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Discussion Paper  
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***Session II: “War by accident”? –  
How to (de-)escalate conflicts with neighbors?***

Christopher Nelson  
Samuels International Associates  
Washington DC

## WAR RISKS IN ASIA AND CAN THEY BE MITIGATED?

*Christopher Nelson*

Friends and distinguished colleagues and guests, it's a great honor for me to be invited to participate in this very timely event by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

I am not, nor (as will become obvious) am I *ever* likely to be an official of the US Government. But it's been my pleasure, and my privilege, to work in Washington on matters of common interest since being an intern in the summer of 1967, and full-time in DC since 1970. So I bring to the discussion the perspective of a long-time observer and sometime practitioner from my days on House Foreign Affairs Committee staff during the heady days of normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China.

What I am not, as will be abundantly clear to anyone who reads my remarks, is an academic. I write about as I talk...it's a script to be spoken...so apologies in advance to anyone trying to translate. But I hope you will appreciate that I try to "tell it like it is", since being neither an official nor an academic, my interest is an objective look at policy and the use of power...*how* it works, and *does* it work.

I want to add *special* thanks to my dear friend Dr. Gudrun Wacker for kindly arranging my invitation, and hope that by the time I'm done she doesn't regret it too much! And Anja Bodenmueller, without you, my wife Jan and I would still be wandering lost around town, so huge thanks for all you did to get us here.

I started typing this paper on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>...an unlucky day for us Americans...but no doubt just coincidentally the same day George Bush's chickens started to so tragically come home to roost in Iraq. The most actively destructive presidency in history lives on...and we've all been forced to "pivot" quite involuntarily from what *had* been, and alas will likely *continue* to be a focus on the heightened risk of conflict in Asia.

In view of recent events in the S. and E. China Seas it's hard *now* to see why Prime Minister Abe caused such an uproar with his warning at Davos that we're facing a "1914" moment in Asia.

You may recall Abe was *denounced* by many bright folks in Europe for sounding like a war-monger, and by some for being part of the problem. Alas, if only it *was* all on Abe...but of course it isn't. That's what we're here to talk about...and what we hope to help find solutions to avoid.

Most of us in Washington, whatever we thought of Abe's conservatism, his denial of unpleasant historic truths, and his indifference to a respectful relationship with South Korea (all *strong* reservations held by Pres. Obama and his advisors, I can assure you) *most* of us had been worried that the "1914" parallels were apt *long* before Abe-san spoke up.

So...what were we seeing? What *are* we seeing? *Three* possible sources of *real* war...

*First* and most *likely* for many years, either a catastrophic collapse of the Kim Regime in N. Korea, or a catastrophic *decision* by that regime or its successors that could literally destroy the Peninsula and its people.

The US-ROK mutual defense treaty, and China's strategic interests in Peninsula stability, add a potential Great Power *frisson* that is hardly needed. We'll come back to that.

*Second*, since the summer of 2010 we've become increasingly concerned over China's decision to use military and paramilitary force to assert its long-standing claims against most of its maritime neighbors, and against Japan in what we call the Senkakus. While we don't think that Beijing, Tokyo or Hanoi, the major *armed* contestants, would be so stupid as to deliberately launch a real *war* over these disputes...the escalation risk of "incidents" is exponentially increasing, as I'm sure you have noticed.

At the core of the instability is what China means by its apparent enforcement of the so-called "9-dash line", covering on the map virtually all the waters of coastal Asia out to Japan and even beyond. If statements by the Leadership and leading academics are taken seriously, the basic policy of Beijing *sounds* like "if we want something inside that line, regardless of anyone else's EEZ or existing claims, it is by historical right ours, and we are merely exercising our rights to take what we're entitled to."

This despite...or in the face of...long established claims, and administration by others. And despite US treaty obligations involved in both the East and South China sea, plus a budding strategic...ummm, "partnership" is still too strong...call it an "understanding" between the US and Vietnam.

*Third*, and most distressing for *all* concerned, as it encompasses the first two...a classic historic Great Power game is now openly underway, and getting worse. It is too soon to say this represents a failure of the most important foreign policy initiative of the past 40 years, but *not* to say *that* is the challenge now faced by Washington, Beijing and the world.

And in an opening dinner event for this very timely conference we were reminded of a *fourth* very likely source of conflict at some point in this century...zero sum game

competition for food and drinking water which is apparently unavoidable, and which clearly demands international recognition and cooperation which, so far, is not under serious contemplation.

You are all basically familiar with the origins and goals of US policy toward China, and until recently, its remarkably successful implementation of a consistent goal: to bring China into the world as a responsible player, a “stakeholder” in Robert Zoellick’s immortal formulation...one governed by a common interest in maintaining the rules for international conduct established after World War 2, and under which all but the least developed nations have prospered.

Indeed you all heard a very clear articulation of these principles in Pres. Obama’s recent West Point speech, and the follow-up interview with National Public Radio. For him, international relations is about playing by the rules of the game, even while trying to change them.

*This* is how most of us in Washington policy circles see it: despite China’s great success, and despite the central US government and business role in sponsoring, and encouraging that success, since the middle of the Hu Jintao presidency a disturbing disconnect has slowly but firmly been set in motion.

Why that’s happened and what to do about it is *the* big debate in US-China circles today...and to the topic of this conference, the most disturbing element is rising pressure on Obama to approve a more military force structured approach to reinforcing American interests on behalf of friends and allies.

To be blunt...since China’s increasing use of military and paramilitary assets to forcibly change the status quo, especially against US treaty partners Japan and The Philippines...the President is under growing pressure to not just talk about the rules, but to use a show of *force* that proves he *means* it.

In short, analysts and former officials you know well (sober, sensible folks...*not* the Bush/Rummy/Cheney crowd) are increasingly on record saying it’s time to *seriously* consider options like the following: send the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet on a cruise through the Senkakus, or perhaps an AEGIS task force past the CNOOC rig in the middle of Vietnam’s EEZ....although it’s not clear Hanoi wants *quite* that much “support”...stay tuned.

*China* seems truly to believe that it is simply asserting control over what is already, or should have been hers all along. So since it *is* China’s, what the PRC does is legal. And since it’s legal, opposition from Vietnam, and US treaty partners Japan and The Philippines is not only unfair, it’s being instigated by a United States now determined to *contain* China’s continued rise to its rightful place in the world.

To this day, we hear apparently serious, sophisticated Chinese saying there was no trouble in the S. China Sea until then-Sec. St. Clinton’s dramatic assertion of the rules

of the road at the Hanoi ARF in 2010. This blatant nonsense ignores that Hillary's speech was *long* in the making and at the specific *request* of friends and allies in Asia, most especially The Philippines and Vietnam.

Any doubts on that *surely* should have been dispelled *since* then by the participants at the IISS's invaluable Shangri-La Defense Dialogue, this year's just concluded...but perhaps not. And that may account for the PRC's apparent inability to see how its tactics against its neighbors, when combined by its continued support of N. Korea, has only served to *reinforce* every US defense relationship in Asia.

(As US allies and trading partners make very clear, while the last thing they want is conflict with China, or, god forbid, US-China conflict, *another* "last thing" they want is to see the US fail to continue its strategic commitment to the region...hence the group anxiety over American constancy, whether or not under the "Pivot".)

In any event, whatever its methods with neighbors, China clearly seeks "a new model of big power relations", in Pres. Xi's words...a revised strategic power arrangement with the US, one affording by definition a greater say in rules development and enforcement. But I hope I've made clear that as *we* see it, it's not just a benign "work through the WTO" or even UNCLOS...

There's now a near *100%* consensus that Pres. Xi wants to establish Chinese *strategic* primacy as far out to sea and in the air as economic and diplomatic pressure plus the PLA possibly can achieve, hence the testing of US resolve over Japan and the Senkakus. And we also now all agree that pushing the hapless/helpless Filipinos around is a way of "showing" the region that a US alliance *can't* protect them if Beijing really wants something...against Manila a relatively safe bet, unlike pushing around the strongly armed, equipped and trained Japanese.

(Remember, as we've just heard on the Iraq debacle, a major component of the "Obama Doctrine" requires allies to help themselves before the US can help them!)

There *is* debate on the degree to which Beijing wants to push the US *back* strategically. We agree China doesn't want to "kick the US *out* of Asia" period, partly because she know she can't, and mainly because she likes trading with us and recognizes that the region does too. But we think China is having genuine trouble accepting that for 150 years, the US has been just as much an "Asia-Pacific" nation as it has been European, so the concept of "Asia for the Asians" is both historically wrong, and a practical non-starter.

We all *hope* Prs. Xi is wrong about this tactic, and the debate now...in the US...is what must Obama do to show both Xi and the region that the US can't be pushed out so easily. A lot of false equivalencies are being drawn in Europe, and in Asia, between Obama's resolve against military force in Syria and Ukraine as somehow

justifying a Chinese assessment that the US won't militarily back its Asian allies...not even Japan in the Senkakus, which are, after all, just "a bunch of rocks".

(Shades of Japan 1941...including much of the same rhetoric as victim...)

Certainly this kind of mis-assessment is not unknown on the Chinese side. Whether it's truly shared by Xi and the decision-makers I rely on you to tell me. And I can hear you warning that whether we are correct or not in judging Xi's goals, stronger US shows of military and strategic support to Vietnam, the Phils and Singapore, especially, will of course reinforce China's various "containment" complaints against us, and thus exponentially heighten the "escalation" and "miscalculation" risk for everyone.

I should add another factor which may increase chances for China, and the region, to mistakenly discount American constancy...the distressing tendency of US officials to piously maintain that actions which are being taken in the Pacific "aren't aimed at China". This is patent nonsense and the Chinese see it as clearly as anyone. Everything the US does in Asia is by, for, or about China in some way.

At this point, it might be good to define terms. A "war" means really going at it, national armies, navies, that kind of thing. A "battle", even, may lead to or *be* part of a war, but if isolated, or contained, is perhaps better thought of as an "incident", one fraught with "escalation risk", but still not a catastrophe except to the casualties and their families, and so still amenable to adult supervision if the institutions are in place, and adults can be found on the contesting sides.

Think for now the games being played in the East and South China Seas. Despite the heightened, inflammatory rhetoric, and increasingly stupid actions of mainly PLA jet jockeys playing Top Gun around Japanese surveillance aircraft...these are dangerous, stupid, and fraught, of course, with escalation risk...but they are *not* "war".

Granted, that presumes rational adults in power as perhaps the *single* most important factor. I think we all learned the hard way that individuals *are* the difference between war and peace even more than institutional capacities. To prove the "case", just ask yourself would Al Gore have invaded Iraq, with all that has followed?

You will have noticed that angry as our Vietnamese friends have been by Chinese actions, the CNOOC oil rig in particular, Hanoi has been careful to avoid sending *warships* out into the game. Whether our treaty allies in Manila are that sensible may be debatable, but is irrelevant, since Philippine elites have not until the past year or so bothered to arm themselves in their own defense, thus allowing Beijing to roam at will through Filipino fishing grounds.

Another problem: even otherwise rational adults can be trapped by the domestic political "logic" of nationalism. As the last 200 years have shown, and not just here in

Berlin, nationalism on an individual basis, a feeling of national pride, rooting for your World Cup players...that can be wholesome, even important to community and national morale. But...surely we have all learned by now that nationalism as state policy is a cancer, often fatal?

So to the “risk of war” we add the increasingly, often distressingly vitriolic “netizens” who, especially in China, seem to find the only acceptable outlet for their variable angst through an increasingly aggressive nationalism which, we are told by Chinese officials, can have disproportionate influence on the Leadership.

But having cited the major three “likely causes” of catastrophe in Asia, let’s take a bird’s eye view of what I called in one of my recent Reports the “arc of instability” through the region. I did it as a deliberate provocation to remind my readers that, to reference Abe, who in 1914 would have thought that the armies of Europe would end up at each other’s throats because some minor duke was killed in an out-of-the-way place of minimal strategic significance?

So to our List of Gloom we must toss-in those capitals increasingly embroiled with how to deal with Xi Jinping's decision that now is the time to accelerate China's drive to reclaim its self-defined historic spheres of influence, and maybe, literally, the physical resources that the rest of Asia had the crazy idea belonged to them.

That was our message a few weeks back and to our surprise...disappointment, really...there were few demurrals. I’d hoped to be argued out of it.

Since delving into the China dilemma can easily take the rest of this conference, let’s use the rest of my time to take a more detailed look at US-N. Korea thinking and policy, since despite all that I just said, I can’t believe that China’s Leadership, any more than my own, will stumble into a war..but I want to make very sure everyone here understands the rising risk factors!

Many of you here may have some strong ideas about dealing with the DPRK drawn from personal experience.

Unlike those involved in the failed KEDO energy portion of the 1994 “Agreed Framework” and the many hundreds of Americans sometimes doing vital NGO humanitarian food relief, the 25 year nuclear stalemate has prevented an entire generation of US diplomats, business and academics from having the “normal” interactions which teach two countries about each other.

I’ve been deeply involved in the US-DPRK policy debate since the Carter Administration in 1977, so what I have to say is from personal observation and sometimes participation. On balance, since the midpoint of the W. Bush Administration, the risk of war, genuine war on the Korean Peninsula...by definition a catastrophe to the people of the Korean Peninsula as a whole...is seen to be in the hands of the Kim Family Regime.

These days, that is assessed as the personal judgment, the ego, the aspirations and, yes, the paranoia of the Boy Marshall, Kim Jong-un himself. What does he understand of reality? Does he believe the DPRK's absurd, sometimes *surreally* paranoid propaganda? Does he *really* think that at any moment, he faces an attack by the United States and the ROK?

You would think he'd noticed that not even *Bush* dared to do that...even "*W*" absorbed the meaning of Seoul within artillery range of the DMZ. So really since the start of the Clinton Administration, US policy has been aimed at finding the formula of sanctions and inducements likely to produced an enforceable nuclear arms and missile control agreement (*but*...and this is critical) one that did not simultaneously grant Pyongyang formal, legal "acceptance" as a nuclear power.

That is *still* American policy, and you don't have to remind me that it hasn't *worked*...nor, in *US* judgment, *is* it likely to so long as the Kim Regime is in power. Whether a military regime in the event of a coup would be open to negotiation is but one of many permutations of the "collapse scenario" debate of the past 25 years.

For as Brookings Jonathan Pollack demonstrated in "No Exit", his study of the DPRK nuclear weapons program since its inception under Kim Il-sung, shortly after the Korean war...the nuclear weapons program is an *integral* part of the Regime itself, and thus not, in reality, "negotiable". That's Jonathan's conclusion...one based on extensive consultation with Chinese archives and experts.

More recently, the DPRK has enshrined nuclear weapons in its *constitution* so that they are...quite literally...*legally* non-negotiable. So if you had been able to get Special Envoy for N. Korea Glyn Davies to come today, he would have asked, with sincerity, "what *is* there for us to negotiate?"

But, some may respond, didn't you come close during the so-called "Leap Day" agreement two years ago? No, Glyn would tell you. That at *best* would have started a moratorium on testing, in payment for large scale humanitarian assistance, with perhaps a hope of coming back to the 6 Party Talks. So that, in practical effect, would continue to amount to "de facto" acceptance of N. Korea as a nuclear weapons power...something which remains inconceivable for the US and certainly not "optimal" for China.

*That* trap was always the flaw in the Bush Administration's 6 Party Talks...since as long as the talks failed to produce verifiable results, the DPRK could, and we now know did, *continue* its clandestine program to produce HEU fissile material which *can* be weaponized...*all* while continuing to perfect its short, medium and now ICBM missiles.

And as the last two US Secretaries of Defense have *explicitly* warned, development of a successful N. Korean ICBM *would* be (god help us, *will* be?) a strategic “game changer”.

I tell you frankly I don’t think that is an idle threat. *Most* of us think that this means the US would take *military* means to try and forestall a Kim ICBM, so right there you have the *most* likely major “threat” of war in Asia...a preemptive move by the US, but one the President would see as *caused* by the DPRK’s determination to achieve an independent, intercontinental nuclear weapons capability.

So, given the task of this conference...what can be done to try and head-off such an existential crisis?

Here’s the problem as the USG sees it: even during the relative optimism of the Bush/Chris Hill/6PT era, the official DPRK position on “denuclearization” was that *only* when the US agrees to abrogate its mutual defense treaties with Japan and the ROK, including withdrawing all nuclear weapons from the Pacific (if not the world...that’s never been explored, of course) only *then* will the DPRK sit down to negotiate on weapons as *part* of a normalization process...with no guarantees to outcome.

This is not a *serious* position and quite likely the Kim regime understands that. So the net is the nuclear stalemate continues with two very dangerous results: *first*, not even the current UN sanctions approved by Moscow and Beijing have been able to stop continued testing and eventual perfection of nuclear warheads and their delivery systems; *second*, the constant risk of miscalculation by the rulers of the DPRK as to what they can get away with, or, what they really face from us.

And periodically, we also see a *third* possibility... the perhaps more realistic risk of internal collapse leading to loss of control of the weapons and...then what? (Much the same as what we seemingly *escaped* during the collapse of the Soviet Union.)

The net is that while the US will always continue to try for the magic formula leading to verifiable denuclearization, since 1992 the *real* US policy remains trying to persuade China to *act* on a realization that its most *profound* strategic interests are ill-served by the Kim Regime *as it is*...and thus to work with the US, the ROK and Japan on a mix of inducements, including sanctions, to somehow *force* the Kim Regime to fundamentally shift toward a policy of security through partnership with the modern world.

To make, in short, the leap of faith and judgment initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1970’s, one which, starting with Deng himself, Beijing has been sincerely urging on Pyongyang, without result, ever since.

As recently explained to me by senior Chinese players in the N. Korea game, Beijing’s policy...perhaps better expressed as its *hope*...is to find that mix of

inducements sufficient to *either* persuade or force Kim Jong-un to, in essence, chose butter over guns. In short, to seriously, sincerely launch a domestic economic reform campaign analogous to that so bravely begun by Deng two generations ago, with the success now seen by all.

But... I've *heard* senior US N. Korea policy-makers deride this Chinese formulation as of course desirable, but *impossible* for the basic reason, and this is a direct quote, "Kim has *already* chosen and it's for weapons!"

Compelling, perhaps, but is it *true*? Finding ways to prove it wrong strikes me as the only *realistic* hope to achieve what then-Sec. St. Colin Powell called "not a change of regime so much as a changed regime", before the US launched the Iraq catastrophe.

I think, in fact, there *may* be a way on N. Korea...and you in Europe have seen it first-hand. It's called "the revolution of rising expectations" and to a large extent, it's why we enjoy a unified Germany today. Contrary to Mao's nonsense, and as Che found out the hard way, revolutions don't come from illiterate, landless peasants.

They come from those who feel they are entitled to expect more from their government and either have a stake in the economy, or want to regain a stake lost. In practical terms, that requires as a precondition *not* people having nothing left to lose so much as people who want *more*, and are either willing to fight for it, or who withdraw their support for a regime failing to give them what they think they need or deserve.

Romania comes to mind.

But is a revolution of rising expectations even *conceivable* for the DPRK? Not, we have to assume, from the gulag victims. But, increasingly, from the first hand observations of scholar Andrei Lankov, whom many of you know, and your colleague Rudiger Frank, the answer is a still tentative but realistically hopeful "yes". Pyongyang now has a very large "middle class" by any socioeconomic definition.

Yes of course they are by definition elites tied to the Kim Regime by all the usual compulsions of a vicious military dictatorship, and that's unlikely to change soon. But, increasingly, with the visual and material proof of how *far* N. Korea lags not just the outside world, but specifically the very real, hugely successful world of South Korea, right across the DMZ...history tells us that's the *required* precursor.

So, if the hope of our conference is to locate peaceful, non-military means to avoid, or mitigate war, I'm here to suggest that Lankov and others urging a massive, coherent, internationally funded campaign to implement every possible means of

flooding N. Korea with information is surely something that we as individuals, and our governments, including China, should support.

I should at least briefly mention one rising international movement which might produce some effective sanctions on the DPRK, especially from those European nations still seeing fit to have diplomatic and trade relations...and that's the current United Nations Human Rights Commission finding of war crimes violations by Kim and his merry band.

At some point by the end of this year, China and Russia will have to step forward to block Security Council action on the recommendations, but perhaps it can be thrown to the General Assembly and something may transpire. Anyhow...enough about N. Korea, we can come back if you wish during the discussion.

On to the "main event"...the rise of China as a great power and how we're all doing with that...

The potential for mutually beneficial cooperation between the US, China and other responsible players in avoiding disaster on the Korean Peninsula should serve as a reminder to the leadership in both Washington and Beijing that whatever our individual differences, facing a common threat is surely more important.

To conclude, if we were having this discussion today in DC or New York (the two venues I spend my time as both observer and participant) you would hear from virtually all the Americans a rising concern that now in Asia, the historic challenge of the hegemonic power accommodating a rising power without armed conflict is looking increasingly problematic.

That is...we're increasingly worried, because we think, no...more...we fear that the agreed-upon model in play since Nixon/Kissinger 1972 may be breaking down. One of the tightest expressions of this was offered recently by Bob Manning, formerly of the National Intelligence Council, now the Atlantic Council, and former DOD official, now consultant Jim Clad, in an Op Ed with this key point:

"The mood has soured, more than the usual ups and downs of big-power relationships. The question now is not whether a 'new type of relationship' [Prs. Xi's formulation] is in the offing, but, rather, whether US-China relations have reached a tipping point..."

Something's got to give It is difficult to see how two contradictory paths – economic integration and security confrontation – can be sustained. The time is fast approaching when the United States will have to decide how and where to draw the line. We are well on the way: Washington now openly challenges the legitimacy of Beijing's South China Sea claims as well as China's expansive and unilateral definitions of air and marigime control aimed at curtailing US and allied access..."

This is where we've come from the desired model governing at the outset of the Obama presidency in 2008. Indeed, in our eyes, once past the vicious, self-serving realities of historic western colonial imperialism..this largely American secured international system has served mankind, very much including China, rather well since 1945.

So we've reacted with both surprise and some *frustration* to Chinese claims that the *reality* of US policy is to "contain" China...because it implies that US policy by design and action is to actively block China from achieving its full potential on the world stage. The discussion about that, sometimes a debate, in the West as well as in Asia, is sometimes posed as a *false* dichotomy..."containment vs. engagement".

Or in a more sophisticated expression..."a hedge" strategy...since without question that *is* and *has* been US policy almost from the outset: to work *with* China and hope for the best, but to be realistic and *not* neglect history's lessons on the potential for regional and strategic conflict in *all* aspects of *any* rising power situation...economically, diplomatically, and militarily.

So the question for Asia and the world today is...will the US/China Great Power rivalry play out as well as the US/UK, or are we headed for catastrophe? And specifically to the point...are there lessons to be learned in the American acceptance of the modes and mores of international relations as established by the European powers "vs" what is increasingly seen as China's decision to forcibly change the rules it does not like?

If we can help identify and act upon the critical factors for peace and stability in the face of this challenge, then this conference will indeed be something we can all be proud of.

On that optimistic note let me end what I fear has been for most of you a fairly hair-raising presentation!