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From proliferation to arms race Nuclear challenges in Asia*

Abstract

If there is a region in the world where the 21st Century will be defined, it is Asia. When the rise of powers meets with old rivalries, competition for regional leadership and pending territorial disputes, the risk of conflict resurfaces and the balance of powers shifts. With changes come new trends, and with new trends come new dynamics. The nuclear realm is one of those where the changes are the most significant, the future the most uncertain, and where ongoing evolutions warrant the most scrutiny. What are these evolutions' main characteristics and what are their consequences for security, deterrence, non-proliferation and disarmament? Five major trends are currently shaping the strategic landscape and one of them has the potential for global ramifications: the advent of a regional arms race.

From proliferation to deterrence

Whereas in the past concerns over nuclear security in Asia were primarily linked to proliferation, over the past two decades, concerns have also grown over the effects of a regional arms race. In the 1990s, the international community was squarely focused on proliferation issues. India and Pakistan formally joined the ranks of military nuclear powers in 1998, while North Korea was exhibiting clear signs of its interest in developing nuclear and associated missiles technologies. At that time, Russia and China, two established nuclear powers, became the main suppliers of technologies related to

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weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems to sensitive countries.

At the turn of the XXIst century, the focus on security issues in Asia moved from proliferation to deterrence. Pending concerns about proliferation still mattered after the revelation of the existence of the AKQ network, the emergence of new proliferation networks emanating from North Korea, and the apparition of suspected proliferation cases in places such as Burma. But the two South Asian nuclear states, India and Pakistan, started to move toward deterrence through a simple yet basic process of “learning by doing”. They did so over years through crisis management, for instance drawing the lessons from the Kargil war, and via the development of their arsenals. Pakistan developed its various missiles – the Ghauri and Shaheen, with the help of China, while India, developed the Prithvi and lately, the Agni.

This period is also concomitant with another important factor that later on would drive the evolutions of strategic arsenals: China was enjoying the results of its successful model of economic development that emphasized the development of advanced technologies, many of which were of dual use (nuclear, lasers, space etc...). Partly thanks to its economic growth, China could pursue its military modernization and accelerate the development of niche technologies (such as missile technologies) in spite of the western arms embargo following the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Today, when it comes to discussing security in Asia, it has become as important to explore the ramifications of a regional arms race as it is to explore the potential effects of proliferation.

China has become a key driving factor in the regional arms race

In less than two decades, China has moved from being a major proliferator of sensitive technologies to driving the regional strategic arms race and technological competition.

Responding to the international pressure intended to curb its stance and behavior toward proliferation, China sent some positive signs and showed willingness to better fit international standards and norms regarding proliferation. Yet, troubling elements were still showing a distortion between the official discourse and practice on the ground¹: some of the most troubling aspects of the “AQK affair” pointed out the suspected transfer of Chinese

nuclear warhead plans to Libya²; some of state owned enterprises were still involved in sensitive transfers; banks were giving indirect yet large financial support to proliferation; and some harbors were giving logistic support in the proliferation flux to Middle East.

Almost six years after the US has tried to give a historical impulsion toward disarmament in Prague where President *Obama* delivered a major speech, and nearly five years after the latest iteration of the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) conferences, China not only remains a proliferator, it also drives the strategic dynamics at its periphery. By the level of its investments, the ambitions they reveal, and the potential for further evolution under conditions of opacity, China has fueled a strategic arms race and technological competition all while demonstrating a deep reluctance to communicate in an open manner on nuclear issues.

This changing trend is highly related to China’s growing political, economic and military power, and deeply rooted in China’s own inner evolving programs for five reasons.

First, the reshaping of the PLA to fit a global scope, and the rapid modernization of the People Liberation Army over the past two decades to fit evolving strategic goals have dissipated the old image of an archaic military force and sketched the picture of the potential next military superpower, all that in a historical time record. In addition to receiving advanced weaponry from Russia, the establishment of scientific and technological cooperation with advanced countries has helped China to modernize its military forces in spite of the ban.

Several years of rapid economic growth have allowed China’s defense budget to grow exponentially in real terms, while sustained investments in dual-use technologies have reaped rich dividends. These investments, which are not accounted for under the current defense budget, have been substantive.

The development of modern technologies³, actively encouraged by the top leadership in Beijing, coupled with a wide-spread reform of the military-industrial complex, has triggered unexpectedly rapid developments. Most of

1. Cf. IPCS Issue Brief – Dual Use or Proliferation? China’s Janus Face – Martin de Lavernée, n° 197, June 2012. Cf. Shirley A. Kan “China and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Missiles: Policy Issues”. Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 9 november 2011.

2. Via Pakistan.

them, not to say all of them, were dual use in nature. Some of the reforms initiated by Beijing previously, separating the civil and military spheres in the military complex, helped favor cooperation with advanced countries in S&T in spite of the western military ban, and helped spur military development. It created a stronger military-industrial complex while from the outside, the linkages remained largely invisible.

Second, the 2nd artillery corps has been given pride of place in China's military development program⁴. As a sign of this trend: the development of a large variety of delivery systems and platforms that could be used for dual use⁵. China has long been considered as having a low profile nuclear policy based on three basic principles, a small nuclear arsenal, a no first use doctrine and a commitment to disarmament, at least officially, but is now regarded as the only state of the P5 that is reshaping its strategic forces in an extent and scope only she knows (Russia also reshapes its arsenal but it communicates much more on it).

Third, the opacity surrounding China's military affairs despite the publication of white papers published every two years, almost devoid of enlightening facts on its strategic capabilities⁶ have created uncertainties over time regarding the size and scope of its strategic forces while raising concerns about the future evolutions in its nuclear arsenal, delivery systems, and doctrine. As China seems to create the conditions to reshape its nuclear arsenal while maintaining a deep ambiguity over its precise architecture, its development of new conventional delivery systems and use of dual use platforms raises troubling questions over the final purpose of such systems and of their potential comingling with nuclear weaponry.

Four, the assertiveness that characterizes Chinese foreign policy under President *Xi Jinping*⁷, is mostly perceived as being

3. Cf. Chinese Military Modernization and Force Development – A western Perspective – A report of the CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy September 2013 – (Anthony H. Cordesman, Ashley Hess, Nicholas S. Yarosh, September 2013).

4. Cf. Annual Report to Congress – Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2014.

5. The DF-21 (DF-21; DF-21A; DF-21C; DF-21D) (东风).

6. Cf. Global Fissile Material Report 2013 “Increasing Transparency of Nuclear Warhead and Fissile Material Stocks as a Step toward Disarmament”. Seventh annual report of the international panel on fissile materials.

indicative of new trends. Economic growth generated economic development, followed up by the development of military strength and coercive tools; coercive tools favored self-confidence; and self-confidence generated assertiveness. Today, China is much more uninhibited than it used to be in the past, particularly regarding the use of coercive means to promote and defend its core interests. The way China envisions the threat and use of force raises a fundamental question for deterrence... after being exclusively defensive will China seek to adopt a more aggressive war fighting posture in the nuclear domain as well? Adding to the continuous lack of transparency and the reshaping of its strategic forces, it does not send out positive signals to its neighbors.

Last but not least, one key aspect of the China's nuclear policy, its no first use doctrine (NFU), which has helped to shape the image of a relatively unthreatening nuclear power over the decades, along with its small arsenal and stated support to disarmament, have raised new doubts. Looking beyond advantages and disadvantages the NFU doctrine provides in terms of shaping for China's nuclear strategy, what credibility should be given to the concept, and what are the prospects for evolution as the 2nd artillery forces continue to be reshaped? In particular, doubts persist around the credibility of NFU in case of a conventional attack against Senkaku-Diaoyu or other disputed territories in Arunachal Pradesh for instance (in India), that Chinese standards generally account for its national legitimate territory.

As a consequence of these changing trends, a process of “cascade” emerged in the regional landscape, both in South Asia and North East Asia.

The transformation of the strategic landscape in South Asia

As a result of these changing trends, South Asia is also undergoing deep strategic evolutions. It would be too long to catalogue every program under development within the PLA or the 2nd artillery forces, and exaggerated to assert that they all have symmetric programs in India's strategic capabilities, but

7. Cf. 2014 Annual Report to Congress – US-China Economic and Security Review Commission – Chapter 2: Military and Security issues involving China – Section 1 – Year in Review: Security and Foreign Affairs. “A key element of China's new active foreign policy is the concept of peripheral diplomacy”.

the correlation between some developments in China and those in India reveals the ongoing dynamic of arms race and technological competition between these two old strategic rivals in the shadow of the diplomatic relationships and the deepening of the economic links. Rapid developments in China's military forces drive India's strategic programs as they fix the cap and oblige Delhi to follow up in the technological competition not to be left out of it. When China wants to go to Mars, each of its traditional strategic challenger gets involved in the conquest of Mars, including India; when China develops the range and the scope of its DF family ballistic missiles, India responds with the AGNI family - the AGNI V, tested recently, is shaped to target every part of China's territory; when China gives the priority in its navy to the development of SSBN's with the production of the Jin class SSBN, and thinks of the next generation, then mirrors the Indian Arihant⁸; when China shows signs of interest in Missile Defense, then India sends comparable signs; and when China shows interest in hypervelocity, India does as well.

The different historical background, model of economic development, and resulting potential within the industrial, science and technological basis, coupled with incomparable inner political systems and economic situation, pave the way for different trajectories and sets limits in the comparison of both nations, but India still invest in a proportion that is in some extent irrational regarding its financial resources and its inner economic and social difficulties, just to stay in the technological competition not to be left aside of it. And this reaction drives transformations in its deterrence policy that have cascade consequences. Under such changing trends in India, Pakistan's deterrence is also under reviving pressure.

Strategic changes in North-East Asia

Meanwhile North East Asia has become the theater for important changes as well.

On the first spot, it is ironical that China who has always criticized the American military presence at its periphery did not use its leverage to freeze the nuclear program in North Korea to curb this trend. As a result of China's reluctance to counter proliferation in

8. Indian SSBN program originated in the 70's and India has never given it up in spite of technical constraints.

DPRK, North Korea is slowly but surely emerging as a full-fledged military nuclear power. And facing the emergence of a North Korean deterrence, South Korea asks for reassurance from Washington. The third nuclear test North Korea carried out was a major landmark in this process. The test raised many questions about the power of the test, the capability to integrate a weapon in a missile, and the range of missiles. And the test came at a specific time of the bilateral relationship when North Korea's posture was evolving toward a more aggressive stance, with the sinking of the Cheonan, the bombing of Yeonpyeong islands.

The need for reassurance would without doubt motivate the deepening of the militarization of the peninsula in a process that also raises secondary proliferation risks. The third nuclear test broke the nuclear taboo⁹ and put the issue in the center stage of the political debate in Seoul.

Besides, the resurgence of old rivalries between China and Japan and the renewing tensions over disputed territories – the Senkaku-Diaoyu, in the context of evolving balance of power, led Japan to duplicate the same logic of seeking reassurances but under different circumstances. Beyond China's assertiveness and more aggressive stance in the "fait-accompli" policy, some developments in China's anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) have considerably raised the costs of American military intervention, and, in so doing, have raised questions over the viability of the U.S.'s security commitment to Japan capabilities.

As well as South Korea, Japan has asked Washington for reassurances. And the discussions over the revision of the Defense Guidelines that shape the bilateral relationship between the United States and Japan in military defense is the latest episode of this process.

Western Deterrence Theory faces new challenges

China's rapid militarization and the development of its strategic forces within the PLA's 2nd artillery corps under conditions of opacity and ambiguity are now creating new challenges for American deterrence. Along with the immediate pressure put on American extended deterrence through heightened demands for reassurance, Washington faces

9. Pacific Forum CSIS – *Honolulu Hawaii*. Pacnet n° 20, March 18, 2013.

new dilemmas at a period where it confronts significant budgetary constraints, and a lessened desire for foreign intervention amongst the American public and political class.

Amid many other developments, the latest test of the WU-14 have demonstrated the interest of China in hypervelocity, and even if it is not significant enough to reveal the achievement of operational programs, it has indicated China's willingness to make major technological breakthrough to defeating American antimissile defense, a pillar of the US triad.

China's continued development of anti-access and area denial capabilities has eroded the credibility of American conventional and extended deterrence, while raising concerns amongst key Asian allies such as Japan and South Korea.

As it will be difficult to reverse the trend lines, the way Washington will address nuclear issues with Beijing within the bilateral strategic relationship will define the regional stability. Other allies within the P3 have a significant a stake in the nature of the

evolution of the strategic landscape in Asia. As a symbol of it when French senior military officials debate over the next generation of programs, they put it clearly that changing trends in deterrence policy in Asia influence the decision making.

Conclusion

Ongoing evolutions and changing trends in Asia, under the backdrop of rising powers and renewed assertiveness may have a sizable impact on old paradigms with regard to deterrence. In these changing times, the way we conceptualize and address issues such as nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament may not work anymore. On the eve of the next NPT exam conference, it raises a basic yet fundamental question: if western disarmament does not encourage disarmament, but actively enables opposite trends, is it rational to continue for another five years in the same direction? Indeed, we may only be locking ourselves into antiquated paradigms and creating favorable conditions for revisionist nuclear powers.◇

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