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Managing the post-INF Treaty Arms Competition in the Asia-Pacific Region: A Japanese Perspective

By Nobuyasu Abe

INTENSIFYING CHINESE THREATS

As China continued its super economic growth, its military spending increased and the arms of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) continued to be modernized, sophisticated and increased in numbers. China still lags far behind the U.S. and Russia in terms of number of nuclear warheads but is fast improving the survivability and penetrability of its nuclear forces by making missiles mobile, putting some underground, improving submarine survivability and apparently MIRVing. China has been long complaining about the U.S. deployment of ballistic missile defense system, perhaps, because of concern that it may compromise the Chinese nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis the United States.

In the field of medium- and short- range ballistic and cruise missiles, China is known to have a great number of ballistic missiles of this range, most of them keeping the Japanese islands within their range. It is now increasing the number further, and improving their precision. Particularly, the newest DF-21D is said to have maneuverability that can make interception difficult and target moving aircraft carriers and other naval vessels. With improved precision the Chinese missiles with conventional warheads can now threaten the U.S. and allied bases within their range.

Against the background of improved air and naval forces, China is becoming increa-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nobuyasu Abe was the former U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs (2003-06). He served as a Commissioner of the Japan Atomic Energy Commission (2014-17), Director of the Center for the Promotion of Disarmament and Nonproliferation, JIIA (2008-2014), Japanese ambassador to the IAEA and CTBTO (1999-2001), Director-General for Arms Control and Science Affairs, MOFA/GOJ (1997-99). He also served as a member of the Advisory Board to the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (2008-09). He was a Senior Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center with its Managing the Atom project (2018-19). Currently, he is the Senior Advisor at the Council on Strategic Risks.
Corresponding author e-mail: atomsforpeace238@gmail.com

singly assertive in its territorial claims in the South China Sea and over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. While missile threats are mainly analyzed by security experts, the Chinese aggressive behavior in the East and South China Seas helps generate public perception of rising Chinese threats.

A new Japanese chess star champion, Sōta Fujii who is still a high school student, says he imagines looking at the chess board from the opponent's side and plans his strategy. Let us consider how the situation looks like from the Chinese side. China had been weak and poor for well over a century and taken advantage of by foreign powers. Now, it has gained a great economic strength and can afford to spend the world's second largest military budget purchasing and developing weapons trying to be on a par with the most advanced military power. "What's wrong with it?" "Western powers and Japan invaded China. Now it is our turn to assert our rights." Frictions are bound to occur and may develop into serious military confrontation.

JAPANESE REACTION

Japan's reaction to external threats in the last two decades primarily focused on the North Korean threat of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. In defense, Japan now employs six Aegis ballistic missile destroyers, is jointly developing advanced ballistic missile interceptors with the U.S. and was in the process of deploying Aegis Ashore missile defense system in two bases in Japan. The latter was canceled recently due to local resistance and their cost. Japan is now in the process of finding an alternative method to meet the threat. One option under consideration is to acquire an offensive capability to destroy the enemy's launching capability. Japan

had long interpreted its Constitutional provision allowing only the right of individual self-defense to mean, as a corollary, maintaining a purely defensive posture by abstaining from acquisition of ballistic missiles, long-range bombers, expeditionary forces and aircraft carriers. The interpretation was amended in 2015 to allow limited cases of collective self-defense. If Japan decides to acquire a capability to attack enemy bases, it will be another major change in its defense policy. An additional reason speculated for the cancellation of Aegis Ashore was that North Korea seems to be working on ways to overcome missile defense by making its missiles maneuverable or taking swarm attack tactics against which Japan needs more advanced ways to counter the threats.

Against the Chinese threats, in particular, a possible incursion or landing on the Senkaku Islands, Japan has shifted its ground, naval and air forces to the southwestern part of Japan and added amphibious landing capability. Against the greater Chinese threat of medium range missile attacks, the missile defense system planned against North Korean threats may be of some use. But, as in the case of North Korea, if China makes its ballistic missiles more penetrable, and since China has a great number of medium-range missiles, the Japanese missile defense can be overpowered.

DEMISE OF THE INF TREATY

On August 2, 2019, the U.S. withdrew from the bilateral INF treaty. In response, Russia announced it would no longer be bound by the treaty, thus the treaty ended its 32-year life. The treaty was popularly called the Intermediate-range **Nuclear Forces Treaty** (emphasis added by the author), but, in fact, it banned the posses-

sion of any kind of intermediate and shorter-range ground-based missiles of 500 to 5,500 km range. While the purpose was to ban intermediate-range nuclear forces for the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the treaty banned the means of delivery irrespective of whether they are carrying nuclear or conventional warheads.

The U.S. provided two main reasons why it decided to abandon the INF treaty. The first is that Russia has been developing and deploying missiles in violation of the treaty. In particular, the U.S. alleged that Russia's 9M728/9M729 Iskander cruise missile had a range over 500 km, violating the treaty range limit. Secondly, China, being a non-party to the INF treaty, is free to develop and deploy INF-class missiles threatening U.S. forces and allies. At the time of the U.S. withdrawal, both Russia and China stated that they would respond by deploying missiles to match any U.S. deployment of INF-class missiles in Europe or in Asia. Soon after its withdrawal, the U.S. tested INF-class missiles and Defense Secretary Mark Esper expressed a U.S. interest in deploying INF-class missiles in the Pacific. Media speculated the possible locations would be Japan, the Philippines, Australia or Guam. The Japanese government officially denies there was any approach from the U.S. side in this respect.

If the missiles the U.S. is considering deploying are to carry nuclear warheads, it would initiate a major political debate in Japan as such deployment would come into conflict with the third leg of its Three Non-nuclear Principles of not possessing, not manufacturing nor allowing introduction of nuclear weapons into Japan. But, apparently, the current U.S. intention is only to deploy missiles with conventional warheads. This sounds plausible, as

whenever calls are heard in South Korea for the U.S. to reintroduce nuclear weapons there in response to the increasing North Korean nuclear threat, the U.S. has been expressing many times that it does not need to redeploy nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. If missiles the U.S. intends to deploy in Japan are dual-use, a domestic pressure may rise to urge the government to ask the U.S. to confirm that they do not carry nuclear warheads.

Any proposal to deploy INF-class missiles even with just conventional warheads in Japan still may not be easy. The significant local resistance against Aegis Ashore deployment, which was one of the two major reasons why the Japanese government recently canceled its deployment, suggests that there will likely be similar local resistance against deployment of U.S. INF-class missiles at any one of the American bases in Japan. The current conservative Japanese government would probably support such deployment as a way to counter the rising Chinese military threat. China has expressed its intention to counter any such U.S. move. So, this is likely to initiate a regional missile deployment competition between the U.S. and China, with Russia possibly joining as well.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

Nuclear arms control has become far more complicated in the past three decades. During the Cold War, the greatest nuclear threat was nuclear-armed ballistic missiles that were hard to defend against. An ICBM placed in a deep bunker could be destroyed by a nuclear blast. An alternative idea was interception by nuclear-tipped missile. In other words, nuclear vs. nuclear. From there the Cold War arms control calculus of counting warheads against warheads and missiles against

missiles evolved. It was basically a bilateral balance between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Today, the issue is increasingly becoming trilateral involving China. In addition, non-nuclear means to frustrate an enemy's nuclear capability have greatly improved and new non-nuclear threats have emerged, all complicating nuclear arms control. Cyber-attacks, precision-guided prompt conventional-weapon strikes could jeopardize nuclear forces before the latter could be launched. Conventionally armed missile defense capabilities have greatly improved although they have yet to meet their promise. Nuclear command and control today greatly depend on space sensors and communication that possibly could be destroyed with conventional means. The gap between nuclear weapons and non-nuclear means has greatly shrunk. Thus, any new arms control regime to replace the INF treaty will have to take such non-nuclear factors into account. So far, no one has come up with a magic formula to incorporate all these factors to balance and stabilize opposing forces.

Ideally, the U.S., Russia and China* should engage in intensive arms control talks to improve mutual understanding of the issues and come up with an agreed set of formulae to control the buildup of strategic and theatre nuclear forces in conjunction with non-nuclear means. To

*This may also include France and the U.K.

start such a process, it is advisable to start with establishing an understanding that such arms control is for mutual benefit. Decelerating the arms buildup competition, bringing stability and avoiding unintended mutual confrontation should benefit all sides. Even achieving this basic understanding is not easy under the current highly contentious circumstances.

Until a comprehensive arms control is agreed upon, some confidence-building measures may be introduced to avoid existing threats of miscalculation or unintended confrontation. One advisable step is to mutually notify which aircraft, missiles, ballistic or cruise, carry nuclear warheads or not. Such a clarification possibly could help avoid a situation of assuming the worst (nuclear attack) and rapidly escalating into nuclear confrontation. Another step may be to exchange information about the nature, perimeter and other basic data about weapons tests. This could help reduce mutual suspicion decelerating weapons development competition.

When such trilateral consultation is held, particularly when it involves the Asia-Pacific theatre, Japan, South Korea and Australia could be involved in an associate capacity. These countries are potential candidates for INF-class missile deployment and are also involved in sensor and other information facilities that support mutual defense.

The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is an advocacy group that aims to inform and energize public opinion, especially high-level policymakers, to take seriously the very real threat posed by nuclear weapons, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which they are contained, diminished and eventually eliminated.