THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ISSUE
AND
THE NORTHEAST ASIA SITUATION:
RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Vasily V. Mikheev
IMEMO

Abstract

The paper deals with the analysis of the following five issues:

- The Northeast Asia situation during the Cold War era;
- The hierarchy of threats and challenges in NEA at present;
- The third nuclear test in North Korea (reasons, consequences, and threats);
- The North Korean political future through the prism of the collapse of the Soviet Union;
- Northeast Asian security and cooperation prospects.

The main ideas of the paper are firstly that the North Korean regime is historically doomed and secondly that Northeast Asia urgently needs the five-party (China, South Korea, Russia, the USA and Japan) cooperation on peaceful regime change in North Korea. The third main point this paper makes is that talks on sharing responsibility among these Five for the future development of North Korea into a “normal” country is the basis for unification (The “Yalta conference” on North Korea).

The paper advocates the theory that the most beneficial strategy for NEA’s future is a peaceful change of the North’s regime through a total engagement policy as well as the other measures mentioned above. Once this occurs new security prospects for the creation of a new multilateral security cooperation in NEA could open up. The American idea of “rebalancing” towards the Asia Pacific could bring a new meaning; that of the establishment of a security
network in NEA on the NEA-5 cooperation formula “(Russia + China) + (US+(ROK and Japan))” (NEA5CF) in order to tackle new security threats and challenges and to create a proper atmosphere for a comprehensive and creative co-development in NEA.

Key words: North Korea, NEA, security, 6-party talks.

NORTHEAST ASIA IN THE COLD WAR EAR: HIERARCHY OF SECURITY PROBLEMS

The Cold War was a period of global ideological, socio-economic and military-political confrontation between two political camps, the socialist and the capitalist ones, led by the two super powers – the former USSR and the USA. It was the communist ideology, totalitarian and authoritarian political systems, and the planned command-distribution economy confronted with ideological pluralism and market-democracy.

The hierarchy of the security issues in NEA followed this global and comprehensive confrontation: Firstly, NEA was a regional area for the Soviet Union, which was formerly the area of American confrontation. Secondly, it was the area of confrontation between the USA and China, as the second-in-size socialist country. The Taiwan issue was a focus of the US, which was a main stake of the Chinese confrontation. Thirdly, there was confrontation between the USSR and China over who was the leader of the socialist movement. Fourthly, in the military-political arena there was a period of confrontation between two pairs of security alliances. The “American–Japanese” and the “American–South Korean” alliances were on one side, and the “USSR–North Korean” and the “Chinese-North Korean” alliances were on the other.

Territorial disputes were perceived in this global military-political confrontation light and did not have an independent meaning for NEA security. Security and political-ideological confrontation impeded upon economic cooperation within the main economies in NEA. Economic partnerships followed configurations of the political alliances. The
former USSR was the main economic partner for North Korea. China was the second economic partner of the North. The USA was the main economic partner for South Korea and Japan.

The North Korean nuclear issue did not exist then. The North started its attempts to work on the military nuke projects at the end of the Soviet period, in the late 1980s, after they signed a peaceful nuclear agreement with the USSR for the construction of the Nuclear Power Station in 1986 (the project failed due to the collapse of the USSR). Moscow received its first information that the North could use atomic cooperation with the USSR for military purposes in 1988. However, in 1990 and 1991, after checking the situation, the former KGB failed to confirm or deny that the North had started the nuclear military program.

In the early 1970s and throughout the 1970s-1980s, Moscow was concerned about the South Korean nuclear program (that was stopped under US pressure) and the US deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea (the issue was solved due to US – SU agreements on the nuclear weapons sphere at the end of the 1980s).

THE PRESENT SECURITY HIERARCHY IN NEA

In this chapter, I distinguish two particular periods of time. The first one is after the collapse of the Soviet Union till the beginning of the new millennium. The second period I will discuss is from the last five to ten years to present.

In the 1990s, crucial changes happened in the NEA. Most notably were:

- The era of military-political confrontation between the USSR and the USA that ended. The Russian–American relationship that evolved into new areas of competition and cooperation, with no threat of war. Russia and the US positioned themselves, and continue to maintain their roles as responsible nuclear superpowers which cooperate on arms reduction and non-proliferation issues.
The American–Chinese relations that have changed following the open-door policy and Chinese market reforms and the American policy of engagement with China. The risk of military conflict over Taiwan which has continued to exist but with a general security atmosphere in NEA that has started to improve.

In the 1990s North Korean nuclear issues began to turn into one of the most serious security risks in NEA. The US–North Korea 1994 Agreed Framework only underlined the importance of it, though it did not help in resolving the issue.

Territorial disputes continued to deteriorate security situations but did not undermine new trends for region-wide economic cooperation which became possible after Russia and China stepped out of the market's way. The collapse of the USSR gave push to Russian–Japanese talks on the “northern territories” issue, that, in turn gave Japan hope to resolve its territorial claims not only in regard to Russia but also to the Tokdo Islands.

Despite the continuation of this fluctuation of security risks, the security environment in general, became better for economic co-development in NEA. Nowadays, the security hierarchy in NEA looks at these following variables:

The Chinese–American relations that have moved to the top of the regional security hierarchy. The role of the Russian–Chinese so called “strategic cooperation” that has dramatically increased. Each of the three countries, Russia, China, and the USA, actively playing the second country as a card in cooperation–competition relationships with the third country (for example, Russia playing the China card against the US, China playing the Russia card against the US, etc.).

The risk of war among the super powers that is barely visibly, or even nonexistent. Chinese–American relations are zigzagging between two lines which are not crossed. On one hand, a growing economic and financial interdependence between China and the
US draws up a red line of military conflict the two sides will not cross over into. On the other hand, the US continues to perceive China in two dichotomous ways. Economically, China (while being a strong competitor to American business) is a “friend” as it plays on market (not socialist “commend-distribution”) rules. However, politically, China is a “foe” as the Communist Party continues to monopolize its political power and ideology. This draws another red line; the creation of the so-called G-2 union, which China and the US must tread lightly on as well.

After the APEC Summit 2012, Russia intensified its policy towards NEA. Russia plans to use its Far Eastern energy resources in order to fill in the growing demand for gas and oil in NEA, focusing on China first. The acceleration of Russian–Chinese economic cooperation and, as a result, the growth of a Russian dependence on Chinese markets and capital, pushes Russia to balance the China factor through developing cooperation with South Korea and Japan, as well as with the USA.

Security architecture in NEA faces serious military-political imbalance with its roots dating back to the Cold War era. On one hand, the security alliances between the US–Japan and US–South Korea do continue to exist. On the other hand, Russia has no similar type of alliance found in NEA. The Russian–North Korean security alliance ended in 1991 with the death of the Soviet Union. The Chinese–North Korean security alliance, from a juridical point of view, is still in effect. However practically speaking, in reality, China gave a signal to the North that it will not help militarily if the North starts the war. These imbalances probe analysts to search for new ideas of how to limit the negative influences of the Cold War in regional security. One idea is to use the experience of the “Russia–NATO” relationship (Russia–NATO Council for security dialog) and establish four pairs of security dialogs in NEA, (1) Russia–“US-Japan Alliance”, (2) Russia–“US-ROK Alliance”, (3) China–“US-Japan”, (4) China–“US-
ROK” Alliances. In the future this could evolve to become a new multilateral security structure in NEA.

- Territorial disputes in NEA go up and down from the security perspective. The territorial issues in the South China Sea (SCS) are becoming more and more important for NEA security as it directly touches China–Japan relations. Another reason for this is that China's military and strategic power growth have made China more active, sometimes to the point of aggression, in defending China's interests in the areas of strategic importance for China's path toward modernization.

- The North Korean nuclear issue is moving to the top of security risks in NEA. After the latest ballistic missile and nuclear devise tests, North Korea turned into the main game-changer in NEA. If we look at the NEA future through the North Korean prism, the third nuclear test created a new security situation that demands stronger cooperation among other main powers which have joint strategic interest in turning NEA into a quickly developing area of creative co-existence and co-development.

In general and at present, the security environment in NEA is better than ever for economic and social cooperation and co-development. However, “better than ever” does not mean “the best”. Imbalances from the Cold War that still persist have become roots for mistrust, barren grounds for cooperation and have furthermore given incentive to increase military operations in NEA. Meanwhile the North Korean nuclear issue continues to create direct threats to regional security.

THE THIRD NUCLEAR TEST: A TURNING POINT

The latest (the third during the last seven years) North Korean nuclear test is a flagrant disregard of the non-proliferation regime and the respective UN resolutions. A strong condemnation of Pyongyang’s actions by the UN Security Council was a correct and anticipated