

**A Realistic Approach to Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone:
A Chinese View**

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Shen Dingli
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1. China and NEA NWFZ

The notion of a Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NEA NWFZ) could certainly entice China, depending upon its exact substance. The type of NEA NWFZ that Dr. Morton Halperin has proposed, as in his Comprehensive Agreement on Peace and Security in Northeast Asia, suggests a future when the Korean Peninsula and Japan are nuclear weapons free, while the nuclear weapons stakeholders defined by the NPT, including China, will remain intact in terms of their nuclear status under such a scheme.

The aforementioned Agreement brings no harm to China, as China will benefit from such a zone. First, the proposed agreement aspires to bring a permanent peace, rather than a mere ceasefire, to the two Koreas, and China's periphery will be therefore more secure and stable. Second, respective declaration of no-hostile intent will strengthen mutual trust and help consolidate the agreement per se. Third, offering civilian energy cooperation amongst members, including nuclear power, is the right balance warranted by the NPT so long as the fear of nuclear proliferation is dispelled for sure.

Meantime this proposal brings no burden to China. China has long supported various sorts of regional nuclear weapons free zones around the globe, except for Southeast Asia where the Treaty of Bangkok has raised some controversy concerning maritime geographical coverage between the ASEAN and China. China doesn't transfer nuclear weapons to and deploy its own nuclear weapons in any such zones. Its long-held declaratory policy of no-use of nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear weapons states has automatically showcased its intent not to threat counties within any such zones. China has also agreed not to sail its nuclear weapons-loaded submarines into such zones.

Therefore, China would welcome a scheme as Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, where it can benefit without significant additional security commitment, as the present formula has neither demanded that China to cut its nuclear forces nor suggested that China re-deploy its nuclear arms at home so as to allow its east part to be nuclear weapons free.

In reality, China has long led the Six Party Talks since 2003, with its hope to make the DPRK to commit not to developing its nuclear weapons, in the name of a nuclear weapons free Korean Peninsula. As long as ROK and Japan will stay within this conception as non-nuclear weapons states to negotiate with the DPRK, such a process shall enhance the chance of nuclear stability in Northeast Asia.

2. The DPRK and nuclear weapons

Since the Six Party Talks were launched in Beijing more than a decade ago, however, any idealists of nuclear arms control and disarmament concerning the DPRK shall be rather dismayed. Instead of committing to at least nuclear self-refraining, the DPRK has well pushed beyond the nuclear threshold – it has not only continued its fissile material operation, possibly on both plutonium and uranium, but also conducted three nuclear tests already, plus shooting missiles as well as projectiles, as called “satellites”, into space.

If there were quite a number of analysts and policymakers who believed in, ten years ago, the possibility to reversing the nuclear course of the DPRK through negotiation and swapping benefits with commitments among various stakeholders, by now most of them are pessimistic. In fact there have always been two schools thus far who believe in either conditional institutionalism or hyperrealism, in regard to the eventuality of the DPRK nuclear future.

The former school still trusts in the power of negotiation and mutual conditional concession. The recent making of ceasefire agreement between Kiev government and those opposition parties in the eastern Ukraine has refreshed hope to this school. In the case of the DPRK nuclear weapons program, it is hoped that as long as the Pyongyang regime still want both “fish and bear paw” – a Chinese idiom indicating competing objectives hard to attain at the same time – then it is likely to manage the trade between security and economy within the Hermit Kingdom leadership, as well as the bargain between the DPRK and its neighbors.

In this spirit, China has transformed itself from a hard realist into a suspicious idealist. Before 2002, China was of the view that the nuclear issue of the DPRK was an issue between Pyongyang and Washington: it is the US threat that had invited the DPRK’s nuclear reaction, so it is up to the US to fix the problem rather than asking China to be responsible. Were the US uninterested in reducing its tangible threat to the DPRK, China would not be effective in facilitating their reconciliation which shall be the base of a meaningful nuclear solution.

This passive view started to change under the Hu Jintao administration, coming into power in 2002 and ushering a page of history to turn a problem of which China is not a source to a solution from which China can benefit. The China-led Six Party Talks (6PT) has changed Chinese image as a passive participant of international system under Deng Xiaoping's reform age. The Six Party Talks, as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), are simple facts that China has behaved more proactively.

Through working with the three generations of the DPRK leadership in the last decade, China has met various frustrations, and by now more fully understood Pyongyang's nuclear strategy and tactics. Without excluding the slightest theoretical chance that the DPRK would still recommit to nuclear abandonment, China starts to suspect if the DPRK would opt for disarming its nuclear wherewithal even when given a best possible offer. Undoubtedly, the swing of US position on this issue – from Clinton's engagement, to Bush's denouncing "axis of evils" and preempting one of them, Iraq, to Obama's cold distancing, has made the reversing of the problem even more difficult.

3. The hard realistic perspective

The other school of international politics has attached more importance to realism, which stresses fear, security, and power as main variables to explain real politique and international relations. In this theorem, the US has to develop nuclear weapons so as to prevent nuclear threat from Nazi Germany, and has to drop the atomic bombs to retaliate against Japan. To prevent both Germany and Japan from acquiring nuclear weapons after the WWII, America has to take the burden to provide nuclear shield for these two countries. Lately the US has to reassert the NATO and US-Japan alliance, both with a nuclear component, to assure Berlin and Tokyo at a time of Russia and China's fast rise.

In the same vein, China has to develop its own nuclear weapons under America's nuclear bluff. Despite its military alliance with the USSR, which naturally included a nuclear coverage, China would still want to build its own nuclear deterrent. Now that its security alliance with the former Soviet Union is gone, and with the US as the sole superpower which keeps selling advanced weaponry to Taiwan, a part of China, China perceives more need to retain its nuclear weaponry. Given the US "rebalancing" in Asia Pacific, America is relocating half of its global naval asset to the West Pacific, clearly for the purpose of checking and balancing China. This would perhaps warrant China's need to further modernize its own deterrent, nuclear and conventional.

The entire Northeast Asia has been under the nuclear shadow for long time. On the one hand, the US has provided extended nuclear deterrence to its allies,

Japan and ROK, till this time. America has deployed nuclear weapons in at least ROK and Taiwan, and possibly in Japan. Though Japan has declared a “three non-nuclear principles,” it used to manage secret nuclear pact with the US. In addition, South Korea and Taiwan turned to their indigenous nuclear weapons programs when the US seemed to be less committal to their security in 1970s to counter the Soviet global expansion. Only through reassuring ROK and Taiwan, the US was able to stop their nuclear weapons programs. Similarly, only through reaffirming with a credible security umbrella, America will be able to persuade Japan not to opt for nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, the DPRK may perceive more threat nowadays than ever. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the DPRK has lost Soviet/Russia security protection. While China nominally still maintains its only military alliance with the DPRK so far, Beijing is neither willing to reaffirm the existence of such a legal bond, nor to be explicit in obliging itself to defend the latter. On the contrary, China has joined the US and American allies to press the DPRK to denuclearize. For a hyperrealist country like the DPRK, it has to count solely on itself after defense partnerships with other countries are all gone though security threats as perceived by it have stayed.

Then, a nuclear deterrent is naturally the DPRK’s current choice. As long as Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons are for security purpose, it will not trade it for anything else. It is apparent that the DPRK has also, from time to time in the past, pretended to trade bomb for life, but that could be interpreted as its tactics rather than a strategy. The DPRK has played the games, repeatedly, to gain international economic aid for its nuclear restraint. But when it comes to choose exclusively either for the bomb or carrot, its answer so far has been clear. In a pessimistic tone, one has to admit that without a regime change, it might be virtually impossible to denuclearize the DPRK.

4. The DPRK and NEA NWFZ

Presently, the DPRK is far closer to nuclear weapons status than it was a decade ago when the Six Party Talks had just opened. As stated above, at this late stage, it is nearly unlikely the DPRK would relinquish its nuclear bomb program whatever any other countries might do.

To mitigate nuclear threat in Northeast Asia, the right approach then might be more realistic and pertinent to the reality. This may require two steps beyond Comprehensive Agreement on Peace and Security – for the DPRK, freezing and incremental reducing its nuclear arsenal; and for the US, acting rather than promising no threat, and normalizing relations with the DPRK as long as the latter would accept nuclear freeze and graduate deduction.

To begin with, it is necessary to place the bar at a reasonable height. The US has not only accepted Israel's nuclear weapons program, but also virtually accepted India and Pakistan's nuclear weapons programs despite initial sanctions against them. Given the "911" terrorist attack, the US has accorded Pakistan with "non-NATO ally" status to qualify American security partnership and military aid. To respond to China's fast ascendance, the US has waived nuclear sanctions on India, initially imposed since India conducted nuclear blast for "peaceful purpose" in 1974. Nevertheless, few years after India tested its nuclear weapons in 1998, the US lifted its sanctions, demonstrating its foreign policy realism, for lining up with India and hedging against China.

One has to understand that the DPRK is not much different from India and Pakistan. It must expect to be treated the same by the US, forgiving its past and ongoing nuclear development for the sake of geostrategic reasons. It must also look at the Iranian nuclear program. Given Iran's highly suspicious nuclear development, the US has refrained itself in the past decade, and forestalled Israel's possible preemption, despite all Iran's noncompliance with various UNSC resolutions disallowing it to enrich any uranium. By now, the US has to accept Iran's limited development of uranium enrichment and nuclear power generation.

The DPRK may also remember what the US preemption against Iraq in 2003 has brought about. The US armed forces eventually withdrew from Iraq for its own loss without finding any justification for conducting this war. But they have left with no apology and compensation, let alone to bring justice to those who launched this warfare. The current ISIL phenomenon in Iraq/Syria is exactly an outcome of the US weakening of the local government without sound reasons. With all these considerations, the DPRK is highly unlikely to abandon its nuclear weapons program at this time to trade for the US intent of no-hostility.

Next, even if the US is ready to accept a nuclear freeze and gradual nuclear reduction of the DPRK, it is far from enough to trade the DPRK's nuclear capacity merely for the US benign intent. For any other nuclear weapons states, de jure or de facto, such as China, Israel, India and Pakistan, the US has set up normal relations with them. It is not difficult to infer that the DPRK will further push its nuclear envelope to qualify for a full political recognition.

Therefore, to prevent the DPRK nuclear program from proceeding further, the US shall not defer its improvement of relations with the DPRK till later. By offering more than no-hostility intent, America ought to present more incentives such as normalization of official relations, not as a reward to the DPRK for its still retaining some nuclear program, but for its willingness to freeze and reduce gradually its nuclear weapons capability.

Given these additional terms, the chance that the DPRK may return to the Six Party Talks, with a more genuine commitment to a scheme of verifiable freeze and incremental dismantlement of its nuclear weapons programs may significantly increase. This will facilitate the process of Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, to make it more realistically attained.

To be sure, a NEA NWFZ without China, Russia and the US to abandon their respective nuclear arms is not a true nuclear weapons free zone covering the entire region. Similarly, a DPRK without fully denuclearizing itself will make the substance of a NEA NWFZ even more distant. However, by achieving a truly meaningful reconciliation of relations between the DPRK and the US, this seems to be the most realistic scenario of an incremental process toward a Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone.