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*Pyongyang’s Nuclear Warheads*Pursuing Options Short of War

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*If Pyongyang develops nuclear missiles capable of attacking the continental United States, it would persuasively be able to deter a conventional attack and have considerably greater freedom to pursue an assertive foreign policy. Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo, writes Paul Saunders, must begin to develop a new and more complex strategy to deter North Korean aggression.*

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Recent news reports regarding a US intelligence assessment that North Korea has developed a miniaturized nuclear warhead suitable for use with its missiles, combined with an escalating exchange of threats between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, have raised tensions between Washington and Pyongyang to almost unprecedented levels. Nevertheless, neither Trump nor Kim likely seeks all-out war. Absent miscalculation leading to a dangerous armed conflict, the greatest risks to the United States and its allies probably lie in conduct short of war.

### War to Destroy Pyongyang’s Nukes?

In thinking about policy responses North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, it is useful to consider America’s historical experience in confronting emerging nuclear weapons states. Among the most important are the cases in which Washington debated going to war to destroy new and small nuclear arsenals at their most vulnerable. The United States considered and rejected this option in managing both the Soviet Union and China—each of which many Americans saw as not only hostile, but also ideological and irrational—and therefore not deterrable. Washington more easily accepted nuclear weapons programs in non-hostile states ranging from the United Kingdom and France to India, Pakistan and Israel.

The United States did fight a war to prevent Iraq from obtaining nuclear weapons, of course, though Americans later learned that Saddam Hussein was much further away from this objective than many realized. Washington threatened war on Iran in similar circumstances, but ultimately accepted a multilateral agreement that delays the nuclear problem without reliably resolving it. Still, Iran and Iraq are fundamentally different from North Korea because unlike Tehran or Saddam Hussein’s Baghdad, Pyongyang already possesses nuclear weapons. The United States has never sought war with a nuclear-armed state and is not likely to do so now.

For its part, North Korea seems quite unlikely to risk suicide by launching an unprovoked nuclear attack. Leaders typically take such extreme risks only when they believe that such a course is better than the alternatives. From this perspective, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis are wise to state publicly that the United States does not seek regime change in North Korea. Under the circumstances, taking this threat off-the-table makes good strategic sense.

### The Real North Korea Problem May be Short of War

While Iran does not have nuclear weapons, the Iran case is a useful one in illustrating practical US priorities and concerns. Over time, it has become apparent that many of Tehran’s strongest American critics are troubled less by the possibility of an Iranian nuclear attack on the United States, Israel, or other US allies—Iran’s leaders are not suicidal either—than by the idea that if Iran successfully obtained nuclear weapons, it could persuasively deter a conventional attack and thus would have considerably greater freedom to pursue an assertive foreign policy in the Middle East. If Pyongyang develops nuclear missiles capable of attacking the continental United States, North Korea would gain a level of freedom that Iran does not yet enjoy.

Indeed, only two US rivals have this degree of freedom in their foreign policy—China and Russia. Their behavior illustrates why Washington strongly prefers doing whatever it can, at an acceptable cost, to prevent new entrants to the nuclear club.

The core problem is that it is not easy to deter a government that possesses nuclear missiles. Deterrence between nuclear powers requires the deterring state to convince the target government that it may be willing to go to war—up to and including nuclear war—to stop or reverse undesirable behavior. Because nuclear war risks mass annihilation, this threat is rarely credible when the stakes are not already existential or close to existential.

Thus, Washington has deterred Chinese or Russian nuclear attacks and invasions of US or allied territory but has been unable to deter Beijing from its provocative conduct in the South China Sea or to deter Russia from seizing Crimea and supporting rebel forces in eastern Ukraine. During the Cold War, America similarly protected itself and its allies but could not deter Soviet invasions of other countries, such as Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979). Accepting a new and hostile nuclear state is so difficult because it requires accepting similar possibilities and living with constraints on US responses in managing an assertive or even aggressive North Korea.

While US and allied policymakers must take seriously the risk of war, whether nuclear or otherwise, and should plan accordingly, they would do well to give considerably greater attention to North Korea’s options short of war.

Washington has already struggled to respond to such “grey zone” challenges in Europe and in Asia and should expect more of them from a North Korea armed with nuclear missiles. Policymakers and analysts should ask themselves not only how their governments should respond to new nuclear and missile tests—or, for that matter, a nuclear attack—but also what to do if Pyongyang repeats and intensifies past provocative actions, such as its sinking of a South Korean naval vessel, its shelling of South Korean civilians, its not-so-covert international assassinations, and the like.

Deploying additional US military personnel, anti-missile systems, and possibly even nuclear weapons to South Korea and surrounding areas will be important elements in deterring a North Korean nuclear attack or, for that matter, a large-scale conventional attack. But these steps will do little to discourage other provocative and dangerous North Korean behavior. That will require a new and more complex strategy that Washington, Seoul, Tokyo and others should begin to develop if they have not already done so. And like current pressure on North Korea over its nuclear tests, it will be more likely to succeed with help from China and Russia. Since this will not be easy, managing the North Korea problem could well become one of the Trump administration’s principal foreign policy challenges.

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# Japan’s Maritime Options

# in a Changing Security Environment

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*In June, the Maritime Self-Defense Force invited military officials from 10 ASEAN countries on a tour of the South China Sea aboard the*Izumo *as the destroyer traveled to the Indian Ocean to take part in joint exercises with the US and Indian navies. Security expert Bonji Ohara puts the move in perspective in the light of a changing regional security environment.*

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*—How has Japan's maritime security policy changed over the years? To what extent has it been affected by China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea?*

**BONJI OHARA:** Safe maritime transport lanes are of critical importance for Japan. Already in 1981, Japan outlined a policy of sea lane defense extending 1,000 nautical miles to the Bashi Channel, south of Taiwan. If the security environment changes, it’s only natural to adjust that policy to ensure the continued safety of sea transport.

The Chinese navy has become more active in recent years and has expanded the scope of its activities, but that in itself does not constitute a change in the security environment. A much more decisive factor is the fact that China is seeking to change the status quo through force. Japan is not directly a party to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, so the concern for Japan is not China’s assertiveness on its territorial claims but its attempts to change the existing international order through force, rather than through debate.

*—What is the significance of sending the MSDF destroyer*Izumo*to Singapore to promote cooperation with the Association Southeast Asian Nations? Why did it avoid crossing the nine-dashed line?*

**OHARA:** Japan’s actions are based on the belief that it is free to act in accordance with the existing international order. Its goals are not to heighten tensions with China but to demonstrate that this order has not been changed through force. The fact that military officers from 10 ASEAN countries boarded the *Izumo* and worked with members of the MSDF was no doubt a manifestation of the shared belief among Japan and ASEAN member states that the international order and rules should not be changed through force.

Because the intention was not to raise tensions with China, there was no need to take action that would unnecessarily provoke Beijing. Avoiding the nine-dash line was probably meant convey the fact that Japan did not regard China with hostility.

*—Japan is engaged in numerous bilateral and multilateral military exercises but has ruled out taking part in the US freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea. How important is it for Japan to play a role in regional security and what more can it do?*

**OHARA:** Japan’s participation in joint military exercises is an attempt to build trust with as many countries as possible in dealing with common threats. In addition to enhancing cooperation in the areas of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, joint naval drills in the South China Sea can help prevent accidental military conflicts. A well-trained coast guard and navy will be better able to defend a country’s territorial waters and manage economic activities within its exclusive economic zone, and they will also be able to respond coolly to a crisis, preventing a “spiral of fear” from triggering a provocative or aggressive military reaction.

As a country that relies on the global commons that is the South China Sea, Japan has been providing capacity building assistance for the navies and coast guards of Southeast Asian countries and offering cooperation to maintain order in this region. But there are limits to what Japan can do. The invitation for ASEAN officers to tour the South China Sea aboard the *Izumo* was not an initiative in itself; the frigate was making a stopover in Singapore en route to the Malabar naval exercises with the US and Indian navies. Japan simply took the opportunity to enhance its cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, and it was not conducting a “freedom of navigation” operation. Japan is unable to conduct such operations for legal reasons and also because it lacks a sufficient number of ships and personnel.

*—How should Japan deal with a neighbor that appears to be increasingly interested in rewriting the rules of international relations?*

**OHARA:** Attempts to change the status quo by force are by no means restricted to the South China Sea. In fact, most governments—to a greater or lesser degree—are unsatisfied with the existing order and prevailing international rules, but they generally refrain from attempting to change them by force.

Many nonstate actors, though, are venting their frustrations in violent ways, such as through mass demonstrations against globalization or terrorist attacks. In the past, China expressed its grievances from a position of weakness, but following its economic ascent has begun asserting its will from a position of strength. Now that it has emerged as one of the world’s most powerful countries, it needs to be more restrained in its recourse to the use of military might.

China’s military capacity is not yet on a par with its economic might, and its leaders are well aware that the country cannot win a war with the United States. Washington, on the other hand, appears to be embracing the tactics of weaker states, such as by prioritizing its own economics interests rather than upholding the ideals of free trade. “Free trade,” of course, was never completely free but was managed through a regime of international regulations. Some are worried that China could start rewriting those rules, but the problem is not who writes them; it’s what those rules actually stipulate. To create rules that are fair to all, it’s important for not just China but also Japan and ASEAN to clearly communicate the kind of rules they hope to see.

*Based on an interview conducted with the*Straits Times*,*[*http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japan-woos-asean-in-aim-to-be-leading-security-player*](http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japan-woos-asean-in-aim-to-be-leading-security-player)*, published June 29, 2017.*

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