“North Korea Nuclear Issue” and Three Dimensional Changes for the 2025 Northeast Asian Security Environment

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From October 2006 to January 2016, North Korea had conducted four nuclear tests. Challenging the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Those nuclear tests have not only undermined the international efforts to consolidate the world’s mechanism of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, but also threatened the peace and stability of Northeast Asia.

The security environment in Northeast Asia (NEA) in 2025 will be influenced by North Korea nuclear issue, which can be analyzed in three dimensions, namely power structure, institutional process and security concept.

1. In the dimension of power structure, NEA in 2025 will see the weakening of unipolarity with the United States.

The power structure refers to the comparison among China, the US, Japan, Russia, South Korea and North Korea, in terms of their comprehensive national power. With America’s strength declined relatively and China’s strength increased since 2005, the change of the power structure in Northeast Asia has led to the competition for dominance in different issues among relevant countries.

In order to analyze Northeast Asian countries’ national power quantitively, the essay has used University of Denver’s International Futures (IFs) model to build a national power model of Northeast Asia, which covers statistics of those countries’ population size, economic strength, technological capability and military expense. The population data of NEA countries if from the United Nations Population Division (UNPD). The historical data of GDP in NEA countries (except North Korea) is from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators (WDI), the population data of North Korea is from U.S. CIA’s World Factbook. The military expense data is from the SIPRI’s Military Expenditure Database (as of 2014), the Correlates of War, and the U.S. Department of State’s “World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 2015”. The 2015-2025 forecast data of GDP and military expense is from the IFs. What’s more, the assessment of national power is based on material capability rather than their mobilization capability or influence, so as to make the measurement more workable.

According to the model, the national power of Northeast Asian countries in 2025 will
approximately transform into the following structure: China and the US will be in the first level; Japan, Russia and South Korea will be in the second level; and North Korea’s national power will be the weakest, placed in the third level.

Chart 1: the proportion of Six States’ national power in Northeast Asia as a whole (1990-2015)

Chart 2: the proportion of Six States’ national power in Northeast Asia as a whole (2015-2025)
Table 1: Rank of the proportion of Six States’ national power in Northeast Asia in 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First level (superpower)</td>
<td>The US</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second level (prospective superpower)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third level (regional great powers)</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth level (regional middle power)</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth level (regional weak power)</td>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Rank of the proportion of Six States’ national power in Northeast Asia in 2025

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First level (superpowers)</td>
<td>The US</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Second level  
(regional great powers)  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
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Third level  
(regional weak power)  
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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
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Meanwhile, the future game in Northeast Asia will not be only among those countries, but also among state groups. In the next decade, the US will ally with Japan to cope with the security situation in Northeast Asia, and there is some possibility that South Korea will participate in it to deal with North Korea nuclear issue or under some other circumstance.

If we view the US, Japan and South Korea as a whole, there will be a dramatic change in the national power comparison in Northeast Asia. Chart 3 has seen the three allied states as a whole, namely the US, Japan and South Korea, resulting in a new structure of national power comparison. From the Chart 3, the total of those three countries’ relative national power will still be far more than other entities before 2025, which will take up about 60% of the regional total strength in the next decade, significantly higher than China’s relative strength.

Chart 3: The proportion of US-Japan-South Korea to the other Northeast Asian states in national power
In general, the future security structure in Northeast Asia is less likely to go back to the rival bipolar system of the Cold War, but develops into a much more complicated situation, where two superpowers (China and the US) co-opetition, five states (China, the US, Japan, Russia and South Korea) are drowned into a multilateral interactive game, and a weak state (North Korea) flaunts.

In the next decade, there will be a strong likelihood that North Korea maintains its regime as well as that North Korea nuclear issue does not substantially influence the development of the power structure in Northeast Asia. However, North Korea may intend to utilize its identity as a nuclear country to compete severely with South Korea for the peninsula’s military superiority as well as for the leadership in the process of the peninsula’s unification. If North Korea insists on its continuation of the nuclear weapon program, the possibility is not excluded that the state, under external pressure, will be confronted with considerable violence and upheaval, and even worse, end in acollapse. If North Korea collapses suddenly, whose probability is actually very low, the Korean Peninsula will transform into a unitary state, and a unified Korea’s overall strength as well as its international position will also be lifted to a new high level, whose power will equal to Japan’s then. In addition, the military presence of the US is also going to lose its validity after North Korea collapses, and at the same time significant adjustment tends to occur in the American-Korean relations. A unified Korean Peninsula will acts as a more independent variable, exerting an increasing influence on the geopolitical structure in Northeast Asia.

2. In the dimension of institutional process, the security institution of NEA in 2025 is urgently demanded.

Institutional process refers to the development trend of regional multilateral security cooperation mechanism in Northeast Asia. Multilateral systems in the fields of politics, economics and environment protection in Northeast Asia have been actively constructed since the Cold War ended.

Unfortunately, no collective security institution, whose force is granted by international law, has established in Northeast Asia. The lack of collective security institution in Northeast Asia, in parallel with enhancement of alliance system’s dominance in regional security structure, has intensified military confrontation.

China, the US, South Korea and other Northeast Asian countries have all put forward their own plan for the security system in Northeast Asia. In February 2016, China proposed that it would discuss with all other parties on ways to implement the concept to move forward denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula in parallel with transition from armistice to peace. In addition, the US has tried to consolidate its alliance with Japan and South Korea, in order to establish a new regional structure and obtain its
leadership. Park Geun-hye government of South Korea, furthermore, raised an idea of pacific cooperation in Northeast Asia in March 2013.

There is a significant divergence in the prioritization between the denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula and the construction of peacemaking among those countries in Northeast Asia. China holds the view that the denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula is the international society’s unshakable objective, as well as that the transition from armistice to peace is also a reasonable concern for North Korea, which should be promoted in parallel with the denuclearization. Unfortunately, the Northeast Asian states have not got to a common view on China’s parallel promoting proposal. The primary things that North Korea focuses on are the survival of its regime and the unification of Korean Peninsula, while the United States and Japan both view denuclearization as their sole concern. As for South Korea, although it adds concern on both denuclearization and unification, the former actually weighs more. In addition, China not only emphasizes denuclearization, but also pours much attention to peace and stabilization. And Russia, however, is showing a more detached, or maybe a vaguer attitude. Apart from North Korea, most countries in the region regard denuclearization as their priority.

In the next decade, the US, Japan and South Korea will strengthen their institutionalization of security cooperation rapidly. The establishment of a trilateral security mechanism among the US, Japan and South Korea, which the US has shown accumulated interest in, is likely to be institutionalized in the following ten years. In contrast, there are far less potential for China, Russia and North Korea to establish a trilateral security mechanism.

If the Korean Peninsula unifies in the next decade, the armistice institution of Korean Peninsula for the last 63 years may come to an end, whereas the construction of the peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula as well as the security system in Northeast Asia will face a new opportunity. Furthermore, as a result of it, the role and presence of the US in the region is also going to be adjusted.

3. In the dimension of security concept, strategic distrust in NEA will probably deepen in the next decade.

Security concept refers to Northeast Asian countries’ understanding about the security situation and other countries’ strategic objectives in Northeast Asia. Because of the increased strategic distrust between China and the US, and the prominence of structural contradiction between China and Japan, as well as the intensified hostility for over 60 years between the US and North Korea, strategic distrust in the region

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tends to be strengthened.

The “Strategic distrust” means a perception that the other side will seek to achieve its key long term goals at concerted cost to your own side’s core prospects and interests. It appears as of 2015 strategic distrust is growing on major states in Northeast Asia and that this perception can, if it festers, create a self-fulfilling prophecy of overall mutual antagonism.

In the next decade, due to the conceptual gap caused by historical memory and ideology, it is going to be quite hard for all sides in Northeast Asia to establish mutual trust.

The pain that Japan has brought to China and the Korean Peninsula during the Second World War still can’t be forgotten yet. There is a deep divergence between China and Japan in history textbooks, Yasukuni Shrine, Nanking Massacre and other issue, which is very easily to ferment under some certain circumstances. If we want eliminate the divergence in historic memory, on one hand, the aggressor’s government should introspect deeply and apologize sincerely for those crimes they have conducted in the past; on the other hand, the victims need to turn over the page of the history with a broad mind.

It is undoubtedly that there is a diversity of political systems and ideology in Northeast Asian countries, which will still exist in the next decade. It is result of those countries’ independent choices due to their own national culture and historical tradition. Individual Northeast Asian countries have proposed to establish the “alliance of values”, and promoted the “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity”, which will make no sense for Northeast Asian countries’ mutual understanding and trust.

If relevant countries take no active step to build mutual trust in the future, the mutual suspicion between China and the US, as well as that between China and Japan will continue to intensify. What’s more, under the above circumstance, the reciprocal hostility between North Korea and the US, as well as that between North Korea and South Korea will also increase.

In the next decade, if there occurs any war or unrest provoked by North Korea nuclear crisis, China and the US are going to intervene. If China’s and the US’s intervention in this issue are antagonistic, those relevant countries in Northeast Asia will be trapped in large-scale hostility. Therefore, it should be a security concept consensus among all parties in Northeast Asia, including China and the US, that war and unrest in the Korean Peninsula should be necessarily avoided.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the dimension of power structure, Northeast Asia in 2025 will see
the weakening of unipolarity with the United States. North Korea may intend to utilize its identity as a nuclear country to compete severely with South Korea for the peninsula’s military superiority as well as for the leadership in the process of the peninsula’s unification. In the dimension of institutional process, the security institution of Northeast Asia in 2025 is urgently demanded. All parties need to discuss on ways to implement the concept to move forward denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula in parallel with transition from armistice to peace. In the dimension of security concept, relevant countries should try their best to relieve the growing strategic distrust and avoid the potential overall mutual antagonism in the next decade. And it should be a security concept consensus among all parties in Northeast Asia, including China and the US, that war and unrest in the Korean Peninsula should be necessarily avoided.

In the condition that it is quite hard to change the linear development trend of the power structure in Northeast Asia, the realistic approaches are constructing regional security institution and improving strategic trust, so as to create a stable and peaceful security environment for the Northeast Asia of 2025.