

Changing Security Dynamics in Asia Pacific Region

Khusrow Akkas Abbasi

Introduction

Recent developments in Asia Pacific region, primarily because of US rebalancing strategy, have multiplier effect on its geo-strategic environment. Rivalries between states have become more pronounced. Asia Pacific region has two nuclear powers and two powers i.e. Japan and South Korea which have the necessary technological base and knowledge to develop nuclear weapons. These are sometime referred to as technological deterrent powers on the basis of their ability to go nuclear at a short notice.

The Asia Pacific region may become world's most complex nuclear environment in the 21st century. The region's existing nuclear powers are continuously modernizing and expanding their capabilities. There is a serious risk that several other states may be caught in security dilemma and opt to nuclearize themselves in years ahead. Intensifying potential dyadic and triadic rivalries, the possible proliferation of nuclear capabilities, and the potential of further change in US policies will impact stability throughout the region, and complicate the efforts to achieve objectives of the international nonproliferation regime.

The region's growing economic and political importance has forced the US to return and maintain a strong foothold in the region. The region produces 30 percent of global exports, its two-way trade with the US surpasses \$1 trillion annually and holds two-thirds of global foreign exchange reserves.¹ China's phenomenal rise in recent decades has made it a powerful actor in the Asia Pacific region's security dynamics. Furthermore US' strategic policies to rebalance have deep and long time implications for the security arrangements of the region.

Against the backdrop of these dynamic changes, the article explores the question whether rival powers in the region, particularly Japan would have an incentive to become overtly nuclear in the evolving strategic environment? It also engages with the sub-question regarding how on-going regional tensions are likely to shape the

future security outlook of the region. Several countries are therefore revisiting their security policies, the paper will however focus on Japan's policies in the changing security dynamics but policies of certain important players in the region will also be briefly discussed.

Evolving Asia Pacific Security Environment

Almost a decade ago, China was only an emerging power, while today it has become a key regional and global player. China's rise portrays the emergence of a new economically vibrant and politically powerful Asia Pacific region. North Korea carried out its third successful nuclear test on February 12, 2013, in the aftermath of its first successful satellite launch.² Such developments have stirred up new suspicions about the pace of the North Korean technical advancement both in nuclear and space programs.

Japan was a uni-dimensional power, till 1990s, on its way to becoming an epitome of the 'economic state' model and disinterested in defence and security related relationships. Its economy was rated second to only that of the US till 2010.³ This is beginning to shift and Japanese power is becoming increasingly multidimensional, although on the policy front it continues to act hesitantly in the region.

After the Vietnam War Asia Pacific region witnessed a unique balance of power. The balance of power was maintained between Asian continental powers i.e. Soviet Union and later China – and the US led coalition of littoral Asian states. This period of geostrategic stability was marked by the absence of any direct military conflict which helped support internal stability among Asia Pacific states (excluding North Korea) and led to unprecedented economic growth and development in the region.

The period of geostrategic stability in the region may be disturbed as a as a result of the comprehensive political, economic, and military transformation now underway there. Changing geopolitical landscape of the Asia Pacific region necessitates that Asian powers have a new look at their security strategy in order to preserve and protect their national interests. However this is not to imply that Asian powers have been inactive in the face of altering security environment but the changes are outpacing their abilities to respond in many instances.

China's Response to the US' Asia Pacific Strategy

Chinese domestic political discourse perceives that the United States' Asia Pacific strategy has two fronts — economically to take advantage of the opportunities available in Asia's emerging markets, and to craft a power balance with China, which is likely to pose a threat to the US' geostrategic interests in the region in the future.⁴

The US economic objectives are to recuperate lost strength and further stimulate its economic influence. It is widely argued, in Washington, that emerging Asian regional integration not only places China at a relatively advantageous position regionally but also jeopardizes US economic interests.⁵ Regional integration in Asia Pacific region has been solidifying since signing of multiple free trade agreements such as China-Taiwan (ECFA), and China-ASEAN (CAFTA), and ASEAN with Australia and New Zealand, Japan, South Korea and India.⁶ Chinese policymakers believe that CAFTA is responsible for the decline in exports and jobs in US. It is for this reason that the US has launched Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiative for enhancing trade relations with states in this region.

China believes that the aim of TPP is to reinforce political pressure over the region and to contain China.⁷ Beijing views soft containment, re-balancing, isolating or encirclement of China as the primary objectives of the US Asia Pacific strategy.⁸ Rising US economic and military engagement in the Asia Pacific region is perceived by China as a threat to its national interests and position as a regional great. Chinese attribute the US policy on South China Sea and its joint naval exercises with regional states to Washington's Cold War mentality and a threat to the security of China and an effort to intimidate and contain China.⁹

National Priorities and Goals

Two recent Chinese white papers: *China's National Defense* in 2010, and *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces* (2013), present a detailed picture of Chinese views of the logic and potential drivers behind Chinese military modernization program.¹⁰ In these papers, China offers an overview of its strategic outlook on global developments.

Active Defense, Local Wars, and People's War describe how China aims to carry itself, build up its forces, and fight at strategic level.¹¹ At operational level, (in the Chinese terminology, at the campaign level), the Chinese army has doctrines of warfare that it believes will make possible for China to win local wars in the early 21st century, even if the adversary is technologically superior. In order to achieve these objectives China has been modernizing its defence forces for the last few years.

On March 5, 2013, Beijing announced a 10.7 percent increase in its annual military budget raising it to \$114 billion, continuing more than two decades of sustained annual defense spending increases.¹² China's leadership characterize the first two decades of this century as a "strategic window of opportunity".¹³ It believes that within this time frame, both internal and external conditions will be favorable for expanding China's "comprehensive national power".¹⁴ Its leaders anticipate that a successful expansion of comprehensive national power will serve China's strategic objectives, which include: enabling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to rule, sustaining economic expansion and maturity, maintaining political stability, defending national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and securing China's status as a great power.¹⁵ Taiwan understandably continues to be a dominant factor in the Chinese force modernization agenda.

Beijing is also making advancement in military programs and weapons procurement intended to develop extended-range power projection and operations in emerging security domains like cyber, space, and electronic warfare.¹⁶ Recent trends in China's weapons production and procurement will facilitate the Chinese People's Liberation Army to carry out a wider range of military operations in Asia well beyond Taiwan, in the South China Sea, western Pacific, and the Indian Ocean.

In pursuit of these goals some key systems have already been deployed while some are to be developed by the end of 2014. These include ballistic missiles (including anti-ship variants), anti-ship and land attack cruise missiles, nuclear submarines, modern surface ships, and an aircraft carrier.¹⁷

On March 25, 2014, while addressing the US Senate Armed Services Committee the head of US Pacific Command (USPACOM), Admiral Samuel Locklear stated that China's advance in submarine capabilities is significant. They possess a large and increasingly capable submarine force. "I think they'll have in the next decade or so

a fairly well modernized force of probably 60 to 70 submarines, which is a lot of submarines for a regional power.” The latest class of PLAN submarines would be armed with a new ballistic missile with an estimated range of 4,000 miles (7,500 km). This will give China its first credible sea-based nuclear deterrent, probably before the end of 2014.¹⁸

In order, for China, to ensure two-way trade, particularly the flow of Middle East oil supplies, Chinese navy has begun to carry out counter-piracy operations on Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOC). China’s disputes over maritime claims in the East China Sea with Japan and several other Southeast Asian claimants to all or parts of the Spratly and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea have led to renewed tensions in these areas.¹⁹

With this level of Chinese, current and evolving, force posture in reaction to security dilemma like situation posed by the US there are emerging security concerns in the region. China’s rise has altered the regional security dynamics and has paved the way for uncertainties among regional states. With the result that domestic political discourse in Japan and South Korea, which are technologically advanced states, is changing in favor of military modernization.

Calculating Japan’s Threat Perception vis-à-vis Rising China

With China’s growing presence in the Asia Pacific region and the territorial disagreement among the littoral states in the East China Sea the security dynamics, especially between China and Japan, have become extremely complex. Threat perceptions related to other regional states such as North Korea and South Korea, are also entwined into this complex matrix. Seoul had discarded its nuclear weapons program in the 1970s, however, like Japan it has the latent technical capacity to produce nuclear weapons.²⁰ North Korea, with its nuclear and missile technology, has also added uncertainty in the dilemma.²¹ For China and Japan, the existing situation is of particular concern. Both China and Japan are identifying threats emanating from each other, while their own strong reactions to these perceived threats are creating a strong sense of insecurity in the region. This vicious circle has not only brought a level of uncertainty in Chinese and Japanese relations but has also kick-started an escalating arms race in the region.²²

Although China has repeatedly emphasized that it has no hegemonic intentions and that its military expansion is just to defend its territories and coastlines but Japan sees China's increasing military power as a threat to its national interests and existence.²³ Japanese leaders have repeatedly asserted that the security environment around Japan has unprecedented volatility and therefore considerable readjustment of its national defense policy is inevitable.²⁴ The establishment of the Japanese National Security Council (NSC) on November 27, 2013, is partially a product of this growing threat perception.²⁵ It is interesting to know that the National Security Bureau, the secretariat to the NSC, has one division among others dealing with "friendly countries" while another that entirely deals with China and North Korea.²⁶ From Japan's point of view, China and North Korea are the two biggest destabilizing factors in the region and pose equal threats to its national security. China responded by formally establishing its own NSC under the same logic.²⁷ In Chinese calculations most of its security threats originate from the US-Japan alliance.

Japan's security dilemma also suffers from the credibility of its alliance with the US, in particular at a time when tensions with China on disputed islands have escalated.²⁸ Spiral of changing strategic environment and inter-connected island disputes have brought South Korea and other parties in direct opposition to each other.

Japan's Rearmament

Japan's constitution was drafted after the Second World War, by Supreme Allied Commander Douglas MacArthur. The framers of the constitution wanted to ensure that Japan would not be in a position to pose a military threat to the West in future. The constitution, therefore, specifically laid down that Japan will never develop as a military power. The chapter II of the Japan's constitution contains only one article under the heading 'Renunciation of War' which says aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.²⁹

Japan has been ardently following policies reflecting the spirit behind this article since the constitution became operational.³⁰ But these policies have come under considerable strain in recent years. Japan's existing security arrangements are being questioned as they are considered inadequate to meet the rising threat to its security. A debate in influential circles in Japan began in 2006 with focus on augmenting its external security.³¹

The notion of belligerency vs. self defence came under critical examination in the context of these debates in Japan's political circles. Keen on enhancing its defence against external threat the government wants to reinterpret relevant article of the constitution because under the rules of business a lengthy and complex procedure is involved in inserting an amendment or changing a constitutional clause. Prime Minister's cabinet has approved a reinterpretation of the constitution in July 2014, widening the definition of the right to self-defence to include the defence of an ally under attack.³² Earlier Japanese governments had held that Japan only had the right to collective self-defence, referring to the article 51 of the Charter of the UN.

Polls of July 2014, however, show that majority of Japanese people oppose the collective self-defence reinterpretation.³³ Beside domestic apprehension, there are also repercussions on increasingly complex regional dynamics of the reinterpretation for Japan's security policy.³⁴ The change of Japan's security policy, in the perspective of constitutional reinterpretation, would not only have internal political repercussions, it would also require Japan to play a bigger role in security alliance with the US. The latter has long been prodding Japan to share the burden of its defence, a stance that supports Obama Administration's "rebalancing" strategy.³⁵

Ongoing Nuclear debate

The contemporary shift in power arrangement of the Asia-Pacific region has again stirred international debate on Japan's nuclear policies. Since North Korean nuclear weapons program was launched in the early 2000s, a number of US officials have mentioned the likelihood of Japan's nuclear response.³⁶ Some US officials have argued that the US should support Japan to build a nuclear ability to deal with North Korean overt nuclearization, and to manage the rise of China.³⁷ Hugh White views that Japan might 'go nuclear' in search of greater independence, getting out of US' influence to balance China's growing power and also believes that a nuclear

Japan would be indispensable for the stability of the current international order.³⁸ However there are several voices which maintain that a nuclear Japan is undesirable and that Japan must continue its reliance on US for deterrence.³⁹

The fundamental arrangement of Japan's non-nuclear policy within its policy circles has not yet altered. Japan has constantly wanted to preserve credible US extended deterrence in the region, while maintaining its status as a non-nuclear state. It is, therefore, highly implausible that Japan will go nuclear by shifting its existing nuclear policy, as long as there is no amendment in the constitution. However, contradictions between these two different policy options—Japan's non-nuclear identity and relying on US extended nuclear deterrence have been a cause of strain in Japan's policy. The Japanese policymakers have endeavored to remove the apparent dissonance between these two contrary policy options by differentiating between Japan's instant request for US nuclear umbrella, and its long-term objective for the elimination of nuclear weapons.⁴⁰

However, there are instances in the past when contradictions in the two policy positions became more apparent. During the Cold War, for example, Japan went against its own non-nuclear principles as it allowed US nuclear armed warships to enter its waters in order to provide deterrence against the Soviet Union.⁴¹ Similarly, Japan's agenda for global nuclear disarmament, for which it signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in 1996 received a setback when the US refused to sign the CTBT.⁴² Japan had then openly criticized the US for its inability to sign the treaty.

However, since the intensification of North Korea's nuclear threats, Japanese criticism of the US has reduced. Japan went to the extent that it officially requested Bush administration not to rule out the option of use of US nuclear weapons against North Korea as a means to ensuring Japan's security.⁴³ Such historical moves might not have directly collided with Japan's overall nuclear disarmament policy, however, it explicitly showed that there is always tension between Japan's national identity as a non-nuclear state and its continuous demand and enormous dependence on the US nuclear umbrella. This extended deterrence for Japan also carries the price tag of \$4.4 billion in terms of Host Nation Support (HNS) which makes as much as 75 percent of the total cost to US for maintaining troops in Japan.⁴⁴

It is improbable that Japan will instantly take a U-turn on its nuclear policy. Japanese policymakers are likely to continue dealing with this dilemma in the next few years. As the credible threats from the region grow, the dilemma is likely to become more acute. Therefore managing regional threats and insecurity is not only important for enhancing Japanese security but also for reducing its reliance on US nuclear guarantee.

Japanese non-nuclear policy has been challenged by North Korea's nuclear and missile tests in 2006 and 2009. Support for development of nuclear weapons within Japan has grown in the wake of these tests both among the people and political circles. In October 2006, for example, 17.6 percent of people approved the statement that Japan should reassess its commitment to continue to be a non-nuclear state depending on changes in the international environment'.⁴⁵ But in 2009, 24% wanted it to revise to permit the introduction of nuclear weapons.⁴⁶ Japan's former defence minister, while serving as policy chief of the country's main opposition party, in an interview said, "I don't think Japan needs to possess nuclear weapons, but it's important to maintain our commercial reactors because it would allow us to produce a nuclear warhead in a short period of time. It's a tactical nuclear deterrent."⁴⁷

Why Japan May Not Go Nuclear

The pacifist constitution of Japan and majority of its public still oppose the nuclearization of Japan. For Japan, there is a cost attached to going nuclear. In order to do so Japan would have to amend its constitution.⁴⁸ Changing the relevant articles of the constitutions would be a very complicated move which may divide Japanese societyⁱ, leading to political upheavals.⁴⁹

Japan's nuclearization is also likely to affect its cordial relations with the US which may lead to the downgradation of their alliance, consequently Japan's vulnerability *vis-à-vis* its adversaries in the region may enhance.

Such a move by Japan would also lead to the collapse of the international nuclear nonproliferation regime. It may have a domino effect in the region as it may

ⁱ The constitution of Japan can be amended through a concurring vote of two-thirds or more of all the members of each House and then shall be submitted to the people in a referendum for ratification, which shall require the affirmative vote of a majority of all votes casted.

encourage other states like South Korea to have their own nuclear weapons, further downgrading Japanese security.⁵⁰ It is also argued that the political price of Japan's nuclearization would be very high. Japan is a signatory to NPT and CTBT. It would, therefore, have to withdraw from these treaties as well as from IAEA safeguards before going nuclear.⁵¹ Such moves would not only hurt Japan's image of peaceful coexistence but also greatly damage its economy as it may also have to face international sanctions. Being devoid of natural resources Japanese economy is heavily dependent on imports of fuel, raw materials and exports of finished goods. Presently it meets less than ten percent of its own total primary energy needs from domestic sources.⁵² It is the world's largest liquefied natural gas importer, second largest coal importer and third largest net oil importer.⁵³

Conclusion

US rebalancing in Asia Pacific and its broad commitments to the region is an overarching strategy that can affect Japan's defence and nuclear policy options. If the US significantly reduces its presence in the region, Japan would then be more likely to take steps that boost its own defence capabilities. Similarly if the US reduces its accumulated stocks of nuclear weapons, it might put into question credibility of US' nuclear deterrence, hence pushing Japan into embarking on starting its own nuclear weapons program.⁵⁴ It can also be concluded that Japan's reliance on the US security guarantees could become a liability for the US if the US-China relationship improves, leaving Japan's interests on the sidelines.

In brief, Japan's non-nuclear policy reveals pragmatic understanding of domestic factors, sensitivity of regional security dynamics, and confidence in the US alliance. Domestic legal impediments, public pressure, and comparatively recent geostrategic developments in the region have influenced and shaped Japanese policy outcomes. Concerns over North Korea's nuclear program and China's rising status have also been factors in Japan's strategic assessment. These developments have generated a new wave of reformist politicians. Politically vibrant but still comparatively smaller sections of society are keen to advance nationalist policies intended to re-orientate Japan's foreign and defence policies. However, dominant internal and external factors do not provide sufficient reasons for Japan to start a nuclear weapon program, at least for now.

*Khusrow Akkas Abbasi is a
CISS Research Assistant*

Endnotes

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