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“Coping with Emerging Threats to East Asian Security”

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Coping with Emerging Threats to East Asian Security

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The Increasingly Unstable Southern and East Eurasia

The end of the Cold War was supposed to bring about “peace dividend,” a popular term used for only a few years after 1989. Perhaps the Europeans and the Russians shared some peace dividend. Yet the rest of the world has quickly forgotten that right after the end of the Cold War such a term even existed. Many armed conflicts, whether ethnic, religious, or territorial, have been stirred up by authoritarian states and those forces opposing them, many of which were located along the southern and eastern periphery of the Eurasian Continent, more specifically, the Balkans, Southwest Asia (the Middle East), South Asia, and East Asia. Weapons of mass destruction and guided missiles have proliferated to the region. Suicide attacks organized by nonstate actors such as al Qaeda, Palestine

radicals, and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) have become a major feature of regional politics. The United States, which has emerged as the single superpower in world politics in post-Cold War years, has increased its defense expenditures and advocates “preemptive strikes” against these terrorist threats.

East Asia faces such threats of terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which have wider implications for global security. What methods should the governments of East Asia employ in order to counter such emerging security threats?

North Korea’s Nuclear Development and Multilateral Sanctions

North Korea’s suspected nuclear programs are currently a major center of world-wide attention. The six-party talks, which were held in Beijing for the first time late last August, may succeed in persuading North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs in exchange for some kind of “regime security” and economic support. Yet it is difficult to be optimistic. Pyongyang seems to be confident that Washington, being so preoccupied with the Iraqi situation, is not going to “invade” North Korea. It also seems to feel assured of China’s economic and energy support, since the latter apparently meets some 60 percent of North Korea’s energy needs. South Korea also is on the way to expand its trade and investment in North Korea, expecting the north to gradually shift into a low-level capitalist economy and to moderate its external posture. Thus it can afford to buy time to develop nuclear programs.

It will most likely drag out the talks so it can prolong the cancellation of its nuclear programs.

Under these circumstances “dialogues” alone do not bring about a desirable outcome. Non-military sanctions and threats to implement them have to be effective. All nations concerned about North Korea should take measures to target sanctions toward the Pyongyang leadership, by stopping illegal smuggling of sensitive machines of dual use and hard currency into North Korea and of illicit drugs and forged currency out of North Korea. South Korea, which is reportedly emerging as the second largest trading partner for North Korea, should more seriously consider imposing economic sanctions. The United States may adopt a policy of accepting a certain number of refugees from North Korea. This will give a message to North Korean leaders that their political system is unacceptable to Washington.

There will also be organized efforts by several like-minded countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, under the name of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Their objective is to interdict vehicles that may carry smuggled goods such as missiles and nuclear materials on the high seas and in international airspace. Uniform pressures of other non-military sanctions against Pyongyang are also important.

China, having a decisive influence over North Korea’s economic and energy needs, thus holds a key to the success of the six-party talks. While Beijing today has emerged as a country that unfolds a constructive diplomacy, criticism against China will be voiced by Washington and Tokyo in the future if it should fail to use its economic card against North Korea, to

bring about the latter's abandonment of nuclear programs.

In the meantime, assuming that North Korea may not agree to abandon its nuclear programs, Japan has strengthened its security ties with the United States, by speeding up the joint development and deployment of missile defense systems. The Minister of State for Defense, Shigeru Ishiba, also takes the position that Japan should be able to attack North Korea's missiles if they are imminently poised to attack Japan. Japan and the United States should have military readiness to deter or counter North Korea's attacks by weapons of mass destruction.

Relations across the Strait of Taiwan

Disagreements between Beijing and Taipei remain unresolved. Although economic interdependency across the Strait of Taiwan has increased with the growth of trade, investment, and tourism, there are no immediate prospects for improvement in political and military relations between the mainland and the island. This is admittedly an old issue.

However, inter-Strait relations have recently assumed a new dimension. The Taipei government has started to issue passports showing "Taiwan," an indication that it wants to make the island an official separate government unit. It also advocates producing its own constitution by national referendum in 2006. Beijing does not rule out the possibility of using force to prevent the Taipei government from pushing toward its formal independence.

In the period of 1997 to 2001, Taiwan and China were the world's two top importers of arms, although in 2000 and 2001 China's purchase of arms was by far the biggest. Meanwhile, the Pentagon's annual report on China's military capabilities this summer indicated that about 450 missiles were deployed along the Pacific coast facing the Strait of Taiwan, with an annual estimated addition of 75 missiles. Is Beijing contemplating military operations to "liberate" Taiwan, when it feels ready? If so, when is it likely to happen?

While Beijing claims that inter-Strait relations are internal matters, the issue has a long historical background that has important international implications. Washington will sustain its traditional efforts in supporting a democratic government run by over 22 million people in Taiwan and providing modern weapons for Taipei to balance the mainland's military capabilities. The inter-Strait relations cannot be discussed either in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or in ASEAN plus 3, due to China's opposition. They can better be handled among Washington, Beijing, and Taipei. The goal should be to maintain the status quo.

East Asia's Energy Needs and Regional Efforts

East Asia has become a gigantic consumer of energy resources. China has become an oil importer. East Asia today depends upon the Middle East oil for 85% of its oil needs, in comparison with 25% for North America and 39% for West Europe.

Sources of threat to energy security to the East Asian countries are two-fold. First, if the Middle East, particularly the Gulf region, should become politically unstable, it might affect the stable supply of oil for East Asia. Second, if terrorist and piracy attacks should be made on oil tankers sailing the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the Strait of Malacca, it will also seriously affect the supply of oil for East Asia.

Today, the U.S. Seventh Fleet operates in a broad area of the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans. Japan provides naval bases and facilities for the U.S. Seventh Fleet. Singapore also provides naval facilities. Recently Vietnam has admitted the first visit by a U.S. naval ship to Ho Chin Minh City. These close relations between the U.S. and East Asian countries help cope with potential threats to the security of the sea lines of communication.

However, more regional multilateral talks may well be conducted within the framework of ARF or ASEAN plus 3, or other appropriate forums, since most countries of the region depend upon the security of the sealanes concerned. The South China Sea and the Indonesian waters today are considered as the world's most dangerous areas in terms of pirates equipped with heavy arms and sophisticated communications tools. Anti-piracy measures should be devised through multilateral arrangements.

Terrorism

Current terrorist attacks by al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah are not the first of the kind in East Asia. North Korean agents at one time threw

grenades at a group of visiting top leaders from South Korea in Myanmar and at another time blasted a South Korean passenger plane by a time bomb. It also abducted South Korean and Japanese citizens. North Korea was sponsoring terrorism. Japan also suffered from Buddhist fanatics, called the Aum Shnrikyo supporters, who attacked Tokyo subways by sarin gas in 1995.

Yet the suicide attacks by al Qaeda and JI are of Islamic origin, posing threats to the United States and its supporting nations. Their attacks have so far taken place in the Philippines and Indonesia, while suspects were uncovered in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, as well as Japan and Australia. Terrorists may join hands with pirates in the South China Sea.

The best way to cope with terrorism is for all nations concerned to improve capabilities for intelligence-gathering and develop devices to share intelligence. This includes the enhancement of the quality of policemen and police organizations of all nations in the region. State-of-the-art technology should be employed to build a national and regional police network in order to identify suspects. It is also important to build a close relationship between the police and citizens, in addition to close surveillance of people's possessions at buildings and vehicles and of cargo ships and planes. Preemptive actions are then important to prevent terrorism from actually taking place. Again, multilateral consultations are necessary.

However, efforts should also be made toward eliminating the root causes of terrorism in the long run. Political oppression, combined with

economic misery, often encourages terrorism. Fair and just political solutions to conflicts are essential, and those concerned nations, particularly rich nations, should make greater attempts to close the gap between rich and poor. Official development aids should be granted more effectively.

China's Uncertain Future: Military Growth and SARS

With the appointment of Hu Jintao as President and Communist Party General Secretary in March this year, Chinese leaders are unfolding a skillful diplomacy to win friends in Washington and East Asian capitals. The first six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear issues were held in late August with relative success with China's adroit management. In October, China joined ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and closed a political distance with ASEAN. This adds to the already close economic relations that Beijing has with ASEAN, by offering even a free trade agreement.

Yet China's future is far from certain. While its economy has been growing at the annual rate of 6 to 9 %, it has created a huge economic gap between urban and rural regions and between developed and underdeveloped sectors within urban areas. The fast economic growth also facilitates more resources being spent for military growth. China is buying destroyers and submarines from Russia. The People's Liberation Army is responsible for China's space program. Its successful launch of a manned spacecraft in October is believed to indicate intended military use of space

rather than scientific exploration of space. In the meantime, China has neglected public health and other social services policy, a result of which was revealed in its vulnerability to epidemic diseases such as SARS.

It is difficult to see where the contradictions between the high economic- military growth and neglected social services will lead. Is China likely to face industrial and agricultural unrest, causing internal political instability of substantial scale? Or can it manage its internal contradictions, leaping forward? A weak, internally unstable China may be a source of economic and social concern for the region, as a number of people are likely to leave the country as refugees. An economically successful China can become a politically and militarily dominant, if not hegemonic, power in the region. Such a China is likely to face rivalry with India, which is also becoming competitive in exerting its diplomatic and economic influence into Southeast Asia.

The future of China really would affect the security environment of East Asia. If China should pursue a role as a constructive and cooperative actor, regional security talks on terrorism and disputed islands in the South China Sea are likely to be fruitful. Multilateral security talks in ARF would also lead to credible security arrangements. However, a political and military dominance by China would become a cause of security concern for many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, causing a Sino-American rivalry, or a strong tie among Japan, the United States, and Russia. India may also join the camp encircling China. In either scenario, the Japanese-US alliance is likely to serve as a core for Asia-Pacific security.

Some Concluding Remarks

Security threats in East Asia are of different nature. There is no single regional security regime to resolve all such threats. Bilateral security arrangements such as the Japanese-US alliance are highly reliable, while multilateral consultations such as ARF may be also useful for building confidence among the countries concerned. Thus different security issues require different approaches:

For North Korea's nuclear threats, the six-party talks seem to dissipate the tensions between North Korea and the United States, though it is not certain whether the talks can really resolve the tensions. International efforts in imposing non-military sanctions should be in order. On inter-Strait conflicts, the United States should support Taiwan's democratic development but not its formal independence. It should also persuade Beijing to restrain itself from using force against Taiwan. For the stable supply of Middle East oil to East Asia, there should be multilateral consultations in ARF or ASEAN plus 3 on the security of the sealanes in the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and East China Sea. Terrorism, on the other hand, requires closer networking of intelligence among the police and the military of the countries concerned. A coalition of willing nations may actually work better than ARF or ASEAN plus 3.

Prime Minister Koizumi proposed the setup of "an East Asian community" in Singapore in January 2002. This proposal will be further

discussed at the forthcoming special summit between the top leaders of Japan and ASEAN 10. The community concept should lay out a road map to a regime of regional security cooperation.

*President, National Defense Academy. The views expressed herein are the author's and do not represent those of the Japan Defense Agency, with which he is affiliated.