Arms racing in East Asia

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An arms race in East Asia

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Asia has engaged in a steady process of arms modernization and expansion. This process accelerated following the end of the Cold War in 1989. By around 2000 Asia’s arms build-up, particularly in East Asia, began to draw the attention of regional analysts. In 2001, for instance, Sam Bateman, a former commander of the Australian navy, asserted that a naval arms race had already begun in East Asia (Bateman 2001: 1). In 2010 Australia’s leading strategic analyst, Desmond Ball, noted the dramatic increases in the defence budgets of both China and the USA (a key player in Asia), the increased defence capabilities in the region, and evidence of an ‘action–reaction’ dynamic in some sub-regions, and thus warned that the region was now on the verge of a full-blown arms race. In addition, the lack of regional institutional and normative constraints to contain escalation and promote crisis stability had also increased the possibility of interstate conflict (Ball 2010: 30–51).

In 2012 one of the world’s leading strategic studies institutes, Britain’s International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) reported that Asia’s total defence spending had, for the first time, exceeded that of Europe (IISS 2013: 33). The IISS asserted that the escalation in military spending and improvements in defence capabilities were the result of ‘increasing uncertainty about the future distribution of power in the region and widespread suspicions, in some cases increasing tension, among the regional armed forces’. While these efforts are meant for deterrent purposes, the IISS concluded that ‘there is (also) substantial evidence of action–reaction dynamics taking hold and influencing regional states’ military programmes’ (ibid.: 245). The IISS also attributed the increase in defence spending in recent years to the region’s strong economic growth. Asian economies grew by 9.51 per cent in 2010, and by 7.76 per cent in 2011. This allowed overall defence spending in Asia to rise by 3.76 per cent in 2011 and by 4.94 per cent in 2012 (ibid.: 247–249).

More significantly, East Asia dominated Asian defence spending, making up about two-thirds of total defence spending in 2012. A large proportion of the increase is due to China’s expanding defence budget, which exceeded US $100,000m. for the first time in 2012. Both Taiwan and South Korea also increased their defence spending in 2012 (IISS 2013: 250). In 2012 the election of the right-wing Shinzo Abe to government led to a reversal of Japan’s decline in defence spending. Alarmled by China’s increasing aggressiveness in asserting its claims over disputed maritime territory in the East China Sea, and the brinkmanship
practiced by North Korea which included ballistic missile and nuclear tests, the Abe government approved a modest increase in defence spending for 2013, the first increase since 2002. The increase was to be used to fund the acquisition of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for reconnaissance purposes, new helicopters and anti-aircraft missiles and the upgrading of part of its fleet of F-15 combat aircraft (The Australian 2013).

As it has become fashionable to describe recent defence modernization and expansion in Asia, particularly in East Asia, as an arms race, it is necessary clearly to define what exactly constitutes an arms race. A useful conceptual framework was offered by Colin Gray in 1972. According to Gray, there are three criteria for evaluating whether an arms race is taking place. First, there must be two or more parties, each of whom is conscious of their antagonism. Second, these parties must also structure their armed forces by paying attention to the probable effectiveness of their forces in combat with, or as a deterrent to, the other arms race participants. In other words, there must be a competitive action-reaction dynamic in the arms build-up. Finally, the parties must compete in terms of quantity and quality, with evidence of a rapid increase in quantity as well as improvement in the quality of armaments (Gray 1972).

The following examines the evidence for an arms race using Gray’s three criteria. If an arms race is indeed taking place, then it must be asked, what are the implications?

**Inter-state antagonisms**

The first criterion, namely the presence of two or more parties who are conscious of their antagonism, is easily met in East Asia. China and Japan have maintained historical animosities dating back to Japan’s imperialist predations since the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and its subsequent rise as a great power. In 1895, following the end of the first Sino–Japanese War, the Treaty of Shimonoseki imposed on China huge indemnities, China’s recognition of Korea’s independence (subsequently annexed by Japan in 1910), and the ceding of Taiwan and Liaotung (today part of Liaoning province) to Japan (Treaty of Shimonoseki 1895).

Strong anti-Japanese sentiment continues to exist in China today as a result of historical memories of Japan’s aggression during the Second World War. This period was marked by various atrocities committed by Japanese troops, such as the Nanjing massacre of some 200,000 civilians in 1937 (see Gendercide.org). While relations were normalized in 1972, and both countries have important trading relations, the ruling Chinese Communist Party’s emphasis on promoting nationalism as a means of shoring up its legitimacy has involved evoking and promoting historical memories of Japanese atrocities. Through China’s education system and mass media, ordinary Chinese people have been bombarded with nationalistic, anti-Japanese propaganda. This has sustained the presence of deep and widespread anti-Japanese sentiment in China (Jacques 2009: 310).

For its part, Japan’s collective amnesia regarding the events of the Second World War has been reflected in its politicians being guilty of attempting to justify the country’s role in that war as well as the whitewashing of a number of historical events which still resonate negatively in China and South Korea, such as the use of women as sex slaves. The ascendency of Shinzo Abe to power has been accompanied by attempts to rewrite history as part of Japan’s revival. Inevitably, these undignified attempts have stoked tensions with Japan’s neighbours, namely China and South Korea. Indeed, A Pew survey in 2013 revealed that 90 per cent of the Chinese have an unfavourable opinion of Japan, which is 17 per cent higher than in 2006 (Pew 2013).

It is this context which partly explains the deterioration in bilateral relations between China and Japan from late 2012 to its worst level since 1945. The issue that has brought the two countries to the brink of open conflict is the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Daiyu...
Islands. Japan nationalized the islands in late 2012, which led to violent anti-Japanese riots in major Chinese cities. This forced many Japanese businesses in China to close temporarily. Patriotic Chinese cancelled orders for Japanese-made products (such as cars) and cancelled their holidays in Japan (ABC News 2012). Regular incursions into Japanese territory by China’s warplanes and ships led to the frequent scrambling of Japan’s F-15 combat aircraft to intercept the intruders. In early 2013 Chinese warships near the Senkaku Islands also locked their fire-control radars onto a Japanese military helicopter and a Japanese warship, dangerous actions which could have caused an accidental outbreak of full-scale war (VOA News 2013).

Apart from Sino-Japanese relations, relations between South Korea and Japan have also been affected by historical animosities as well as territorial disputes. South Korea suffered decades of brutal colonial rule under Japan from 1910 to 1945. A major issue left unaddressed since that period has been the status of the disputed Dokdo Island (known as Takeshima in Japan). Indeed, this proved such an emotive issue that it prevented the normalization of relations between the two US allies until 1965. However, the issue has not gone away. In August 2012 South Korea’s President Lee Myung-bak visited Dokdo Island, which he emotionally proclaimed to be ‘truly our territory, and … worth defending with our lives’ (New York Times 2012). A Pew survey in 2013 also revealed that some 77 per cent of South Koreans have an unfavourable view of Japan, which is 25 per cent higher than it was in 2008 (Pew 2013).

Another set of interstate antagonisms are found on the Korean peninsula. Since the division of Korea into a communist North and a non-communist South following the end of the Second World War, the two sides have lived in antagonism, with tensions never far from the surface. The Korean War (1950–1953) only served to harden the ideological divide between the two sides. Since then, North Korea has frequently resorted to provocative brinkmanship to force the South and its ally, the USA, to bargain with it. Raked by famine and economic collapse, and with a new and insecure young leader, Kim Jong-un, who came to power following the illness and subsequent death of his father, Kim Jong-il, North Korea has in recent years resorted to previously unseen levels of brinkmanship. In 2010 a North Korean submarine sunk a South Korean naval corvette, the Choenan, killing 46 sailors (CNN 2010). This was followed by the artillery shelling of an island in South Korea close to the maritime border, during which two people were killed (Reuters 2010). In late 2012 North Korea carried out a successful ballistic missile test and followed this up with a nuclear test in February 2013. North Korea then reacted to fresh UN sanctions by abrogating the armistice that had ended the Korean War in 1953, thus returning the Korean peninsula to a state of war (Bloomberg 2013). These events raised tensions on the Korean peninsula to their highest level since 1953, and increased the possibility of accidental war due to miscalculation.

Finally, there remains the Taiwan problem. This was created during the onset of the Cold War when the USA extended its protection to the Kuomintang regime that had fled to Taiwan following the end of the Chinese civil war from 1945–1949. The normalization of US–Sino relations in the 1970s led to the growing worldwide acceptance of the ‘One China’ principle that states that Taiwan is part of China. Thus, Taiwan’s very existence as a state has been in question. The threat of forceful reunification by China, where this issue arouses particularly strong emotive and nationalistic feelings, has meant that some kind of military parity in the Taiwan Strait would be needed if China is to be deterred and stability maintained (Lee 2013: 85).

**Competitive action-reaction dynamic**

The second criterion for an arms race is that the parties involved must structure their armed forces according to the probable effectiveness of their forces in combat with, or as a deterrent
to, each other. As Ball and the IISS have indicated, there is evidence that there is a competitive and interactive action-reaction dynamic at work.

An evaluation of some of the new capabilities being acquired by East Asian states supports the notion of an interactive process leading states to procure similar types of weapons systems in order to maintain a military balance and to prevent other states from gaining a conventional edge. The caveat concerns North Korea, which has opted for asymmetric warfare and anti-access capabilities as it does not have access to the latest military technology, nor does it have the resources to do so given the dire state of its economy. Instead, it has opted to develop nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, the world’s largest commando forces, large numbers of midget submarines, and massed artillery in order to threaten the South Korean capital, Seoul.

An evaluation of Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW & C) aircraft, which are technologically sophisticated and expensive to procure and maintain, gives an indication of the interactive nature of the arms race in East Asia. Such aircraft are a significant force multiplier as they provide early warning and allow large areas of air and maritime space to be controlled. US allies in East Asia have access to US AEW & C technology. Thus, Taiwan operates six Hawkeye early warning aircraft to detect any surprise attack from China (IISS 2014: 282). Japan has a large force of early warning aircraft, comprising 17 Hawkeye and four Boeing 767 aircraft; the latter has a range of 10,370 km and is equipped with sophisticated AN/APY-2 radar system that can detect maritime and air targets up to 320 km away (see Airforce-Technology.com). South Korea deploys four B-737 Peace Eye early warning aircraft which were delivered from the USA in 2012 (Boeing 2012). China, on the other hand, has developed its own very efficient early warning aircraft that is reportedly technologically ahead of US systems. It currently operates four KJ-200 early warning aircraft which deploy a system similar to the Swedish-made Irieye system, and large KJ-2000 early warning aircraft based on the latest active phased array radar (Kopp 2010).

The acquisition of similar advanced multi-role combat aircraft is also evident in the air forces of China, Japan and South Korea. Taiwan has not been able to compete in this area due to the reluctance by many countries of offending China by selling it advanced combat aircraft. Its air force thus deploys increasingly outdated combat aircraft, such as the F-5E Tiger, F-16A/B, French Mirage 2000, and the locally developed Ching Kuo, all of which were procured in the 1980s or 1990s (IISS 2014: 282). Taiwan’s request for F-16C/D combat aircraft has so far been rejected by the USA, which has instead offered to upgrade its 146 F-16A/B combat aircraft with the retrofitting of the latest active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar, structural upgrades and improved avionics and electronic warfare capabilities (Flightglobal 2012).

China has led the way in recent combat aircraft development. Its large and capable air force deployed over 2,400 combat aircraft in 2013, including the Russian-made Su-30MKK Flanker, currently regarded as one of the best combat aircraft in the world; the Russian-made air-superiority Su-27 and its local imitations, the J-11; and the locally made J-10 combat aircraft, which is regarded as the equivalent of the US F-16 (IISS 2014: 235–236). China is also currently developing the new J-20 stealth combat aircraft. Separately, it is developing carrier-borne combat aircraft, namely the J-15 (based on the Su-27) and the J-31 stealth combat aircraft (The Telegraph 2012). In 2013 Japan’s air force had 201 of the proven US-made F-15J Eagle combat aircraft as its mainstay, with an additional 76 of the locally built F-2 (a longer-range equivalent of the F-16) and 63 obsolete F-4 Phantom combat aircraft (IISS 2014: 253). After failing in its bid to acquire the fifth-generation F-22 stealth combat aircraft from the USA, it turned its attention to the stealth F-35 joint strike fighter (JSF) in order to
counter China’s development of similar aircraft. Thus, in 2011 Japan announced that it would buy 42 of the US-made F-35s (The National 2011). Similarly, South Korea has in recent years also moved to upgrade its air force, procuring 60 of the latest versions of the F-15. Currently, it has over 500 combat aircraft, including 164 modern F-16C/D combat aircraft (IISS 2014: 259). In 2013 South Korea was evaluating the procurement of 60 new combat aircraft, and the F-35 JSF was a key contender (Defense News 2013).

Another area of arms competition has been in UAVs. In East Asia, China has led the way in terms of development and deployment, which is reflected in the large number of UAV projects undertaken since the 1980s. They comprise three main classes: mini-drones with a range of up to 70 km (the AW, Z and W series); tactical medium-range drones with a range of 150–200 km (the ASN 200 series); and strategic medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) drones with a range of up to 2,400 km (Hsu 2013: 6). As demonstrated in various recent air shows, China has a number of new UAVs in development, including the CH-4 MALE UAV, a multi-purpose drone capable of reconnaissance, electronic warfare and ground-strike missions, and the Xianglong/Soar Dragon high-altitude long-endurance (HALE) UAV which resembles the US RQ-4 Global Hawk (ibid.: 10–11). China has also developed the Lijian stealth drone similar to the US X-74B being developed for its aircraft carriers, which was reportedly completing trials in May 2013 (News China 2013).

In response, Japan has expressed an interest in acquiring UAVs of its own, such as the US Global Hawk UAV (The Guardian 2013). It is also developing a missile-detecting drone to bolster its ballistic missile defence system (AFP 2012). South Korea has developed its own UAV projects in its bid to become a leading UAV operator, such as the KUS-7 and KUS-9 tactical UAVs, a new MALE UAV similar to the US Predator drone to be deployed after 2016, and a Smart UAV which can land and take off vertically (Airforce-Technology.com 2010). South Korea has also requested to buy four new US-made Global Hawk HALE UAVs (Bloomberg 2012). Taiwan has responded to China’s massive UAV programme by developing its own UAV which is similar to the US Predator drone, as well as an advanced stealth combat drone similar to the US X-47B (Flightglobal 2011).

Finally, a naval arms race appears to be taking place in East Asia (Ball 2010: 42). China and South Korea have emerged as major naval powers, while Japan’s navy remains one of the largest and most sophisticated in Asia.

In 2013 China’s navy deployed 70 principal surface combat vessels, the most prominent of which are its new conventional aircraft carrier, the Liaoning (the former Russian Varyag), and four modern Russian-made Sovremenny-class air warfare destroyers. In addition, China has developed new stealth multi-role frigates similar to the French Lafayette-class, namely the Type 054A Jiangkai-class frigate (IISS 2014: 233–234). China is also seeking to deploy an increasing number of conventional aircraft carriers, as it has begun to develop the aircraft to be used for them, such as the J-15 and the J-31. Japan deployed 47 principal surface combat vessels in 2012, including two Hyuga-class helicopter carriers that can accommodate up to 10 helicopters (ibid.: 251). It has also commenced the construction of a new and larger class of carriers which can deploy 14 helicopters, the first of which are expected to enter service in 2015 (Chosun Ilbo 2013). These carriers are useful for amphibious warfare and anti-submarine purposes, but they could also eventually embark the F-35B JSF capable of taking off and landing vertically that is being developed by the USA. Japan’s six Atago- and Kongo-class destroyers are also equipped with the sophisticated US Aegis combat system which facilitates extensive sea, air and ballistic missile defence.

Similarly to China and Japan, South Korea has a expanding navy comprising carriers, destroyers, frigates and corvettes. In 2013 it had 22 principal surface combat warships, with an
additional 30 missile corvettes. Its principal warships are six KDX-2 and three KDX-3 air warfare destroyers, with the latter equipped with the Aegis combat system (IISS 2014: 258). In 2007 South Korea also took delivery of its sole helicopter carrier (officially classified as an amphibious assault ship), the Dokdo, and another two are planned (Military-Today 2013: 255). In 2013 Taiwan had, on paper, 26 principal surface combat vessels. However, the most modern warships in Taiwan’s navy are four modernized former US navy Kidd-class destroyers, albeit armed with Harpoon anti-ship and SM-2 anti-aircraft missiles (IISS 2014: 281).

Significantly, China, Japan, North Korea and South Korea all deploy large submarine fleets, which suggests that a submarine arms race among them exists. In 2013 China had 70 submarines, including nine nuclear-powered submarines, some of which carry nuclear ballistic missiles. Japan had 18 conventional submarines including the new Soryu-class equipped with air independent propulsion (AIP) which provides greater endurance, while South Korea deployed 23 vessels, including new Son Won-ill-class AIP-equipped submarines. North Korea had 72 submarines, including 52 midget submarines (IISS 2014). Taiwan is the exception in that it has failed to procure modern submarines from abroad, and therefore was continuing to deploy four obsolete submarines in 2012 (ibid.: 281).

In sum, the arms race in East Asia is characterized by sophistication as it employs the latest military technology, as well as scale given the number of weapons systems involved, thus substantially improving the offensive capabilities of the states in the region. The military build-ups are clearly aimed at each other, given the interactive, competitive element that has resulted in similar weapons systems being procured.

**Rapid increase in quantity and quality of armaments**

Another indicator of the emergence of an arms race is the rapid increase in quantity and quality of armaments. A comparison of the number of major weapons systems developed between 1990 (after the ending of the Cold War) and 2013 provides an indication of the ongoing military expansion (see Table 3.1 and Table 3.2). However, these figures merely provide an approximate and inaccurate guide when compared with a more in-depth qualitative analysis. This is because in some states the number of weapons systems in certain categories have actually decreased, although this has been more than made up for by the increase in the quality of armaments.

China increased its armoured forces between 1990 and 2013, including the introduction of new Type 98 and Type 99 main battle tanks. It introduced AEW & C aircraft, an important force multiplier for its air force. While its combat aircraft force decreased sharply, it has been more than made up for by the increase in the quality of armaments, in the form of Su-30 MKK, Su-27/J11, J10 combat aircraft and the impending deployment of the stealth J-20. It has acquired its first conventional aircraft carrier, and has expanded the number and increased the quality of its principal surface combat fleet. China has also developed nuclear submarines and has expanded and improved its amphibious landing capabilities. In sum, China has vastly increased its defensive and offensive military capabilities in all major areas.

Fundamentally, Japan maintained its capabilities during the period 1990–2013, though it has clearly lost ground in comparison to China’s rapid military development. While the number of principal surface combat vessels fell from 68 to 47, the acquisition of six Aegis destroyers has improved its military quality and capabilities. It also procured more efficient Boeing 767 AEW & C aircraft and two helicopter carriers, and more are to be constructed. Japan has also recently decided to acquire the new stealth F-35 JSFs.
South Korea’s military development during the same period has been impressive, with both numbers and quality increasing for all major weapons systems. South Korea introduced a number of new capabilities, such as an amphibious helicopter carrier, Aegis destroyers, and Boeing 737 AEW & C aircraft. It also improved its existing capabilities, such as introducing the locally developed K1 main battle tank and substantially expanding its fleet of submarines.

Its adversary, North Korea, impressively has maintained large conventional forces but its weapons systems are obsolete and North Korea does not possess sophisticated military technology. However, it does have asymmetric and anti-access capabilities in the form of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and a large force of submarines. Finally, Taiwan appears, on paper at least, to have only slightly reduced its air and naval capabilities while improving its land capabilities during this period. In reality, in 2013 Taiwan fielded increasingly obsolete weapons systems. For instance, its combat aircraft represent the technology of the 1980s, while its navy boasts just two former US Guppy-class submarines of Second World War vintage, and two Zwaardvis-class submarines procured from Holland in the late 1980s.

Overall, however, the picture is clear: significant interstate antagonisms exist, there is evidence of a competitive action-reaction dynamic at work, and finally, there has been a rapid increase in both the quantity and quality of armaments. In short, there is evidence of an arms race in East Asia.

Table 3.1 Selected Major Weapons Systems in East Asia (1990)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Main Battle Tanks</th>
<th>Armoured Personnel Carriers</th>
<th>AEW &amp; C</th>
<th>Combat Aircraft</th>
<th>Aircraft / Helicopter Carriers</th>
<th>Principal Surface Warships</th>
<th>Submarines</th>
<th>Major Landing Ships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>2,800</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5,070</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1,222</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>1,550</td>
<td>2,140</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IISS 1990.

Table 3.2 Selected Major Weapons Systems in East Asia (2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Main Battle Tanks</th>
<th>Armoured Personnel Carriers</th>
<th>AEW &amp; C</th>
<th>Combat Aircraft</th>
<th>Aircraft / Helicopter Carriers</th>
<th>Principal Surface Warships</th>
<th>Submarines</th>
<th>Major Landing Ships</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>6,840</td>
<td>7,952</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2,525</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>85 (9 nuclear)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>777</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>2,514</td>
<td>3,030</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22 (plus 30 corvettes)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>1,247</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IISS 2014.
Conclusion: implications of the arms race in East Asia

East Asia’s arms race leads to the classic problem of the security dilemma, in which a state that is perceived as becoming too powerful leads to counter-acquisitions by other states. This results in misperceptions, conflict spirals, heightened tensions and ultimately open conflict, thereby destroying the very security that arms are supposed to guarantee (Jervis 1976). East Asia’s sustained economic rise since the end of the Korean War in 1953 and the lack of any major conflict since has lulled many into believing that growing economic interdependence will make war unlikely in that region (Khoo 2013: 47–48). However, this is a false premise as significant historical antagonisms have remained. Japan’s imperialism prior to 1945 and its failure adequately to account for its past continues to stir up strong nationalist emotions in China and South Korea. In addition, the divisions between North Korea and South Korea are as strong and intractable as ever, leading to an arms race on the Korean peninsula.

The situation is compounded by the weakness or absence of regional institutions, regimes and laws that could regulate interstate relations, build trust and confidence, and otherwise put a stop to the arms race. None of the distinctive confidence- and security-building measures which were in place in Europe during the Cold War and helped to calm tensions as well as contain the arms race exist in Asia. Within East Asia itself, the Six-Party Talks have focused only on the Korean issue and have not managed to stem North Korea’s open brinkmanship that in early 2013 almost brought the Korean peninsula to war again.

The arms race in East Asia is dangerous owing to the increased risk of miscalculation as a result of misperception. Chinese policymakers appear to be convinced that Japan is dominated by right-wing conservatives bent on reviving militarism (Glosserman 2012). At the same time, there is also a perception within China that given its growing strength, it should now aggressively assert what it perceives to be its legitimate claims in the East and South China Seas. Thus, China’s nationalist discourse perceives that the problems about disputed territory emanate from other powers, not China (Sutter 2012). The consequences of conflict between China and Japan, on the Korean peninsula or over Taiwan, however, will not stay regional. As a key player in East Asia, the USA, which has security commitments to Japan and South Korea, residual commitments to Taiwan, and troops on the ground in East Asia and in the Western Pacific, will be drawn in. The problem is that any conflict in East Asia is not likely to remain conventional for long. In fact, it is likely that it would rapidly escalate into a nuclear war because three of the key players, namely China, North Korea and the USA, possess nuclear weapons.

Bibliography


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