



# Asian Conflicts Reports

## ◆ Recent Terrorism Developments in Indonesia

- ◆ China, North Korea-Iran Nuclear Axis
- ◆ Muscular Secularism in Singapore
- ◆ Wahhabism in Sri Lanka
- ◆ Privately Armed Groups in the Philippines

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# China and the North Korea-Iran Nuclear Axis

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1

The inability of the USA to prevent North Korean and Iranian Nuclearization is casting doubts on the credibility of the US security umbrella over its allies

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization grouping of states is increasingly superseding the UN and other traditional security paradigms

3

China is becoming a de facto guarantor of security for rogue regimes such as Iran and the DPRK

On May 20 South Korea (ROK) ended all ambiguity on the sinking of their *Cheonan* naval vessel by a torpedo attack from the North Korean DPRK. Since then, as expected, China once again watered down any sanctions on the DPRK and Iran's nuclear programs. Meanwhile, the DPRK has stepped up its rhetoric and threatened an "all out war" on any sanctions or military actions. In the same week, the DPRK's WMD proliferating partner, Iran, threatened Israel that "if the Zionist regime attacks Iran, the Zionists will have no longer than a week to live." With war drums being beaten in both the Korean Peninsula and the Middle East, a sign of a DPRK and Iran emboldened by the inability of the international community to stop their nuclear programs, eyes now fall on the credibility of the U.S. security umbrella over its allies Israel and the ROK. At a time when rogue regimes are pursuing nuclear weapons and setting off a cascade of nuclear proliferation that threatens the NPT regime, the U.S. and the international community are bound in the stalemate of the UNSC conceptual framework. U.S. policymakers are not fully internalizing the nuances of alternative paradigms, nor the new fault lines of emerging new geopolitical and economic realities. It is now time for U.S. policymakers to consider some of the conceptual game changes that have taken place in the world over the last decade and find a new roadmap by which to lead a coalition of like-minded states on issues such as the DPRK-Iran nuclear proliferation. There is also a continuing need to maintain a robust security guarantee for U.S. allies.

## The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the North Korea-Iran Nuclear Axis:

There has been a growing body of literature on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), most recently on its increasing role in Afghanistan and whether it should be engaged with by NATO. However, to date there has been no attempt to apply this analytical lens to the DPRK-Iran nuclear issue. SCO members consist of China, Russia, and the four central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as four observers of Iran, Pakistan, India and Mongolia. There has been increasing cooperation between China, Russia and Iran on the issue of energy, and the Sino-Russian axis in the UNSC has persistently stonewalled or watered down sanctions on the DPRK and Iran for their nuclear non-compliance. This suggests a regrouping of states in the SCO paradigm that supersedes the UN framework on the DPRK-Iran nuclear axis:

### Conventional Paradigm: Six Powers & Six Parties vs. rogue regimes

**P5+1 (6 Powers)** → U.S.A, Germany, France, UK vs **China, Russia on Iran**  
**Six Party** → U.S.A, Japan, ROK, (DPRK) vs **China, Russia on North Korea**

### New SCO Paradigm: NATO members/partners vs. SCO members/observers

**NATO members** → Germany, France **China, Russia**  
**and partners** UK, Japan **Iran, (DPRK)**  
**(democracies)** ROK, U.S.A **←SCO members**  
**(authoritarian regimes)**

It is helpful to treat the DPRK-Iran axis as one unit in applying the new SCO paradigm, since DPRK-Iran strategic cooperation dates back to the first days of the Islamic Republic. Its basis is clear - Iran needs access to advanced military technology to underwrite its regional ambitions while the DPRK needs hard currency to support its isolated regime as an international pariah. The DPRK's Nodong and Taepodong missile series were the basis for Iran's flagship Shahab missile project, and they cooperate via proxy missile testing to evade sanctions, regular data exchanges, as well as in the nuclear realm. In addition, extensive evidence has emerged to suggest DPRK's role in the construction of the Hizbullah underground tunnel network that played a vital role in the 2006 Second Lebanon War. The Lebanese tunnels bear a striking resemblance to similar facilities discovered by the ROK near the DMZ, and the DPRK has even trained three top Hizbullah officials - Hassan Hasrallah, Hizbullah's secretary general and the head of the Hizbullah military organization; Ibrahim Akil, head of Hizbullah's security and Intelligence service; and Mustapha Badreddine, Hizbullah's counter-espionage chief.



The overwhelming evidence of DPRK sponsor of terrorism and WMD proliferation, coupled with its recent aggression against the ROK, have energized U.S. lawmakers to press the Obama administration to re-list DPRK as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Currently tensions are high on the Korean Peninsula as China and DPRK stepped up their rhetoric against U.S.-ROK military exercises in Sea of Japan and the Yellow Sea. Washington and Seoul have been troubled by China's silence on the *Cheonan* issue and also by Chinese president Hu Jintao hosting of Kim Jong Il in Beijing on May 4, 2010. Beijing waited nearly a month after the vessel's sinking before extending condolences to the ROK, and scholars such as Ralph Cossa, head of Pacific Forum of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, observed that "When it comes to dealing with North Korea, Washington (And I would argue Seoul even more so) increasingly sees China as part of the problem rather than the solution." It appears that the DPRK and Iran have both learned to play the 'China card' in the UNSC.

#### **The China Card:**

China has a mutual defense treaty with the DPRK, and sees it as an important buffer zone and guard post in a Taiwan contingency. In a 2006 *China Security* article by Shen Dingli, executive director of International Studies Institute and Center for American Studies in Fudan University, he laid out the strategic significance of the DPRK in China's policy towards the U.S. China's main goals are economic development and national re-unification with Taiwan. With a shared border of 1,400 km, the DPRK acts as a guard post for China against U.S. troops in the ROK, thereby allowing China to redeploy military assets away from Northeast Asia towards Taiwan. He further argued that a nuclear DPRK is an asset to China's security, because a nuclear DPRK could pin down U.S. forces in a Taiwan contingency and deter U.S. considerations of possible military intervention. In this case, a nuclear DPRK makes war on the Peninsula less likely, given U.S. wariness of risking its troops in the ROK and Japan. Shen conceded that the DPRK used the six-party talks to buy time to develop nuclear weapons.

Similarly, Iran plays the 'China card' in the Persian Gulf. In 2000, a Chinese article in the influential *Strategy and Management Journal* recommended that China's strategy in the Persian Gulf should be to align with Iran. The author posits that since the U.S. already controls the west bank of the oil rich Persian Gulf via its pro-American proxies (Saudi Arabia, smaller Gulf states), the Gulf is in effect an "internal sea" for the U.S. and challenges to that position are likely to fail. However, if China and Russia expand relations with Iran, they could maintain a "minimum balance" to thwart U.S. moves. Since oil imports from the Gulf require both the U.S. controlled west bank and China-Russia supported Iranian east bank, this axis would block U.S. efforts to impose oil embargoes against other countries. In the event of a Sino-U.S. military clash over Taiwan, the U.S. would be unable to shut off China's Gulf oil supplies since China, Russia and Iran control the Gulf's east bank. In 2001, China adopted this strategic vision and founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that paved way for the current Sino-Russia-Iran axis to counter perceived U.S. hegemony. This reflects a realignment of countries that divides, rather than unites the UNSC actors, and results in a stalemate that has been unable to prevent a nuclear DPRK or a nuclearizing Iran. In turn, the protective Chinese umbrella in the UNSC further emboldens the DPRK and Iran to engage in aggressive behavior.

#### **Conclusion:**

Given the failure of a policy of engagement to prevent the emergence of a nuclear DPRK and a nuclearizing Iran, U.S. allies are beginning to consider their own nuclear options to hedge against a perceived waning U.S. power in a multi-polar world. It is important at this critical juncture for the U.S. to recalibrate its engagement policy and maintain the credibility of its security guarantee. Since the realignment of SCO actors' interests in the UNSC has stonewalled any effective sanctions, the U.S. and her allies need to consider an alternative path to resolve the threats of the DPRK-Iran nuclear axis. Leading a coalition of like-minded states to implement crippling sanctions on Iran and DPRK may be a first step to stopping further aggression, and conducting military exercises to demonstrate solidarity in face of threats is a good way to reassure U.S. allies. As John F Kennedy said in face of the Cuban missile crisis; "the 1930s taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged ultimately leads to war."

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