

Governing North-East Asia Security:  
Nuclear Non-proliferation & Strategic Reconciliation

Liu, Huaping

School of International Relations

Beijing Language and Culture University

[hp\\_liu@hotmail.com](mailto:hp_liu@hotmail.com)

Paper for POSSE Year 6

Dec. 2015

**Abstract:** Nuclear proliferation issue has occupied the central position of the North East Asia area for more than 20 years. Besides nuclear proliferation problem, there are still many other quarrels and disputes among the countries of this region. Instead of discussing the proliferation issue technically and tactically, this paper would like to place this issue under a wider strategic context to find a way out and mainly focus on the relationships between or among China, ROK and Japan. The major hypothesis is that the nuclear proliferation issue must be settled under the condition of genuine strategic reconciliation among these nations. If the three nations can build mutual-confidence, it would doubtlessly in turn create a favorable environment for the Korea peninsular internal reconciliation. More importantly, such reconciliation can also push the US- DPRK relationship improved which is the key to denuclearization in the region.

**Key words:** North-East Asia; Nuclear Proliferation; Strategic Reconciliation

Regional security problems in Northeast Asia (NEA) are plentiful. Most of them originate in territorial roots, such as those islands disputes between China and Japan, Japan and ROK. Different history memory of the past wars, as well as respective ideological orientation still split these countries. The worst thing is one of the two major wars since the WWII – the Korean War, occurred in Northeast Asia. Thus far, the Cold War in this part of the world has not ended – Mainland China and Taiwan, the two Koreas, are both separate. Various quarrels even military incidents occurred from time to time in this area. Among these multiple complex security problems, the nuclear proliferation in Korean Peninsular is the most urgent one without any doubt. In order to deal with this common threat for all the other related countries, many efforts have been made, such as economic sanctions, political negotiations, even giving pressure by military excises. However, up to now, the proliferation issue is still beyond of the control. This paper tries to discuss

the wider and deeper background for authentic and sustainable cooperation of all the concerned countries in this area to face the challenge of nuclear proliferation.

## I. Concepts Definition

Firstly, I would like to give short definitions for a few terms.

Northeast Asian countries mainly refer to China, North Korea (DPRK), South Korea (ROK) and Japan. As it is well known that there is no normal relationship between DPRK with ROK and DPRK with Japan, I don't think it can be expected to discuss any reconciliation between DPRK and ROK or Japan in the foreseeable future. Considering the nature of nuclear issue and the current situation of relations in NEA, strategic reconciliation mostly focuses on three countries: China, ROK and Japan.

The Strategic reconciliation means that all the three countries can get out from the shadow of history forever based on sincere respect for the history and serious considerations on the historical wars between Japan and China, Japan and ROK. It doesn't mean we want to forget the history, but means we can get right and rational lessons from the tragic history and then build healthy bilateral relations in the future.

"Strategic reconciliation" also means that all concerned countries in the region can take the long-term common interests as the top political agenda. Each country should not take advantages from damaging the others. Such strategic reconciliation must be firstly built on the mutual understandings over the history as I mentioned just now. Then it can be based on the concrete and realistic common interests and common security concerns. Of course, this kind of reconciliation demands the highest decision-makers of each country to regard the whole region's security with far-sight vision and rational judgment.

## II. Non-Proliferation Issue

There are two ways to observe the nuclear proliferation issue in the North-East Asia region.

One is mainly focus on the current security situation. When people talk about the nuclear proliferation problem, there is no doubt that we firstly regard it as a security or military one since it affects regional even global non-proliferation condition. As a result, people would tend to look for a military way to contain it. For example, the US strengthened the regional military alliances and the military exercises against the DPRK. But in return, the later, DPRK carried out more nuclear and missile related technology tests. Again, the US carried more upgrade military exercises. It's clear that nuclear building in one side and military pressure in the other side are mutually reinforced into a vicious circle. DPRK repeatedly claimed that US military deployment in South Korea and US-ROK allied military excises against it have made it insecure. The extended nuclear umbrella provided by US for ROK and Japan, and US nuclear usage policy (possibility first strike at the North Korea) have helped to strengthen the will and determination for DPRK to develop nuclear weapons. It is clear that military issue is unlikely to be solved by military way. Now, nobody believes the proliferation problem has been softened after so many years of military confrontation, let alone to be addressed. Oppositely, the region is facing a more nuclear armed North Korea today although nobody knows the exact numbers of its nuclear weapons.

In addition, the deficient economic condition also leads to weaker sense of security for DPRK. In this sense, economic sanctions seems have only aggravated the insecurity of the DPRK, which makes DPRK to be more inclined to develop military forces, including nuclear power.

The other way of looking at the nuclear issue is turn attention to a wider political context of the nuclear proliferation. After more than two-decade of

discussion and confrontation on this problem, we are now clearer that although it is really a security issue at first sight, it is more a political one in nature. It has something to do with the history conflicts and its affects, and mutual strategic distrust between the previous enemy countries. Furthermore, it is related to the relationship of DPRK-US ultimately. When we regard it more as a political issue, the approach would be more political way. One proposal here mentioned is try to build an environment to make the three countries to realize the real strategic reconciliation and push the DPRK-US relations going to normalization at the same time. These two fronts can be co-promoted each other. Only under a relative normal and stable political relations condition, the proliferation problem could be addressed. Here in this paper, it would just focus on the first point, i.e. exploring how to realize strategic reconciliation between China and Japan, ROK and Japan.

Therefore, in order to denuclearization in Korea peninsular, the direct military pressure and economic sanction seem not have worked. Another approach deserves to explore: to create a favorable environment for US-DPRK dialogue directly by total reconciliation among the regional countries, and through this to reduce the insecurity concern of DPRK and to eliminate its desire of developing nuclear weapons.

### III. Contradictions and Common Concerns among NEA Countries

Currently, there are at least four major contradictions between or among these NEA countries' relations:

- i. Division views on history
- ii. Territorial disputes
- iii. Geological competitions
- iv. Ideological differences

Compared with the territorial disputes, geological competition and

ideological differences, the division views on history looks not so urgent and more general, but it's really the most fundamental factor for long-lasting relationships between or among these countries since it is highly relevant to inter-states mutual political trust. Without basic and stable political mutual trust, any progress on other aspects can not last for long time. History has told us this regulation for many times. For example, the changes of Chinese-Japanese relations are mainly influenced by the differences of historical understanding. Since 1972 when two countries established formal and normal relationship, two countries experienced a good period during which *the friendly & peaceful treaty of China-Japan* in the late of 1978 was signed. During that time, both two countries set aside the disputes on territory & history and enjoyed mutual-benefit development. But when former Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro (in term of office 1982-1987) officially visited the Yasukuni Shrine where the WWII war crimes are honored On Aug. 15, 1985, for the first time after the WWII, the good relationship was suddenly reversed. This event caused widespread anger and demonstration in China (also in ROK). China's university students rushed out to the street to protest the Japanese leader's humiliation on the feeling of Chinese people and press then Chinese government to adjust its friendly policy toward Japan. As a major part reason, Hu Yaobang resigned as the Chinese Communist Party leader who was committed hard to building good relationship between China and Japan before 1985. Since the mid of 1980s, besides visiting Yasukuni Shrine issue, text book issue, Nanking Massacre, and military sex slave issue have been constantly damaged the increasingly fragile China-Japan relations and Japan- ROK relations as well. No doubt, territory disputes and economic competition are very important for bilateral relations, but history disputes have definitely weakened the basis of overall relationships among these countries, and for long term, hurt the feelings of all the people toward each other. Under this background, any cooperation is temporary and unstable due to lack of least mutual trust.

However, even a number of the problems fore-mentioned are between and amongst these NEA countries, there are a number of the other problems are the common threats that all of these countries must face. China, Japan and ROK all understand that DPRK's legitimate need of national security; none of them feel it's an acceptable option for Pyongyang to respond with its nuclear weapons program and even sophisticated delivery systems. Concerning non-traditional security threats, all NEA countries, including DPRK, feels increasingly vulnerable vis-à-vis rising epidemics, carbon emission as well as radiation due to nuclear incident. Therefore it is quite necessary to clarify the common threats that China, Japan and ROK all face. The following listing offers a possible approach to categorizing their common threats, which obviously calls for collaboration toward to resolution.

Nuclear proliferation in NEA poses threat to all other members in the region; Nuclear incident(s) nightmare could place the NEA under the threat of radiation fallout; Dispute over sovereignty, especially over islands sovereignty; Distrust among members of the region, as well as alliance security arrangement; Non-traditional threats including environmental protection, public health, financial stability and cyberspace security, etc.

All of these common problems need collaboration of NEA countries. Concerning so diversified challenges, unity and mutual trust is very vital and necessary. If the low-level tasks such as environment protection, epidemic preventing are easier to cooperate each other, the high-level politics, such as nuclear proliferation however need all concerned countries have strong and united stance to pursue the last and complete resolution. Without the other parties' unity and mutual confidence, it's least possible to expect any definite outcome even the DPRK comes back to the table of Six-Party Talk one day in the future. After all, China, Japan and ROK are the most important Interests of stakeholders of peninsular nuclear problem. Therefore, how to unite to deal with this core common security problem should be at the top of each country's agenda. In order to face this challenge, NEA countries have to

resolve their long-lasting confrontation or quarrels among or between them, specifically the division on historical problem.

#### IV. Strategic Reconciliation

Getting out from the tragedy historic memories is doubtless the biggest challenge for the NEA countries' mutual reconciliation. There are good times no matter in economic cooperation, trade, or even political area among these countries from time to time. But whenever the views on history disputes emerge, overall bilateral relationship would be suddenly damaged. In this regard, Japanese-Chinese, Japanese-Koreans should really learn the example of Germans and their neighbors. How to apologize sincerely and get genuine forgiveness among North East Asia countries still need all countries to study and strive. Since lack of the common understanding on history and each country expresses its own views of points, it's urgent to create a platform for apologize and forgiveness through dialogue and negotiation. All concerned countries should take the task of bridging the historical divisions as important as establishing the diplomatic relations. Strong political will is urgently required in this regard. Top design for strategic reconciliation is essential although at least up to now, there is no such intention and acknowledgement among NEA countries.

Genuine reconciliation between nations also must be built on the long-term mutual acceptance among the common people. Decision-makers and specialists should take leading responsibilities to educate and cultivate the people to get reconciliation from the bottom. Any hostile even "enemy" education and propaganda can only cause more confrontation and conflicts. For example, Japanese education about the WWII for the public emphasizes the loss and the hurt that they suffered during the Second World War. More evidently, Japan has been acting as the sole victim of the atom weapons of the

War. It's true that the atom bombs killed and hurt hundreds of thousands civilians who deserves sympathy, but there were much more civilians in Asia & pacific countries died and suffered due to the Japanese invasion wars. Just the Nanking massacre killed about 300 thousand Chinese civilians. The brutal colonial ruling over the Korean Peninsula brought untold disasters to the Korean people. Let alone the grievous sex slaves captured and forced by the Japanese military. Deliberately ignoring even denying these history facts, when Japanese memorize the WWII, there is a discomforting phenomenon that they seem mainly in memory of Japan as a victim of the War, and not from the root of the origin of the war and the disaster that the war brought to the other countries. Even there are powerful peaceful thoughts and movements after the WWII in Japan, but due to the education and media influence, Many Japanese people tend to believe that any war is injustice and there is no any differentiation between justice and injustice during WWII. Under this judgment, it's natural to be deduced that Japan shouldn't be responsible for the Asia-Pacific wars during WWII. It is precisely also because of this view of education and war, the Japanese political right-wing often stand out to deny the war of aggression from time to time which definitely leads to Asian people especially the Chinese and Korean anger and protest. The bilateral relations between Japan and these two countries have going through with twists and turns in the repeated provocation and confrontation on history acknowledgement.

On the other side, as the victim countries of Japan's invasion, China and Korea have something to do to help themselves and the other side to come out from the history of dark and resentment. It's understandable for the government to educate the public and the young people not to forget the tragic history. But the emphasis should be placed really on the how to avoid such history reoccurrence and preventing war from happening again. Hostile or evil education has not helped the public to know themselves and the others objectively and rationally. After all, the history has turned the dark page over

already, both of previous perpetrators and victims need to look forward to a common benefit future. If they can't get common sense on history conflicts, they should at least try to set aside the hatred feeling each other. It is very unwise and incorrect to educate and cultivate people to hate each other. A lot of media, films and TV series simplify the anti-Japanese War in China, which are filled with demon and makeup about Japanese. Such repeated performance and image firstly not benefit for serious education about that period of history, and secondly cause unnecessary resentment and dissatisfaction of the Japanese toward China.

Therefore, it's crucial for each country of NEA to educate its own younger generation for future good bilateral relationship. One thing is clear, if It is hard to bridge the gap of acknowledgement differences on the historical facts, it will be much harder to heal the hostile emotional feelings of the two countries. Once such mutual hostile emotions emerge, it will be fixed and lasts for a long time. Politicians or governments sometimes might use so-called nationalism emotions with bias to serve their temporary specific purposes and then next month or next year, the same politicians or governments would like to change their hostile policy to anything else, but the emotions or feelings rooted in the public can not change so quickly and flexibly. Therefore, all NEA countries should realize that the mutual acknowledgement of the public from these countries is the most important resource for inter-states relations. The politicians should not manipulate the so-called nationalism and patriotism to deepen the existed resentment existed between each other but pay much attention to the nation's long-lasting welfare and mutual benefits. All branches of education, media and government of NEA countries have respective responsibility to avoid cultivating the public to hate each other any more.

In conclusion, both political dialogue and people education are important for inter-nations reconciliation. After a period of gradual negotiations officially for the historical reconciliation with political determination, and long-term

rational education on history, concerned countries would hopefully to get a formal and legally biding agreement on history. Then the page of pain history could be hoped to turn over forever.

To push such reconciliation forward, all concerned countries should continue to enlarge their common critical interests, such as denuclearization in Korea peninsular, regional stability and security, environment protection, sustainable economy and trade. If these countries want to be good neighbors, each of them should consider the common interests as proprieties in policy-making process, and each country doesn't take advantages from damaging the others purposely. Although this sounds too ideal currently, there is no any other better way for these countries to come out from the heavy-burden history. It must be kept in mind that normal economic competition, including overseas infrastructure construction, investment or trade, shouldn't be linked unsuitable to political confrontation. Such as Japan will invest in India for building high-speed rail and China will do the same thing in Indonesia. It's very nature and common economic competition but interpreted often by some nationalists as win-lose struggle between Japan and China. Another example, the Africa has vast opportunities for the other countries in the world, no matter Japan or China going there to trade or invest is a very natural thing, but again some people would like to link it as the struggle between two countries. More important thing is, in the past few years, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzou often mentioned China at almost all international occasions as a threat to Asia including Japan. Moreover, he even compared current China as Germany before 1914 alluding China's war ambition and provoking China-US relations. In Asia, Prime Minister Abe seems committed to isolate China from the other countries with exaggerating China's threat to its neighbors. On the other hand, China and ROK expressed deep concern over the intention of Japan's new explanation and possible modification on its peace constitution with worries about the reviving of Japan's militarism. Such recycled mutual distrust partly resulted from

history mutual understanding and again results into wider and deeper mutual non-acceptance between the public of the two countries.

Lack of support from the bottom, any improvement of bilateral relations will need more time and energy to make. Even in economic respect, compared with some other regions in the world, North East Asia regional integration pace lags behind very far. This actually hurts each country's economy in this region. Politicians have the special duty to lead the public to look at the bright side of the bilateral ties in today's close interdependence world. Any collapse of Japan's economy or China's economy can not be afforded by each country, even the rest of the world. Competition and even confrontation of some kind are unavoidable for inter-national relations, but, it's unnecessary to calculate each act and each move with the confronting ideology.

## V. Available Platforms of NEA Security Governance

There are some existed platforms for NEA countries. China, Japan and ROK are in the ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum and East Summit. The three countries began the trilateral summit meeting in 2008 and have met six times until this year. Due to the tense diplomatic relations between China and Japan on one hand, and Japan and ROK on the other hand, mainly caused by the Japanese Prime Minister Abe visiting Yasukuni Shrine in 2013, the summit of three countries was cancelled in 2013 and 2014 and then resumed in Nov 2015.

As the nuclear proliferation issue, Six-Party Talks is still the only platform for all concerned countries to discuss and exchange views. No matter how many difficulties it has faced, this is the only regime which has been accepted by all concerned partners though it has been suspended since 2008. It needs to strive to resume as soon as possible.

In non-traditional security area, as a matter fact, NEA has experienced all kinds of non-traditional security threats, from financial crisis to environmental challenges such as smog, and to the rise of recent pandemics as SARS and MERS. All these entail collective efforts to contain. Specifically, the regional environmental governance appears to be moving more smoothly than the traditional security area. The Tripartite Environment Minister Meeting continues to function amid the tense political situation in the region, the latest meeting taking place in Shanghai in April 2015 which adopted the joint action plan for 2015-2019. The Acid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia established in 2001 now has 13 countries included and aims at a common understanding on the state of acid deposition problems and providing policy makers with valuable information on the air pollution and other related issues. Environment pollution, especially the air pollution has become a major problem for fast-developing China. As the close neighbors of China, Japan and ROK pay much attention on this issue. It can be predicted that counter-air pollution will be the key area for triangle cooperation.

Besides environment threat NEA countries faced commonly, the nuclear energy security area is also need to cooperate each other. Japan and ROK have, for long time, heavily depended upon nuclear energy, and China is planning to catch up in this regard to cut down the carbon emission and reduce the environment pressure. Therefore, not to allow the Fukushima nuclear incident to recur remains a daunting challenge.

Cooperation on the other areas is also constructive for security governance. Overall economic integration will definitely improve the regional interdependence and stability. Economic interdependence among China, Japan and ROK has increased considerably during the past decade or so. China-South Korea-Japan FTA negotiation just finished the 9<sup>th</sup> round talk in Dec of this year in Japan. The earlier FTA establishment of three countries will benefit all countries in the region which in return promote the political reconciliation among them. Therefore, regional economic integration

momentum should be pushed with wisdom and far-sight. In return, it could be helpful for inter-nation reconciliation.

## Conclusions

The security of all the countries in North-East Asia should be considered equally. In other words, if any one country feels insecure, the whole region will result into instability and insecurity. On one hand, DPRK's national security should be respected; on the other hand, the other countries' concern of nuclear proliferation must be considered. The reality is even allied with the most powerful country in the world, ROK and Japan still feel the threat from a nuclear-armed DPRK, China worries the safety of DPRK's nuclear tests and nuclear weapons proliferation. The long-lasting nuclear problem has demonstrated that Isolation, economic sanction and military pressure, etc. seems have just stimulated the North Korea to make more desperate attempt for military building including nuclear weapons production.

A collapsed and disordered DPRK is no of any good to its neighbors. It's neither acceptable if DPRK is forced to become reckless in desperation with nuclear weapons. Facing such huge and fearful threat, all other countries must be truly united to deal with it. Without any doubt, the key of denuclearization in Korea Peninsular is to make the relationship between North Korea and the US normalization. But before that or at the same time, reconciliation inside of this region between or among NEA countries would be very helpful for pushing the DPRK-US relationship going to mitigation. As the allies of US, Japan and ROK could be helpful for encouraging and pushing the US to improve the relationship with North Korea, just like what many partners of the US in Europe and Latin America, had called for the US for many years to normalize the relationship with Cuba.

China, Japan and South Korea must pay high attention to the importance

of true reconciliation on history and continue to expand the common interests of countries in the areas of non-traditional security, environment and economy while avoiding conflicts on history, territory, etc. Without concrete history reconciliation among these three countries, there would be no unified position and determination to deal with this most pressing problem, neither the perpetual stability and sustainable economic prosperous in this region.

In order to break through the North-East Asia security dilemma, Chinese, Korean and Japanese should learn the French-German reconciliation experience to look beyond the history burdens and give up traditional realist ways of thought. The “old” realism theory, no matter military competition or military confrontation, is not helpful for this area’s security problems including nuclear non-proliferation. No matter how hard and how different the situation in Asia is from that in West Europe, these three countries have to learn to forget the mutual-hated history. Official negotiations must be supported by the public’s mutual-acceptance. The governments, media, schools and the society should educate and cultivate the public with rational and objective value of view. For future common peace, stability and prosperous of these countries in this region, the history filled with war, invasion, inequality, humiliation must be turned over forever.

Leaders of three countries should take the regional integration as a top political priority to carry out avoiding being interfered by any accidents. They should keep in mind that people in this region are on the same boat when facing the threat of nuclear proliferation, unstable regional situation, economic developing pressure, environment deterioration, and so on so forth. In order to deal with the common challenges and ensure common interests, three countries should unite to pursue a win-win outcome with every effort and strive to become neighbors with helping each other, not hating each other.