Strategic rivalry in the Asia–Pacific theater: a new nuclear arms race?

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While the progress to date on denuclearizing North Korea is encouraging, proclaiming the end of nuclear threats in Northeast Asia is premature. First, North Korea has lately been having second thoughts with regard to full disclosure of its nuclear holdings. Second, and more seriously, the deterioration of Russo-American relations over nuclear issues is not confined to a strictly European agenda. Issues arising out of the Bush administration’s nuclear strategy that seem to expand the parameters for first-strike use by America, the future of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, and missile defenses in Asia in the context of revivified U.S. alliances in Asia have all appeared on the agenda and could lead to negative consequences for Asian security. Two potential consequences in particular could emerge. One could be a nuclear arms race between Moscow and Washington, while another could see further movement toward the consolidation of a genuine Sino-Russian bloc in opposition to what Moscow and Beijing both see as a consolidation of such a bloc around missile defenses and the strengthening of the U.S. alliance system in Asia.

Introduction

The six-party accords of February and October 2007, respectively, concerning North Korea have opened the way, or so many analysts believe, to a new order in Northeast Asia.1 And if they are fully implemented, there will be good reason to argue that the dangers of proliferation and of a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia have abated and that a multilateral regional security mechanism, if not order, has come into being. However, such rejoicing is premature for a number of reasons. North Korea, as of the end of 2007, is apparently having second thoughts about revealing the full scope of its nuclear programs and seems to be trying to bargain with those facilities once again for recognition by Washington in advance of full disclosure, a tactic apparently intended to allow it to reap the benefits of its nuclear program while not fully renouncing it.2 America and China have firmly refused to countenance this tactic, telling North Korea that it must live up to the 2007 accords, calling for full disclosure, before there can be a peace treaty ending the Korean War and normalization of relations with America.3 Hence—for the moment, at any rate—we cannot assume that North Korea’s denuclearization and the progress to a new Asian order are complete. Indeed, Pyongyang is now trying again to bring up the issue of receiving compensation in the form of a light-water reactor, and to angle for recognition by Washington before, or as a condition of, its denuclearization.4

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But beyond that, another nuclear specter is rising to haunt Asia; specifically, the real possibility of a new strategic competition between America and Russia. One of the most pronounced trends in contemporary world politics is the rapid deterioration of Russo-American and East–West ties. Indeed, this deterioration is being aggravated by the very clear Russian effort to make relations with the U.S. government seem worse than they are. For example, the Russian media took a speech in October 2007 by U.S. Ambassador William Burns wholly out of context and published a headline charging him with saying that tensions in bilateral relations are more acute than they have ever been. In other ways also, Moscow seems intent on being as provocative as possible—for example, by selling nuclear fuel to Iran for the reactor at Bushehr, even as it admits that Iran does not need it, and by continuing to block efforts to impose UN and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) controls on Iran. The parameters of this discord are well known and to a considerable degree, at least as reported in the press and in public statements emanating from Moscow and Washington, it would seem that they are largely focused on European security issues such as the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) or the question of missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic.

However, without denigrating the importance of these European issues, we would be gravely remiss as analysts if we simply ignored the Asia–Pacific dimensions of the emerging Russo-American rivalry. The visible cooperation, if not partnership, between Russia and China, where both sides say that relations have never been better, is clearly tied to both states’ relationships with the United States. These ties also owe a great deal to Sino-Russian rejection of America’s (largely rhetorical) stance championing democratic expansion throughout the world. Minxin Pei of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace observes,

Russia and China have found common cause in Central Asia in trying to push out American influence. Even in the security area, Russia has become more willing to advance its ties with China, as can be seen in the first large-scale joint military exercises conducted on Chinese territory in 2005. The rapid improvement in ties and growing cooperation between China and Russia owes, to a great extent, not to any Chinese new initiative, but to Russia’s changing relationship with the West under Vladimir Putin’s rule. As President Putin became increasingly authoritarian, he needed China as an ally in counter-balancing the West. The net strategic effect of Russia’s reorientation of its policy toward the West has been tremendously positive for China.

Thus, beyond the strategic rivalry, there is also an ideological-political rivalry which reinforces mutual suspicion.

Consequently, the danger is that this ideological-strategic rivalry will harden—leading to a polarized, bilateral, and hostile division of Asia into blocs based on a Sino-Russian bloc confronting a U.S. alliance system led by alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Some Western writers have already opined that Sino-Russian relations appear to be tending toward an anti-American alliance in both Northeast and central Asia. But, more recently, both Asian and Western writers have begun to argue that such a polarization in Asia could be taking shape. The shared interest of perceiving America as an ideological and geopolitical threat has also united Moscow and Beijing in a common cause. Already in the 1990s, prominent analysts of world politics like Richard Betts and Robert Jervis, and then subsequent CIA studies, postulated that the greatest security threat to American