

the japan times

Established 1897
Incorporating The Japan Advertiser 1890-1940
The Japan Chronicle 1868-1940
The Japan Mail 1870-1918
The Japan Times 1865-1870

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opinion

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The geography of dangers is changing

Editorial

The Munich Security Conference (MSC) is the world's largest independent forum on international security policy. Since it began in 1963, it has become the leading place for the discussion of current and future security challenges: Heads of state, along with national security policy decision-makers and analysts from around the world attend.

As would be expected at a European event, events in Asia have been marginal to the main conversations. That oversight prompted the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) to launch the Shangri-La Dialogue, which convenes each spring in Singapore.

Asian participation at the MSC remains limited; this year just a handful of Asian officials attended — Foreign Minister Taro Kono among them — but the issues that the group takes up are of rising significance to Asia. And Asian issues are of growing importance to Europe. As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted in remarks at the opening session of the meeting, "All allies are within range of North Korean missiles. Pyongyang is closer to Munich than it is to Washington DC" — and he could have added closer to London, Paris, Berlin and almost every other European capital.

Nuclear issues were an important part of the MSC discussions. While there was unanimity among participants on the need for North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program, that was not the only nuclear-related topic and there was considerably less agreement when those other issues were raised. The new U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, with its emphasis on great power competition and the need to strengthen deterrence, has reminded the world of the continued, if not growing, salience of nuclear weapons for defense planning and the potential for catastrophe if deterrence fails.

Fu Ying, the former Chinese diplomat who serves as chair of the National People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee, warned of the dangers of nuclear modernization and competition. While reaffirming China's commitment to its policy of minimum deterrence and no first use (NFU) of nuclear weapons, she inveighed against other countries that threaten global peace and stability. Fu, like her colleagues in Beijing, refuses to acknowledge how her country's policies contribute to insecurity. That blind spot must be remedied.

Fu was part of a chorus that questioned the credibility and capacity of the existing global order. Their pessimism was evident in the title of the panel on which Foreign Minister Kono spoke: "Present at the Destruction? The Liberal International Order under Threat." To their credit, the conference organizers framed the outcome as uncertain — note the question mark — rather than a given.

Kono focused on the North Korean challenge, but he also called out other countries that are prepared to change the status quo by force. The seeming inability of the world to stop such unilateral actions has sown doubt in international law and institutions, and is contributing to the renewed emphasis on competition, deterrence and military capabilities.

That is not the only such challenge, however. MSC organizers were right to focus on emerging cracks in the global economy, in particular the growing popularity of protectionism. Terrorism remains a source of danger, but more attention is being devoted to threats created by the insinuation of technology into the fabric of modern society. Not only are there dangers that result from increasing connectivity and the chaos that could follow from disruption of infrastructure, but policymakers are focusing on efforts to meddle in democracy and manipulate the democratic process. Eric Schmidt, the former head of the internet behemoth Google, acknowledged that "The trust that has been built up in democracy is much easier to destroy than rebuild."

All these problems demand the attention of Asia security policy planners, too. The world is shrinking in size and regional problems now ripple quickly around the globe. A new awareness of the diminishing significance of distance has prompted Japan to reach out and find common cause with European partners like the United Kingdom and France. A critical partner in this effort is NATO. Japan and NATO signed a joint political declaration in April 2013, and agreed on an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Program in May 2014. Bilateral consultations are a vital part of this process and they have assumed new vibrancy in recent years.

NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg noted less than a year ago in a speech in Tokyo that "the geography of danger has shifted." Those changes are accelerating and the Japanese government, like its counterparts elsewhere, must do more to stay on top of them. Active engagement with Europe is a start. Europe must reach out as well.

Perils of trivializing nuclear weapons

Gap between atomic and conventional arms is growing dangerously thin

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In case you haven't noticed, the nuclear arms issue is back — in its strategic rather than its tactical or battlefield dimension.

That's true not only in North Korea, but in Russia as well. It has deployed Iskander missiles (known as the SS-26 in NATO-speak) in the enclave (some call it an exclave) of Kaliningrad, the capital of which is the former Koenigsberg of Immanuel Kant.

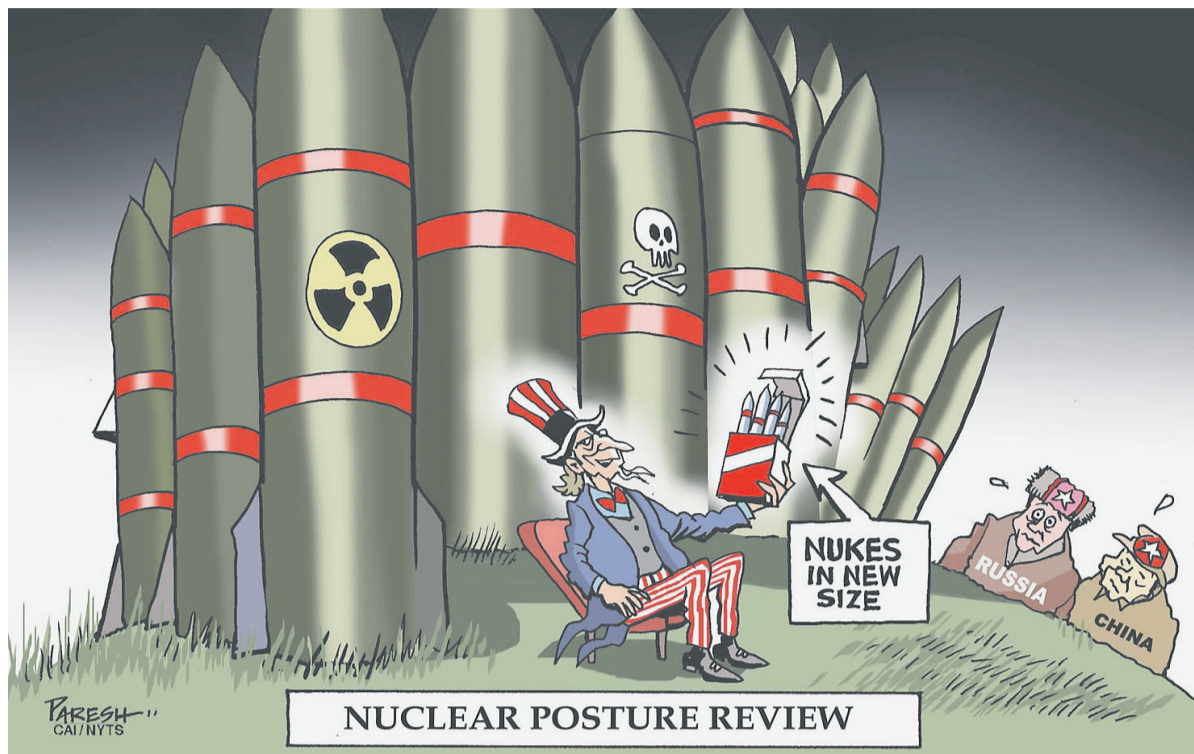
These missiles are capable of carrying nuclear payloads (whether they do in fact carry them is unknown). Russia made its move in response to the deployment of 4,500 allied troops in Poland and the Baltic states.

If the Kaliningrad-based Iskander missiles are armed with nuclear warheads, Russia would be in breach of the 1986 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty agreed by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. This is dangerous.

For its part, the Trump administration has published a new nuclear doctrine in its latest Nuclear Posture Review to renew its arsenal. The U.S. move is especially intended to allow for lighter payloads (although greater than at Hiroshima). The underlying idea is that this could make them "more usable," or at least more "thinkable." Hitting the nail on the head as usual, Harvard University's Stephen Walt argues that the Pentagon is answering "questions that nobody should be asking."

The modernization of the U.S. nuclear arsenal essentially comes in response not to North Korea, but to Russia and China's modernization of their nuclear weapons. It notably did not start with President Donald Trump, but with his predecessor Barack Obama. Obama's move was all the more telling as his prematurely being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize included being heralded for being the first U.S. president to advocate a "world without nuclear weapons."

But at the end of his two terms in office, as



I noted at the time, Obama launched a program to overhaul the arsenal, admittedly bringing down total numbers. The notion of favoring less potent nuclear arms also dates back a long way.

The current U.S. defense secretary, Jim Mattis, goes much further in his new doctrine. Contrary to the Obama administration, which had scrapped them, he advocates the reintroduction of updated sea-launched cruise missiles loaded with nuclear warheads.

"Mad Dog" Mattis proposes respecting the terms of the 2010 New START Treaty, although it has not yet been ratified. That treaty was the last major arms control agreement between Russia and the United States prior to the cooling of relations that followed the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine.

New START, also known as START III, limits both sides to 1,500 nuclear warheads. This is far fewer than in the Cold War but enough to destroy the world many times over.

However, it remains to be seen whether the two powers will be capable of reaching a new agreement when the current one expires in 2021. They are not working on it.

The U.S. continues to respect the treaty that bans nuclear testing, although it too has never been ratified.

The new nuclear strategy involves a modernization of the arsenal. According to its authors, the doctrine simply "clarifies" the situation. "Our goal is to convince adversaries that they have nothing to gain and everything to lose from the use of nuclear weapons," Mattis declared at the presentation of the review.

But it may signal a major change, because it also means that such adversaries "must understand that there are no possible benefits from non-nuclear aggression or limited nuclear escalation."

Above all, the new U.S. nuclear doctrine calls for the development of smaller weapons and a "flexible, tailored" strategy of nuclear deterrence to have all possible options available in an escalation. In "extreme circumstances" that may lead to the use of these weapons to defend the vital interests of the U.S., its allies or its partners, even in the face of "significant non-nuclear strategic attacks."

In other words, it broadens the scenarios in which the U.S. may use nuclear arms,

The new U.S. nuclear doctrine broadens the scenarios in which the U.S. may use nuclear arms, including against non-nuclear threats.

including that of nuclear against non-nuclear (which was, lest it be forgotten, at the root of the Cold War in Europe).

The document advocates strengthening "the integration of nuclear and non-nuclear military planning." There is a danger of trivializing these weapons — especially when, as the review itself says, there is "an unprecedented range and mix of threats, including major conventional, chemical, biological, nuclear, space and cyber threats, and violent nonstate actors."

Deterrence continues to be the rule, albeit in a very different guise. It is no longer a matter of two sides, but rather three or more, including nonstate actors. While nuclear weapons would not deter terrorists of the Islamic State variety or others, the fear of nuclear terrorism of some sort is ever present.

The fact is that the boundary between the nuclear and the non-nuclear is blurred by this doctrine. It is also being blurred in another way: With the building of the increasingly powerful conventional bombs being developed by the U.S. (as well as Russia and China), such as the so-called hypersonic weapons.

The U.S. used what it dubbed the "mother of all bombs," its largest conventional weapon, launched from an airplane, the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB), in Afghanistan last April against a network of Islamic State tunnels in the province of Nangarhar.

In other words, nuclear weapons are downsizing while their conventional counterparts become ever more powerful.

"Let it be an arms race!" Trump proclaimed during his election campaign. There is just such a race, again, in the nuclear domain, without even counting the new proliferators such as North Korea.

Nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented, but they can be reinvented. And it seems that this is what we face: Not the prospect of a quantitative race this time, but rather a qualitative race, one that corrodes the boundaries between the nuclear and the non-nuclear.

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India's choice in the Maldives

The crisis is a defining moment for New Delhi as China encroaches on its traditional sphere of influence

Brahma Chellaney

NEW DELHI

The Maldives — that beautiful Indian Ocean country comprising more than 1,000 coral islands — is known the world over as a tranquil and luxurious travel destination. But the country is now being roiled by a political crisis so severe that international advisories are cautioning against travel there.

The rule of law in the Maldives has been steadily deteriorating since President Abdulla Yameen came to power in 2013. The situation escalated sharply earlier this month, when Yameen refused to comply with the Supreme Court's unanimous order quashing the convictions, which he had engineered, of nine opposition figures — including the exiled former president, Mohamed Nasheed — on terrorism charges. Instead of freeing those whose sentences were nullified, Yameen declared a state of emergency and jailed two of the Supreme Court's five judges, including the chief justice.

To be sure, authoritarianism is not new to the Maldives. Indeed, Nasheed is the only democratically elected, non-autocratic president the country has had since it gained independence from Britain in 1965. His tenure lasted just over three years, until, in 2012, he was forced at gunpoint to resign.

But the Maldives' sordid politics is having an increasingly far-reaching impact, not least because it is closely linked to radical Islam. On the day Nasheed was overthrown, Islamists ransacked the Maldives' main museum, smashing priceless Buddhist and Hindu statues and erasing all evidence of the country's pre-Islamic roots. On a per capita basis, the Maldives has sent the highest number of foreign fighters to support terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq.

Moreover, the Maldives sits astride critical shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean, making it vital to security in the region. As a result, the country's deteriorating political conditions are increasingly capturing the international community's attention. Democratic powers, from the United States to India, are calling on the United Nations to intervene in the crisis, while China, seeking to advance its own interests in the Indian Ocean, is defending the graft-tainted Yameen.

The increasingly close relationship between China and the Maldives represents a significant shift from the past, when India was the country's primary regional partner. Maldivians are mainly of Indian and Sri Lankan origin, and have strong cultural and economic ties to those countries. Their country has traditionally been viewed as part of India's sphere of influence.

But, in recent years, China has been eroding India's influence in the Maldives as part of its effort to build its "string of pearls": a chain of military installations and economic projects aimed at projecting Chinese power in the Indian Ocean. Just as China recently secured the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota with a 99-year lease, it has, according to Nasheed, quietly acquired 17 islands in the heavily indebted Maldives for investment purposes.

But, betraying its strategic objectives, China has also sent warships to visit the Maldives. If China, which has stepped up military pressure on India along their Himalayan frontier, turned one of the Maldivian islands into a naval base, it would effectively open a maritime front against India — a milestone in China's strategic encirclement of its neighbor.

The Maldivian crisis thus is a defining moment for India. Will India intervene militarily, as Nasheed and other Maldivian opposition leaders have requested, or will it allow Yameen to continue to enable China to pursue its strategic objectives in the region?

There is some precedent for an Indian military intervention in the Maldives. In 1988, India snuffed out a coup attempt against the autocratic Maumoon Abdul Gayoom engineered by a Maldivian businessman with the aid of armed mercenaries, especially Sri Lankan Tamil separatists. Thanks to India's swift military action, Gayoom would hold



Maldivian police on Feb. 15 remove one of several opposition members trying to enter parliament, which was shut down after President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency. AP

onto power for another two decades.

Yet when the country's first and only democratically elected president beseemed India in 2012 to rescue him from the Islamist forces laying siege to his office, India looked the other way. India's government felt betrayed by Nasheed's own burgeoning relationship with China. Not only had Nasheed awarded China its first infrastructure contracts; just three months before his ouster, he had inaugurated the new Chinese Embassy in the capital, Male, on the same day that India's then-prime minister, Manmohan Singh, arrived for a regional summit.

Today, an Indian intervention could be dicey, not least because no legitimate authority is inviting India to send in forces. Indian paratroopers could gain effective control of Male within a few hours. But what would the endgame be? Amid rising Islamist influence and shifting political allegiances among the handful of powerful families that dominate the Maldives' economy and politics, finding reliable allies committed to — much less capable of — protecting democratic freedoms would prove a daunting challenge.

Moreover, even if Yameen were ousted and the country held a democratic election, it is unlikely that China's influence could be contained. As the experiences of Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka illustrate, China has outmaneuvered India diplomatically, even when dealing with democ-

cratically elected governments. Indeed, it did so in the Maldives itself, with Nasheed. Because the country's debt will continue to rise, regardless of its leadership, China will retain its favorite source of leverage.

India, with its proximity and historical ties to the Maldives, may seem to hold a strong hand. But it has a lot to lose if it aggravates an already volatile political situation in its maritime backyard by intervening militarily.

India's best option is to hold out a credible threat of military action, while imposing, together with other democratic powers, economic sanctions that undercut support for Yameen among the Maldivian elite, many of whom own the luxury resorts that now have far too many empty rooms. With them on side, perhaps the international community would be able to ensure that the presidential election scheduled for later this year is fair and inclusive — and supervised by the U.N. That is the only way to end the crisis, and restore peace to an Indian Ocean paradise.

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