

# **Nuclear Threat Reduction in Northeast Asia**

Tong ZHAO

Associate

Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy

Presentation made at Pugwash Conference 2015

At the beginning of my presentation, I would like to call your attention to a recently revealed story during the Cold War. The story was recently published by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. Even though the story has not been fully confirmed but based on all available evidence, it is likely to be true:

During Cold War, US stationed nuclear weapons on Okinawa. This accident happened on October 28, 1962, at the very height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. On that day, the commanding officer at the Missile Operations Center on Okinawa mistakenly issued real launch codes to all his missile launch officers. As a result, the missile launch officers were ordered to launch a total of 32 nuclear missiles; and each missile carried a nuclear warhead of a yield of 1.1 megaton, which is 70 times more powerful than the bomb that destroyed Nagasaki. And according to this launch order, these 32 nuclear missiles would have struck not only Russian but also Chinese targets, and possibly North Korean and Vietnamese targets too. Disaster was only avoided because some of the missile launch officers suspected about the correctness of the launch order and did not carry out the strike immediately. Later, the mistaken launch order was revoked.

In other words, until today, Russia and China did not even know they were almost struck by 32 high-yield nuclear weapons, because of a simple mistake made by a US missile commanding officer.

Even though this story has not been fully confirmed, there are multiple other confirmed accidents of the same nature. The lesson is, sometimes we have not done our utmost to work on reduction of nuclear dangers, because we simply have not realized how close we had been to nuclear catastrophe.

With that said, unfortunately, nuclear relationship in NEA is not becoming more stable, and the dangers associated with it might be actually growing.

For instance, the DPRK nuclear capability is rapidly improving, which I will discuss later. But even nuclear relationship b/t the major powers in the region, US, Russia, China, are not becoming more stable.

Major players in the region have embraced deep mistrust towards each other. Such mistrust leads them to see everything through the lens of zero-sum game and to embrace worst-case speculation about each other's intentions. As a result, any new development, such as that of missile defense and precision conventional weapons is suspected as deliberate efforts to

undermine the other's nuclear deterrent. This has made it extremely difficult to conduct nuclear arms control and disarmament.

What can be done to help mitigate and reduce such political mistrust and to reduce nuclear dangers? One thing I think we have not done a good job about, but should give it more importance, is for us to focus more on resolving different perceptions about outstanding, operational-level issues. Here I would like to offer two examples.

First example: THAAD deployment in South Korea

US wants to deploy THAAD to counter DPRK, but it can also affect China. For example, the X-band radar AN/TPY-2 may be capable of monitoring Chinese missile tests in Northeastern China, offering US an opportunity to collect intelligence on technical capabilities of Chinese missiles. Furthermore, China recently deployed SLBMs; if these missiles are launched from Yellow Sea, they may be detected and tracked by this radar in South Korea; if this tracking data is transferred to other US missile defense systems, it can increase their overall capability to intercept Chinese missiles.

The important thing here is, however, to understand how much this THAAD deployment is aimed at countering DPRK, and how much it is aimed at China. The basic fact is THAAD can affect China, but it is useful for countering DPRK missiles too. Many Chinese media reporters, including some policy experts, have failed to understand the technical component of the issue, and argued that THAAD is totally incapable of countering DPRK, but very capable of countering Chinese missiles. Therefore, the political intention must be to contain China. Such opinion is so widely-heard in China that I am afraid it will have impact on Chinese decision-makers' thinking on this issue.

So this is an operational-level issue, with a significant technical component. Why cannot scientists and technical experts conduct thorough analysis and provide decision-makers with unbiased insight? Or even better, why cannot US and Chinese scientists work together and find out how much this deployment can affect DPRK and Chinese missiles. In fact, the governments should sponsor such joint research, to remove unnecessary misunderstanding and reduce mistrust.

2 example: Controversy over Japan's plutonium stockpile

China has long been very much concerned about Japan's status of so-called nuclear threshold country. Many Chinese, including some experts, believe that Japan wants to build a virtual nuclear weapons capability under the cover of civilian nuclear energy.

Two reasons for this concern: one is occasional statements by conservative officials about the need for and capability of Japan to develop nuclear weapons. Second, and more important, is the fact that Japan possesses a lot of plutonium. But the key indicator that can tell about Japan's intentions, is how did Japan end up with such a large stockpile. Is it the result of an intentional policy or did it happen by accident?

My colleague, James Acton, did a recent analysis of the historical, technical and bureaucratic details about Japan's nuclear energy program; the analysis shows it is primarily because of

technical reasons and bureaucratic dysfunction that Japan failed to achieve its “no surplus plutonium”; not a result of deliberate effort to accumulate Plutonium.

Given that Japan’s nuclear weapons’ potential has become an increasingly important issue between China and Japan, and has seriously affected their mutual threat perception, it is urgently important that direct exchanges between the scientific and policy communities should take place. And I think scientific and policy communities such as the Pugwash community can and should make a meaningful contribution.

Now, allow me to briefly comment on the DPRK nuclear issue.

DPRK’s growing nuclear capability is another major destabilizing factor in NEA. To address this issue, fundamentally the international community needs to reach some basic agreement about how to make DPRK give up its nuclear weapons. There are basically two approaches. A: double down on the coercive measure of imposing more economic and military pressure on DPRK to force it into giving up nuclear weapons; or B: acknowledge the fact that DPRK feels very much threatened, and we should try to reduce DPRK’s threat perception by encouraging and facilitating its efforts to develop and liberalize economy and to transform itself from an outlier state to a normal member of the international community. And if DPRK feels less threatened, we may be able to negotiate down or even negotiate away its nuclear weapons.

These are the two main approaches available. The US and some others believe in the coercive approach. But China has more faith in the more accommodating approach and China fundamentally questions the wisdom of the coercive approach. I, personally, have serious doubts about the coercive approach too. This is not because I am a Chinese, but because I find the argument behind the accommodating approach more convincing. When I was very young, I was told about one of Aesop’s Fables, which left a very deep impression on me. The fable, is called The North Wind and the Sun, which I am sure many of you have heard about. It is illustrated by these two drawings, and the story is very straightforward.

It was a competition between the North wind and the Sun to decide who is more powerful. The competition was to make a passing traveler remove his cloak. The North Wind went first, but the harder the North Wind blew, the tighter the traveler wrapped his cloak, to keep himself warm, but when the Sun came out and started to shine, the traveler felt warm enough that he no longer needed the cloak and therefore took it off.

You might think it is naïve to connect the world’s most complex security problem to an Aesop’s fable. But after giving some thoughts about the DPRK nuclear issue, I have come to believe nothing else illustrates the superior power of persuasion over coercion, including in the DPRK case, in a better way than this Aesop’s fable.

Going back to DPRK, many accuse DPRK of being too provocative. Let’s do not forget the fact: when the weaker party is being extremely provocative and defiant, it is usually because, it is extremely scared. Being provocative and risk-taking is the rational strategy for the weaker party. This is called the brinkmanship. This is easier for Chinese to understand than for some of our colleagues from US or other Western countries, because they have rarely been in the position of absolute weakness and vulnerability. But China has. China, of 50 years ago, was DPRK of today.

50 years ago, China was the pariah state, it was very weak, it felt really threatened, and as a result, it chose to be very defiant, and even rebellious. And in the end, it was not the US economic sanctions and military pressure that made China change course, it was President Nixon flying over to Beijing and believing he can make friends with China. And, it was after US-China relationship got better and China felt it faced less security threat, that it started to open-up and reform. And that is how we saw China, in the 1980s, for the first time, announced major disarmament measures including cutting 1 million troops at one time.

Due to such first-hand experience, China disagrees with the US approach of dealing with DPRK. Let's remember that, the significance of nuclear weapons is socially constructed. Focusing solely on nuclear weapon, we only reinforce DPRK perception of its importance. Our long-standing reluctance to engage with DPRK and our focus on coercive measures has already resulted in the DPRK's firm belief in importance of nuclear weapons. The situation has come to be that, in the near term, it is unrealistic to expect DPRK to give up nuclear weapons. Therefore, we may have to opt for more practical goals, which is to freeze DPRK nuclear development and to make sure there is no on-ward proliferation by DPRK to other countries or non-state actors.

It is just like Iran nuclear talks. By refusing to make any concessions for many years, we only left Iran to grow capability and become increasingly less willing to give up what it had already achieved. In the end, we ended up accepting less satisfactory agreement provisions than what was once very much within our reach.

And things on the ground are changing too. With the Strategic Patience strategy of US failing to achieve meaningful results, DPRK has quickly improved its nuclear & missile capability. Our hope that more economic pressure will break the will of DPRK is falling apart too. With Kim Jong-un taking increasingly reformative economic measures, DPRK's economy is actually on a better footing than it has ever been in many years, despite all the economic sanctions. It has achieved modest but continuous growth for a few years. Some South Korean think tank even estimates that DPRK economy could maintain an annual growth rate of 7% for the next few years. Even if this figure might be exaggerated, the basic fact is there is no sign at all that DPRK economy is collapsing; or any additional sanctions can make it give up its nuclear weapons.

Again, looking forward, regarding DPRK, we may have to set our goal as to freeze rather than to immediately eliminate DPRK nuclear weapons. On the DPRK side, although it has vehemently rejected immediate disarmament, it has not completely dismissed the possibility of freezing nuclear development. Here, we may want to consider borrowing the Indian model. That is to let DPRK to maintain its national prestige by allowing it the right to develop nuclear energy, in exchange for agreeing to stop improving nuclear weapons capability, not to conduct on-ward proliferation, make its nuclear program transparent, and allow international access and verification. I hope we can carry on the positive momentum of the successful Iran deal and make progress on DPRK nuclear issue too.