

Northeast Asia's New Consensus and North Korea

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For the first time in modern history, the nations of Northeast Asia share common national priorities. China, Japan, Russia, the two Koreas and Mongolia all seek peace, prosperity and stability. These priorities exceed in importance previous concerns about ideology such as capitalism verse communism. The nature of a nation's political institutions, whether democratic or authoritarian, is today also a secondary concern.

Nationalism, however, remains a divisive force in the region. The most divisive issues relate to the past, not the present. Most are a consequence of Japan's imperial legacy when Japan sought to forcefully dominate the region. China and the two Koreas continue to challenge Japan's claims to several small islands in the South China Sea and the disputed island know to Koreans as Tokto but claimed by Japan as Takeshima. Japan likewise contests Russia's claim to and occupation of a string of small islands north of Hokkaido.

But the common pursuit of peace, prosperity and stability is restraining the fervor of nationalism. Given a choice between forcefully asserting their claims and sustaining peace, the region's nations opt for peace over armed clashes. The primary reason is that the continuation of their prosperity requires both peace and stability. If war were to erupt, damage to the region's and each nations' economies could be wide spread and

cataclysmic. Similarly, instability, especially on the Korean Peninsula, could thrust the entire region into war and devastation.

For the time being at least, Northeast Asia is at peace and shares similar national goals. Consequently, the region has become one of the most prosperous and economically dynamic in the world. Japan remains the world second largest economies. China, with its huge population, has foregone the exportation of communist revolution in favor of pursuing prosperity through capitalistic economic development. China could soon become the world's second largest and eventually largest economies. Russia continues to recover from its bankruptcy during the Cold War. Certain to promote Russia's prosperity is the development of huge oil reserves along the Russian Pacific coast. Oil thirsty Japan, South Korea and China will inevitably rely on Russian oil to sustain their economic prosperity.

Nevertheless, the entire region's peace, prosperity and stability could abruptly crumble into chaos and destruction. The trigger for such a disaster would be instability on the Korean Peninsula. Everything about the peninsula is small compared to its neighbors China, Russia and Japan. Korea's land area, population and economy are relatively smaller. But the Korean Peninsula's location at the center of East Asia give it great strategic importance.

The Korean Peninsula is the only area in the world where the interests of all the world's superpowers - China, Russia, USA and Japan - come together. Japan more than a century

ago recognized Korea's geo-political importance. To defend itself from Western imperialism, Japan first defeated China and then Russia to prevent any foreign power from occupying the peninsula and using it as a base to threaten Japan. The United States, China and Russia nearly engaged in nuclear warfare over the Korean Peninsula between 1950 and 1953. The Korean peninsula remained an arena of intense superpower rivalry until the Cold War ended in 1990.

Although the Japanese empire has evaporated and Russia and China normalized relations with the United States and its allies, the Cold War persists on the Korean Peninsula. The main reason is Korea's continuing division into two hostile camps, the Republic of Korea in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north.

Only South Korea has benefited from the Cold War's end. South Korea won its Cold War rivalry with North Korea. In 1988 all of North Korea's communist allies, including the Soviet Union and China, discarded their disdain for South Korea and engaged it by attending the 1988 Seoul Olympiad. South Korea subsequently normalized diplomatic and commercial ties with all its former communist adversaries except North Korea.

South Korea also achieved military supremacy. Seoul retained unaltered its Cold War alliance with the United States. Of particular importance in this alliance is the US promise to maintain its "nuclear umbrella" over South Korea. This pledge assures South Korea that if any nation attacks it with nuclear weapons, the United States will promptly destroy the attacker with its own nuclear weapons.

North Korea, however, lost its nuclear umbrella at the end of the Cold War. After Russia had replaced the Soviet Union, Moscow informed Pyongyang that no longer would it be defended by a Russian “nuclear umbrella.” Nor would Russia continue to provide North Korea with military assistance in the form of technology and interest free loans to purchase modern military equipment. China by 1992 similarly reduced its military commitment to North Korea.

At the same time, the first so-called Gulf War erupted in the Middle East after Iraq invaded Kuwait. In response, the United States rallied an international military coalition of Arab and European nations to expel Iraq from Kuwait. The coalition completely defeated Iraq’s army during a short three day war.

This distant defeat had a profound impact on North Korea’s military leadership. Their entire huge military arsenal of tanks, artillery, etc was based on Soviet technology. North Korea had long profited from manufacturing and exporting Soviet designed military equipment, including ballistic missiles. But superior US military technology had completely overwhelmed and destroyed Iraq’s similar arsenal. This rendered North Korea’s arsenal obsolete. In the event of war with the United States or South Korea, North Korea’s defeat was not inevitable.

North Korea’s military leaders faced a dilemma. To deter the US from attacking North Korea, Pyongyang’s generals had to either quickly build a completely new and modern weapons arsenal or find another way to defend their nation. The cost of developing and

building and entirely new arsenal would have been prohibitive and taken a great deal of time and effort. North Korea at the time was sinking into a deep economic depression triggered by the Soviet Union's collapse and had lost its international weapons market.

Pyongyang's other option was to build a nuclear arsenal. Advocates of this option obviously won. By 1992, North Korea had begun to make plutonium, the essence of a nuclear bomb.

For two decades North Korea's nuclear ambitions have been Northeast Asia's primary security concern. Because of Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons, the United States, Japan and South Korea have refused to follow Russia and China by normalizing relations with North Korea. The United States has maintained its Cold War era defense treaties with Japan and South Korea. Central to these treaties are the US continuing maintenance of a nuclear umbrella over both its allies in view of North Korea's development of a nuclear arsenal.

North Korea counters that it must have nuclear weapons to defend itself from the United States and its allies. Pyongyang insists that Washington, Tokyo and Seoul maintain a "hostile policy" toward it. Like the United States has long claimed, North Korea similarly calls its nuclear weapons a "deterrent capability" designed to discourage a US military attack on it.

Former President George W. Bush unwittingly gave Pyongyang's generals reason to justify the building of a nuclear arsenal. He did this by declaring in January 2002 that North Korea was one of three nations - the other two were Iraq and Iran - that belonged to an "axis of evil." He claimed that their support for terrorism and pursuit of nuclear weapons were a direct threat to the United States and its allies. Bush then declared that he possessed the authority to defend the United States by launching, if he unilaterally deemed it necessary, a pre-emptive first strike nuclear attack on any of these three nations. When he subsequently invaded Iraq, North Korea's generals responded by quickening the development of a nuclear arsenal and ballistic missiles needed hit US military bases in Japan and possibly further away.

Fortunately for the world, China intervened in the spring of 2003 by promoting what became the Six Party Talks. China, Russia, the USA, Japan and the two Koreas subsequently joined these talks. Intense diplomacy has not yet halted North Korea's nuclear weapons development. But the talks did restrain tensions in the region and have allowed continuing pursuit of prosperity.

But today peace and stability in Northeast Asia remains fragile. It could crumble any moment. The primary reasons remain potential instability on the Korean Peninsula. That stability could be shattered either by the eruption of armed hostilities between North Korea and one of its adversaries. But another, largely ignore potential cause of instability could be the death of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.

Regardless of the cause, the Korean Peninsula must remain a priority concern for all the region's nations. Their shared quest for prosperity directly depends on sustaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia, particularly on the Korean Peninsula.

Finally, our options for dealing with North Korea are limited to three: a. war, b. diplomatic and commercial isolation, and c. negotiation. The Korean War solved nothing despite great cost, especially to the Korean people. The cost of another Korean War would be far worse. Not only would it disrupt the regional and world economy, the war could escalate to a nuclear catastrophe. Isolation of North Korea using economic sanctions has failed for more than a half century to win Pyongyang's compliance with the international community's demands. If anything, economic sanctions and similar coercive tactics play into the hands of Pyongyang's advocates of building a nuclear arsenal.

Realistically speaking the only reasonable option left is to resume negotiations with North Korea. Politically this option may be the least favored but in terms of sustaining peace, prosperity and stability in Northeast Asia, it could prove the most effective and least costly option.