

JIAP OBSERVATION

***IF BUSH'S KOREA POLICY FAILS: A NEW SECURITY
'ARRANGEMENT' IN ASIA?***

*This article was first published on 1/17/03 in the 1/12-18/03 edition of the Asia Policy Weekly (APW), a weekly review of important news, opinion, and primary source documents for the Northeast Asia policy professional. APW is distributed to the members of the **Japan Information Access Project** [<http://www.jiaponline.org>].*

Let's imagine the worst-case scenario that the Bush Administration fails in its efforts to disarm and to engage North Korea. What might be some of the consequences? A number of commentators have suggested recently that this is an opportunity for Japan to possess its own nuclear weapons as a deterrent to both North Korea and China. Neither Japan's immediate neighbors nor its own citizens, however, are likely to tolerate a nuclear Japan. Other conservative commentators now advocate pulling U.S. troops out of both South Korea and Japan and have them go it alone. Thus, Japan has reason to be concerned about the American commitment to defend them as well as the rationality and prudence of current U.S. foreign policy. One troubling alternative to the U.S. nuclear shield is an "arrangement" between Japan and nuclear North Korea.

North Korea has already proven a near "reliable" counter to American foreign policy adventurism. No government in Asia wants a war in the Middle East. Oil import-dependent, the region cringes thinking that its energy supplies may be cut off. With Asia's fragile economic recoveries and sometimes more fragile political structures, a war against Iraq, especially if messy and drawn out, is unacceptable. Yet, only privately will U.S. Asian allies voice strongly their objections. North Korea's real or imagined nuclear plans have been a potent distraction from Washington's war plans. More important, Pyongyang has neatly exposed the contradictions in Bush's "axis of evil" pre-emption strategy—isn't North Korea with nuclear weapons more dangerous than Iraq that is only developing them? Neither Tokyo nor Seoul could have expressed these doubts as clearly.

Since the end of the Cold War, the governments of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have voiced doubts over the reliability of Washington's defense commitment to them. China's capitalist communists are not the same as the Red Chinese of a generation ago. The greater global threat of communism that rationalized U.S. defense of the region is gone. North Korea, impoverished and dependent on outside aid, is viewed as a convenient threat during domestic security debates. Adding to these reservations is the long festering discomfort East Asian military planners have with being dependent upon the U.S. military. During these country's development the U.S. presence may have been useful by keeping military budgets down and tensions mitigated. Yet, this overseer role by the U.S. is also considered humiliating. The tacit "cork in the bottle" argument—the US is needed to keep the Asians from harming each other—is seen now as an insult to the modern democracies in Northeast Asia.

Thus, where can Japan turn for security alternatives if its own nuclear capability is not feasible? Looking to the Chinese would simply be replacing one dependency for another. Russia is Western with its own agenda. As bitter as the memories may be, the reality is that Japan, in part through its colonial past, has ties long and deep within Korea's economic and political structures.

Japan is also the one regional non-communist country with the most developed links to North Korea. It should not be forgotten that pre-war North Korea was a Japanese industrialized zone. Companies that had factories there are interested in reviving those ties as the redevelopment of North Korea would provide a good jumpstart to Japan's moribund economy. More interesting is the near billion dollars a year that flow from Japanese Koreans to their relatives in the North. The DPRK is also not exactly isolated commercially from Japan. Roughly 1000 North Korean cargo ships call on Japanese ports annually. In addition, the Man Gyong Bong 92, a cargo/passenger ship, makes about 30 round trips annually from Niigata to Wonsan, North Korea. Yet to be explored are the linkages between Japanese Koreans, Japan's underworld, Japan's right wing, corrupt Japanese politicians and North Korean officials. In a word, Japan already has important relationships with the DPRK.

A nuclear North Korea is most certainly a danger in the region. Yet, as the Chinese have shown, whoever holds, however tentatively, the leash on this "Mad Dog" is in a more sheltered security position. Neither China nor the US dares attack, as the repercussions would be severe. More interesting is the image of the DRPK as uncontrollable, erratic and every bit crazy. It works well for any state that wants to distance itself from the responsibility of the nuclear option. North Korea provides reasonable deniable accountability.

Beijing understands the usefulness of a loony nuclear Pyongyang. How much real influence the Chinese have on this “Hermit Kingdom” is questionable. Through aid, investment, and personal ties Japan has the potential to develop an even closer “relationship” with the DPRK. China will not be so pleased by this, but neither are they delighted by US troops in South Korea and Japan. To have nuclear arms by proxy (“murder by a borrowed knife” as the Chinese say), albeit tentatively, may be considered one of Japan’s security options. Yes, this all sounds crazy as a possible scenario for East Asian security, but they call Kim Jong-Il crazy too and look where he has U.S. President George Bush.

Mindy L. Kotler

Director

Japan Information Access Project