The Big Choices for Asia in the Decades Ahead

Who can say what Asia might look like in 20 years' time? No one with any real degree of certainty, but the events and trends of today give pointers. North Korea's continuing nuclearization, military build-ups around the region, Japan's probing constitutional reforms, swelling mega-cities and shifting demographics across Asia — all are examples of changes under way that will see a dramatically different Asia in coming decades.

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Rethinking Conflict: Asia's Emerging 'Pentapolar' Nuclear System

By Paul Bracken

Given the historic period of prolonged peace in East Asia since 1979, it would be tempting to conclude that this part of the world has escaped the risk of major-power war. But the build-up of military capabilities among major powers in the region, four of which possess nuclear weapons, suggests otherwise. This regional arms race is a major concern. Paul Bracken unpacks the implications of this rising threat, and why the next 10 years are critical.

A MAJOR-POWER SYSTEM of war is forming in Asia. It's easy to miss this structure, because it is in the early years of formation, and most attention is focused on the details of Asia's missiles, submarines and aircraft. But this view of Asian security is like looking through a straw. One sees interesting features, yes, but not the bigger picture. Stepping back and taking a broader look, we see that an interrelated nuclear system is forming based on the strategic postures of China, Russia, India and the United States, plus the missile defenses for Japan. These five major powers make up Asia's "pentapolar" nuclear system described in this essay.

Over the next decade, this system may tend toward slow change, risk avoidance and conservative behavior — much as the war system of the first nuclear age did. Or it may change in dynamic, goal-seeking and innovative ways. A framework is needed to understand and organize these possibilities, because we can't say for sure in which direction it will go since the Asian nuclear system is just too new, and too dissimilar from the structure of the first nuclear age.

Asia's new missiles, submarines and other weapons systems could be interpreted merely as "routine" nuclear modernization by China, India, Russia and the US. But my thesis in this essay is that a "routine modernization" theory offers an inadequate conceptualization of the deep structural change now occurring, and of the growing risks this has for the world order. It is more deeply embedded in the new Asian political order than any business-as-usual modernization suggests. And the risks of something going wrong, whether from strategic miscalculation, bad luck or sloppy thinking, are so great that this subject requires a lot more sober attention than it has received.

THE NEXT DECADE IS CRITICAL

A 10-year time frame is critical because of a confluence of trends in strategic force deployments and modernization. US nuclear modernization is only now beginning, and many people debate whether it will happen at all. But over the next 10 years, it will be obvious that it *is* taking place, and more, that it will not be a simple recreation of the "1975 system." By this I mean a two-power nuclear world where narrow counterforce and countervalue arguments frame the debate. Over the next 10 years, it will be obvious that Asia's nuclear modernization is shaping US modernization, and that we are never returning to an international order where only two countries matter when it comes to nuclear weapons. The US will be drawn into Asia's nuclear modernization in ways that may not be appreciated today, but will be impossible to ignore in a few years.

Then there is modernization in Russia, China and India. While Russian nuclear forces get a great deal of attention, China and India over the next few years will get a lot more. Both are deploying new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Both are deploying nuclear triads, a force structure made up of missiles, submarines and aircraft. And both are set to equip their missiles with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), including their submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Their postures are looking a lot like the American force of the 1960s and 1970s.

As Asia's nuclear modernization proceeds, conventional-nuclear thresholds will become brighter red lines than they are now. In short, US conventional forces will be seen increasingly in a nuclear context. This question isn't widely noticed today, but over the next few years it will be.

The nuclear forces of the secondary powers are also growing, and depending on the case, will become a *de facto* characteristic of international relations, even if they are not accepted in an official way. The focus of this essay is on the war system of the major powers. North Korea, Pakistan, Israel and Iran are not major powers, but they are sources of nuclear instability. Their forces will grow to a point that it will change how the world thinks about the nuclear order. Today, this is still in terms of nuclear nonproliferation and US extended deterrence. But it will become increasingly clear that the world is, indeed, in a *second* nuclear age. We are not going back to the world of 1975.

We are in the early stages of a nuclear regime that is just getting started, much as in the late 1940s and 1950s, when the groundwork of the first nuclear age was established. Conventions, red lines, doctrine and policy were worked out at that time — with enduring political consequences. Over the next 10 years, the foundations of a second nuclear age will take shape, with consequences that we must start thinking about now.

ASIA'S PENTAPOLAR SYSTEM

All multipolar systems have a hierarchy of power and status. Nuclear multipolarity is no different. In my book on the second nuclear age, I argued that when it comes to nuclear weapons, this hierarchy matters a great deal.[1] It's not just that some countries get the bomb — that's nuclear proliferation. The bigger issue is the larger system produced from the spread of the bomb, one made up of **m**ajor powers, **s**econdary powers and subnational **g**roups, what I call the MSG framework. A "major" power here is defined by wealth and technology. The key idea is that while nine countries in the world have nuclear weapons today,

1 Paul Bracken, *The Second Nuclear Age, Strategy, Danger, and the New Power Politics* (New York: Times Books, 2012), pp. 94-5.

2 Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), p. 339.

3 Bracken, *Second Nuclear Age*, pp. 197-201.

4 See Paul Bracken, "The Cyber Threat to Nuclear Stability," *Orbis*, Spring 2016.

international relations among them are quite different depending on which group a country is in. The US treats Russia and China very differently from the way it does North Korea or Israel. India, likewise, deals differently with China than it does with Pakistan.

This essay focuses on the strategic interactions of major powers in Asia. Think of these as a five-sided polygon. Each vertex is a country: China, Russia, India, Japan and the US. Japan is the odd man out, since it is not a nuclear-weapons state, though it is a major power. Nonetheless, I would argue that it is part of the developing Asian nuclear system because the US has guaranteed Japan's security with its own nuclear arms. Further, Japan is a nuclear threshold state. If it chose to develop nuclear weapons, it could do so in short order, and in a fairly impressive way. Finally, US missile defense in Asia is designed to protect Japan (and South Korea) from nuclear attack but these defenses also blunt China's growing force of missiles. All of these reasons pull Japan into Asia's nuclear orbit.

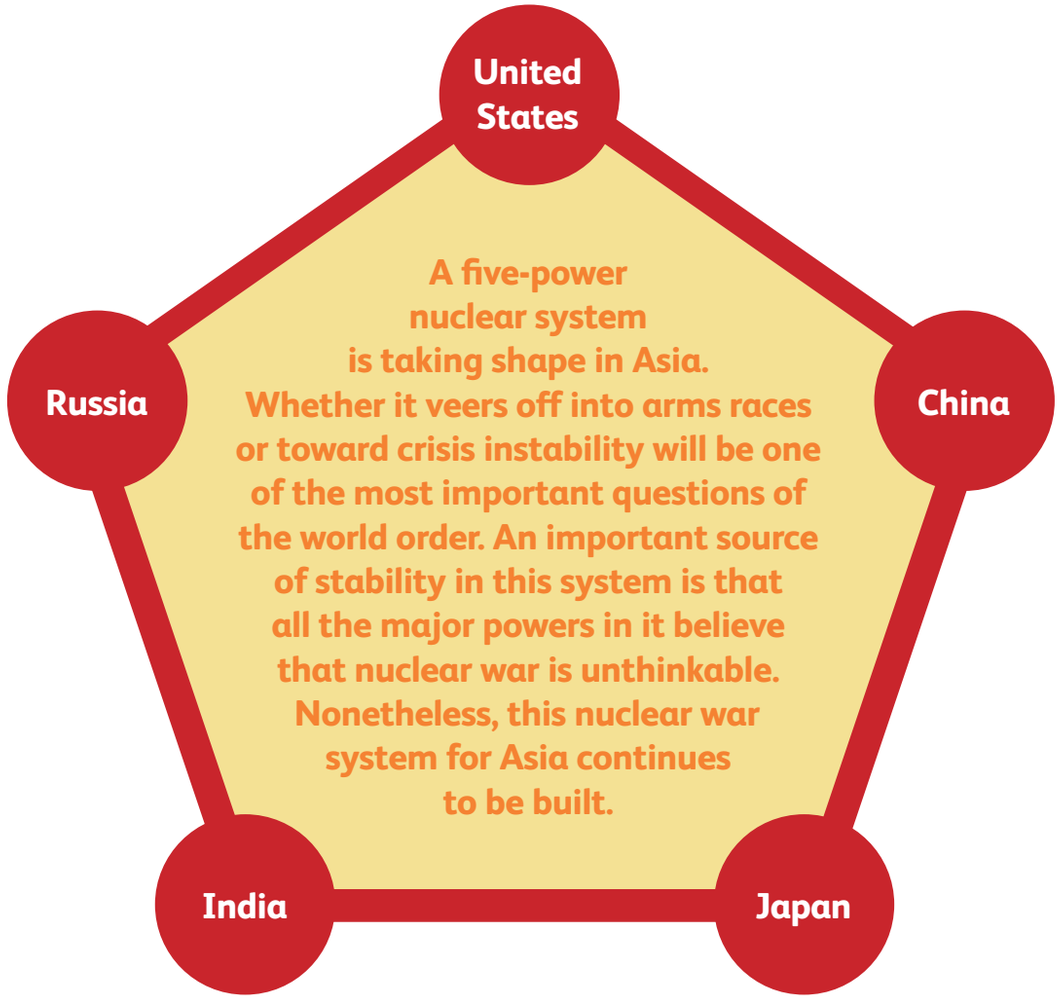
While a country can be a major power without nuclear arms, like Japan, the correlation is pretty high between possession of nuclear arms and being a major power. For example, it is hard to see how China could have gone through its meteoric rise to major power status had it not also been a nuclear power. The use of China to offset the Soviet Union in the 1980s would have been impossible and China couldn't operate in the league of great powers if it didn't have a nuclear deterrent. Today, for example, it would make little sense for China to modernize its overall military, absent a serious nuclear component.

India also illustrates the association between major power status and nuclear arms. After its 1998 nuclear tests, the US sharply condemned India. Sanctions were imposed and there were demands for India to sign the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear state, which would have meant giving up nuclear weapons and allowing intrusive inspections. "Soft" power was used to try and roll back the Indian bomb program. I recall a meeting in 1998 where a prominent journalist told me that international companies and banks would force India to do just this. The credit rating agencies had cut India's debt rating because of the sanctions, and this was supposedly going to force India into such economic chaos that Delhi would have to give up the bomb.

But when was the last time anyone seriously proposed that India sign the NPT? President Barack Obama's 2009 address in Prague called for a world free of nuclear weapons, yet somehow India was left out of the equation, since Washington signed a commercial nuclear power deal with Delhi, removing sanctions and freeing up India to make as many bombs as it liked.

India is now a legitimate, recognized nuclear-weapons state, NPT fictions to the contrary. Moreover, India's nuclear weapons are deeply linked to its new major power position. Without nuclear arms, India could play nothing like the strategic offset role to China that it does in US policy. It would depend on the US or Russia for defense against China, something that would never be accepted by India's leaders. And as Charles de Gaulle once put it, without the bomb, France wouldn't get invited to arms control conferences. And neither would India. Given that we are in a second nuclear age, one could expect that there will be many such meetings in the future.

A multipolar system like the one developing in Asia naturally lends itself to changes in power relationships. If one or more countries — the vertices of the polygon — build up their military power, the others can respond in a number of different ways. They could do nothing, and simply live with the new power imbalance. Or they might opt for a closer coalition in order to share resources, intelligence or technology. Building up one's own military is another obvious response.



MILITARY INTERACTIONS

Asia's nuclear interactions can be usefully considered in terms of different axes that are now "connecting" the vertices in the pentapolar structure. These are US-Japan missile defenses, India's missile modernization with respect to China and how Asian nuclear modernization affects US-Russian nuclear stability.

US missile defenses impact China's strategic posture. China's military buildup in missiles is the backbone of its whole modernization program. As a force by itself, it's a very impressive thing, larger now than the Soviet missile threat against Europe during the Cold War. Unlike that force, however, which was mostly unguided and slow reacting, China's is equipped with precision-strike technology, rapid retargeting and agility. In the 1970s, the Soviet force underwrote a "hostage Europe" strategy with political and military implications. In a crisis, it was impossible to overlook, in peacetime, it was "always there," and this influenced diplomacy.

The Chinese have a far larger intermediate-range missile force than the Soviets ever had

against Europe with both conventional and nuclear punch that allows for accurate strikes. And it is getting hard not to notice. For one thing, it gives good reason not to allow a crisis, say over the "new" islands in the South China Sea, to get too far out of hand. It pushes *crisis avoidance* on the US and Japan, as China expands its island construction program and other territorial claims.

US missile defense strategically entangles the US and Japan with China, and it does so in the upper reaches of the escalation ladder. Chinese missiles destroyed by US anti-missile missiles would mean fewer landing on Japan or other targets. But active US missile defense would immediately bring the US into war with China. From a deterrence viewpoint, this means a great deal. For one thing, it offsets many of the advantages China gained from building these missiles in the first place. For another, it drives conflict to lower levels of escalation where there is more room for maneuver. It also forces China to confront the fact that it faces several nuclear fronts. India's new ICBMs and SLBMs with MIRV warheads matter here. Over the next 10 years, they will give India a lot more striking power. They put pressure on China, because Beijing has to think through what a war with the US would mean when it is surrounded by nuclear missiles from three states (the US, India and Russia), and missile defenses around Japan.

India's MIRVs add to Japanese security for this reason. In 10 years, India's MIRVed missiles could destroy 10-25 of the largest Chinese cities. China will have no defense against this. If India gets a hydrogen bomb, this destructive capacity reaches a higher degree of certainty. This adds to deterrence against China, psychologically if not militarily, because in any big war with the US and Japan, China will know that its military would be so destroyed that it would be vulnerable to any state with undamaged nuclear forces. In other words, China won't be able to get out of such a conflict with anything remotely like a win.

Another axis for military interaction is forming between the US and Russia in this system. Henry Kissinger has picked up on it, observing that at some point the nuclear forces of China and India will have to be considered in the calculations of nuclear stability between the US and Russia.[2] Exactly when this occurs depends on the details, but by my estimate it is within the 10-year scope of this essay. Indeed, it's one of the reasons the next 10 years are so critical.

The nuclear balance that has been thought of for seven decades as a US-Russian matter is thus going to change in the next decade. China and India can upset the US-Russian stability calculation. There will have to be a widening of the debate about nuclear weapons and the international order to include *multipolar* stability. Here, all of the powers involved are Asian. This by itself will have considerable psychological and political implications.

NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY

Asia's pentapolar system has another dimension, diplomacy and crisis management. Game theory offers some useful insights into this. Stability in a multipolar system depends on the power of the countries in it, and also on the coalitions they form. If Russia were to join China in joint strategic targeting, this would present serious challenges to the US, for example.

Nuclear diplomacy in the second nuclear age, therefore, is likely going to be about splitting coalitions, preventing them from forming, and bolstering ones that are favorable.

Looked at this way, the greatest sources of instability do not come from counterforce improvements — i.e. from missile accuracy improvements. Rather, they arise from imbalances in power among coalitions. The best way to stabilize a multipolar system is often to transfer strategic information to bolster the strength of one of the other vertices.

Let's consider a historical example of this in a tripolar system. When US President Richard Nixon went to China in 1972, his assistant, Henry Kissinger, carried with him the nuclear order of battle for Soviet forces in the Far East.[3] Kissinger gave this information to the Chinese, including the type of Soviet weapons, yield, range — and location. Photographs and maps of weapons also were provided to them. In short, the US gave China targeting information for Soviet nuclear forces.

This information transfer stabilized the tripolar nuclear world of the 1970s, which involved the US, the Soviet Union and China. Information transfer for nuclear stability is much more important today. In the 1970s, nearly all nuclear weapons on land were in fixed sites. Some missiles were mobile, but even these were mostly dug in and protected.

Over the last 20 years, this has changed. The backbone of nuclear forces in Asia today is made up of land-based *mobile* missiles. Russia, China, North Korea, India, Pakistan, Iran and Israel all use mobile missiles. Only the US doesn't.

Cyber technologies are making the hunt for mobile missiles faster, better and cheaper.[4] As a result, the hunt for mobile missiles will be the next great phase of the arms race in Asia. This means that counterforce attacks can take out nuclear forces using only conventional weapons. From the point of view of crisis stability, this is extremely unfortunate. How the Asian pentapolar system handles the vulnerability of the secondary nuclear states in Asia is likely to be one of the greatest challenges of the next 10 years. The major powers need to think through stability in this very different technological landscape.

CONCLUSION

A five-power nuclear system is taking shape in Asia. Whether it veers off into arms races or toward crisis instability will be one of the most important questions of the world order. An important source of stability in this system is that all the major powers in it believe that nuclear war is unthinkable. Nonetheless, this nuclear war system for Asia continues to be built. This contradiction between attitudes about nuclear war and the stark fact that nuclear war systems are getting built needs to be recognized. Nations are acting as if major nuclear-power war isn't possible — just as they field weapons for this very purpose.

The thesis of this paper is that these weapons have reached such a level that a larger interactive system of Asian nuclear powers is taking shape. Absent a sober, big-picture understanding of this fantastic set of developments, we risk sleepwalking into serious dangers. Understanding the structures and possible stability trajectories of the system is a necessary first step if we are ever to steer it in a positive direction.

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