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Donald Trump's Japanese and South Korean Nuclear Threat to China: A tipping point in East Asia?

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Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is often now cited by the remaining band of optimists in Washington as a safe pair of hands, limiting the influence of the foreign policy manias permeating the White House. Unfortunately for both the United States and the rest of the world, Tillerson's public comments during his mid-March visits to Japan, South Korea and China show the precise opposite by threatening China with U.S. encouragement of acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan and South Korea. Faced with American risk-taking on this order, at a time of mounting tensions in the Asia-Pacific, Australia and other nations in the region require an independent foreign policy focussed on sanity about nuclear weapons.

On March 19, Erin McPike of the *Independent Journalism Review*, the one journalist allowed on Tillerson's plane for the East Asia tour, conducted a wide-ranging 30 minute interview as they headed for Beijing from Seoul. Tillerson's main talking point was the Trump administration's view of the need for China to rein in North Korea on nuclear weapons: as the presidential tweeter put it 'They [North Korea] have been "playing" the United States for years. China has done little to help!'

With Tillerson stressing that U.S. 'strategic patience' with the DPRK is over, and that 'all options are on the table', McPike asked if he still maintained his Senate confirmation hearing position that Japan and South Korea do not need nuclear weapons. Tillerson's reply was stunning:

> 'EM: You told Fox yesterday that "nothing is off the table" with respect to the nuclearization of the Korean peninsula. **In your confirmation hearing, you kind of said that South Korea and Japan don't need to have nuclear weapons. Has your view changed,** given the urgency of the situation with North Korea, particularly because Japan could finalize development of a nuclear weapon rather quickly if they needed to?

> 'RT: No, it has not, nor has the policy of the United States changed. Our objective is a denuclearized Korean peninsula. A denuclearized Korean peninsula negates any thought or need for Japan to have nuclear weapons. We say all options are on the table, but we cannot predict the future. So **we do think it's important that everyone in the region has a clear understanding that circumstances could evolve to the point that for mutual deterrence reasons, we might have to consider that.** But as I said yesterday, there are a lot of … there's a lot of steps and a lot of distance between now and a time that we would have to make a decision like that.'

The implication of those two sentences was clear. Tillerson was delivering the sharpest of warnings to China:

> either rein in North Korea, or face your worst strategic nightmare as we give our approval to our allies in Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons.

Such a signal operates on two assumptions, one about China and the DPRK, and another about United States interests in East Asian allied nuclear proliferation. Neither is sound. Firstly, the U.S. assumes that China has the means to persuade the DPRK to stop its missile and nuclear weapons programs. For more than a year it has been clear that the Kim Jong-un regime is seething about China's now frequent and substantial criticisms of North Korean nuclear provocations as it moves along the weapons learning curve. China does have a few options remaining, but all risk regime change in nuclear-armed North Korea – either slowly by applying draconian energy and economic sanctions or quickly by direct intervention – with high risk of war with North Korea both ways.

Secondly, there has been a stream of U.S policy thinking stretching back at least to the Bush administration that assumes that a world with a nuclear-armed Japan and South Korea would be more threatening to China than to the United States. To be sure, the first part of that assumption is correct – China would have to completely rethink its strategic posture towards all of East Asia. It would have to face a greatly heightened risk of nuclear war on the neighbouring Korean peninsula – also a matter of some interest to the United States.

Korean news reporting on North Korean ballistic missile testing, February 2017

A nuclear-armed Japan may come about through reluctant U.S. acceptance of a nationalist Japanese government mimicking De Gaulle's removal of France from NATO in the 1960s, while still remaining generally aligned with 'the West'. Or it may be the result, as Tillerson seems to envisage, of Japan being encouraged by the United States to become, as Richard Armitage advocated, 'the Great Britain of East Asia' – presumably in part thinking of Britain as a hyper-loyal client nuclear state, dependent on the U.S. for its missiles. This

would envisage Japan as a loyal and still subordinate partner, a second tier, or at least third tier nuclear- armed state – presumably with a high level of 'conventional weapons militarization'. This is not a thought much welcomed in Seoul, and Japanese and South Korean nuclearization will be separated only by an historical nanosecond, with Taiwan equally facing a future-defining choice about nuclear weapons development.

In this fantasy of U.S. East Asian nuclear hegemony reborn, all this would be accompanied by a U.S.-led East Asian version of NATO, linked in the south to Australia, and in the wilder shores of late imperial dreaming of an 'alliance of democracies', to a U.S.-aligned India. What could possibly go wrong?

But in the longer run, apart from the direct risks of such an event for the U.S. itself, its East Asian alliance network, now in its seventh decade, founded on Japanese and Korean acceptance of U.S. nuclear primacy and a U.S. nuclear umbrella, would change dramatically, bringing with it, for better or worse, the end of U.S. hegemony in East and Southeast Asia. Whether occurring on a Gaullist or British model, the foundations of Korean and Japanese relations with the United States would be irrevocably altered. Even leaving aside the obvious questions about the DPRK, in the event of a nuclearized Japan and South Korea, clearly the mathematical risks of nuclear war initiated in East Asia would be very much greater than even the current risks of India-Pakistan nuclear conflict. Regional nuclear security planning would be woven with multiple valences of possible perceived nuclear threats. The calculus of China-U.S. nuclear relations immediately becomes much more complex, with China facing two new potential threats, nominally at least coordinating with the U.S., in addition to the older concerns about India and Russia. For the United States, a nuclear-armed, fully 'normalized' Japan would never be the undoubted loyal lapdog of by then likely post-United Kingdom Little England. And the calculations of a nuclear-armed South Korea and Japan about each other would start and finish in historically-conditioned suspicion.

At a global level, the U.S. opening the door to Japanese and Korean nuclear weapons could not fail to encourage a cascade of regional races to nuclear weapons, not only in the Western Pacific but in the Middle East, in Latin America, and quite possibly in Africa. The risks of regional nuclear war, with all its now thoroughly documented catastrophic environmental and climate consequences, would be both manifold and far higher than at present.

For Australia, the ever compliant ally of the United States, there has never been a more stark choice: Is the Turnbull government willing to sit on its hands as its dominant ally not only allows but actually encourages Japan and South Korea to build their own nuclear bombs? Does Foreign Minister Julie Bishop imagine that Trumpian brinkmanship increases Australian security? Does she somehow think that the already-gathering band of advocates of Australian nuclear weapons will not become more influential? And does she think that none of this will encourage now still fringe Indonesian figures who may long for a reprise of Soekarnoist dreams of a nuclear Nusantara? It is critical that Australia see the Tillerson threat as a wake-up call to the complete failure of its own nuclear disarmament policy, and seize the chance to initiate a more independent foreign policy.

All of this is happening at the same time as the United Nations commences an historically unprecedented attempt to create a 'legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination'. The global nuclear ban treaty initiative, led by the non-nuclear weapons states (Austria, Brazil, Ireland, Mexico, Nigeria, and South Africa) and global civil society

organisations no longer willing to wait for the nuclear weapons states to fulfil their long dishonoured Non-Proliferation Treaty pledge to negotiate nuclear disarmament in good faith, aims above all to stigmatize all aspects of nuclear weapons and through a process of delegitimizing policies — supported by the nuclear weapons states and their allies alike — and challenge the discursive hegemony of the fiction of nuclear deterrence.

After instructing its NATO allies to boycott the nuclear ban treaty negotiations, the United States has reportedly placed extraordinary pressure on a divided Japanese Cabinet to ensure that it falls into line. Australia, the most complacent of U.S. allies, required no such pressure. Remarkably, every country in South East Asia and every Pacific island country is participating in the talks and supporting the proposal, leaving US allies Japan, Korea and Australia in isolation.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world is held hostage doubly to both the adventurism of the Trump administration and to the threat to planetary survival from the nine nuclear-armed states. As Tim Wright of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons wrote in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*,

> 'Recent threats of a new nuclear arms race and ongoing programs to replace old nuclear warheads with ever-deadlier ones cause much damage to the NPT, as does the ill-considered boycott of the forthcoming UN negotiations.'

The Trump-Tillerson threat of a nuclear-armed Japan and South Korea is the clearest possible message that the U.S. is abandoning even the fig leaf of non-proliferation policy, and that the road to nuclear abolition, hard and long as it may be, is the only viable path.

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