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FALL 2022

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Cover illustration by VASAVA

Throughout the summer, the protesters in Colombo faced waves of military oppression, with prominent activists who had led the *aragalaya* (Sinhalese for "struggle") arrested en masse. Despite their months of sustained protest—and headlines around the world—remarkably little has changed. Sri Lanka's protesters have achieved little other than lip service to the notion of constitutional reform. Wickremesinghe's crackdown on protesters, while pledging to address their demands, illustrates exactly why his words ring hollow.

What remains lacking is a coherent vision for the island's future. Moreover, the absence of demands from Tamils in the northeast was stark. A list of demands, signed by over 60 organizations representing the movement, made no mention of the need to demilitarize the country or attain justice for the crimes committed by the military. Indeed, there was no mention of the armed forces at all. The Army remained untouchable.

Tamil organizations have been clear about a potential way forward for the island. Trapped in cycles of instability and violence—from the decades-long civil war to the deadly 2019 Easter Sunday attacks to the current economic crisis—they have called for a fundamental rethinking of Sri Lanka's political structure.

In July, a number of Tamil civil society organizations issued a statement noting the historic opportunity to tackle the root cause of Sri Lanka's ills—"Sinhala Buddhist nationalism."

In their demands, they called for a restructuring of Sri Lankan society that respects "the secular and plurinational nature of the island and the right to self-determination." Key to that is restructuring the economy away from the military establishment and breaking the climate of impunity on the island by pursuing accountability. Immediate steps, including releasing land held by the armed forces and curtailing their extensive powers granted by the Prevention of Terrorism Act, have been demanded for decades.

Not only must Sri Lanka's protesters heed that call and refocus their efforts toward dismantling the militarization of the state, but so too must the international community. In August, the U.S. ambassador to Sri Lanka announced over $1 million in funding for the defense ministry to carry out an anti-human-trafficking project. The United States continues to carry out exercises with Sri Lankan troops and has even gifted the Sri Lanka Navy a third U.S. vessel. Continuing to engage with Sri Lanka's military lends it a veneer of legitimacy that whitewashes its role in the island's violent history. The country's south—and Sri Lanka's global partners—must know that tackling this crisis also means confronting the institutions that are fueling it. ■

VIRUBEN NANDAKUMAR is an editor at the *Tamil Guardian.*

East Asia's Nuclear Debates Are Their Own

By Robert E. Kelly

A February poll found that 71 percent of South Koreans wanted their country to have nuclear weapons. Another in May found that 70.2 percent supported indigenous nuclearization, with 63.6 percent in support even if it violated the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The drivers, unsurprisingly, are North Korea's weapons of mass destruction, or WMDs, and China's growing belligerence. These factors impact the Japanese nuclearization debate, too, though interest there is noticeably lower. The United States has long opposed South Korean and Japanese counter-nuclearization. But in the light of the Russia-Ukraine war, Washington should not hegemonically dictate the outcome of its allies' WMD debates.

NATO anxiety over possible Russian use of WMDs following its invasion of Ukraine illustrates the potential limits on U.S. counter-escalation when facing a nuclearized opponent. Western pundits have been quite candid that Russian nuclear weapons were the reason for rejecting the no-fly zone sought by Kyiv. Chinese and especially North Korean WMDs might play a similar blocking or limiting role in East Asian contingencies.

Importantly, U.S. guarantees to South Korea and Japan are formalized as treaties, whereas NATO is not similarly committed to Ukraine. But during the Cold War, Britain and France were incredulous enough that the United States would sacrifice "New York for Paris" that they built their own nuclear weapons despite formal U.S. guarantees. That same logic is at work in East Asia today. The United States will not sacrifice "Los Angeles for Seoul."

China, with its relatively restrained nuclear rhetoric, is less the issue here than North Korea, which regularly and flamboyantly invokes its nuclear weapons. Pyongyang is not going to reform, will march relentlessly toward more and better WMDs, and is building its doctrine around their use, including possible tactical deployments.

Alternatives to direct South Korean or Japanese nuclear deterrence of North Korean WMDs are soft. Extended nuclear deterrence is weakly credible if it means nuked U.S. cities to defend South Korea or Japan. Missile defense does not work well enough to provide a roof against as many weapons as North Korea appears to be building. China will not take serious action to stop

Pyongyang. A negotiated deal—the best solution and hence discussed at length below—might control Pyongyang's programs somewhat via missile or warhead limits or inspector access. But North Korea seems unwilling to negotiate seriously, is an untrustworthy counterparty, is unlikely to cut enough to relieve the existential threat its WMDs now pose to South Korea and Japan, and would demand exorbitant counter-concessions as payment.

This poor option set is already forcing "thinking the unthinkable" discussions in the region. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol has suggested preemptive strikes on North Korean missile sites in a crisis, and former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe suggested the return of U.S. nuclear weapons to the region. The sheer precarity of South Korean and Japanese exposure to a nuclearized or missile Orwellian tyranny—which will be evident yet again this year if Pyongyang tests another nuclear weapon as predicted—will make it increasingly awkward for the United States to hegemonically insist that Seoul, and Tokyo even, not investigate all security options.

Worse, U.S. resistance to allied nuclearization assumes a traditional American internationalism that is no longer assured. The Republican Party increasingly disdains alliances and admires authoritarianism. If former U.S. President Donald Trump—or a similar Trumpist—retakes the presidency in 2024, U.S. opposition to East Asian allies' nuclearization will decline dramatically—if only because the United States will no longer care what they do. As president, Trump was more interested in personal relationships with regional autocrats such as Chinese President Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un than with traditional U.S. partners.

This would not be the first time the United States has tacitly accepted another country's nuclearization. Ostensibly, the United States has supported

People walk past replica missiles at the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul on Feb. 28, 2019.

CHUNG SUNG-JUN/GETTY IMAGES

the NPT for decades. In practice, though, Washington tolerates at least five other states—Britain, France, India, Israel, and Pakistan—being unwilling to build down their stockpiles. Using the vague standard implied by these examples—friendship with the United States; reasonable state capacity; and, at least theoretically, democratic rule—South Korea and Japan more than clear the bar for what is effectively a U.S. NPT exemption.

Judged by U.S. behavior toward NPT contravention, the treaty is better understood as a U.S. effort to prevent unfriendly or hostile states from nuclearizing rather than as a blanket, "Global Zero" commitment to fewer nuclear weapons in the world. The United States does not pressure friendly nuclear weapons states, or itself, to meet NPT requirements. It gave up sanctioning India's and Pakistan's violations after just three years. Applying this more honest standard of U.S. interests to arms control, the NPT is of questionable utility in East Asia.

China, Russia, and North Korea already possess nuclear weapons and show no signs of building down. So there is no regional nuclearization cascade for South Korea or Japan to provoke, because it has already happened. And Taiwanese nuclearization is unlikely, as Taiwanese elites are quite aware that it would provoke China.

Next, there is an underdiscussed NPT downside: It provokes the alliance-debilitating "New York for Paris" debates mentioned above. If U.S. allies do not nuclearize and must rely on U.S. nuclear weapons for nuclear deterrence, then they will inevitably question whether the United States will use those weapons in their defense if it might incur a retaliatory nuclear strike on the U.S. homeland. The answer to that question is almost certainly no, as then-French President Charles de Gaulle realized 61 years ago. The easiest way to reduce this bitter, alliance-undermining dissension is to let U.S. allies self-insure via indigenous nuclearization.

Finally, South Korean and Japanese nuclearization could serve shared regional interests by providing supplemental, local deterrence (as British and French nukes did during the Cold War) and by improving alliance burden-sharing. Further, the threat of South Korean or Japanese nuclearization might finally prompt Pyongyang and Beijing to take North Korean denuclearization negotiations seriously. Should South Korea and Japan respect the NPT and Global Zero plan while China, Russia, and North Korea do as they will, the effective outcome is unilateral disarmament.

This is politically and strategically infeasible; we regrettably live in a world of persistent nuclear armament.

No one seriously believes Seoul or Tokyo will launch an out-of-the-blue, nuclear-first strike on an opponent; set up something like the A.Q. Khan proliferation network; sell WMDs to terrorists or other rogues; put Homer Simpson in charge of nuclear safety; or be so sloppy as to require something like the Nunn-Lugar program. Indeed, as liberal democracies with robust state capacities and preexisting, well-managed nuclear energy programs, they will likely be quite responsible, as Britain and France have been. Even Pakistan and India have been better with their arsenals than the panic of the late 1990s suggested. Even dictatorships have been cautious about these issues. And as democracies with a history of foreign-policy restraint, democratic peace theory suggests they would be good stewards, certainly better than East Asia's autocratic nuclear powers.

There is generalized anxiety about a regional arms race, which South Korean or Japanese nuclearization might exacerbate. Perhaps, but as noted above, there is no local cascade to be sparked because it has already occurred. China, Russia, and North Korea have all moved first. China and Russia have established nuclear arsenals and have no intention of complying with the build-down imperative. Russia's growing rhetorical invocation of its nuclear weapons is a disturbing evolution. North Korea repeatedly agreed, nonbindingly since 1992, to avoid nuclear weapons—only to exit the NPT and keep building. It now has intercontinental ballistic missiles and several dozen nuclear warheads.

North Korea will not sign a deal that reduces its arsenal enough to reduce the strategic threat that brought Yoon to float preemption earlier this year. Even if Pyongyang signed a deal—and did not cheat—it would never cut deeply enough to obviate the existential threat it now poses to Japan and South Korea. Complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization is fantasy.

The negotiations between Kim, Trump, and previous South Korean President Moon Jae-in strongly suggest this. From 2018 to 2020, North Korea had the best chance in its history to capture a balance-positive deal with South Korea and the United States. Revealingly, Kim passed it up, even though the constellation of forces was nearly ideal for Pyongyang in two overlapping dovish presidencies in the North's primary opponents.

With Trump, Pyongyang had the best U.S. president ever for its interests. Trump loathed South Korea. He knew little about Korean history, nuclear weapons, or ballistic missiles; according to former Trump National Security Advisor John Bolton, Trump did not even prepare for his summits with Kim. Trump did not care about the U.S. position in East Asia and disliked U.S. allies generally. He desperately wanted to sign a peace deal with Kim to win a Nobel Peace Prize and help his reelection bid, and Moon came from a South Korean left that has often been eager to engage with Pyongyang.

It is hard to imagine better counterparties to whom Kim might have made some genuine concessions to receive large counter-concessions. Instead, Kim's one serious offer to Trump, at the Hanoi summit in 2019, was very unbalanced. Kim offered to shutter one aging nuclear plant for full sanctions removal. Even Trump realized this was a bad deal, and talks collapsed.

Finally, nuclearization discussions in South Korea and Japan indicate a seriousness about their own security, which is long overdue. Cheap-riding and strategy immaturity among U.S. allies are long-established problems. This is glaringly obvious in Europe now, where local U.S. allies, much more impacted by the Russia-Ukraine war, are nonetheless buck-passing leadership of the response to Washington. The United States should discourage this if it is to finally achieve a more restrained, less sprawling foreign policy; a less gargantuan defense budget; greater focus on China; fewer "forever war" interventions; and so on.

If allied democracies want nuclear weapons, if their foreign-policy elites and voters decide to take this step, then the United States should accept that this is their choice. As a liberal alliance leader, the United States should not tell its partners what to do or what they may even debate. South Korean and Japanese interest in WMDs is defensive, in good faith, and follows decades of restraint; it is obviously not offensively intended. The United States should want its allies to take greater responsibility, develop deep national security doctrines, spend more, stop turning to it for foreign-policy direction, and so on. Indeed, Yoon recognized that in the very title of an article he wrote for *Foreign Affairs* prior to the 2022 South Korean presidential election: "South Korea Needs to Step Up." Precisely.

Allied cheap-riding is bad for the United States at home, too. Militarized hegemony is deeply toxic to U.S. domestic politics. The U.S. national security state is too large and intrusive. U.S. policing has become militarized, and the culture fetishizes soldiers and military violence in a manner unique and disturbing for a republic. Greater allied burden-sharing has long been a goal of U.S. foreign policy, and it would be good for U.S. republican values at home if it did less abroad. There is no reason why greater allied strategic responsibility should not include WMDs if well-governed democratic allies so choose.

No one wants more nuclearization if avoidable. The decision is momentous, and I do not endorse it. Ideally, arms control with North Korea would alleviate some risk, as would missile defense, while extended deterrence and Chinese resistance could encourage North Korea to slow down.

But these options are all poor and getting worse. The United States will not fight a nuclear war solely for its allies,

a point on which analysts should be honest even if U.S. officials dance around it. Direct South Korean and Japanese deterrence is increasingly a better option than these alternatives, and the United States should at least allow its allies to debate the issue without strong-arming them. ■

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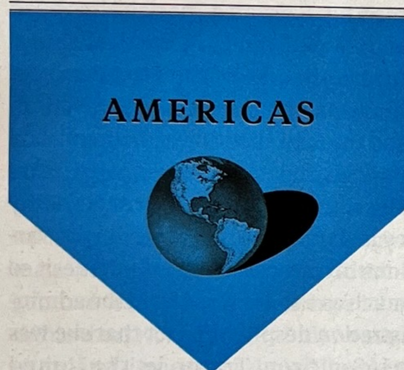
SOUTH ASIA BRIEF: *Michael Kugelman writes a weekly digest of news and analysis from India and seven neighboring countries—a region that comprises one-fourth of the world's population. Sign up for email newsletters at ForeignPolicy.com/briefings.*



Biden Needs Architects, Not Mechanics

By Stephen M. Walt

I voted for Joe Biden in 2020 and was relieved when he was elected president, but I worried that Biden and his team of non-rivals wouldn't be up to the task of designing a foreign policy and grand strategy for the 21st century. The obvious danger was that they'd fall back on the various nostrums, sound bites, and policies that may have worked well during the Cold War but have mostly failed ever since.

Remember what the administration said it would do? It was going to revitalize the United States' alliances and unite the democratic world against the rising tide of autocracy. It was going to focus laser-like on China and win that competition for primacy. Climate change was going to be a top priority. The United States would also rejoin the nuclear deal with Iran, make Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman a "pariah," end the "forever wars," and give Americans a foreign (economic) policy for the "middle class"—whatever that means. And U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken promised that human rights would be "at the center" of the administration's foreign policy.

So how's all that worked out so far?

To be fair, Biden & Co. delivered on some of those early promises. They did end the war in Afghanistan, and the admittedly chaotic ending probably could not have been avoided. Biden has mollified allies alienated by his predecessor's shenanigans, and Russia's war in Ukraine has given NATO a new lease on life for the moment. The United States has rejoined the Paris climate agreement. And although the Biden team has scored a few own-goals since taking office (such as the amateurish rollout of the so-called AUKUS submarine deal with Britain and Australia, as well as the repeated need to walk back the president's verbal slips), there have been fewer gaffes in 18 months under Biden than in any random two weeks of former U.S. President Donald Trump's show.

But overall, there is little sign that the administration has a clear, convincing, and successful strategy in place. If one looks at the range of initiatives and responses they've pursued over the past year and a half, the record is unimpressive.

On Ukraine, Biden's team did a good job orchestrating the trans-Atlantic response to Russia's invasion, beginning with the adroit and politically effective use of intelligence in the run-up to the war. The (mostly) united European response and the (mostly) helpful reaction of countries such as Germany owe much to Biden's efforts (and to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's canny public diplomacy)—and have undoubtedly been a rude shock to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But Americans shouldn't lose sight of the United States' mishandling of the larger situation, a series of mistakes that began under former U.S. President Bill Clinton and continued under every subsequent leader. It has become toxically controversial to raise this issue, with the architects of these missteps going to unnatural lengths to deny that Western policy had anything whatsoever to do with this tragedy. But it is hard not to see Putin's invasion as a classic preventive war: an illegal invasion undertaken to derail the accelerating U.S. effort to arm Ukraine and bring it into the Western orbit.

When Putin mobilized his army and made it clear he'd invade if his concerns were not met, the administration's repeated refusal to even consider ending NATO's "open door policy" guaranteed that war would come. Having convinced Ukraine to give up the nuclear weapons it had inherited from the former Soviet Union back in the 1990s—thereby removing a powerful deterrent to a future Russian attack—the West's failure to acknowledge Russian concerns or anticipate how Moscow might respond was an extraordinary strategic miscalculation.

Here's what worries me: Ukraine's heroic resistance and billions of dollars of Western military assistance have not prevented Russia from seizing a considerable portion of Ukrainian territory. Sanctions will weaken Russia over time but probably won't dislodge Putin from the Kremlin or convince him to withdraw. The result will not be a decisive Western triumph but a