

CHINA MONTHLY

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My Bomb, Your Bomb

The Big Picture



The crew of China's Shenzhou 16 mission captured for the first time the full structure of the Tiangong space station, which is expected to continue operating at least until the mid-2030s.

THE BRIEFING

Xi-Biden Hotline

After four hours with President Xi Jinping in the outskirts of San Francisco ahead of the APEC Summit, US President Joe Biden said: "For two large countries like China and the United States, turning their back on each other is not an option...It is unrealistic for one side to remodel the other." They agreed to work to curb fentanyl production, open a presidential hotline, and resume military-to-military communications. "We're back to direct, open clear direct communication on a direct basis...He and I agreed that each one of us can pick up the phone call directly and we'll be heard immediately."

Taiwan Opposition Unity Collapse

Hou Yu-ih of the Nationalist Party and Ko Wen-je, the founder of the Taiwan People's Party, both registered individually as presidential candidates, as Taiwan's two main opposition parties spectacularly failed in their bid for a unity ticket to unseat the governing Democratic Progressive Party in the January 2024 presidential election. In a meeting open to journalists just ahead of the nomination deadline, the duo traded accusations of bad faith in dealings over who would have had to accept the vice presidential nomination on that unity ticket.

Peak Carbon

China's carbon emissions could peak in 2023 before entering an unprecedented structural decline in 2024 after a record surge in clean energy investments, with Beijing's 2023 solar and wind installation targets met by September while electric vehicles' market share is already well ahead of China's 20% target for 2025. The lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air also wrote that the most striking growth has been in solar power, with installations increasing 210 gigawatts in 2023 – four times what China added in 2020.

Li Qiang Takes Top Job

Chinese Premier Li Qiang has been appointed as the head of the Central Finance Commission (CFC), the top planner for the country's financial system. It is the first time any official has ever headed an organisation that would typically be chaired by President Xi Jinping. The CFC started daily operations in late September, the South China Morning Post reported.

Unprecedented Property Support

Regulators are considering allowing banks to issue unprecedented unsecured loans to some developers for day-to-day operations, potentially freeing up capital for debt repayment. Meanwhile, China's top lawmaking body said that banks should increase funding for developers to reduce the risk of additional defaults and make certain that housing projects get completed.

MY BOMB, YOUR BOMB

By Raymond Lim

We live today in the world of Dr Strangelove. Yes, how to stop worrying and love the bomb. The Russian invasion of Ukraine showed that countries that give up nuclear weapons like Ukraine are vulnerable and that having them like Russia limits the freedom of action of your adversaries. As former United States President Bill Clinton said recently, "I feel a personal stake because I got them [Ukraine] to agree to give up their nuclear weapons. And none of them believe that Russia would have pulled this stunt if Ukraine still had their weapons." Clinton was referring to the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 when Ukraine agreed to give up 1,900 nuclear warheads in exchange for security assurances from the United States and the United Kingdom as well as a commitment from Russia to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity. "They were afraid to give them up because they thought that's the only thing that protected them from an expansionist Russia," he added. Well, that has come to pass. First the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and then the February 2022 invasion.

In the part of the world where I live, one can expect North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to say, "I could have told you so." Libya's Muammar Gaddafi when speaking to the public for the last time said that Kim Jong Il (Kim Jong Un's father) must be looking at him and laughing. Gaddafi gave up his nuclear ambitions and the result for him was not just an invasion by NATO-led forces but his corpse being paraded through the streets of Misrata. That lesson would not have been lost on Kim. "There but for the grace of Nukes go I." For the North Korean leadership, the Ukraine War reinforces the view that nuclear weapons and its delivery systems are not just bargaining chips with the West but necessary for security and regime survival. Nuclear weapons and ICBMs (inter-continental ballistic missile) are here to stay in North Korea's arsenal. More bombs will be made, and missile capabilities further improved.

New York for Tokyo

It is the latter – ICBMs – that is the joker in the pack here. The mere possibility that the North Korean boast may be true, that it has ICBMs that can successfully carry nuclear warheads to hit the mainland United States, changes the strategic situation in Northeast Asia. Charles de Gaulle famously said in his argument for an independent nuclear capability for France that America would not sacrifice New York for Paris in the face of Soviet nuclear intimidation. In Seoul and Tokyo that same question would be asked as to whether Washington would protect South Korea and Japan at the cost of US cities being nuked by the North Koreans. The answer is quite obviously "No". And so, while both countries have sought and received reassurances from the United States that its nuclear umbrella would be there to defend them against North

Korea and in the case of Japan against China, the lessons of history tell them that these assurances may not be worth the paper they are printed on if push comes to shove.

Afghanistan is the most recent example where the United States left its erstwhile ally by slipping away in the dead of the night from Bagram Airfield without notifying the Afghan government and in the not-too-distant past, the Vietnam War where the Thieu government in the South was abandoned despite American assurances to the contrary. The iconic photograph of people scrambling desperately to be evacuated by an American helicopter on the rooftop of a building used by the CIA as Saigon fell says it all. And mind you in both cases, the United States was not facing a nuclear-armed adversary that could blow up American cities.

My Security, Your Threat

This is why both South Korea and Japan may go nuclear. The Ukraine War has added both urgency and saliency to this issue as it has driven home the point that nuclear weapons act as a constraint on foreign military assistance to your enemy, both in the nature of the assistance and the extent of it. In fact, Western leaders openly and repeatedly advocated extreme caution in not crossing possible Russian red lines that may trigger a wider war with a Russia that has ominously threatened nuclear retaliation. Unlike Japan which is still traumatized by memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; most South Koreans - a super-majority of two-thirds in the latest poll - want their country to develop its own nuclear weapons. Even for Japan where anti-nuclear sentiment is strong, the late Abe Shinzo, its former prime minister felt compelled to speak out in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that Japan should consider having its own nuclear weapons. So, the Ukraine War puts the final nail in the coffin of denuclearization, not just of North Korea but for nuclear non-proliferation in Northeast Asia as a whole.

The American aim of the denuclearization of North Korea was never realistic to begin with. A pre-emptive strike to destroy North Korea's nuclear capabilities even if it is successful - which is itself extremely doubtful - would trigger off not just retaliation but escalation. James Mattis when he was US defense secretary said, "If this goes to a military solution, it is going to be tragic on an unbelievable scale." He went on, "It will be a war more serious in terms of human suffering than anything we have seen since 1953". As Bismarck pointedly said, "Preventive war is like committing suicide for fear of death." The very act of a pre-emptive military strike against North Korea may well trigger a nuclear war that it was its aim to pre-empt.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom in the West that China is a bad actor in North Korea, China has through the years shifted its position from "safeguarding regional peace and stability" to specifically committing to a "nuclear-free" peninsula. As James Mattis said at the height of US President Donald Trump's "fire and fury" rant against North Korea, China has the same policy as the United States of a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. But this is a parallel rather than the same interest as to the Chinese this means no nuclear assets must be

deployed in the Korean Peninsula including US nuclear-armed submarines in the region and not just the North Korean's.

Further unlike America, China believes that North Korea's nuclear weapons are for defensive purposes. North Korea's provocation in testing and showcasing its ballistic missiles and bombs are acts of deterrence. As Dr Strangelove said in referring to the Soviet Union's "Doomsday Machine", "the whole point of having such a weapon is lost if you keep it a secret." Therefore, to the Chinese, it is not just the United States or its allies, Japan and South Korea that have legitimate national security concerns. North Korea too has legitimate national security concerns which must be addressed before it will agree to any restriction on its nuclear weapons program. I use the word "restriction" deliberately as I do not believe that the North Koreans will ever give up their nuclear weapons completely. Like Russian President Vladimir Putin said, "North Korea would rather eat grass than give up their nuclear weapons as that is an invitation to the cemetery." Putin's war on Ukraine would have further hammered home that point even though the North Koreans never ever needed convincing here.

United States policy on North Korea remains that of the complete denuclearization of North Korea. But from Bill Clinton's "Agreed Framework" in 1994 to George W. Bush's "Six Party Talks" in 2003 to Barack Obama's "strategic patience" in 2012 to Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" in 2017 which morphed into a love fest with what Trump called "beautiful letters" with the "very honorable" (previously "little rocket man") Kim Jong Un in 2019, the United States has failed to get rid of North Korea's nuclear weapons. Instead, North Korea has successfully tested nuclear bombs and has made significant progress on the delivery systems. These cannot be reversed without a catastrophic war. Nor will North Korea do the West a favor by collapsing because China will ensure that this does not happen because it does not want chaos along its borders. In the absence then of a new policy to get rid of North Korean nukes from the Biden administration whose policy on this matter remains to be discovered; North Korea will remain a nuclear-armed state for the foreseeable future.

My Bomb, Your Bomb

In light of this and the Ukraine War, some have argued that South Korea and Japan should be encouraged to go nuclear as they reckoned that this will bring about greater stability because with the region bristling with nuclear weapons, no country would risk adventurism or seek hegemony, as to do so may result in "Mutual Assured Destruction" (MAD). MAD will keep the leaders of the region sane. But for MAD to bring stability it must be clear who is being deterred, and by whom. If there are many nuclear-armed players, it is not clear who is deterring whom.

For instance, is South Korea's nukes meant to deter North Korea or Japan? Both North Korea and South Korea do not rank each other as the country they hate the most. Japan takes top spot here because of its harsh occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. To South Korea, part of a divided country that is technically still at war with the other part, peace and reconciliation with North Korea takes precedence over denuclearization.

And as for North Korea are their nukes meant for Japan and South Korea or the United States? As far as North Korea's threat assessment is concerned, the only country which would seek to use military force to effect regime change is the United States. This is why despite the fact that their missiles could already deliver nuclear warheads to Japan and South Korea; they have continued to improve them so as to be able to hit the mainland United States.

Then there is Japan. Are Japan's nukes meant to deter North Korea or China? Japan views China not North Korea as its biggest security threat as its greatest worry is that a rising China may one day want to settle accounts on the terrible suffering inflicted on the Chinese people by Japan in the Second World War. It was the longest war of that global conflict, stretching from 1937 to 1945, with an estimated 20 million Chinese people, mostly civilians, killed. History haunts Sino-Japan relations.

Finally, there is China, the resident giant in Northeast Asia. We need to ask ourselves, from the time Japan and South Korea, get from here to going nuclear, would the Chinese act pre-emptively to stop it? Would it provoke a Chinese reaction like the United States' reaction in the Cuban Missile Crisis? Would the United States act to stop China and thereby risk a conflict with nuclear escalatory risks?

And how do you achieve strategic balance in a region with multiple nuclear-armed states? Instead of balance, would you instead increase the risk of nuclear war as miscalculations rise given the increased complexity and variability of actions as the nuclear-armed states will each have different security considerations and nuclear use policies.

Thomas Schelling, whose works informed much of nuclear deterrence thinking used the analogy of two climbers chained together at the edge of a cliff. If one was to threaten to push the other over the cliff, both would be doomed; just as it would be if one state threatens nuclear war, unacceptable retaliation may ensue. This is mutual deterrence. But if you have five players – the United States, China, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan – with multiple configurations of chains amongst them at the same cliff edge; the risk of miscalculations rises sharply as there is no mutuality on who is being deterred and by whom. The more variables you have in the equation, the harder it is to reach equilibrium.

Perfect the enemy of the good

It is tragically true that when it comes to war and peace between nations, there are often only bad and less bad options. But to encourage nuclear proliferation and hence increase the risk of nuclear annihilation, is not the choice of a less bad option but a Thanos-level death wish for mankind. The overriding aim surely must be to try to reduce the risk of nuclear war in the region which a policy of proliferation does not. In this regard, we should start by recognizing reality. The reality is that the United States already factors in the fact that North Korea has nuclear weapons in America's defense planning. Nuclear deterrence already exists between both countries. Both want to avoid a nuclear war.

Without saying so, the US and its allies *de facto* accept that North Korea is not going to give up completely its nuclear weapons. The policy then should be to work towards

reducing the risk of the use of nuclear weapons. Thus, the United States should be having not just arms control, but also strategic stability talks with North Korea to reduce the escalation risk towards a nuclear conflict. It should stop insisting that the goal of any such talks must be the denuclearization of North Korea. The North Korean regime may be homicidal, but they are not suicidal. To insist on what they believe is critical to their survival is to preclude taking steps towards reducing the risks of nuclear conflict. The perfect should not be the enemy of the good. We live in an imperfect world and wisdom lies in understanding that some problems simply cannot be solved but mitigated.

*“God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

- Reinhold Niebuhr

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