

**More Than Meets the Eye:  
What the North Korean Nuclear Crisis Portends for East Asian Security**

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Abstract

The North Korean nuclear program is riding on its organizational and political momentum. Unless it is resolved within a reasonably short period of time, the momentum will push the program past the threshold; i.e., to the testing of nuclear bombs. This would not only precipitate an acute international crisis, but also result in region-wide nuclear proliferation with profound implications for the security and stability of not ~~only just~~ the East Asian region but the entire world. To minimize such dangers, participants in the six-party talks should bear in mind the following and act accordingly.

First, the international coalition led by the U.S. should offer a package to North Korea that integrates both credible and realistic promises of reward that North Korea would get if they comply and credible threats of punishment, including the international sanctions they would face if they cross the clearly set red-line. Second, the credibility of the position will be maintained and enhanced if the participants form a common front to play diplomatic games vis-à-vis North Korea. Third, given the diverse and often conflicting interests among regional powers, it would not be easy to form such a common front. Yet collaboration to form a common front is possible and likely if regional powers somehow foster the norms of, and develop the institutions of, multilateralism. Fourth, to foster the norms of multilateralism, the regional powers need to approach the North Korean issue not just from the narrow perspective of proliferation, but from a much broader perspective of regional and international security order.

Keywords: North Korea, nuclear proliferation, East Asia, regional security order, future of world politics, unipolar world, balance of power

## Introduction

The International crisis over the nuclear ambition of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) has become an enduring feature of East Asian security during the past one and half decades. In 1991-1992, the United States of America together with its South Korean ally worked hard to lure Pyongyang into the international non-proliferation regime anchored by Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). That effort fell short of securing Pyongyang's compliance, as it announced the intention to withdraw from the NPT in March 1993, precipitating a cascading crisis. It took twenty months of tough and rough negotiation for Washington and Pyongyang to reach an agreement in terms of the Agreed Framework (AF) in October 1994. Eight years later in October 2002, the issue came to the fore again as Pyongyang allegedly acknowledged another nuclear program via highly enriched uranium (HEU).

It took nearly three years of tough bargaining, both on and off the table, before representatives from the United States and North Korea, together with those from four other countries including South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia, reached an agreement on the principles to resolve the second crisis in Beijing, September 19, 2005. If fully implemented, the Joint Statement of the fourth round of the six-party talks would have turned out seminal for the security order in East Asia.<sup>1</sup> The Korean peninsula would remain non-nuclear or become denuclearized in the manner of "complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement" (CVID) to curtail the dangerous potential of region-wide nuclear proliferation; diplomatic relations between North Korea on the one hand and Japan and the United States on the other would be normalized; the Korean War of 1950-1953 would be officially over as the warring parties signed a peace treaty; and North Korea would be fully incorporated in the international community so as to pave the way for unification of the Korean peninsula, integration of the East Asian economy, and an eventual East Asian community comparable to that of Europe.

Few, if any, observers are sanguine enough to expect all or most of the above,

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the Joint Statement of the fourth round of the six-party talks can be found at [http://www.mofat.go.kr/mofat/mk\\_a008/mk\\_b083/mk\\_c163/1190664\\_5281.html](http://www.mofat.go.kr/mofat/mk_a008/mk_b083/mk_c163/1190664_5281.html) (accessed on December 12, 2005).

however. The Beijing agreement is but a statement of vague principles. Its interpretation and implementation is subject to further bargaining, which would be no less contentious. As a referent, recall that Washington risked a war in order to force Pyongyang to freeze its nuclear programs in 1994.<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that, at the time, Pyongyang denied any weapons implications of its nuclear programs.<sup>3</sup> After the bombshell assertion in 2002, the situation is far more grave. Pyongyang ended the freeze and resumed nuclear activities. By February 2005, as declared by Pyongyang, it had finished reprocessing of 8,000 spent fuel rods removed from the 5 MW reactor to separate weapon grade plutonium and had come to possess “deterrent power.” Even after the Beijing agreement, the reactor is still running to produce more weapon-grade material and there is no indication that the suspected HEU program has halted. Regardless of whether Pyongyang’s assertion is true or not, further bargaining would have to involve identification, dismantlement, and verification of all of those activities. In 1994, to *freeze known* activities took the “sticks” in terms of the credible threat of war, and the “carrots” in terms of a non-aggression guarantee, promise of diplomatic normalization, and provision of two light water reactors (LWRs) with the capacity of 1,000 MWe each. It is not yet clear what it would take to identify and verifiably *dismantle unknown* programs. But simple arithmetic tells that it would need much bigger sticks and juicier carrots than in 1994. The key issue is then how to mobilize and wield such large sticks and carrots in the multilateral setting of the six-party talks.

This essay addresses the last point. So far, most analyses of the crisis have focused on the motives of North Korea and policy responses by the United States and its allies (e.g., Cha 2002; Cha and Kang 2003; Laney and Shaplen 2003), where the issue is in general treated as a case of proliferation (Mazarr 1995; Sigal 1998; Levite 2003; Braun and Chyba 2004; Montgomery 2005). There is hardly any convincing argument about the prospect of the crisis from a wider perspective, and what the crisis portends for international as well as regional security in East Asia.

The arguments advanced in this essay consist of the following three sets. First, resolution of North Korean nuclear crisis is not likely to come in short period of time at relatively low cost. For as time passed by, the North’s program itself has advanced so

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the first North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993-1994, see Wit et al. (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Of course at the time, the crisis was over the suspicion that Pyongyang might have separated one or two bomb worth of plutonium from the spent fuel rods taken out of the 5-MW experimental reactor.

메모 [TS1]: U.S. made no non-aggression guarantee in the Agreed Framework.

far that reversing the course would take a great deal of material resources and strong political will on the part of the United States and its allies.

Second, while mobilizing and wielding such amount of resources would take highly coordinated and well orchestrated policy measures, it is hard to expect such coordination among the participants. U.S. policy-makers generally refer to “the United States and its allies,” but it is not certain at all whether other participants to the six-party talks are really “allies” of the United States. Japan and South Korea are formally allies of the United States, but China and Russia are not. And it is not clear how long Japan and South Korean will remain so. These five parties to the six-party talks seem to share an interest in denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. But it is not clear either how strong this shared interest is or how long they will continue to share it. The security constellation in East Asia is so fluid that the security interests of and political configuration among the regional actors may rapidly change as time passes.

Third, the way regional powers cooperate, or fail to cooperate to resolve the crisis, affects not only the future prospect of the crisis itself, but also the future security order in the region profoundly. As mentioned above and discussed below in detail, East Asia is an area where political and security dynamics at domestic, regional, and global levels are intertwined in such complex ways that a seemingly minor event could trigger big changes (Jervis 1997). In such a circumstance, the end state of North Korean nuclear program, be it either successful nuclearization or denuclearization or something in-between, will change the security equation in the region profoundly. Further, trust and distrust, and amity and enmity among the participants shall be strengthened or weakened in the process.

The following consists of three main sections. In the immediately following section, I briefly describe the evolution and current state of North Korean nuclear program. The purpose is to highlight the difficulty of reversing the course and illustrate a few scenarios. In the next section, I describe and analyze the current phase of the regional security order in East Asia. I do so at three levels of analysis—domestic, regional, and global—and emphasize how closely intertwined those three levels of security dynamics. Then, I try to show how combustible the mix of North Korean nuclear scenarios and regional security dynamics may be. Overall, the purpose of this essay is not to get a complete picture of future development, which is still subject to

the readers' imagination, but to alert analysts and policy-makers alike that what the North Korean nuclear crisis portends for the regional security order is more than meets the eye.

### **North Korean Nuclear Program: What Does It Take to Reverse the Course?**

#### *The State of North Korean Weapons Programs*

North Korea is such a secretive state that the precise status of its nuclear program is not known to outsiders, or even most insiders. Yet, it is generally agreed that the dangers of North Korean nuclear program stems from three sources.<sup>4</sup> The first two are that Pyongyang has been trying to develop nuclear bombs out of two bomb-making materials —plutonium and HEU. The third is that Pyongyang has also tried to develop long-range missiles to deliver the bombs.

The plutonium facility consists of one 5-MW reactor that began operation in 1987, two larger reactors (50-MW and 200-MW each) under construction, and a plutonium reprocessing plant, all of which had been frozen according to the Agreed Framework in 1994. By that time, North Korean was suspected of having separated 5-10 kilograms of plutonium from the spent fuel rods removed from the 5 MW reactor, which was the very issue that triggered the crisis of 1993-1994. Also by that time, about 8,000 spent fuel rods had been removed from the reactor, which went into storage via the Agreed Framework. After the collapse of the Agreed Framework in late 2002, Pyongyang claimed that they finished reprocessing all these rods, which were estimated to yield 25-30 kilograms of plutonium. Altogether, North Korea is believed to have separated 30-40 kilograms of plutonium, enough for 5-8 bombs, although none of these are confirmed yet. In February 2005, Pyongyang declared that it came to possess “deterrent power” out of these, but has not yet tested a bomb. While the 5 MW reactor is still running to produce one bomb's worth of plutonium annually, there is no evidence that construction of the two larger reactors has resumed.

As for the HEU program, Pyongyang has consistently denied its existence

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of current state of North Korean weapons program, see Niksch (2005).

while U.S. intelligence gathered separate information regarding the program such as its connection to proliferation rings (Braun and Chyba 2004; Montgomery 2005) and evidence of overseas purchases of equipment and materials needed for uranium enrichment. As for the delivery system, North Korea has deployed *Rodong* missile with a range of up to 900 miles since 1998. Also in 1998, North Korea test-fired a longer range *Taepo Dong-1* missile over Japan, which caused great international alarm. North Korea announced a moratorium on missile tests and negotiated with the Clinton administration for economic compensation for foregoing future missile tests. Pyongyang has not test-fired missiles since then, but its missile exports continued as witnessed in late 2002 when a North Korean commercial ship carrying missiles was intercepted and inspected near the Arabian Sea.

#### *The Current State and Future Scenarios of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis*

The Beijing Agreement of September 2005 states that North Korea “committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.” The most contested issue at the first meeting of the fifth round of the six-party talks, held in Beijing in November 2005, was the timing of LWR provision. But in my view, a no less serious, or even more serious, point of contention will be the scope of “all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.” The most critical issue will be: does North Korea really have any nuclear weapons, as they claimed? This will create a delicate dilemma for the participants, particularly North Korea. If it turns out that North Korea does not possess any nuclear weapons but is only bluffing, North Korea’s already dubious credibility and their bargaining position will be critically damaged. If Pyongyang does possess nuclear weapons, they would not abandon them until the last point of bargaining due to the reasons discussed below.

There are some additional considerations why early resolution of the issue is hard to expect. First, there is no consensus among the governments and observers regarding North Korea’s intentions and proper policy responses. Experts have hotly debated whether North Korea’s intention to build nuclear arsenal was defensive out of a deep-rooted sense of insecurity or offensive to force neighboring powers into political and economic concessions (e.g., Cha and Kang 2003). And they are naturally

divided over the proper means to handle the issue. Proponents of the latter position recommend to wield sticks or implement a “hawkish” policy **to destroy Pyongyang’s ambition** (Cha 2003); and proponents of the former position recommend offering carrots or pursuing a “dovish” engagement policy in order to ameliorate Pyongyang’s deep sense of isolation and insecurity. The United States and Japan are inclined to the former position; and China and South Korea are inclined to the latter position.

Second, regardless of whether Pyongyang is motivated offensively or defensively, North Korea must have built up a large organizational and political commitment to nuclear armament. It has been noted that there are some 3,000 scientists and research personnel devoted to the nuclear program (Niksich 2005, 9).<sup>5</sup> Possession of nuclear deterrent has been one of the key elements in North Korea’s new “military-first” campaign. Pyongyang may not be able to afford to abandon its nuclear program with such large organizational as well as political commitment, without major concessions from the United States to compensate. It will be far more so if North Korea indeed possesses nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup>

Third, such large organizational and political commitment should have created its own momentum. In addition to the tendency of organizational inertia (Allison and Zelikow 1999), the political rationale to justify commitment of scarce resources to the nuclear program will push the program forward such that Pyongyang cumulatively increases its nuclear capability over time. To reverse such momentum will require a strategic decision based on extraordinarily strong will at the political level.

Fourth, there is another factor that will bar such a strategic decision. Despite the monolithic image of the North Korean leadership, it is in fact divided between “hawkish” military and party ideologues and “dovish” technocrats, a division which North Korean leader Kim Jong Il has shrewdly manipulated in order to consolidate his power and position (Quinones 2004). When a key decision unit is divided, however, it is likely that important decisions are delayed and, if a decision is ever made, it is a compromise of contending positions, or a political resultant. As noted by Allison and Zelikow (1999), power is often shared such that even if each faction does not

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<sup>5</sup> This is one of the reasons that North Koreans during the six-party talks cited why they cannot give up the right to peaceful use of nuclear energy. Interview with a South Korean official who participated in the six-party talks in August 2005.

<sup>6</sup> On this point, one may refer to the status quo bias and loss aversion tendency noted by prospect theory. See Farnham (1994), Kahneman and Tversky (2000) and Hwang (2005) for this.

command enough power to force any decision, each has enough power to block or veto the decision. If any proposed solution favors one faction more than another, the disfavored faction will likely veto the proposal and delay the decision. If the situation compels a decision, it will likely be a compromise between the factions. As much as the nuclear issue is among the top priorities of the North Korean leadership, then any decision involving the case is likely to be highly contested, delayed, and compromised.<sup>7</sup>

Putting these factors together yields some important insights for further bargaining with Pyongyang. First, the United States and its “allies” must wield “sticks” and “carrots” simultaneously to force and/or lure Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear programs. Wielding “sticks” alone would only exacerbate the sense of insecurity in the North Korean leadership, creating a conflict spiral; wielding only “carrots” will appease Pyongyang’s zeal to power—the classic dilemma between the deterrence model and the spiral model noted by Jervis (1976).

Second, the “sticks” and the “carrots” must be big enough to overwhelm any internal division within North Korea. For even if internal division is so severe that the relationship among the factions is close to zero-sum, an overwhelming external pressure to force a choice between “living or dying together” will likely induce a common position from the feuding parties.

Third, to wield such overwhelming “sticks” and “carrots” requires close coordination and cooperation among the participants. It should be the United States who leads the coalition because it is only the United States who controls enough resources—political, economic, and military. But Washington is unlikely, or even unwilling to offer big “carrots” to Pyongyang due to domestic reasons. According to the political rhetoric in Washington, Pyongyang is one of the states that form the “axis of evil,” is an “outpost of tyranny,” and “a criminal regime.” To offer any “carrots” to them means “rewarding bad behavior,” which can hardly win any domestic political

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<sup>7</sup> North Korean watchers in South Korea has often noted that North Korean commitment to “denuclearization” of the Korean peninsula could be sincere as North Korean officials referred to the “dying wish” of the late leader, Kim Il Sung, current leader Kim Jong Il’s father, to justify it. Kenneth Quinones, a long-time North Korean observer, saw it to the contrary. If Kim Jong Il had to refer to his father’s “dying wish,” he noted, it could mean that his control over the nuclear issue was far from complete. [Interview with Quinones, August 2005.](#)



support.<sup>8</sup> Naturally Washington is more inclined to wield the “sticks” but other participants, particularly China and South Korea that share borders with North Korea and thus worry about any instability in North Korea and resulting fallout, oppose this and are more inclined to the “carrots.”

Seen from bargaining theory (e.g., Schelling 1966), such differences in positions prevent effective bargaining vis-à-vis Pyongyang because they lower the credibility of the bargaining position. That is to say, if Pyongyang believes the U.S. threat of force or any other forceful measure will face opposition from other parties, the threat is but a bluff and will not induce Pyongyang’s compliance. If Pyongyang believes it cannot get enough compensation due to U.S. opposition, the offer of benefits by South Korea and/or China will not change Pyongyang’s mind. Then division of labor, say the United States playing the role of a “~~good~~-bad cop” and South Korea and/or China playing the role of a “bad-~~good~~ cop,” may seem logical. But this is not without problem either, for it will create disproportionate burdens among the participants. The carrot approach costs when it succeeds; the stick approach costs when it fails. That is to say, the participants who offer the carrots will have to deliver the promise if it works, while those wielding the sticks will not have to deliver it if it works. The contrary is also true; the participants offering the carrots would not have bear the cost if it fails, while those wielding the sticks would have to deliver the threat to save their credibility.

In sum, to force ~~and/or lure (or allure)~~ Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction programs will require very close cooperation among the United States and its allies in the six-party Talks. They must frame a package that contains both “sticks” and “carrots” big enough to force Pyongyang to face a fateful decision to abandon its program and implement the agreement. If they succeed in doing do, then North Korea may go to a course of nuclear reversal that resembles the case of Libya. Otherwise, the situation in North Korea may end up in any of the following scenarios.

The first possibility is another Agreed Framework whereby North Korea

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<sup>8</sup> “Axis of evil” is the term used by President George W. Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address; “outpost of tyrannies” was used by then Secretary of State nominee Condoleeza Rice in hearings before the Senate in January 2005; and “criminal regime” was used by U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Alexander Vershbow on December 7, 2005. See Wit et al. (2004) for how the image of the Agreed Framework of 1994 being an aid package to North Korea ruined domestic political support for it.

agrees to freeze its nuclear activity until a limited aid package such as LWRs is completed and other political compensation such as diplomatic normalization and a non-aggression treaty with the U.S. is fulfilled. Eventual denuclearization is postponed and subject to further bargaining.

A second possibility is that while negotiations in terms of the Six-Party Talks drag on, North Korea becomes a *de facto* nuclear power like Israel. This is not too far-fetched given that North Korea already claimed possession of a nuclear deterrent. All Pyongyang needs is recognition, albeit implicit, by other nations either by word or by deed or by both. That is, if surrounding nations take a nuclear North Korea for granted and take measures accordingly—for example, changing their defense posture—then North Korea becomes a *de facto* nuclear power. [Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan will face insurmountable domestic pressure to follow the suit.](#)

A third possibility is a kind of logical extension of the second scenario. That is, failing to get international recognition for its nuclear status, Pyongyang goes on to test its nuclear bombs. This may not be an optimal choice for Kim Jong Il, but it is not a too far-fetched speculation either, considering the organizational and political momentum built around it within North Korea. This will lead to either of the following two or possibly three scenarios. The first is that the North Korean economy, regime and/or state collapses due to economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council, which is a definite possibility. The second is that North Korea somehow survives the sanction and becomes a nuclear power like Pakistan. North Korea's economic condition is indeed dire, but it survived its worst economic crisis during the past decade. So, it is an open question whether North Korea would survive the sanctions or not. The third possibility is that the U.S., alone or together with international coalition forces, invades North Korea immediately before or after the test—an Iraqi scenario. The aim and/or result of the invasion would not be limited to prevention of nuclear North Korea, but the overthrow of the North Korean regime or state.

Of course, the above scenarios are not exhaustive but illustrative. A key question is—which of the scenarios is the most likely? It is the main point of argument in this paper that it depends on how regional powers cooperate or fail to cooperate in responding to North Korea's challenge. But the success or failure to cooperate is not

just a random factor but a function of a regional security order that is rapidly transforming in a systematic, albeit highly complex, manner, as discussed in the following section. Furthermore, the transformation of regional security will also be affected by how the North Korean nuclear problem is solved or unsolved—a kind of system of simultaneous equations.

### **East Asian Security Order in Transformation**

East Asian security in the post-Cold War era has been subject to intense debate among international relations (IR) scholars (e.g., Ikenberry 2003). Some scholars challenged the hyperbolic vision of “Pacific Century” (e.g., Friedberg 1993/94; Betts 1993/94), and some others responded by emphasizing the peculiarity of the regional order (e.g., Kang 2003; Acharya 2003/03; Kang 2003/04). But the debate to date has yielded more confusion than clarification. To me, the confusion largely comes from mingling of levels of analysis.

Security dynamics in the East Asian region unfolds along three levels of analysis, all of which however are highly intertwined. The first is at the global level. IR scholars generally agree that this world is characterized by its unipolar structure with the United States as the sole pole, which is unprecedented in modern history (Kapstein and Mastanduno 1999; Ikenberry 2002). As much as the unipolarity is unprecedented, scholars are disputing about its future. Some believe it is destined to be but a “moment” due to the invariable law of balance of power. Others believe it will last because U.S. power is predominant enough to defy the modern law of balance of power. Still others take a balanced stance, arguing that American primacy is likely but not destined to decline. This debate is central to today’s IR discipline as it in essence evolves around the nature and future of modern international politics. East Asia is a geostrategic region where one superpower and three great powers in a system of 1 + 4 are located. If any systemic change is to take place in the near future, it is likely to be in this region.<sup>9</sup>

The second is at the regional level. IR scholars tend to dismiss any

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<sup>9</sup> Buzan and Wæver (2002) characterize the contemporary international system as 1 (superpower) + 4

region-specific approach to security issues for good reasons. First, international politics is great power politics that plays out on the system, hence global, level. Second, the aforementioned point is further validated by recent trends, i.e., the revolution in transportation/communication technology and power projection capability of the United States that shrank geographic distance. But security is not just a matter of material capability but also a matter of psychological feeling of amity and enmity among nations. And the sense of amity/enmity is shaped through the political process of what Buzan and others (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilder 1998) call securitization, which is largely based on historical memories. East Asia forms a regional security complex due to shared memories of historical amity and enmity (Buzan and Wæver 2002).

The third is at the domestic or local level. East Asian nations were integrated into the modern international political system by colonization and semi-colonization in the late 19th century. Their history as modern nation-states began only after decolonization in the 20th century, and it is far from complete yet (Friedberg 1993/94). Further, the global overlay of the Cold War had “distorted” their courses of development to a degree.<sup>10</sup> As the Cold War overlay is lifted, the politics of national identity and the search for “normalcy” has begun. As far as national security is interdependent, any spontaneous, largely indigenous move toward normalcy cannot but create regional repercussions.

The levels of analysis is but an analytic artifact, and in reality, security dynamics at each level affect each other to form highly complex multi-level dynamics. Multi-level dynamics may not be an exceptional case for East Asia, but it is the author’s belief that their extent is particularly great in this region.

#### *Global Level: Balance of Power Politics in a Unipolar World*

After the end of the Cold War and the rise of the United States as sole superpower, modern international politics and international relations theory built from its history has faced a fundamental challenge. The challenge is so fundamental that modern balance of power politics and balance of power theory, or “the theory” of international

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(great powers), where the great powers include the European Union, Russia, China, and Japan.

politics, is at stake.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, scholarship in the field of IR has devoted a great deal of efforts to the meaning, nature, and future of such a world.

No sooner than the collapse of the Soviet Union IR scholars began to predict, not the rise but the demise of U.S. power (Layne 1991; Waltz 1993). U.S. power and status as the sole superpower would decline because of the iron law of balance of power. Nations that feel threatened by the overwhelming power of the United States would rush to balance it through internal and external methods; that is, by augmenting its military capabilities and by forming countervailing coalitions.

Noticing that no balancing effort has occurred so far and no visible sign to do so is on the horizon, scholars have begun to think again. Some argue that although balance of power is likely, it is not a law but a tendency, because nations balance threat, not power (Walt 1987; Mastanduno 1997). That is, as long as the United States wields its power with restraint and moderation, it will not pose a threat to other powers who do not feel any need to balance it. Further, U.S. restraint and moderation is not just a matter of policy choice, which is subject to political whim, but built into the American political system and the international system that the United States constructed during the past half a century (Ikenberry 2002).

Others go even further. U.S. power is so predominant that it does not allow any room for balancing, they contend. For “[a] unipolar system is one in which a counterbalance is impossible,” and “when a counterbalance becomes possible, the system is not unipolar” (Wohlforth 1999, 29). Under U.S. hegemony, further, any hegemonic rivalry between second-tier states is suppressed and any systemic source of conflict is missing. Under such a condition, no state has an incentive to balance U.S. power. Instead, second-tier states in a unipolar system bandwagon on U.S. power.

Waltz (2002) however is not convinced that U.S. primacy will or can last. He unyieldingly believes balancing against U.S. power will take place, if not today, but tomorrow, although he was not certain when tomorrow will come. According to him, wielding power with restraint and moderation is out of question because it is not in the nature of power, as noted in frequent complaints about the “arrogance” of the United

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of overlay is from Buzan (1991) and Buzan and Wæver (2002).

<sup>11</sup> Recall Kenneth Waltz’ assertion that “if there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance-of-power theory is it” (Waltz 1979, 117).

States.<sup>12</sup> And he also argues that the “all-but-inevitable movement from unipolarity to multipolarity is taking place not in Europe but in Asia. The internal development and the external reaction of China and Japan are steadily raising both countries to the great-power level” (Waltz 2002, 56). China will emerge as a great power even without trying very hard (Waltz 2002; see also Christensen 2001), which will be discussed later. Japan poses a subtle problem in this regard.

Many, even including Waltz, believe Japan is reluctant to play the role of great power (Waltz 2002, 58; Lind 2004). If Japan plays a greater role in military affairs, it does so by riding on the U.S. bandwagon, and thus may not have anything to do with balance of power. Yet it is immensely misleading if one assumes Japan’s rise to a great power status does not balance U.S. power because Japan is a U.S. ally and is bandwagoning on U.S. power. For it is power, not policy, that balances power. That is, Japan may balance U.S. power by bandwagoning on it. As discussed below, Japan has emerged from a pacifist **free-rider** to a regional, or even a global, great power upon the urging and encouragement of the United States (Wu 2005/06). Its military spending and naval force is second to the United States (Lind 2004). Japan is actively seeking to expand its international role further in international organizations such as the UN Security Council and trying to revise its constitution which bars Japan from having a military force and waging international wars. Since such a move reflects a general trend within Japan, it will hardly be reversible.

A more intriguing case is China. The sheer size and rapid economic growth of China will challenge U.S. power and status even without attempting to. It is not necessary to review the huge literature on China’s rise and its implications for international politics.<sup>13</sup> Suffice it to mention an often neglected literature, which nevertheless yields an important insight for future international politics—the lateral pressure theory of war (Choucri and North 1975; Ashley 1980). The lateral pressure theory argues that national growth causes international rivalry and war. Any national growth brings about external effects in terms of expansion—expansion for market and resources, and of political and diplomatic activities. This expansion naturally conflicts

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<sup>12</sup> See Huntington (1999) and Wills (1999). See also Ikenberry’s (2002) elaborate discussion of the new national security strategy taken by the George W. Bush administration after September 11. Kim (2000) notes some systematic tendencies to explain why U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War has turned more aggressive and arrogant.

<sup>13</sup> For a recent and comprehensive review, see Friedberg (2005).

with other nations' expansion and creates an intersection of interests. While this intersection of interests results in bilateral rivalry, it also often results into open hostilities and conflicts due to local events, dubbed by Ashley (1980) as "provocations."

What is remarkable in this regard is that China's influence in East Asia is rapidly expanding (Shambaugh 2004/05). Also noteworthy is China's recent moves toward Russia and Central Asia, where it has initiated the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This signals two of China's goals—first, to secure the crucial energy supply to feed its fast growing economy, and second, to foster a strategic partnership with Russia. In its July 2005 Summit Meeting, SCO adopted a resolution demanding a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region. In August 2005, China conducted a large-scale joint military exercise with Russia off its shore. Given that Central Asia is the region where the United States has also extended its presence following the war against Afghanistan, one can say that United States and Chinese spheres of interest are rapidly intersecting.

In sum, East Asia is squarely located in the heart of a potential systemic transformation. While often neglected by system-level theorists, systemic transformation will likely be precipitated by regional and local level dynamics, as discussed below.

#### *Regional Level: Securitization of History and Conflict Formation*

Whether China and/or Japan will consciously balance U.S. power in the future so as to trigger a systemic transformation is still open to question. As summarized by Friedberg (2005), the balance between elements of cooperation on the one hand and elements of confrontation on the other hand in the U.S.-China relations may be tilted toward the cooperative end (see Johnston 2003; Shambaugh 2004/05). Also as noted by Katzenstein and Okawara (2001/02), Japan's search for a "normal" state may operate within a complex network of bilateral as well as multilateral institutions. Also, as argued by Wohlforth (1999), even if China grows and/or Japan rearms, it may not be enough to challenge U.S. predominance. As for now, however, regional dynamics are more prominent, which will eventually affect long-term, global level dynamics. As

Christensen (1999) perceptively notes, China's immediate security concern evolves around Japan (see also Wu 2005/06). Like most other states in Asia, China also suffers from the **spectre** of past Japanese militarism. As the Cold War ended and the U.S.-Japanese alliance lost its rationale, China worried about the possible rearmament of an increasingly insecure Japan due to the potential weakening of its alliance with the United States. However, as the U.S.-Japan alliance moved in the opposite direction, i.e., further consolidation with Japan shouldering a greater burden, China became uneasy with growing Japanese power and status. Thus, the place of Japan in East Asia poses an unanswerable dilemma.

Japan's increasing role and power is not just a matter of strategic choice, but also driven by domestic considerations. Japan shares the region-wide problem of national identity crisis as discussed below. In a world of modern nation-states, the Japanese nation-state is far from normal—it is not allowed to have military forces and the right to wage war against other nations. Since the end of the Cold War, Japan has taken a number of steps toward a “normal” state, as summarized in Katzenstein and Okawara (2001/02, 156-157). Such movements have been further accelerated after Prime Minister Koizumi took power in 2001. In late 2004, Japan released a new National Defense Program Outline where China was declared a security concern. In 2005, Japan had diplomatic clashes with South Korea and China on several occasions. In February, a local government announced a “**Takeshima Day**” commemorating islands under South Korean control (called Dokdo in Korean), that caused a massive public backlash in Korea. This move coincided with the Japanese Education Ministry's decision to pass newly revised middle school textbooks on social studies and history which leaned even more with right-wing tendencies than an earlier version that had already caused great repercussions in the region. In spring 2005, there were waves of anti-Japan demonstrations in China condemning Japan's view of history as well as its efforts to be granted a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Yet, despite strong protests from both China and Korea, Prime Minister Koizumi continued his visit to the Yasukuni shrine honoring Japanese war heroes, including convicted war criminals **from World War II**.

Koizumi, who has more power than any of his predecessors in recent memory after his landslide victory in the September 2005 Diet elections, seems determined to



irreversibly turn the tide toward making Japan a “normal state.” Both at the November 2005 summit conference of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation held in Busan, South Korea as well as at the December East Asian Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Chinese leaders refused to sit bilaterally with the Japanese leader.<sup>14</sup>

What is particularly noteworthy is that the dispute over history is not just with Japan. In 2003, Chinese historians released a report claiming as their own the ancient kingdom of Goguryeo (*Koguryo*), which Koreans have long proudly claimed as a central period within Korean history. This deeply angered South Koreans and chilled the burgeoning “China fever” in South Korea. Also East Asia is a region filled with territorial disputes between regional states. In addition to the Dokdo-Takeshima conflict with Korea, Japan also has territorial disputes with China/Taiwan over the Diaoyu-Senkaku islands and the exclusive economic zone in the East China Sea, and is in dispute with Russia over four islands. China also has territorial disputes with a few Southeast Asian states over the Spratly islands, and has territorial disputes with some fourteen states with neighboring borders.

That East Asia is filled with territorial disputes and that history often becomes securitized in this region have to do with its modern history. Asian countries were forced into the modern Western international system in the nineteenth century. The modern concept of territorially based nation-states was foreign to Asian states until then. Even more foreign was the concept of state sovereignty and sovereign equality, as interstate relations in East Asia was characterized more by hierarchy than by anarchy (Kang 2003). Under colonial rule by western powers, they learned painful lessons about the concept of sovereignty and modern international politics. Their search for modern nation-statehood began only after World War II and decolonization, and is still an ongoing process. In the process, any threat to their national identity is in essence a threat to their national security (Buzan 1991). In this context, contested interpretations of history and territorial disputes are a matter of national identity, and thus national security.

Therefore, if Japan, whose ill-fated search for modernity resulted in an “abnormal” state without the right to military power and to wage war, can be said to suffer from a national identity crisis, other states in the region also suffer from the

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<sup>14</sup> See Khoo and Smith (2005, 197-99) for a list of recent disputes between China and Japan.

same identity crisis to an even greater extent. That many East Asian states have recently experienced rapid economic growth and political democratization (two of the most important aspects of modernization) has much to do with the surge of national identity politics in the region.

*Domestic and Local Levels: The Politics of National Identity and The Search for Normalcy*

In the summer of 2002, South Korean people spent frantic months as their national soccer team advanced to the **semi-finals** in the FIFA World Cup matches **co-hosted** by Japan and Korea. When South Korea beat Spain in the quarter-final match, over seven million Koreans, nearly one seventh of the entire population, stormed into the street. Then in November, two American soldiers, who had run over and killed two South Korean middle school girls with an armored vehicle, were given a non-guilty verdict at an American military court. Anti-American protest in the form of candle-light demonstrations was organized by nongovernmental civic organizations (NGOs). The protest rapidly grew in size, spreading across the entire nation, and lasted over a month. Kim (2004) has explained this protest in terms of the national identity dynamic, a concept proposed by Bloom (1990).

National identity dynamic, based on the psychological need for identification, refers to the potential for mass political action when there is either a threat to national identity or opportunity to enhance it. The sense of national identity, or the psychological **ability-trait** to identify oneself with the nation the individual belongs to, has much to do with democratization as individuals experience the nation-state through political participation and internalize feelings of national identity. **That is,** **s**weeping democratization in South Korea after the civil revolution in 1987 coincided with the end of the Cold War, real improvement of the standard of living after rapid economic development, and high profile events such as the 1988 Olympic Games held in Seoul. Such developments have resulted in a strong sense of national identity in the South Korean people, opening the door for mass political action.

The situation is similar in Taiwan and potentially even more explosive. Like in South Korea, a long dictatorship was justified by the Cold War confrontation with

mainland China, and nationalistic appeals to reunification. In the meantime, Taiwanese people have suffered from a national identity crisis as Taiwanese national sovereignty, and membership in major international organizations such as the United Nations was flatly denied by the international community. Responding to the zeal for national identity that has grown following democratization, a candidate from the opposition Democratic Progressive Party won the 2000 presidential election on a platform for developing a unique and democratic Taiwanese identity (Khoo and Smith 2005). The dynamics of the 2004 presidential election was even more dramatic in this regard.

Such domestic developments inevitably have international and interstate ramifications. The emergence of democratic, nationalistic, and economically prosperous South Korea has posed a structural and existential threat to isolated and economically devastated North Korea. As noted by Buzan (1991), the relative success of a rival state with a contrasting ideology poses a structural threat as it will erode the people's confidence in and loyalty to the prevailing ideology and mode of government. Also as noted by Buzan and amply demonstrated by the fate of East Germany, the relative success of one half of a divided nation over the other half poses the structural threat of "absorption" when nationalism is a key ideology sustaining national integrity. [Such a dualism of threat from successful Southern brethren, i.e., ideological threat of subversion and nationalistic threat of absorption](#), together with the fact that North Korea cannot match South Korea's modern military, [at least partially in part](#) explains North Korea's determination for nuclear armament.

The situation is no less dangerous in the [Straits](#). The politics of national identity in Taiwan, complicated by the rise of China, poses an existential threat to China's fragile domestic structure. The search for "normalcy" and the movement toward independence in Taiwan is not just a threat for potential territorial loss. It threatens China's integrity as a "multi-nation state" as dubbed by Buzan (1991). China's anti-secession law of March 2005 which threatens the use of force against any secessionist movement targets not only Taiwan but also other potential secessionist regions such as Tibet. However, given the special relations that Taiwan has with the United States, and Japan as well to a lesser degree, any crisis over the Straits has high potential for an explosive international crisis.

Thus, the Taiwan case clearly illustrates two of the key themes in this paper. First, East Asian security dynamics are closely intertwined at three different levels—the domestic/local, regional, and global. Second, because the politics of national identity are driven largely by spontaneous aspirations of the mass public, they are ~~beyond governments' prudential control out of strategic prudence~~ ~~[outside of governmental control]~~. In sum, the East Asian security order faces an ever present potential for systemic transformation, that will likely be triggered by stochastic, abrupt events at the local level.

### *The Future of East Asian Security Order*

As much as local developments affect international politics, they are also profoundly shaped by the international environment. Thus, the manner in which local events unfold and the extent to which they change regional as well as global international politics will be affected by the regional security order in which they take place. How, then, can we characterize the current security order in East Asia, and if it is indeed in the process of reformation, where is it heading? While a decisive answer to this question is beyond the scope and purpose of this essay, a few examples can help illuminate these issues.

A regional security order can be characterized by the distribution of capabilities across regional actors, prevailing mode of behavior, and policy patterns. In terms of relative capabilities, it will be mainly determined by the extent to which the United States gets and remains involved in the region, the future prospect of China's continued growth, and the rearmament of Japan. In terms of behavior and policy, key variables will include unilateralism/multilateralism in U.S. foreign policy, China's practice of balance of power politics, and Japanese movement toward "normal state."

First, if the United States gets fully involved in East Asia, the regional security order will initially be characterized by a unipolar U.S. hegemonic structure, albeit incomplete (Mastanduno 2002). The degree to which the United States practices unilateralism or multilateralism will define the behavioral characteristic of the unipolar order, ranging from a malign to a benign one. ~~Both the balance of power theory and the balance of threat theory suggest that a benign unipolar order will last~~

~~longer.~~ In a *malign unipolar order* where the United States flexes its muscles, a threatened China will rush for internal mobilization and an external alliance with Russia, who will feel as threatened as China. Regional politics may then result in a bipolar confrontation between U.S.-Japan versus China-Russia. In the meantime, a unilateral United States which is less sensitive to other nations' security concerns and guided by the belief that others will bandwagon, will push Japan to take on a greater share of the defense burden. Japan worries U.S. whim more than U.S. power, and China's power more than U.S. power, and willingly enhances its military capability lest the United States should abandon it some time in the future. Eventually, distribution of capabilities in the region will become more even among the three great powers and balance of power politics, if played softly, may become the prevailing mode of politics.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, the United States may limit its involvement in the region and try to play the role of an off-shore balancer. The security dilemma between China and Japan may become exacerbated. Balance of power politics is a prevailing mode of politics, where great powers balances each other through flexible and cross-cutting coalition building activities across wide range of issues. For example, the United States may team up with Japan over Taiwan issues, but team with China against Japan over the issue of the UN reforms.

Another possibility is that the great powers in the region including Russia will form a kind of the "concert of great powers." Realizing how precarious the politico-military relationships among them are as well as how indispensable their economic ties are, major powers may agree that they cannot afford full-scale confrontations and put aside their differences. Instead, they may agree to collectively and/or collaboratively manage local politics which, as noted above, are highly flammable.

It is a matter of pure speculation which of the above scenarios is more likely to be realized. As time passes and regional powers cooperate or fail to cooperate in handling potentially unstable local events, they may or may not learn from the experience and develop a *modus vivendi*. The North Korean nuclear crisis is one such event.

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<sup>15</sup> See Nye (2004), Paper (2005), and Paul (2005) for the concept of soft balancing.

## North Korean Nuclear Crisis and East Asian Security Order

In section II, I have shown how difficult it will be to attain complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, given the current phase of the North Korean program. It was shown that to force and/or allure Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program would require both big “sticks” in terms of credible threats of punishment and big “carrots” in terms of equally credible promises of rewards. Credibility requires capability, willingness, and political feasibility. And I argued that a close cooperation among regional powers is needed because (1) the amount of required resources will be large, (2) some nations are inclined to “sticks” and others are inclined to “carrots,” and (3) burdens will be unevenly distributed among the participants resulting in a typical collective action dilemma.

If the participants to the six-party talks (other than North Korea) fail to reach an agreement within a relatively short period of time, it is likely that North Korea will become a nuclear power similar to Israel or Pakistan, precipitating further crisis. It is more likely, however, that the participants will reach a tentative agreement that resembles the 1994 Agreed Framework, where North Korea agrees to freeze its nuclear activities but retains nuclear potential at least until the promise of reward is fully realized. This scenario is likely to be achieved if regional actors practice balance of power politics, where the concern for relative gains is predominant. U.S. attempts at coercive measures will be soft balanced by China, Russia, and South Korea, and the United States will refuse any of the carrots that North Korea wants, such as a **non-aggression** pact with North Korea, not to mention economic aid.

In a malign unipolar system where the United States flexes its muscle unilaterally, an impatient United States may hastily pressure Pyongyang with coercive threat. Protest by other powers may embolden Pyongyang to resist and the United States with its international credibility at stake may move to deliver the threat despite international protests, as in the war against Iraq. The resulting military confrontation and the possible collapse of North Korea will destabilize the entire region with long-term repercussions.

Therefore for both the successful resolution of the crisis as well as regional

stability, the nations concerned must foster and practice the norms and institutions of *multilateralism*. According to Ruggie (1993), multilateralism as an institution is based on the shared belief in the indivisibility of the value at stake and the expectation of diffuse reciprocity. Following this reasoning, the security in the region of East Asia can be regarded as indivisible in that the insecurity of one actor means insecurity for other actors as well. Such a sense of indivisibility will prevail if regional actors fully understand the logic(s) of security dilemma and that security is security interdependence. European nations, after long history of insecurity and conflict, finally learned this lesson and succeeded in creating a security community among themselves. East Asian nations do not have such a history and thus may not have learned such lessons. However, as their economies are so interdependent and their economic vitalities are so critical to national integrity, it is not out of the question that East Asian nations will foster a sense of indivisibility.

Second, if multilateralism becomes the prevailing mode of conduct, the expectations for diffuse reciprocity facilitates cooperation, for even egoistic nations find the exchanges balanced over time, across multiple actors, and over a range of issues (see also Kim 2003). Even if apparent burden sharing to resolve North Korean nuclear crisis is uneven, actors still find the interests balanced, because initial burdens will be compensated over time, as compensation made to an actor can be compensated by other actors, and loss in an issue area can be made up in another area.

Indeed, this was precisely the case in 1994, when South Korea was willing to bear a disproportionately large share of the burden, with the expectation of long term improvement of inter-Korean relations. This remains true to this day. Unlike in 1994, China has shown a greater willingness in the present day to shoulder diplomatic as well as economic burdens. Such commitments are also shared by Japan, and to a degree Russia. Being geographically distant and having a global perspective, the United States seems to least share the indivisibility of values and the expectations for diffuse reciprocity. This is particularly the case after the shock of September 11 terrorist attacks as Americans, citizens and politicians alike, become more concerned with *national* security at the expense of *international* security. Therefore, it is critical for the successful and peaceful resolution of the North Korean crisis that U.S. political leaders somehow foster strategic prudence and approach the issue from a broader

international perspective and, not just narrowly focused on regional security.

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The North Korean nuclear program is moving forward, riding on its organizational and political momentum. Unless it is resolved within a reasonably short period of time, the momentum will push the program past the threshold, i.e., the testing of nuclear bombs. It will not only precipitate an acute international crisis but also result in region-wide nuclear proliferation with profound implications for not ~~just only~~ for the East Asian region but ~~also~~ for the entire world. Yet early resolution is easier said than done because of the combination of many factors. The discussion presented here yields the following set of policy recommendations for the participating nations in the six-party talks.

First, an international coalition led by the United States should offer a package to North Korea that integrates *both* the credible and realistic promise of reward that North Korea would get if they comply and the credible threat of punishment including international sanctions they would face should they cross a clearly set red-line.

Second, the credibility of such a position will be maintained and enhanced if the participants form a common coordinated front to deal diplomatically vis-à-vis North Korea. The situation is no better if, on one hand, South Korea offers large economic assistance to North Korea conditional to Pyongyang's compliance with the non-proliferation regime, while on the other hand the United States imposes economic sanctions on North Korea. It does not help either if Washington implies military actions if North Korea crosses the red-line, and at the same time Seoul declares peaceful resolution of the crisis at all costs.

Third, reaching such an integrated and common position by the five participants will require them to foster and practice the norms and institutions of multilateralism. Multilateralism will become the prevailing mode of conduct among regional actors if they realize security interdependence—a task that is also highly precarious and vulnerable to local exigencies.



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