America's Asian Allies Need Their Own Nukes

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Nobody envies U.S. President-elect Joe Biden at the moment. The problems he faces seem insurmountable.

China likely will be the administration's most serious foreign challenge. The United States is wealthier and more powerful, but remains committed—overcommitted, in fact—around the globe. The world's finest—and most expensive—military goes only so far.

Moreover, domestic needs and international wants will increasingly clash. As America entered 2020, the federal budget deficit was expected to run to $1.1 trillion. Combating the coronavirus pandemic and providing economic relief pushed that number to $3.1 trillion. It will be more than $2 trillion this year, and could go much higher, if Congress and the president agree on a new stimulus package. The Congressional Budget Office had predicted another $10 trillion in red ink over the coming decade, but the additional COVID-19 deficit, reflecting a combination of increased outlays and decreased revenues, could be as much as $16 trillion.

China is a challenge—but it's not a direct military threat to the United States itself. Without such a threat, it will be difficult if not impossible to rouse public sentiment sufficiently to fund the sort of military expansion necessary to overawe and defeat a rising China in its own neighborhood. It costs much more to project power than deter its use, especially across an ocean several thousand miles wide. But there's a cheaper and more effective solution to keeping the peace: Let America's allies have nukes.

Can the United States defend Taiwan, destroy Chinese naval outposts on artificial islands, keep sea lanes open, protect territories claimed by Japan and the Philippines, and so on? Beijing is focused on developing Anti Access/Area Denial capabilities: It costs much less for China to build missiles and submarines capable of sinking aircraft carriers than for the United States to construct, staff, and maintain the latter. The Pentagon is concocting countervailing strategies, but they will be neither cheap nor risk-free. How much can Americans, facing manifold, expensive challenges at home and elsewhere abroad, afford to devote to containing the PRC essentially within its own borders?

And should the United States even attempt to do so? It will be difficult to generate sustained public support for sacrificial military spending to, say, ensure that the Senkaku Islands remain

under Japanese control. Japan analysts at Washington think tanks might wax eloquent in their latest webinar about the vital American interests at stake, but the public will be more skeptical. And, in fact, many of the Washington policy community's greatest fears understandably don't matter much to the American people.

For instance, it isn't terribly important that Beijing has grabbed control of Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines. Ownership of such specks of land yield control over fish and hydrocarbons, but that does not make them worth Americans' blood. Nor are the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Indeed, American involvement is not the best response, and certainly shouldn't be the first response in such contingencies. It is self-evident that such activities matter more to allied and friendly nations than to America. The best constraint on the PRC comes from its neighbors. It is surrounded by nations it's fought with in the last century, both as victim and invader: Russia, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and India. New middling powers include Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Just as Beijing is concentrating on deterring U.S. military intervention in the region, other countries can create forces capable of deterring China. They surely have an interest to do so —and not just to hold outlying territories. The independence of these and other nations matters more than their control over disputed lands.

Of course, these nations, which vary widely in size, wealth, and government, typically contend that they can ill afford to mount a defense, and that historical or political differences prevent them organizing together. Despite some truth to their objections, such claims should not become excuses for cheap riding. If these states are under threat, one much greater than that facing the United States, with pacific neighbors south and north, and vast oceans east and west, they have a powerful incentive to act.

Yet America's friends and allies have taken a shockingly lackadaisical attitude toward their own security. Even if the United States backstops their independence, American involvement should be a last resort.

The Europeans have pioneered freeloading on Washington's vast military spending, but the Asians are not far behind. If Tokyo is truly worried about losing a few barren pieces of rock—or, more seriously, fears an invasion of its main islands—why doesn't it devote more than 1 percent of spending on defense? The tribulations of history are well-known, but they are no justification for expecting badly cash-strapped Americans to step into the breach.

The Philippines barely makes an effort, devoting less than a 1 percent of its GDP to its armed forces. A few years back its defense minister complained that the navy could barely sail and the air force could barely fly. The navy's flagship is a half-century old U.S. Coast Guard cast-off. Manila hopes to borrow the U.S. Pacific fleet in case of trouble.

Worse, Taiwan, by far China's most endangered neighbor, spends less than 2 percent of GDP to protect itself—although a recently proposed budget envisages raising this considerably. Military outlays have gotten caught in the political crossfire between the two major parties. Grant Newsham of the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies cited "successive Democratic Progressive Party and Kuomintang administrations' mystifying but steadfast refusal to properly fund

defense—even though Taiwan is a wealthy nation and facing a serious threat from mainland China."

Why are countries so unwilling to do more on their own behalf? Perhaps they do not believe Beijing poses a threat—or they are convinced that America will step in if necessary. Growing concern over the PRC and its perceived ambitions appears to have loosened the military purse strings of some Chinese neighbors—but not nearly enough. U.S. officials have tried complaining, whining, and demanding, with only indifferent success. Better for the incoming administration to tell allies and friends that while America "is back," as the president-elect has proclaimed, that doesn't mean Americans should carry a burden that rightly belongs to others. Nor should other governments want to put their nations' futures into someone else's hands, even those belonging to the United States.

This applies with greatest force to the principle of extended deterrence, which friendly governments seem to assume is their due.

Washington's threat to go nuclear on its allies' behalf—an implicit promise of undetermined reach in unstated circumstances—is an extraordinary commitment, since it treats other nations' interests of varying importance as existential for America. This strategy is most likely to work if the opponent does not possess nuclear weapons or Washington's interest in its ally's security is at least as great as that of the nuclear-armed adversary. That is not the case in today's potential East Asia-Pacific conflicts.

Put bluntly, none of the contested interests are worth the resulting risks to America's homeland. Certainly not the various islands, reefs, shoals, islets, rocks, and other detritus strewn about the South China Sea, East China Sea, and other waters nearby. Nor the Philippines, a semi-failed state, almost uniquely badly governed. Taiwan is a better, or certainly a more valuable, friend, but is little more important to America's defense than Cuba is to Chinese security, which isn't much.

It is difficult to make a credible case for extended deterrence even for Japan. Would any American president really trade Los Angeles for Tokyo? The promise is made on the assumption that the bluff will never be called: Advocates simply assume perfect deterrence. However, history is littered with similar military and political presumptions, later shattered with catastrophic consequences.

The danger surrounding South Korea is most acute, and not because of Beijing. Rather, the threat is North Korea's nuclear program. Pyongyang has no interest in attacking the United States but can be expected to defend itself. It would have a strong incentive to use nukes if Washington threatened the North's defeat. Yet nothing in the Korean peninsula is worth the sacrifice of American cities.

What to do? There is one way to square the circle. The Biden administration should reconsider reflexive U.S. opposition to "friendly proliferation." Ironically, current policy ensures that nuclear weapons are held by only the worst Asian states—authoritarian and revisionist China and

Russia, Islamist and unstable Pakistan, illiberal and Hindu nationalist India, and totalitarian and threatening North Korea.

Against all these, Washington is supposed to defend Japan and South Korea, certainly, the Philippines and Australia, possibly, and Taiwan, conceivably. That is dangerous for everyone, especially the United States.

Reversing a policy supported by neoconservative nation-builders, unilateral nationalists, and liberal internationalists would not be easy. The change would be dramatic, and not without risk, whether from potential terrorism, nuclear accidents, or geopolitical provocations. Although the nuclear age has been surprisingly stable, proliferation necessarily creates additional risks for conflict and leakage. Nevertheless, the existence of nuclear weapons probably helped contain conventional conflict, especially between the United States and the Soviet Union. Even more, nations are convinced that modest arsenals keep rival states at bay, which is why countries as disparate as Israel, North Korea, and India have developed arsenals at great cost.

All of these countries, except the Philippines, are easily capable of developing their own nuclear weapons. Of course, they might decide not to do so, as is their right. However, there is significant popular support in South Korea for amassing a countervailing arsenal. The issue is understandably far more fraught for Japan. However, Japanese enthusiasm for pacifism always has reflected a belief that Washington would come to that country's defense. If that was no longer certain, the Japanese people might react differently.

Australia is another potential nuclear state. Until recently, Canberra might have been hesitant to risk its commercially advantageous relationship with the PRC. However, under sharp economic assault from Beijing today, Australians may be more inclined to add the ultimate weapon to their military repertoire.

Taiwan is in greatest need of such a weapon, but developing one would be highly destabilizing, since Beijing would be tempted to preempt the process. The alternative would be for Washington to fill Taiwan's need, with a profound impact on Sino-American relations. Proliferation would not be a good solution—but it might be the least bad one.

No doubt, a nuclear-armed China would react badly to better-armed neighbors, but it is no happier with a more involved United States. Moreover, the prospect of American friends and allies developing nukes might prompt the PRC to change course, backing away from confrontation, seeking diplomatic answers for territorial disputes, and pushing North Korea harder to limit if not roll back its nuclear program. Two or three additional nations choosing nukes would permanently transform the regional balance of power, to China's great disadvantage.

The PRC, not Russia or the Middle East, will pose the defining challenge to the Biden administration. Grappling with such a rising power will be very different to confronting the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It is easier to know what not to do with China than what to do. Don't go to war. Don't stage a new cold war. Don't sacrifice core values and basic interests.

Don’t make the issue all about Washington. Don’t waste money and credibility on overambitious, unsustainable attempts at containment. Don’t attempt to dictate to the PRC.

But what to do? The United States should think creatively about new approaches to old problems. One way to do so is to stop hectoring partners and preventing them from doing what they want to do. Including, perhaps, developing nuclear weapons.

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