



NUCLEAR DEBATES IN ASIA

The Role of Geopolitics and Domestic Processes

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Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Uncovering Nuclear Thinking in Asia

The rise in global demand for nuclear energy is heavily concentrated in emerging and aspiring Asian powers. While nuclear power may alleviate energy shortages and climate change concerns, the promotion of nuclear energy compounds Asia's nuclear weapon proliferation problems alongside nuclear power safety risks. All this is exacerbated by rising geopolitical tensions in Asia with more assertive policies – especially from China – in the region testing regional stability.

Against this perilous setting, [Nuclear Debates in Asia: The Role of Geopolitics and Domestic Processes](#) – a new book by the Rising Powers Initiative (RPI) at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies – questions the extent to which we can infer nuclear thinking simply from external conditions and instead considers policy thinking on nuclear power and proliferation in Asia to be more complex and variegated than often posited. In this Asia Report, we present analysis offered at a recent RPI book launch event at the Elliott School for International Studies at George Washington University (GWU) with commentary by several of the authors on South Korea, Japan, China, and Taiwan. [You can also listen to the event's audio on the Sigur Center's website.](#)

Five Important Findings in the Book

The Nuclear Debates in Asia book found several illuminating common features across Asia:

- First, decision making on nuclear issues is still largely centrally controlled in a process dominated by elites in both democratic and authoritarian states.
- Second, this stranglehold on nuclear decision making has at times been confronted by grassroots level movements

often focused on a specific nuclear question (e.g. protests against nuclear power plants or reprocessing facilities, anti-nuclear weapon groups) especially as pluralism is on the rise in parts of Southeast Asia, Japan, India, and even China.

- Third, nuclear weapons policy has been remarkably consistent despite tremendous external security challenges (particularly China's ascendancy) and the rise of so-called "resource nationalism" alongside growing energy demands. Instead, nuclear policy appears to be relatively insulated from the whims of populist Nationalism.
- Fourth, the overall center of gravity in most of the countries studied shows the dominance of a Realist-Globalist coalition.
- Finally, Pakistan remains the outlier in this trend with nuclear debates essentially dominated by elites with Nationalist views.

Book Overview

The book is the product of a two year RPI study (2012-2014) that explored the trajectory of nuclear energy, security, and nonproliferation in several key countries in Asia: China, India, Japan, Pakistan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and other states in ASEAN. Arguing against conventional wisdom, the project made the case that rather than simply viewing nuclear debates through the lens of state-level, structural drivers, that the domestic variable is a powerful factor in shaping nuclear decision making.

Rather than simply viewing nuclear debates through the lens of state-level, structural drivers, this book sees the domestic variable as a powerful factor in shaping nuclear

Deepa Ollapally, Research Professor of International Affairs and one of the project's Principal Investigators, presented the book's overarching framework of looking at various schools of thought within these domestic nuclear debates: Nuclear Realists, Nuclear Nationalists, and Nuclear Globalists. *Realists* stress the importance of self-strengthening and self-reliance but are relatively open to forming alliances with other states, especially great and rising powers. In pursuing strength, Realists value tangible military and/or economic assets. Still, they prefer to use this power prudently and worry about overstressing their capabilities. They are therefore willing to exercise self-restraint or be restrained by others if it serves national interests.

Nationalists see the world as hostile and strive for policies, postures, and capabilities similar to Realists. The key difference, however, is Nationalists emphasize these assets as not just

a means to achieve national goals but as an end itself. As a result, they view the rise of their nation or attaining nuclear capability as a matter of national pride and sometimes a moral obligation. They are firmly skeptical of international alliances and international regimes that might restrain their options on nuclear matters.

In contrast to the other groups, *Globalists* tend to favor international political and economic integration over military solutions as means to resolve security and political disputes. They are sensitive to how their country is viewed around the world and many prefer to work with nations that espouse democratic values. They are supportive of international regimes such as the nonproliferation treaty and multilateral nuclear energy cooperation mechanisms.

These schools are thought are not absolute demarcations; individuals may subscribe to one viewpoint on a nuclear energy but hold another on nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, they are useful characterizations to gauge the center of gravity within a country on nuclear debates and assess the future direction of countries in Asia on these issues. With this overview, authors delve into individual cases, focusing here on China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

China

After surveying Chinese debates on nuclear energy, nuclear weapons, arms control, nonproliferation, and nuclear security, the chapter on China by **Hui Zhang**, Senior Research Associate within the Belfer Center at Harvard University, demonstrates the supremacy of Realist and Globalist views on these issues. **Robert Sutter**, Professor of Practice of International Affairs at GWU, offered his thoughts on the chapter at the book launch.

Conventional wisdom proposes that China's efforts to modernize its nuclear weapon arsenal and make it more reliable and effective are proof of a more aggressive threat. Zhang, however, pushed back on this interpretation and asserted the modernization push is driven by a Realist preference to maintain a "minimum nuclear deterrent," a No First Use pledge, and other restraints on China's nuclear options in order to prevent a costly nuclear arms race with the United States and other nuclear powers. Gains in nuclear weapon capabilities, Realists argue, could be used by Beijing as leverage in future arms control talks with Moscow and Washington. Furthermore, the Globalist school's contention that China needs to maintain a positive international image on nonproliferation matters as a means to reach its wider

economic and development goals appears to be holding strong within the country's governing elite.

China's massive push for more domestic nuclear energy aims to: (1) address the country's air pollution crisis; (2) mitigate climate change and meet international emission reduction targets; and (3) enhance national energy security. Realists in

Despite an ever more challenging security and energy situation for China, Dr. Hui Zhang still foresaw remarkable consistency in the country's nuclear policies.

China see nuclear energy as a means to protect the current Chinese growth and development model by offering a solution to the public's anxieties about air quality and to provide sufficient energy outputs to continue expanding the economy. Globalists favor nuclear power to improve China's image on the international stage as a prime contributor to climate change solutions. Nationalists promote nuclear power for reasons of self-sufficiency on energy, but that view is overshadowed by Realist and Globalist arguments. These

nuclear energy debates are largely controlled by elites in China, but after the nuclear power plant accident at Japan's Fukushima prefecture in March 2011, local protests against several nuclear energy plants and related projects indicate that this grip has somewhat weakened. Despite an ever more challenging security and energy situation for China, Zhang still foresaw a remarkable consistency in the country's nuclear policies.

Japan

Mike Mochizuki, Associate Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at GWU and the project's co-Principal Investigator, cuts against the prevailing discourse claiming Japanese security anxieties toward threats from China and North Korea will push Tokyo in favor of developing nuclear weapons or at least encourage Japan to hedge on this choice. By maintaining a large stockpile of separated plutonium from its nuclear power industry, this perspective contends, Japan's leaders leverage their ability to quickly build a nuclear arsenal to deter its rivals and keep the United States close. While there is some truth to these positions, Mochizuki believes they are quite exaggerated.

The threshold for Japan to make a decision in favor of obtaining its own nuclear weapons is extremely high. Even the threat of a growing nuclear armed North Korea, a rapidly modernized Chinese military, and the possibility

of a Donald Trump Administration is not enough for Pro-Nuclear Nationalists to overcome the Japanese public's strong anti-nuclear bias and the country's pacifist constitution. After Fukushima, the center of gravity within Japan on nuclear debates shifted toward a coalition of Nuclear Realists and Anti-Nuclear Activists. The Pro-Nuclear Nationalist voice may be loud, but it is very much in the minority.

Mochizuki saw a fundamental bargain develop in 1950s Japan between nuclear energy proponents and anti-nuclear weapon activists: nuclear energy can be a national policy priority only under robust nonproliferation constraints. This norm or allergy against nuclear weapons is resilient and further strengthened by an increasingly popular Globalist position of Nuclear Double Zero: no nuclear weapons and no nuclear energy. The author doubts Japan's recently restarted nuclear energy plants will ever return to a level of output that once supplied over 30 percent of the country's electricity or its pre-Fukushima ambition of [nearly 70 percent by 2030](#); a more realistic target is closer to 10 to 15 percent. In recent weeks, Japan has even started to walk away from prior massive investments in reprocessing and fast breeder nuclear reactors. On the other hand, Japan and its U.S. partners are still deeply interested in exporting Japanese nuclear energy technology abroad where Japan is less constrained in its activities than at home.

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On the military side, Mochizuki expects the public's anti-nuclear sentiment to continue reinforcing Japan's commitment to non-nuclear principles. To address the security challenges posed by North Korea and China, security Realists will focus their attention on upgrading conventional defense capabilities and tightening the alliance with the United States, rather than seriously considering a nuclear weapons option.

South Korea

Scott Snyder, Senior Fellow for Korea studies and Director of the program on U.S.-Korea policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, identifies three categories of nuclear debates in the Republic of Korea (ROK): (1) the drive for energy self-reliance through nuclear power; (2) whether South Korea should rely on nuclear weapons – their own or the U.S. stockpile – to deter North Korea; and (3) the balance between nonproliferation objectives and spent nuclear fuel management. Snyder observes that each of these debates were shaped over past decades by changes in the U.S.-ROK

alliance, the country's transition from authoritarianism to democracy, and the evolution of ROK technical capabilities.

There is a dominant Realist-Globalist coalition in South Korea today, but it was not always the case. In the 1970s, Seoul had a secret nuclear weapons program advanced by Nationalists unsure of the U.S. commitment to South Korea after the Nixon Doctrine, U.S. military escalation in Vietnam, and an ever provocative North Korea. It took an ultimatum by Washington and a promise to reengage the Peninsula for South Korea to abandon these ambitions or else risk a divorce from its Western allies.

As South Korea moved toward a more democratic government, Globalists furthered an export driven economic plan that included the transfer of ROK civilian nuclear power reactor technology abroad. This has resulted in a rift between the U.S. nonproliferation agenda and Korean scientists and politicians who want the freedom to engage in some form of plutonium reprocessing to manage the country's radioactive waste storage challenge and remain competitive in the global nuclear energy marketplace. The United States insists South Korea's particular approach to reprocessing – called pyroprocessing – still poses

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a proliferation risk since this type of technology has applications in producing fuel for both nuclear reactors and nuclear warheads. Globalists have thus far won the argument that collaboration with Washington on nuclear energy and protecting South Korea's image as a nonproliferation supporter outweighs the benefits of more flexibility. These compromises have

allowed the latest and long negotiated U.S.-ROK civilian nuclear cooperation agreement to [move forward last year](#).

North Korean military provocations, especially the second nuclear test in 2009, have tested the Realist-Globalist coalition and South Korea's non-nuclear weapon status. Frustration with inconsistent U.S. policy on North Korea and a perception that China refuses to reign in its partners in Pyongyang create conditions in Seoul that could see a new Nationalist push toward an indigenous nuclear arsenal. For the time being, however, this viewpoint is in the minority, though Realists express versions of it by advocating for the [return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea](#).

Taiwan

In the 1960s and 1970s, Taiwanese elites attempted on two occasions to pursue a nuclear weapons program. These days, **Robert Sutter** proclaims this line of thinking is mostly discarded. Taiwan's support for nonproliferation norms and safeguards against the spread of nuclear weapons is strong. The island has instead been intensely deliberating on whether to keep or expand the number of nuclear power plants in the country with the debate centered on reactor safety and energy demands. These debates were heated during the recent national elections with the now ruling Democratic Progressive Party campaigning against the pro-nuclear power position supported by the Kuomintang (KMT).

After the January 2016 presidential election, however, the intensity of the nuclear energy debate diminished with the country moving on to other pressing issues. Sutter argues the United States can rest assured that Taiwan will not resume nuclear weapon ambitions nor backtrack on commitments to being an ideal model for nonproliferation. Still, due to Taipei's turbulent political dynamics, Washington should not expect a stable and consistent position on nuclear power within Taiwan even as the country aims to be nuclear free by 2025.

American regional security commitments have prevented pro-nuclear Nationalist discourse from gaining a foothold in allied states.

Conclusions for U.S. Foreign Policy

The United States has played an important role in shaping the discourse and policies on these nuclear debates in all the Asian countries reviewed by the book. By reaffirming its regional security commitments, Washington has prevented pro-nuclear Nationalist discourse from gaining a foothold in allied states like Japan and South Korea. Moreover, the U.S. ability to regulate access to nuclear technologies has compelled states like South Korea and Taiwan to abandon clandestine nuclear weapon programs or encourage nations like India and Vietnam to accept constraints.

In terms of nuclear energy, the U.S. government and nuclear industry has supported the expansion of civilian nuclear energy programs in Asia and has helped impede the Japanese movement to abandon nuclear power altogether. The United States has an interest in strengthening nuclear safety and nonproliferation throughout Asia and can advance this agenda by moving from an Asian nuclear network dominated by the United States through bilateral relationships to a more

multilateral structure that promotes cooperation among Asian countries as well as between Washington and individual Asian capitals.

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The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The *Nuclear Debates in Asia* project was supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

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