

## Policy Watch: Japan, China and N.Korea

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U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice this week secured a pledge from Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso that Japan "is absolutely not considering" acquiring nuclear weapons in response to the recent North Korean nuclear test. Rice then reiterated the American commitment to defend Japan.

These moves were intended to ease some of the tensions that have emerged as a result of the North Korean nuclear crisis. It is not clear, though, that they will have this effect. They certainly will not help resolve the crisis. Here's why:

There is a general consensus that China has more influence over North Korea than any other country, and that Beijing thus has a greater possibility than anyone else (including Washington) to get Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Just how much influence China actually has with North Korea, of course, is an open question -- even in Beijing.

One thing, though, is clear: China is not doing as much as it could to pressure North Korea. China, along with Russia, worked to water down the U.N. Security Council resolution imposing sanctions on North Korea in response to its recent nuclear test. Even then, China has indicated that it will not interdict ships going to and from North Korea to inspect them for weaponry and other material the U.N. Security Council resolution (which China voted for) has banned Pyongyang from trading in.

The United States, Japan, and South Korea (even if it will not say so) fear that North Korea will launch a nuclear attack against one or all of them. China, by contrast, apparently does not fear that North Korea will launch a nuclear attack against it. There are, however, other things that China does worry about.

One of these, according to press accounts, is a messy collapse of the communist regime in North Korea. This could lead to millions of starving North Koreans seeking refuge in China. Beijing also reportedly fears that a North Korean collapse will lead to the reunification of the Korean peninsula under the auspices of the South, and thus a loss of influence for China. A nuclear armed North Korea is apparently preferable to Beijing than to either of these possibilities.

But China fears other things too, including the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan. A nuclear-armed Japan would be less amenable to pressure from China. The Japanese acquisition of nuclear weapons might also lead to South Korea, and even Taiwan, acquiring them too.

America and the West do not want Japan, South Korea and Taiwan to have nuclear weapons, but their acquiring them would not be a threat to them in the way that North Korea's obtaining them would be. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are all established democracies that can be expected to behave rationally and restrainedly, as other democracies with nuclear weapons (United States, United Kingdom, France, Israel, and India) have done.

Even if Beijing understands this, it still has a strong incentive to prevent Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan from acquiring nuclear weapons; to the extent that acquiring nuclear weapons would increase Japan's and South Korea's relative power in the region, this would come mainly at China's expense. A nuclear-armed Taiwan, of course, would seriously threaten Beijing's efforts to deter it from declaring independence.

If Beijing feared that a nuclear-armed North Korea might well result in Japan, (and maybe South Korea and Taiwan) acquiring nuclear weapons, it would have a strong incentive to act far more strenuously than it has so far to induce North Korea to forswear nuclear weapons. However, by prompting Tokyo to claim that it is not even considering acquiring nuclear weapons, as Secretary Rice has done, Washington reduces Beijing's incentive for pressuring Pyongyang on this issue.

Neither Washington, Seoul, nor even Tokyo want Japan to acquire nuclear weapons. But if Secretary Rice or some other high level U.S. official expressed understanding about how Japan might consider acquiring nuclear weapons in response to North Korea doing so, Beijing's incentive to induce Pyongyang to renounce them would surely increase.

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