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Trends in International Politics 2023

East Asia's Worsening Security Situation

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2022 was not a good year for security in the Asia Pacific Region, with multiple crucial relationships hitting a new low, and 2023 does not promise to be much better. While all-out military confrontation is not likely, it is also not off the table and care needs to be taken that contingency events and hasty decisions do not trigger a full-blown escalation. The following highlights three of the most critical flashpoints: the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and the re-emergence of Cold War blocs in East Asia.

On the Korean peninsula, 2022 saw a drastic increase in North Korea testing ballistic, cruise and hypersonic missiles. Overall, North Korea launched almost three times as many missiles as during the previous peak year of 2017 (CSIS 2022), with some of them flying over Japanese mainland territory and forcing residents to seek shelter (Shin 2022). Additionally, in a move that further raises the risk of accidental nuclear war, North Korea revised its nuclear doctrine to specify that “a nuclear strike shall be launched automatically and immediately” if a hostile attack is perceived to threaten the life of Kim Jong-Un (Davenport 2022). In response to these missile tests and policy changes, the US, South Korea and Japan stepped up their military drills, both bilaterally and trilaterally, further contributing to an escalation of tensions. Partially as a result of this spiral of provocations, there are reasons to believe that North Korea will test its first nuclear device since 2017 in the coming year (BBC News, 21 November 2022).

This development is accompanied by a change in leadership in South Korea, where conservative Yoon Suk-Yeol took over the presidency from the previous left-leaning administration headed by Moon Jae-In. Unlike Moon, who pursued a conciliatory approach with the North, Yoon takes a more hard-line stance and has made it clear that “the age of appeasing North Korea is over” (Foster-Carter 2022, 112). Given that North Korea has also blamed the South for its Covid outbreak (ibid., 115), it does not seem likely that inter-Korean dialogue will resume soon. In this context, it is noteworthy that South Korea’s much-strained relations with Japan have not yet recovered, also because Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has had his hands full with domestic issues after the shocking assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (Lee & Lim 2022). However, it is likely that there will be a major Japan-South Korea summit in 2023 aimed at mending ties and increasing security cooperation, even if there is little hope for genuine progress on the two countries’ historical disputes.

Tensions over the Taiwan Strait, too, hit a new high in 2022. Taiwan has seen an increase in international support in recent years, for example from the G7 and the European Union—a trend that was exemplified by US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s high-profile visit in August 2022. In response, China’s rhetoric with regard to the need to finally reunify the island with the mainland has become harsher and the immediate consequence of Pelosi’s

visit was China's "most extensive military exercises ever conducted near Taiwan, closer to the island than ever before" (Keegan & Churchman 2022, 99). In the course of the exercise, some missiles flew over Taiwan's territory and, for the first time, landed in Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone, further escalating regional tensions. Japan, meanwhile, has made it clear that it stands with Taiwan and, in another first, explicitly linked its security policy to "peace and stability across the Taiwan strait". This move is significant because it has the potential to replace the conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as the most contentious issue in Sino-Japanese relations (Sasaki 2022). While this change in tone does not commit Japan to aid in Taiwan's defence should China launch an offensive, it certainly raises that possibility and thus contributes to a significant worsening of China-Japan relations. This is further compounded by Japan releasing a new National Security Strategy (NSS) in December 2022. The NSS does not only aim to double defence spending and acquire capabilities that would previously have been considered incompatible with Japan's peace constitution, but it also explicitly singles out China as the "greatest strategic challenge" (Singh 2023).

All of these existing tensions are further exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the new Cold War era that we seem to be witnessing. Not only is Russia itself a Pacific power, but East-West tensions have always played out in the Asia Pacific region, which has few institutional settings to

manage them. The war in Ukraine implicates the US allies and partners of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan who have introduced their own sanctions on Russia, but who also need to manage relations with China on which their economies are dependent. China, on the other hand, is engaged in a balancing act where it is aligned with Russia's opposition to perceived Western expansionism, but wants to avoid becoming the target of Western sanctions itself. North Korea has gone one step further in siding with Russia, allegedly selling it weapons and ammunition (Berg 2022) and even officially recognising the so-called people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (Foster-Carter 2022, 116) as well as their incorporation into Russia. Thus, what we are seeing in East Asia is a re-emergence of the old Cold War blocs, with China, Russia and North Korea moving closer together—in the process mending frayed China-North Korea relations (Pacheco Pardo & Kim 2022)—and US-aligned countries like South Korea and Japan being designated as "unfriendly" by Russia (Roehrig 2022).

These developments will shape the work of academics and policymakers alike. They complicate and reinvigorate existing analyses on nuclear weapons, China's rise and the changing international order, so that we can expect increasing research on China-Russia relations and the New Cold War. The war in Ukraine, and the Mearsheimer controversy, also reminds us again that academic research is not divorced from the practice of international relations. Scholars will have to carefully consider ethical

questions about the impact of their work on ongoing conflicts. European policymakers, meanwhile, should be aware that whatever they decide to do with regard to Ukraine has consequences far beyond Europe. This is exemplified by the war in Ukraine raising concerns about China using it as an opportunity to engage in similar actions in Taiwan (Chan 2022). And while Xi Jinping has so far proved more prudent than Vladimir Putin, there is no telling what a perceived increase in Western distraction will do, especially if further domestic unrest

makes an international escalation politically beneficial. However, the reverse is also true, with the broad deterioration of relations in East Asia having the potential to create unfortunate linkages that could drag European states into regional conflicts. In this context, the increase in military spending (SIPRI 2022) and general overall militarization of East Asia is another cause for concern.

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