in the form of engagement, containment, or the threat of military force) to dissuade North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK) from its nuclear program may be close to exhausted. The consequence is that the DPRK may progress, largely scot-free, toward the production of miniaturized nuclear weapons to be combined with its ongoing ballistic program, thereby providing North Korea with a full-fledged nuclear deterrent.

In turn, it is clear that also close to the forefront of regional policymakers' minds is the long-held apprehension that if North Korea is allowed the unbridled maintenance of its nuclear program then this will have a broader impact on nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia. It is often speculated that the current non-nuclear weapon states in Northeast Asia, whether "reversal" or "threshold" states, may be provoked by North Korea to embark on their own nuclear weapons programs. This "nuclear cascade" might begin with Japan reconsidering its nuclear option, closely followed by South Korea reacting to the change of stance by both North Korea and Japan. The possible further upgrading by China (People's Republic of China or PRC) of its nuclear capabilities and doctrine, in reaction to a nuclearized Japan and Korean Peninsula, might then trigger renewed interest by Taiwan in a nuclear weapons capacity. Since October of 2006, North Korea's nuclear test has refueled this type of speculation. In mid-October, almost as if on cue, Nakagawa Shoichi, Chairman of the Policy Research Council of the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and Foreign Minister Aso Taro attempted to initiate a debate in Japan on the utility of nuclear weapons. Abe Shinzo, the new prime minister, moved to reaffirm Japan's non-nuclear principles, but not before Japan's purported nuclear intentions had attracted the interest of China

and South Korea.¹ The leadership of both states expressed their appreciation of the need for Japan to preserve its non-nuclear stance.² President George W. Bush on October 16 noted his concern that Japan's possible reconsideration of its nuclear stance would cause anxieties for China and that North Korea's nuclear weapons might produce an arms race in Northeast Asia.³ Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice on October 10 voiced similar concerns, although expressing confidence that Japan would not go nuclear.⁴ Meanwhile, in the United States there is a willingness to exploit again the so-called Japan card of encouraging talk of Japan's breaching of its non-nuclear stance as a means to punish China for its failure to pressure North Korea on its nuclear program.⁵

The objective of this essay is to consider how much foundation should be afforded to such speculation. Is such speculation the stuff of perennial scaremongering (especially with regard to the case of Japan) that fails to take into account the constraints for Northeast Asian states that act against their seeking to acquire nuclear weapons? Or does this prediction accurately reflect the fact that, now effectively out of the box, North Korea's nuclear program is exercising an even greater pernicious influence in gnawing away at nuclear constraints in the region? In addition, the essay seeks conclusions both about the wider ramifications for regional security and about how the United States might look to manage its regional security ties so as to minimize the impact of North Korea's nuclear status.

The essay is divided into five main sections:

- ≈ pp. 79–83 examines the four main drivers or facilitators for and against nuclear proliferation

¹ "Jimin Seichokai 'Kaku Hoyu no Giron Hitsuyo,' Shusho wa Sangensoku o Kyocho" [LDP PARC: Debate on Nuclear Weapons Is Necessary: Prime Minister Emphasizes Three Non-Nuclear Principles], *Asahi Shimbun*, October 15, 2006 ≈ <http://www.asahi.com/special/nuclear/TKY200610150124.html>.

² "Wen Lauds Abe's Non-Nuclear Stand," *Japan Times Online*, October 25, 2006 ≈ <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/nn20061025a5.html>.

³ "Nihon no Kaku Busoron, Chugoku mo Kennen Busshu Daitoryo ga Hanno" [Japan's Nuclear Weapons Debate, China Concerned, President Bush's Reaction], *Asahi Shimbun*, October 17, 2006 ≈ <http://www.asahi.com/special/nuclear/TKY200610170272.html>.

⁴ "No Japan Nukes: Rice," *Japan Times Online*, October 12, 2006 ≈ <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/nn20061012a2.html>.

⁵ Jim Lobe, "U.S. Neo-Conservatives Call for Japanese Nukes, Regime Change in North Korea," *Japan Focus*, October 17, 2006 ≈ <http://japanfocus.org/products/details/2249>. For an earlier articulation of the strategy of pushing Japan toward nuclearization to counter North Korea, see Ted Galen Carpenter, "Options for Dealing with North Korea," *Foreign Policy Briefing* 73, January 6, 2003, Cato Institute ≈ <http://www.cato.org/pubs/fpbriefs/fpb73.pdf>. For a discussion of the Japan card strategy in general, see Kurt M. Campbell and Tsuyoshi Sunohara, "Japan: Thinking the Unthinkable," in *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices*, ed. Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 246.

- ∞ pp. 83–93 examines the case of Japan against each of these main drivers to reveal the degree of its interest in nuclear proliferation
- ∞ pp. 93–98 likewise examines the case of South Korea
- ∞ pp. 98–101 so examines the case of Taiwan
- ∞ pp. 101–104 outlines the policy implications for the United States in seeking to slow or halt the spread of nuclear weapons in Northeast Asia

EXAMINING NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION IN NORTHEAST ASIA

In order to ascertain the potential impact (now and looking toward 2015) of North Korea's nuclear weapons acquisition upon proliferation in Northeast Asia, it is necessary to employ a combination of historical and theoretical insights. The examination of historical precedent is useful because this is not the first time that the proliferation question has been raised in Northeast Asia, and thus history may reveal the key motivations for states to seek or abstain from nuclear weapons acquisition. Likewise, general theories of nuclear proliferation, many of which are derived in part from historical experience in Northeast Asia and other regions, also provide a means of identifying the key motivations that determine a country's stance toward nuclearization: to pursue nuclear weapons, to be against the pursuit and to continue to abstain, or to continue to "hedge" their capabilities.⁶ Hence, taken together, historical precedent and proliferation theories provide a set of conditions governing nuclear proliferation, the absence or prevalence of which can then be tested for in the contemporary region in order to divine likely proliferation scenarios and trajectories.

National Security: Security and Alliance Dilemmas

National security is generally regarded as the primary driver of nuclear proliferation.⁷ States faced with enhanced security dilemmas resulting from existential threats—whether in the form of new conventional or nuclear capabilities, or new offensive and defensive weapons systems that add

⁶ Ariel E. Levite, "Never Say Never Again: Nuclear Reversal Revisited," *International Security* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2002/2003): 59.

⁷ John Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (January 1950): 157–80; Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/1997): 57; and Mitchell B. Reiss, "Prospects for Nuclear Proliferation in Asia," in *Strategic Asia 2005–06: Military Modernization in an Era of Uncertainty*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis and Michael Wills (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2005), 335.