

Asia-Pacific: The New Nuclear Fault Line?

Benjamin Zala

It is by now becoming increasingly clear that the Asia-Pacific region will come to dominate the international relations of at least the first half of the Twenty First Century. Not only in the highly visible and often contentious areas of economy and security, but also in areas such as health, communication and environment, the states and peoples of the Asia-Pacific are ever more finding themselves under the international spotlight.

For the middle sized states of the region such as Australia, the challenges to both regional and international security created by such a sudden and forceful ascendancy of the Asia-Pacific region will most likely come to define much of their foreign and defence policies in the coming decades. It follows that these challenges should define future planning and strategic thinking now, and the security of the region is therefore receiving much attention from academia, think-tanks, NGOs and government agencies. Due to the continuous North Korean crisis over the last few years, a renewed focus has emerged on nuclear weapons and their associated delivery systems as the spectre of a nuclear arms race in the Asia-Pacific region has been raised, particularly in comments in the media.

Whether this is a short-term prospect related to North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship (made particularly problematic by its recent nuclear test) that is likely to be circumvented by careful diplomacy, or whether the Asia-Pacific region really is set to become the new nuclear fault line of the twenty-first century in the way Europe was for the duration of the Cold War, could be central to understanding the security dynamics of the region in the foreseeable future.

The Twentieth Century's Terror Endures

Since the end of the Cold War, the threat of nuclear war has lost its place as a prime concern in international affairs. With an absence of intense superpower rivalry, nuclear weaponry, arms races and doctrines such as Mutually Assured Destruction no longer dominate either the public imagination or the esoteric thinking and writing of the strategic and defence communities around the world the way they once did. For the most part, this relaxing of the previous concerns about an all-out, deliberately launched, nuclear attack is understandable.

Yet while some advances have been made in terms of reducing the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia, both states continue to hold vast stockpiles of nuclear warheads while another six states maintain modest stockpiles of their own.¹ Added to this are two more states that have broken away from the established nuclear non-proliferation regime—one explicitly (North Korea) and the other more implicitly reclining from the spirit of the regime (Iran).

At the multilateral level, the sense of optimism and concrete progress following the end of the Cold War demonstrated by the indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the adding of an Additional Protocol to the treaty, the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the progress towards a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty, has almost completely disappeared. Instead cooperation and progress has given way to stagnation and now complete deadlock, dramatically highlighted twice in 2005 by the complete failure of the NPT Review Conference and the total omission of any reference to nuclear disarmament or non-proliferation in the Final Document of the UN sponsored World Summit.

The United States and Russia: Nuclear Armed and Turning to Asia

At the beginning of 2006, the United States retained around 5,735 operational nuclear warheads and is currently poised to deploy a 'more accurate preemptive nuclear strike capability in the Asia-Pacific region.'² The central role of nuclear weapons in US defence policies remains and billions of dollars are being spent annually to not only maintain this force but also to upgrade it, with a current emphasis on increasing the 'usability' of nuclear weapons.³

While Washington's potential rivals in the region watch US offensive nuclear weapons modernisation efforts with increasing unease, US defensive efforts are also closely observed. The current US Administration's renewed push for the deployment of a ballistic missile defence system has raised the nuclear stakes – particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. According to Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, 'Missile defense appears to be a major part of Russia's decision to retain multiple-warhead ICBMs and to develop new weapons capabilities.'⁴ This includes new warheads that can change both altitude and direction and therefore attempt to elude a missile defence system. China too is reportedly working on warhead modifications to

¹ This includes Britain, China, France, India, Israel (although still undeclared) and Pakistan.

² R.S. Norris and H.M. Kristensen, 'US Nuclear Forces, 2006', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 62, no. 1, (January/February 2006), pp. 68-71.

³ Norris and Kristensen, 'US Nuclear Forces, 2006', p. 68.

⁴ R.S. Norris and H.M. Kristensen, 'Russian Nuclear Forces, 2006', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 62, no. 2 (March/April 2006), p. 66.

counter the US system which currently involves theatre defence components in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.⁵

While the immediate post-September 11 period has seen Washington preoccupied with the threat of non-state terrorism, it is unlikely that strategic policy circles in the world's only superpower will continue to make this the priority over the geo-political movements underway in Asia for much longer.⁶ The rise of China has long been of immediate concern to Washington, which views Beijing as a potential great power rival in the Asia-Pacific region. The conflict over Taiwan continues to threaten the relative calm between Washington and Beijing and the current US Administration's unilateral tendencies have resulted in the United States being viewed with a sense of unease and distrust by many Asian states—a situation not going unnoticed by China. Whilst the increasing economic and military clout of India is viewed in much more accommodating terms, the United States has shown a willingness to exploit the geo-political tensions of the region by reversing its policy on India's nuclear program and engaging in close collaboration in this area.

Russia has approximately 5,830 operational nuclear warheads in its active arsenal.⁷ In an attempt to demonstrate its status as a powerful state, Russia appears to be attempting to reassert its nuclear strength of late via a program of modernisation and upgrades.⁸ Whilst the role of economic and cultural interdependence in international relations has long since been established by liberal institutionalist theorists, there still remains no more symbolic means of demonstrating 'hard' power than military might, and there is no greater military capability than a robust strategic nuclear force.

For Moscow, Asia presents an opportunity to regain some of its former status as a superpower and perhaps join the club of rising powers alongside China, India, a unified Europe and other, more far-flung contenders (Japan, Brazil, Nigeria etc.). The obvious first place where signs of a re-emerging Russia may be found is in the former-Soviet states of Central Asia. Not only faced with the growing focus on the region by the United States (particularly since September 11) both in relation to terrorism and energy security, but also with a concerted effort by Beijing to mark out its own sphere of influence in the region⁹, the path to a renewed Russian strategic presence in Central Asia is fraught with dangers.

⁵ Other countries in the region, including Australia, have indicated strong support for the US missile defence system.

⁶ For discussion of this in relation to China, see B. Taylor, 'Towards Hegemony? Assessing China's Asian Ambitions', *Security Challenges*, vol. 1, no. 1 (November 2005), pp. 21-25.

⁷ Norris and Kristensen, 'Russian Nuclear Forces, 2006', p. 64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-67.

⁹ See N. Swanström, 'China and Central Asia: a new Great Game or traditional vassal relations?', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 14, no. 45 (November 2005), pp. 569-584.

While Moscow may wish to project Russian power into the Asia-Pacific region, as one writer notes, 'the Russian military is still an archaic and inefficient organization, incapable of fulfilling Moscow's ambitious aims.'¹⁰ The most effective way for Russia to assert itself as a Great Power in the region is to remind the much smaller nuclear powers of China, India, Pakistan, North Korea and any other state that joins the nuclear club that besides the United States, no other state has a balanced nuclear force in sufficient numbers to prevail against any other nuclear power.

Geo-Political Tensions and Military Modernisation

Military modernisation in Asia-Pacific will continue to help shape the way power is distributed in the region and affect the likelihood of conflict in particular areas or over particular issues – including nuclear conflict. Until now, having the largest military in Asia-Pacific has not enabled China to pursue military objectives effectively throughout its immediate region, yet as its military modernisation continues this is unlikely to remain the case.¹¹ Many observers concentrate on the effect this has on the standoff in the Taiwan Straits, but the implications for China's aspirations for global superpower status, as well as its strategy aimed at securing medium to long-term energy supplies, may also be profound. In many ways the same can be said for India.

How military modernisation in Asia-Pacific relates to nuclear weaponry is highlighted particularly by China's current focus on naval power as its highest priority for review and upgrade. The Chinese navy is currently working on its submarine launched ballistic missile program on multiple fronts.¹² China's nuclear deterrent will benefit from further upgrades to its already strong ballistic missile capabilities placing Taiwan, Japan, India and the United States more firmly within its reach. While much of the current discussion (understandably) focuses on North Korea's ability spark a regional nuclear arms race, China's ability to set in motion a similar chain of events should not be underestimated. As relations cool further with Japan and hegemonic rivalry increases with the United States, the likelihood of this scenario only increases.

This does not mean that the possibility of North Korea's nuclear weapons program leading to a regional arms race should be taken lightly. It may not play out immediately as states in the Asia-Pacific region watch closely to see just how successful Pyongyang will be in building a credible nuclear

¹⁰ D. Mistry, 'Military Modernization in Asia', *Asian Security*, vol. 2, no. 1 (February 2006), p. 60.

¹¹ For further discussion of China's military modernisation, see D. Shambaugh, 'China's Military Modernization: Making Steady and Surprising Progress', in A. Tellis and M. Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia 2005-06: Military Modernization in an Era of Uncertainty*, Seattle, The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2005, pp. 67-104.

¹² R.S. Norris and H.M. Kristensen, 'Chinese Nuclear Forces, 2006', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 62, no. 3 (May/June 2006), pp. 60-3.

deterrent, and how its neighbours react to such developments. While Japanese leaders are insisting today that Japan will not follow the same path and take steps to weaponise its significant nuclear capabilities, this does not mean that this will remain the case in the coming years. The same can be said for both South Korea and Taiwan. The North Korean nuclear crisis has thrown into sharp relief the extent to which the traditional 'security dilemma' is alive and well within the Asia-Pacific region.

In response to Chinese intransigence over the independence issue, set against the backdrop of China's military modernisation, Taiwan has embarked upon its own reassessment of its military capabilities. Put in simple terms, there are many factors which make the China-Taiwan dispute an unequal one,¹³ but none more plainly in security terms than the fact that one side has a nuclear arsenal immediately at its disposal and the other shelters within the 'nuclear umbrella' of another state. For those in Taipei advocating a forceful approach to their cross-Straight neighbour, this disparity must take first priority in any military modernization effort aimed at creating a defence policy more independent from the United States, whose reliability to use nuclear forces in the defence of Taiwan has never been completely assured.¹⁴

The twin factors of a civilian nuclear program relatively easily adapted to include at least some military components on the one hand, and a military modernisation program which is currently moving the Taiwanese defence forces away from an army-centric focus on the other hand, lead to the conclusion that Taiwan's status as a non-nuclear weapons state may not remain secure for long. Recent Taiwanese upgrades of its cruise missiles have only emphasized this idea across the region, not least for strategic and defence analysts in China. This danger is only reinforced by the fact that Taiwan developed a covert nuclear weapons program in the 1960s, which was only fully abandoned towards the end of the 1980s.¹⁵

A similar nuclear-armed standoff still threatens between India and Pakistan, particularly over the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. While relations at the moment are at their most cordial in years, few long time observers are treating this as a likely status-quo just yet. Many factors, including the propensity of competing powers to manipulate both sides for strategic purposes, the chronic instability of the military regime in Pakistan

¹³ As it involves an almost universally acknowledged 'rising power' with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council on one side and a small-medium sized state that is formally recognized by only a handful of states on the other.

¹⁴ It is often overlooked in examinations of the Taiwan issue that a more prudent and cautious path may well be taken by the United States in any overt conflict between Taiwan and China, which could include a strategic retreat early on. For a historical perspective in this regard, see, P. Monk, *Thunder from the Silent Zone: Rethinking China*, Melbourne, Scribe, 2005, p. 109.

¹⁵ Nuclear Threat Initiative, *Taiwan Profile*, 2003, <http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/Taiwan/index.html> [Accessed 1 October 2006].

and the still high levels of popular animosity towards the other in both countries, have the potential to reverse the recent rapprochement and spark major conflict once more. It should be noted that only four years ago in 2002 both countries came to the brink of a hot war, with public threats made on both sides of nuclear strikes and retaliation.

The proliferation of nuclear technology and know-how is not only of concern in relation to states in the Asia-Pacific region¹⁶ but also in relation to non-state terrorism. The revelation of the extent of the now infamous A.Q. Khan nuclear black market network has added a new dimension to the nuclear question in the Asia-Pacific. Yet, while important to counter-proliferation activities, in terms of nuclear weapons, the terrorist threat to peace and stability in the region is dwarfed by that which is posed by states armed with nuclear arsenals capable of inflicting truly massive destruction.

Conclusion

In any possible major conflict that may erupt in Asia-Pacific – whether on the Korean peninsula, between Japan and China, in the Taiwan straight, or over Kashmir—a major instigating factor may not be deliberate hostilities but miscalculation. Since the nuclear age in international relations began in 1945, states have been deterred from using all military options available for pursuing strategic objectives due to the threat of a nuclear exchange between two or more states. Yet nuclear deterrence has not always been the constraining force that it ought to be. As Paul Monk has observed, the history of the US-Sino confrontation over Taiwan gives some cause for concern in this regard.

It was not the intention of the Truman administration in 1948-50 to embroil itself in a war with China or to defend the Republic of China on Taiwan, yet it found itself doing both. It was not the intention of Mao Zedong in the late 1940s or the late 1950s to embroil himself in a war with the United States. Yet he ended up in a brutal and costly conflict in Korea, in which hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers were killed (including one of his own sons), and he very nearly brought on a cataclysmic U.S. nuclear strike against China in 1958.¹⁷

If the Asia-Pacific region remains a theatre of Great Power competition as well as retaining the geo-political flashpoints discussed above (as it appears likely to for some time), the threat of miscalculation in military planning will only increase. If the nuclear weapons paths discussed above are also followed (even if only by some), the threat of a nuclear exchange could well

¹⁶ Other states in the Asia-Pacific region other than the ones mentioned in this article are of considerable proliferation concern including Japan and Indonesia. See F. Barnaby and S. Bernie, *Thinking the Unthinkable: Japanese Nuclear Power and Proliferation in East Asia*, Oxford Research Group Briefing Paper, August 2005; and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Countries of Strategic Nuclear Concern – Indonesia*, 2004, <<http://www.sipri.org/contents/expcon/cnsc2ins.html>> [Accessed 1 October 2006].

¹⁷ Monk, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

come to characterise the strategic relations of states in Asia-Pacific just as it did for the members of NATO and the Warsaw Pact in Europe during the Cold War.

Early on in the Cold War, scholars and practitioners turned their minds towards coming up with ways of facilitating rapprochement and some level of cooperation amongst the nuclear powers, and in particular the two bipolar rivals. At the beginning of the Twenty First Century, it does not appear that strategic thinking and diplomatic efforts are making the equivalent gains in the Asia-Pacific region. Whether the region's geopolitics over the coming decades come to be characterised by being part of a larger multipolar order, an Asia-Pacific balance of powers or the continuation of an uneasy dominance of the region by the American superpower alongside a number of 'great' and 'rising' powers, is still unclear. Yet whatever the make up of the region in terms of power relations, the Asia-Pacific appears to be set to dominate early-mid Twenty First Century international relations. In the absence of robust regional arms control agreements¹⁸ or a multilateral framework to discuss the strategic problems of the region,¹⁹ coupled with the rapidly disintegrating consensus on nuclear weapons issues at the international level, the prospects of the Asia-Pacific region becoming the new nuclear fault line seem set to significantly increase.

Benjamin Zala holds a Bachelor of International Relations (Hons) from La Trobe University where he is currently working with the Centre for Dialogue. His main research interests are international organisation and international security. B.zala@latrobe.edu.au

¹⁸ While nuclear weapon free zone treaties do exist in both the South Pacific and Southeast Asia, both have done little to curb the nuclear aspirations of states in the more militarily important areas of South and North Asia. Both treaties are also likely to be weakened by the general crisis in arms control and disarmament negotiations at the international level.

¹⁹ While the regional governance architecture of the Asia-Pacific region is steadily growing, the vast majority of this is focused on trade and finance issues. This has been illustrated by the ad-hoc nature of the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear crisis outside of any regional arrangement.