

# Prospects for East Asian Security: A Korean Perspective

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## Introduction

East Asia has been at peace for more than a quarter century. For nearly every East Asian country save the most laggard, this long peace, to borrow John Lewis Gaddis' words, has brought about unprecedented economic development and internal growth. The economic slump brought about the financial crisis of 1978-79 notwithstanding, East Asia continues to move forward and grow, becoming more interconnected, ever more interdependent, and increasingly more transparent. In the age of instant telecommunication and the internet, the process of integration and interdependence is likely to accelerate not slow. Arguably, after nearly a century of bloody conflict, destruction, and lost opportunities, East Asian states have finally come to appreciate the benefits of cooperation over conflict.

It would, of course, be premature to assert that the dangers of renewed conflict in the region have declined to genuinely tolerable levels. North Korea's capacity to make trouble, the potential volatility of the China-Taiwan relationship, territorial disputes in the South China Sea, are among the more obvious areas of concern. Tension in between the United States and China over the introduction of Theater Missile Defense (TMD) is the latest issue of contention clouding the regional security horizon. But in spite of these problems, East Asia is a fairly stable place at this juncture. There are no immediate political or military challenges that threaten to undermine the region's fundamental strategic stability. Nor is there any permanent basis for hostility amongst the major players in East Asia. The dangerous fires of militant nationalism that inflamed the region in the first half of the past century, and the antipathetic ideologies that fueled the Cold War for most of the second half, have now receded into history.

In spite of East Asia's apparent strategic stability, however, the major regional actors appear to be as preoccupied about their "security" as ever. What accounts for this paradox? Are security prospects for the region truly darkening as we enter this century? Or does the professed unease instead reflect exaggerated or unfounded fears and suspicions? What ought to be done in order to maintain strategic equilibrium, promote cooperative behavior on the part of potential rivals, and extend peace in the region?

## 1. Seeing Demons, Organizing Crusades

Is East Asia irreversibly headed for growing instability and possible conflict? In a recent study, none other than Graham Allison states that “the Asia-Pacific region has become an increasingly dangerous and uncertain Place...fraught with old instabilities and new risks.”<sup>1</sup> Allison asks why “America’s alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region has not evolved or changed significantly since the end of the Soviet threat”, implicitly calling for a new security arrangement that could more effectively counter what he calls the “arc of potential instability from the divided Korean peninsula...to the nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan...to an unstable Indonesia...to China’s political and ideological conflict with Taiwan”.<sup>2</sup> The premise is that the best way to address these and other dangers, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other destabilizing high-tech conventional weapons, is to strengthen the United States’ alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, investing in more advanced weapons systems including missile defenses, and by retaining a strong American military presence in the region.

While strengthening of the alliance is clearly called for, this alone is not likely to be sufficient. In order to meet future security challenges, we are going to need more than just more of the old medicine. In the extremely fluid strategic environment in East Asia today, we need to identify ways to diffuse tensions as much as we need to prepare our defenses in the event that our efforts toward tension reduction and preventive diplomacy should fail. Above all, we must be very careful about drawing new lines of demarcation separating the region into an “us” and “them”. Given complexity of regional politics, not to mention the increasingly intertwined economic relationships in the region, who would be included and who would be left out? And are the region’s complex security challenges really best addressed by simply strengthening the alliance? Do we fully understand the nature of the security threat to the region after the Cold War in Asia? What can we do that is more forward-looking, more proactive than merely doing more of what we did in the past?

It is certainly unsatisfactory that North Korea continues to brandish the threat of unleashing another war on the Korean peninsula, or uses the threat of going nuclear as instruments of national policy. North Korea’s actions are profoundly dangerous and destabilizing to the fragile peace in East Asia. It is also not satisfactory that China threatens

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<sup>1</sup> Although Allison defines the Asia-Pacific region to include Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia along with Australasia and the Pacific Islands, for our purposes we can probably substitute and narrow the Asia-Pacific region to the core East Asian region (Northeast and Southeast Asia) without too much loss of geographic or strategic meaning. See Graham T. Allison’s comments in the preface to Robert D. Blackwill and Paul Dibb, eds., *America’s Asian Alliances* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard JFK School of Government, 2000), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the use of force against Taiwan should the latter choose to declare independence. Chinese and North Korean sales of ballistic missiles and missile parts must be restrained. It is no more satisfactory that massive abuse of basic human rights routinely take place not only in North Korea and China but also in many other parts of East Asia.<sup>3</sup> The potential for regional spillover of internal disturbances in Indonesia, Laos and Myanmar, not to mention North Korea, cannot be overlooked. The potential for naval clashes in the South China Sea is another area of concern. The catalogue of potential trouble spots big and small could go on.

Clearly, closer alliance cooperation, perhaps even strengthening, may be called for as we address these challenges and sort out security priorities as we begin this century. But many of the security challenges in East Asia today defy simple military solutions. Even if military solutions may appear tempting at times, it would be well to remember that any conflict involving North Korea, or for that matter China, will without the shadow of a doubt exact terrible, unacceptable costs for the alliance. Especially for the United States, the recent experience in former Yugoslavia ought to hold out some lessons about the international political and economic costs of military solutions, if not about the virtual impossibility of maintaining domestic political support for prolonged military intervention overseas.

Even if the alliance strengthening were to be less threatening to potential adversaries, especially China, what would this achieve in the end? China is a nuclear-armed military giant, not easily pressured by outside powers. Need we be reminded of the Sino-Soviet split? Japan and South Korea are fully aware of the potential costs of a new cold war in East Asia. How, then, would the United States motivate a very reluctant Japan, or an even more reluctant South Korea possibly, to join in what could very easily become an extremely costly, dangerous and probably unnecessary "containment" of China? It should be evident that pushing this idea too far could lead to the very opposite of what Allison would like to see, contributing not to a strengthening but to the fraying of the United States' alliances with Japan and South Korea.

It is critical that we bring a far more blended, sophisticated touch to the region's security challenges of this century. The blunt sword of military alliance has its uses, but we need more than that in East Asia today. A "reshaping" of the security arrangement, a "new security architecture", a "new security framework"...how often have we heard these and other tired variations of these expressions? And how little have they meant? The reality underpinning regional strategic stability has been the lack of fundamental hostility amongst the major actors, and the considered application of flexible, pragmatic policy measures by these powers that aimed at incremental gains, seeing it in their mutual interest not to view the evolving East Asian security environment through the prism of zero-sum calculations.

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<sup>3</sup> On systematic human rights abuses in North Korea see, among others, Denny Roy, "The Security-Human Rights Nexus in North Korea", *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Winter/Spring 1997, pp.1-19.

This is particularly true in the case of the United States. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has arguably had substantial leeway for unilateral actions in East Asia. But instead of throwing its weight around indiscriminately, Washington chose to work around the cold war security architecture it had invested in, prudently using only limited amounts of pressure to achieve clearly defined and achievable objectives. Over-ambitious or dogmatic responses to many of the region's security problems in the recent past, such as on the Korean peninsula in 1994 or in the Taiwan Straits in 1996, could have thrown the whole of East Asia into widespread turmoil. Alliance cooperation has been useful in this regard. Japan's, and to a lesser extent South Korea's, contribution in terms of diplomatic and economic contributions to stabilize the region have also been valuable to regional stability. In the case of defusing the North Korean nuclear crisis of 1994, for example, Seoul's decision to contribute the lion's share of the funds for KEDO was critical to the success of the Geneva Framework Agreement in October of that year.<sup>4</sup>

What East Asia can definitely do without in this century is another war. Avoiding war, not preparing to fight one, is THE foremost, not to mention the common, security challenge facing the countries of this region. To the extent traditional military deterrence strategies have their uses, such strategies ought to be pursued but cautiously lest they themselves become the source of conflict. We must take care to guard against seeing or creating new demons where none exist (we still have old ones to deal with). Most of all, as that ultimate realist Hans Morgenthau warned us, we must not let ourselves become the prisoners of a crusading mindset, not unless absolutely vital, sheer survival issues are at stake. Are security challenges in East Asia today of this kind?

## 2. East Asia's Strategic Environment in 2001

As noted at the outset of this paper, the dangers of renewed conflict in the region have not diminished to tolerable levels. East Asia is one of the most heavily armed regions of the world. Especially in Northeast Asia, China and Taiwan, Japan, and the two Koreas are still spending substantial amounts to modernize and upgrade their military capabilities. Total defense spending in the region amounted to about \$150 billion in 1998, and grows at over 20 percent annually despite the economic slowdown.<sup>5</sup> Seeds of possible future conflict lie in the

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<sup>4</sup> KEDO is the acronym for the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, a multilateral initiative to provide two light-water nuclear power generators for North Korea in exchange for the latter's cooperation in shutting down its Soviet supplied graphite reactors suspected of producing weapons-grade plutonium for Pyongyang's clandestine nuclear weapons program.

<sup>5</sup> Detailed breakdown of individual country expenditures for East Asia and Australasia can be found in *The Military Balance 1998-99* (London: IISS, 1999), pp.165-201.

still festering territorial and political disputes. There are few regional institutions to enhance security. Those that exist, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), are still in their infancy and far too weak to enforce regional order. In addition, the strategic competition for power and influence in between the four major powers in the region— China, Japan, Russia and the United States —add another layer of uncertainty to the region's future security.

The sheer political diversity of the region, from democracies to those led by authoritarian governments to outright military dictatorships, creates further difficulties for stable relations amongst East Asian countries. Moreover, with the exception of the United States and possibly Japan, virtually every one of the players in East Asia is driven by non-status quo foreign policy goals. China has clear ambitions to be the regional hegemon in this century, displacing the United States. Russia obviously is not happy with its present status and frustrated that it cannot play a bigger regional role. South Korea, even as it worries about the economic costs and potential internal instability that might arise from unification, anticipates the day when a united Korea can gain a more independent role on the regional and global stage. North Korea harbors the same dreams, albeit one that is the mirror image of its Southern cousin.

In the ASEAN region, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines all aspire to greater regional influence, though their limited capabilities circumscribe their strategic horizons for the time being. Instability in Southeast Asia would pose serious challenges to regional security and well-being because nearly half of the world's maritime trade, including fuel and natural resources vital to Northeast Asia, passes through the sea lanes that lie in between the Southeast Asian countries.

Despite these concerns, however, there is no immediate danger that the region's essential stability will be rocked in the near future by actions on the part of the smaller players in the region. Although they may chafe at existing arrangements from time to time, in general they have all been beneficiaries of the existing order. Moreover, they are dependent on the continuation of the present system if they are to keep on growing economically and politically. Though things may change in the longer term, for now none of the smaller actors in East Asia have strong incentives to try to upset things as they are. That is, except for the two unknowns— North Korea and Taiwan. Over the foreseeable future the actions of these two smaller actors carry the greatest potential to either help perpetuate or seriously destabilize the peace in East Asia.

#### (1) *Taiwan*

We have had a foretaste of what serious tensions across the Taiwan Straits can do to the region in the crisis of March 1996. At that time, China, trying to influence the outcome of Taiwan's first open presidential elections, conducted three waves of military exercises in the

Taiwan Straits. China's intention was to demonstrate that any moves by Taiwan to declare an independent stance from Beijing's "One China" policy would be met by overwhelming force to bring Taiwan back into China's fold. In the first exercise, the Chinese PLA fired four short-range M-9 tactical missiles that landed outside the two main Taiwanese trading ports of Kaoshiung and Keelung. This was followed by a combined naval and air exercise south of the Taiwan Straits that was intended to show that the PLA could gain air superiority over Taiwan and block off maritime access to the island. The final exercise drove home the point with an amphibious landing drill on the island of Pingtan, ten miles offshore from the Chinese mainland.<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, the unprecedented Chinese military exercises threw Taiwan into panic. The Taipei stock market plummeted, the currency markets also took a dive, and foreign investors began to feel severe jitters. Other countries in the region, most especially South Korea and Japan, paid close attention to the development. In the end, the United States had to respond to the Taiwan crisis by sending two carrier battle groups from the 7<sup>th</sup> fleet to calm nerves in Taipei and to signal Beijing that the use of force against Taiwan would not be permitted. Undoubtedly, however, the United States would have preferred to not have had a stand-off with China over Taiwan. The Pentagon, in fact, in an effort to downplay the incident, officially explained that the two carrier battle groups were detouring around the Taiwan Straits because of bad weather.

Washington's foremost security objective in the Taiwan Straits is to keep a balance in between Beijing and Taipei and to avoid military conflict. For Washington, the March 1996 elections in Taiwan, where the opposition party called for de jure independence and precipitated the crisis, was a no-win situation. On the one hand, the Clinton administration could not be seen to be discouraging democratic processes in Taiwan and, on the other, it had no effective levers to discourage Beijing from taking the actions that it did. But neither could Washington sit idle, lest its inaction be misinterpreted by Beijing or by its allies and others in East Asia. By having to respond to Beijing in the fashion that it was forced into, Washington had to accept a period of worsened relations with Beijing. But perhaps the biggest cost was the damage done to the gradual warming in the bilateral relationship since the severe deterioration after the June 1989 Tienanmen incident. Popular and Congressional perceptions of China went from bad to worse after the incident. For the United States which needs China's cooperation on a broad range of issues in East Asia, not least among them the thorny issue of managing North Korea, the Taiwan Straits crisis was an unwanted, untimely and extremely

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<sup>6</sup> For detailed analysis of the March 12-23 PLA exercises, see East Asian Diplomatic and Defense Review (Toronto: Han-He Information Center), April 1996. On the political and strategic implications of China's Taiwan policy, see Weixing Hu, "The Taiwan Strait and Asian Pacific Security", *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Winter/Spring 1997, pp.149-182.

frustrating challenge.

## (2) North Korea

The criticality of the North Korean nuclear threat, and Pyongyang's sale of missiles and missile parts and technology dominated East Asian, particularly Northeast Asian, security discussions for much of the 1990s. The test firing of North Korea's three-stage Taepodong missile in the summer of 1998 was especially alarming to Tokyo as its trajectory went over the Japanese archipelago.<sup>7</sup> The Taepodong missile scare followed on the earlier scare unleashed by the test firing in 1993 of more primitive Rodong missiles that landed in the sea between the Korean peninsula and Japan.

The possibility of North Korean missiles raining down on Japan was arguably one of the most compelling reasons, not least in the popular imagination, for Japan moving with alacrity to sign on to the United States' plans for Theater Missile Defense in the North Pacific. In August 1999, Japan formally signed a \$350 million agreement with the United States to fund a five-year joint research and development for a sea-based upper-tier TMD capability.<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, however, the North Korean threat to the region appears to have been checked to an encouraging extent in 2001. The combination of continued deterrence policies enhanced by joint American and South Korean efforts to bring the North Koreans into a pattern of constructive engagement may finally be bearing fruit. In June of last year, South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung became the first ever South Korean leader to meet with his Northern counterpart, General Kim Jong Il. The Pyongyang summit was an important milestone that may be the harbinger of a less tense, more cooperative relationship between the two Koreas.

The Northern Kim's visit to Shanghai last week, if reports of his activities and remarks are accurate, could be further evidence that North Korea may be on the verge of undertaking

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<sup>7</sup> On North Korean missiles, and more generally on the need for close alliance policy coordination to control North Korea's military threats and prepare for the endgame in North Korea, see Kyongsoo Lho, "The Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea in 2003: Soft Landing or Collapse?" Kyongsoo Lho and Kay Moller (eds), *North Korean Scenarios and Responses of the European Union* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1999), pp.15-32.

<sup>8</sup> For detailed discussions of missile threats in Asia and an excellent study of Japanese and other Asian reactions to the United States' deployment of Theater Missile Defense/National Missile Defense (TMD/NMD), see Michael J. Green and Toby F. Dalton, *Asian Reactions to U.S. Missile Defense*, (Seattle: National Bureau of Research), Vol. 11, Number 3, November 2000. Especially pp.16-20 for Japanese reactions.

some significant and much needed changes to its way of doing things both internally and in the external domain. Even if the North embarks on internal reforms and improves its dealings with the outside world, it is likely that the situation on the Korean peninsula will stay tense for some time still, and there remain serious obstacles before we can be reassured about North Korea's longer-term intentions. But the risk of renewed war on the Korean peninsula must now be considered to have become less immediate than at any time since the 1950s. If the reforms that the Northern Kim is rumored to have in his mind become real, the risk will decline even further, enhancing stability on the Korean peninsula and in the region as a whole.

Arguably, therefore, as we enter this century it is not so much the Korean peninsula anymore but the Taiwan Straits that probably raises the greatest regional security concerns for the foreseeable future. The progression of domestic events in Taiwan over the past decade suggests that Taipei is not going to back down easily from asserting its *de jure* independent international status irrespective of Chinese threats. Beijing, in turn, emboldened by its increasing wealth and regional reach, will hardly compromise on its "One China" policy. As the Taiwan Straits crisis of March 1996 amply illustrated, the next round of tensions between China and Taiwan could easily escalate out of control, dragging in the United States and its allies into an unwanted conflict with China.

### 3. Maintaining Priorities in a Time of Uncertainty

Two interrelated events in the past decade served to fundamentally alter East Asia's strategic landscape. First, the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed what was until then perceived to be the principal threat to regional security and stability. Second, the disappearance of the Soviet threat in turn made it unnecessary for the United States to maintain its strategic cooperation with China (what was then termed a "united front" by the late Deng Xiao Ping). After 1991, China's significance to the formulation of United States' foreign and security declined sharply and led to a reassessment of China's strategic relevance in the future.

There are a number of reasons for this change in American perceptions of China's relevance in global and regional affairs. Although the scope of this paper does not permit a full discussion on this important subject, the "marginalization" of China's in American strategic thinking likely stemmed from at least the following calculations: one, Washington's initial euphoria/over-confidence about its sole supremacy combined with the anticipation that all socialist states, including China, would crumble over the near term; two, that in any event the United States no longer needed China to keep strategic stability in East Asia; three, that needing infusion of American capital, technology and markets for its economic development China would remain cooperative; but if worse came to worst and China were to oppose American leadership, the combination of America's wealth and technological lead in the military sector—



the “revolution in military affairs (RMAs)”, were then just beginning to capture the imagination of American military planners —would assure American supremacy. The success of the Gulf War seemed only to confirm these assumptions.

But the making of a new world order patterned in America's self-image proved a bit more difficult than was assumed in 1991. Not only the so-called rogue states, and not just the Islamic world opposed the idea. And it was not quite as simple as Samuel Huntington imagined things either, with non-Western civilizations “clashing” with the West for global predominance; most European countries had deep reservations about the notion too, even as they recognized the indispensability of America's strategic power projection capability in assuring global and regional peace. Both Europe and Asia, skittish about American “unipolarity”, chose instead to try to strengthen existing international institutions and create new ones such as the Asia-Europe inspired ASEM summits and ministerials.

What about Chinese reactions? It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that China's suspicion of the United States' global and regional policies have multiplied in the past decade to a point where Beijing now no longer sees much benefit in seeking cooperation with Washington. The United States-Japan security partnership to which Beijing showed ambivalence in earlier times is now seen as an active, not so long-term threat to China's security. Beijing's political leadership and the PLA see the 1999 Yugoslav conflict in a very negative light, and nationalist passions against the United States were aroused as the result of the unfortunate bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. China's intense suspicion of the United States only compounds the uncertainty in what is already a fragile relationship between Washington and Beijing.

It is against this backdrop that Washington proposes to upgrade Theater Missile Defenses (TMD) in East Asia and construct a National Missile Defense (NMD) system for the continental U.S. The rationale given for the missile defenses is two fold: one, that the United States must have reassurances against rogue states and terrorist groups that may seek to attack America in the future; and two, that America's allies in East Asia must be protected against North Korea's missiles. The Chinese PLA quite predictably is firmly against this plan, as are the Russians. The recent spate of visits by Russian and Chinese leadership to each others capitals was brought about by their common opposition to the deployment TMD/NMD.

Strictly speaking, there can be little doubt that a fully capable TMD system in East Asia would provide military reassurance for the United States forces in the region and for America's allies, Japan and South Korea. TMD capability for Taiwan would clearly give it the confidence to take an even more independent stance against China. For the American defense manufacturers involved in the development of the TMD/NMD, participation by these countries, and others, would help defray research and development cost as well as bring down unit productions costs as well.

But the real question has to be this: will acquisition of Theater Missile Defenses truly enhance security for East Asia, or reduce risks for U.S. forces in the region? If one anticipates the inevitability of future conflict with China, the answer is probably “yes”. If one does not, the answer can only be more qualified. The crux of the dilemma, then, is how to think about China, and thinking out ways to encourage China to take a less hostile view of the outside world than it harbors at this time. If security policy is left only in the hands of military planners in both Beijing and Washington, the likelihood of increasing suspicion and conflictual relations grow. If, on the other hand, security is defined in broader, more comprehensive ways that includes a more central role for constructive diplomacy, the odds improve for a better managed, less conflictual relationship.

East Asia’s security and stability in this century critically depend on the absence of serious conflict in between China and the United States. There is no other security challenge greater than this facing East Asia today. The past decade has not been encouraging in this respect. Opportunities were lost either because of the lack of sufficient priority attached to the management of bilateral relations in between the two East Asian giants, or because one or the other, or both, failed to exercise the diplomatic initiative to get ahead of the curve and prevent potential problems from taking shape. The Taiwan crisis of 1995-6 was arguably avoidable had there been some timely and effective diplomacy. If the growing rift in between China and the United States is left untended the possibilities for further deterioration in the bilateral relationship can only grow, with the danger that the two will get trapped into a new arms race fraught with risks for the whole region.

The security task ahead for East Asia is clear. The United States and China must sit down together and try to narrow the gap in their respective positions and strategic outlooks. Although hard national security interests of both countries will have to be debated, it should not be impossible to arrive at mutually acceptable goals and the norms whereby their relationship could be regulated in this century. As the China scholar David Shambaugh notes, “...geography and long-term national interests suggest...that the United States and China must coexist in the world and in the Asia-Pacific region”.<sup>9</sup> East Asia cannot be stable without stable relations in between China and the United States. It is probably unavoidable that the relationship will be competitive, but the competition need not become adversarial and hostility-ridden. It should go without saying that if the core security question revolving around the two powers is made more transparent and manageable, subsidiary issues such as North Korea and Taiwan, or the issues of the South China Seas, will become more amenable to negotiation and peaceful resolution.

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<sup>9</sup> David Shambaugh, “China’s Military Views the World”, *International Security* Vol.24, No.3 Winter 1999/2000, p.79.