



As US 'leads from behind', Asian allies seek nuclear weapons

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Abstract

With President Obama's "leading from behind" policy stance and inability to stop a nuclear North Korea or Iran, US allies are changing their security calculus and considering acquiring nuclear weapons as a form of minimal deterrence and burden sharing for regional security.

About the Author of this Issue

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Analysis

Currently there are nine members in the world's nuclear club – US, UK, France, Russia, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea. The club is about to admit its 10th member – Iran.

Given Iran and North Korea collaborate in their nuclear programs¹, Tehran is naturally taking a leaf out of Pyongyang's playbook to use the Six Power Talk (and Six Party Talks) to run out the clock before achieving nuclear breakout capacity.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is thus briefing Congress in March regarding the impending threat of a nuclear Iran, and while mainstream media has focused on the Obama White House's vitriol and threats towards Israel for not giving Obama the heads up, they are missing the larger point: US is not standing up for its allies.

Sensing the White House is dismissive of an ally's security concerns, Congress stepped in to reassure Israel regarding Iran's nuclear program. In face of Obama's "leading from behind" policy stance that is leaving allies feeling abandoned, others are also stepping in to help allies in their defense planning. In Asia, there is growing support for allies to seek nuclear weapons as a contingency plan.

Arthur Waldron, a highly respected China hand and advisor to the Pentagon, in March 2014 penned an article in *Nikkei Asian Review*² calling for Japan to develop its own military might and nuclear weapons. Doubting US commitment, and fearing a scenario that "Japan will face, at some point, a conflict with a larger, nuclear capable aggressor, at a time when it has no countervailing power of its own, nor reliable ally," he exhorted Japan "must use the years ahead to develop an all-around independent military capacity, including the sort of minimal nuclear deterrent that Britain, France and other countries possess."

Being a China hand, Waldron perhaps was alluding to Taiwan that found itself in a situation whereby "it has no countervailing power of its own, nor reliable ally."

In the 1970s, when UN de-recognized Taiwan in 1972, followed by Carter administration in 1979, Taiwan suddenly found itself an orphan that is isolated and delegitimized in the international community. It thus embarked on a clandestine nuclear program for self-defense.

However, CIA cultivated a spy in Taiwan's nuclear weapons program, Col Chang Hsien-yi, and lured him to defect to the US in 1987 with damning evidence, so the program was halted. Now, as US increasingly sees China's absorption of Taiwan as a foregone conclusion, a former Taiwan defense official lamented that without Chang's defection, "the country would have walked down a much less treacherous path."

Washington's unwillingness to lead or support allies is thus eroding its credibility as a trustworthy security guarantor. Coupled with the inability to dismantle North Korea and Iran's illicit nuclear programs, allies no longer feel US is in a position to tell them to disarm themselves while allowing their adversaries to acquire nuclear weapons. As such, US Asian allies are considering their nuclear option, and this notion is gaining traction.

¹ See also: Christina Y. Lin, "The King from the East, DPRK-Syria-Iran Nuclear Nexus and Strategic Implications for Israel and the ROK", in: KEI Korea Economic Institute, Academic Paper Series, October 2008, Vol. 3, Number 7, <http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/APS-Lin.pdf>

² See also: Arthur Waldron, "Japan needs its own military might", in: *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 31, 2014, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Geopolitico/Arthur-Waldron-Japan-needs-its-own-military-might>



In April³ and December⁴ 2014, MIT's Harvey Sapolsky and Christine Leah from Yale penned articles calling for Asian allies to go nuclear. They argued that in view of declining US resources and costly investments in conventional forces, allowing Asian allies such as Japan, South Korea and Australia to defend themselves with nuclear weapons would be a form of burden sharing in regional security and stability. Moreover, many doubt the US would offer extended nuclear deterrence by trading Los Angeles for Tokyo or Seoul.

Bruce Bechtol, former China and Korea analyst in the US Defense Intelligence Agency admitted in the case of a North Korean nuclear attack on the South, the US would not respond in kind. Japanese officials also distrust a US nuclear umbrella with "a hole over Japan." So in February 2013 when North Korea conducted a third nuclear test, a Japanese overseer of the country's atomic energy program confessed to *Voice of America* that several influential lawmakers asked him how quickly Japan can construct a viable nuclear weapon.

In the past, Japanese defense officials had estimated it would take 183 days, or six months. For South Korea it is also six months, and according to a renowned Taiwanese nuclear scientist, one year for Taiwan. However, last week a former official from Taiwan's National Defense University said it would take an additional six months to perfect the weapon, bringing total time frame to about a year and a half.

Similar to being caught flatfooted by the backlash regarding the President's absence in the Paris unity march two weeks ago, the Obama administration does not realize its current treatment of Israel would symbolize US treatment of its allies. Indeed when Russia invaded Crimea, witnessing a meek US response, Tokyo threatened the US that if it behaves the same way towards Japan over the Senkaku Islands, Japan would abrogate the defense treaty, kick US troops out of its bases, and build nuclear weapons.

Seeing Washington's hostility towards Jerusalem and dismissal of her security concerns, it appears unlikely Obama White House would help Israel and resort to military option to stop a nuclear Iran. Perhaps, US allies in Asia and Middle East would indeed take Waldron, Sapolsky and Leah's advice, and start building nuclear weapons.

Remarks: Opinions expressed are those of the author.

³ See also: Harvey M. Sapolsky, Christine M. Leah, "Let Asia Go Nuclear", in: The National Interest, April 14, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/let-asia-go-nuclear-10259>

⁴ See also: Christine M. Leah, "Time for Japan to Get Its Own Nuclear Weapons?", in: The National Interest, December 3, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/time-japan-get-its-own-nuclear-weapons-11773>