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## A nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia?

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Speculation is rife that North Korea's burgeoning nuclear and ballistic missile programs will spark a dangerous new Northeast Asian arms race. In May of this year, senior officials in United States President Donald Trump's administration reportedly confided in Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop their fears that such an arms race was "inevitable" should the international community fail to rein in Pyongyang's nuclear and missile advances. During an interview on CNN in October 2017, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton agreed, asserting that "we will now have an arms race—a nuclear arms race in East Asia". Senior political figures like Minister Bishop and Secretary Clinton have encountered no shortage of strategic analysts willing to substantiate their claims. The prominent American commentator Michael Auslin, for instance, argued recently that "North Korea is *ensuring* a nuclear arms race". Similarly, the late Desmond Ball pointed presciently to a predominantly naval Northeast Asian arms race—through one with clear nuclear dimensions—in a paper published just over half a decade ago.

The arms race concept is widely employed. While its precise meaning remains contested, most experts agree that, used correctly, it applies to a relatively rare phenomenon in international relations.

First and foremost, a defining characteristic of any arms race is the notion of “reciprocal interaction”. In other words, two or more states need to disagree over the “proper” balance of military power between them and they need to be self-consciously increasing their arsenals—quantitatively or qualitatively, or both—specifically in response to that disagreement. Second, for arms-racing in any genuine sense of the term to occur, this action-reaction dynamic ought to be occurring rapidly. The classic historical example of the arms race phenomenon is that involving Britain and Germany in the period prior to the First World War. Then, the British responded to Germany’s naval build-up by developing a powerful new class of warship called the dreadnought, which the Germans subsequently copied. In the decade preceding the First World War, the number of dreadnoughts built by Britain was influenced significantly by the numbers built by Germany, and vice versa.

Pyongyang is clearly in a hurry to develop its inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability, to enable it to deliver a nuclear strike on the continental US. North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-un, has authorised more missile tests in 2017 alone than his father, Kim Jong-Il, did during his entire reign from 1994-2011. Likewise, three of North Korea’s six nuclear tests have taken place under Kim Jong-un’s watch. Consistent with the arms race concept, North Korea’s foreign minister Ri Yong Ho has indicated that Pyongyang’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is intended to realise a “balance of power with the US”. Moreover, there has been an evident action-reaction dynamic to the increasingly vitriolic statements traded between Kim and Trump. Beyond the rhetoric, however, there is very little evidence to suggest that Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile advances

are indeed reactive. Rather, they appear to reflect nothing other than the culmination of a decades-long determination to establish North Korea as a fully-fledged nuclear power.

There is certainly some evidence to suggest, however, that South Korea has been responding to Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile advances in ways consistent with the arms race concept. Much to China’s chagrin, for instance, Seoul in July 2017 confirmed that it would proceed with the installation of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defence system immediately following a North Korean ICBM test. Similarly, in September 2017 in the wake of North Korea’s sixth nuclear test, the Trump administration acceded to a request from Seoul to remove the 500-kilogram weight limit in place on conventional warheads provided by the US to South Korea. Removing these restrictions affords Seoul much greater capacity to strike against the North in the event of conflict.

Yet South Korean responses to Pyongyang’s advancing nuclear and missile programs have not been as rapid as the arms race concept would anticipate. THAAD deployment, for instance, was politically fraught and proceeded fitfully. The decision to deploy was initially announced by the US and South Korea in July 2016. Yet this decision was called into question by the May 2017 election of President Moon Jae-in. Whilst on the campaign trail, Moon had pledged to review THAAD deployment. Likewise, while South Korean conservatives have called for the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons removed in 1991 to the Peninsula, South Korea’s Defense Minister Song Young-moo dismissed this as a potential reaction to Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile advances following a meeting with his US counterpart, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, in October 2017.

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Tokyo's reactions to North Korea's nuclear and missile advances have followed a similar pattern. Over the course of the past quarter century, these advances have steadily pushed Japan into reforming key elements of its national defence policy. The August 1998 Taepodong missile test fired by North Korea over Japanese territory, for instance, pushed Tokyo into further reviewing its defence capabilities and, ultimately, cooperating with the US on ballistic missile defence. Likewise, North Korea's October 2006 nuclear test prompted open discussion in Japan about the utility of possessing an indigenous nuclear deterrent.

Pyongyang's most recent nuclear and missile tests appear to be triggering even more substantial reactions. They have, for example, prompted former Japanese Minister of Defense Shigeru Ishiba to raise the prospect Tokyo might loosen its three non-nuclear principles and seek to have the US introduce nuclear weapons into Japan. Tokyo is considering developing further counterstrike capabilities to provide a more multi-layered response strategy for retaliating against a North Korean attack. Japan's Ministry of Defense has also requested an increase in the country's defence budget for 2018, with specific items including an onshore version of the Aegis missile defence system.

Yet there are also important weaknesses in the argument that Japan is engaged in arms-racing behaviour. As in the South Korean case, Tokyo's reactions to North Korea's

nuclear and missile advances have been highly incremental and protracted. Contrary to the expectations of the arms race concept, it is thus hard to sustain the contention that Japan's reactions to Pyongyang's provocations constitute a major qualitative or quantitative shift, as opposed to reflecting a more considered military modernisation process. Mounting speculation that Japan "going nuclear" will be a central element in Northeast Asia's emerging nuclear arms race runs into similar difficulties. Beyond the political and public arguments that would have to be made within Japan, substantial and complex operational planning would be needed for such a development to occur. As the technologically-savvy strategic commentator Richard Bitzinger has recently observed, numerous operational steps and capability issues would need to be resolved, and there is little evidence today that Japan has even begun to put such a process in place.

Commentators predicting the emergence of a Northeast Asian nuclear arms race might argue that South Korean and Japanese policies to date have only been possible because of the confidence that Seoul and Tokyo have had in the nuclear umbrella provided by their senior ally, the US. Yet as the confidence of Seoul and Tokyo in US extended nuclear deterrence erodes in the face of North Korea's nuclear and missile advances, these commentators would argue, so too are the pace of Japanese and South Korean reactions to those advances likely to increase.

What such prognoses fail to account for, however, is the tradition of self-restraint which has long been a feature of Asian strategic culture. Writing in the late 1980s and challenging the conventional wisdom that arms control measures were next to non-existent in this region, for instance, the respected strategic commentator Gerald Segal concluded that informal and inherently more flexible arms control measures "based as much on unstated self-restraint" constituted one of "the hallmarks of Asian arms control".

Three decades on, it would be worth exploring further whether Tokyo and Seoul's thus far quite measured responses in the face of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile advances are, in fact, a product of this deep-seated culture of self-restraint. Is China's still relatively modest nuclear arsenal a reflection of this culture too? Will North Korea continue to expand its nuclear and missile forces indefinitely, or will a measure of self-restraint appear from Pyongyang at some point also?

Should such a culture of self-restraint today exist, the Singaporean practitioner Bilahari Kausikan calls for its abandonment. In a provocative, yet sophisticated contribution to the Northeast Asian nuclear arms race debate, he asserts that regional stability would be best served by Japan and South Korea pursuing nuclear weapons. Following a Waltzian logic, Kausikan argues that such a development would allow for "a six-way balance of mutually assured destruction (MAD) among the US, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and North Korea" to form. Just as the fear of MAD served to effectively deter the Americans and the Soviets from entering the nuclear abyss during the Cold War, Kausikan contends, so will it ultimately prove stabilising in Northeast Asia today.

However, Kausikan's proposal underestimates the difficulty of applying the Cold War construct of MAD to contemporary Northeast Asia. The greater number of players involved here renders this region infinitely more complex and unpredictable than the much simpler bipolar world which existed during the superpower stalemate. Moreover, Northeast Asia's strategic geography is different. As another Singaporean scholar Bernard Loo has recently observed, during the Cold War "the early warning systems

that both superpowers maintained provided them with a reaction time of approximately 30 minutes". In Northeast Asia today, however, "the region is simply too compact, such that warning times of a pre-emptive first strike will be virtually non-existent".

Growing speculation notwithstanding, the spectre of a Northeast Asian nuclear arms race thus still appears some way off. To be sure, Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capabilities are advancing faster than most analysts anticipated. Yet there is little evidence of reciprocal interaction—the very essence of arms-racing—as a driver of North Korean behaviour.

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Further, Japanese and South Korean responses can also be seen as the product of the continued erosion of American extended nuclear deterrence. In other words, Tokyo and Seoul are not simply engaging in an arms race with North Korea but are also hedging against the risk of abandonment by the US. Indeed, it is not altogether inconceivable that either or both might ultimately embark down the nuclear path themselves if they no longer view the US nuclear umbrella as a sufficient deterrent to Pyongyang. Suggestions that such a development is inevitable, however, underestimates the self-restraint which has long been a feature of this region's strategic culture.

While a Northeast Asian nuclear arms race seems unlikely at this juncture, arguments that such a shift might ultimately prove stabilising should be treated with considerable caution. Northeast Asia's strategic dynamics are considerably more complex and fluid than those obtained between the superpowers during the Cold War.

Ensuring that a proper Northeast Asian nuclear arms race does not take off, however improbable one might seem, should thus remain a matter of high priority for both regional and US policymakers.