

The political threats facing East Asia

Empathy is key to resolving disputes in some of East Asia's most volatile hotspots

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In science circles, the Pacific Rim is known as the 'ring of fire' because of its many active volcanoes. The label is apt when applied to security challenges as well. Like volcanoes, they dominate the landscape and stand as perpetual reminders of peril. They rarely erupt, but when they do, it is without much warning and at great human cost.

There are three particularly worrisome security 'volcanoes' in East Asia. By far the most complex and least tractable is North Korea, the world's last remaining klepto-totalitarian state. Almost everything about it is mysterious. Little is known of its ruler, Kim Jong-un, and even less about the power structure and dynamics of his inner circle. When Kim came to power in 2012 following the death of his father, analysts had expected that his youth would mean he would play little more than a symbolic role in a culture where age confers authority. To the extent that he wielded influence at all, the smart money held, his Swiss education and exposure to life in the West would incline him towards reform. It also held that his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, particularly well connected to the Chinese and known to be an advocate of economic engagement, would be a key player. All in all, Kim's ascent seemed a hopeful sign.

Every expectation has proved wrong. Kim has maintained the family tradition of erratic, unpredictable foreign-policy behaviour, while slamming the door on reform and having his uncle shot. North Korea is determined to maintain and improve its nuclear arsenal and its missile capability. South Korea, Japan and the United States – and, increasingly, China – are unwilling to tolerate a nuclear North Korea forever. Thus Pyongyang appears set on a collision course with its neighbours even if it does – and perhaps even more so if it does not – manage to avoid economic collapse.

The second volcano is the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, administered by Japan, but claimed by China and Taiwan (islands that are, in fact, of volcanic origin). Uninhabited and of negligible strategic or economic value except to those from Okinawa and Taiwan who work their waters, the islands are symbolically important lightning rods for lingering historical grievances, national antipathies and geopolitical anxieties. The good news is that all sides agree that these islands are not themselves worth fighting for. The bad news is that history is full of examples of wars breaking out over useless islands. The

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main danger here, analysts agree, is not that Beijing or Tokyo will coldly calculate that the likely gains of military conflict outweigh the likely costs, but that an unexpected event such as an encounter at sea, an air defence action, a landing by nationalist activists or even just a change in the political status quo will inflame passions and trigger escalation.

Resolution through diplomacy

Many of these dangers can be reduced by improved channels of communication, agreements on maritime codes of conduct (such as the recently signed Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea) and other technical confidence- and security-building measures. But these dangers cannot be eliminated until and unless the parties agree



either to put the dispute back in the box or to resolve it through diplomacy or adjudication. Taiwan and Japan have managed to do the former by means of their April 2013 fishing accord; but Tokyo and Beijing cannot even agree that there is a dispute to resolve. Japan insists that there is not, and China has so far refused to play its one card that would force Japan to agree that there is: namely, referring the matter to the International Court of Justice.

By contrast, Japan and China also disagree on the demarcation of maritime rights over a large part of the East China Sea continental shelf. The latter dispute implicates some valuable oil and gas deposits, but the two countries have in fact managed this particular dispute relatively well.

The third volcano is US-Chinese rivalry. The United States fears that China seeks to overthrow the US-centric San Francisco system that has provided order and stability in the region for more than 60 years. In particular, it is worried that, as China's rise continues, it will seek to dominate its neighbours, assert control over crucial sea lines of communication and supplant the US as the dominant military power in the



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The world is struggling to manage the security challenges posed by North Korea, having failed to anticipate the direction in which Kim Jong-un would take the country

region, much as it has become its dominant economic power. In turn, China fears that Washington wants to 'contain' it, keep it weak, frustrate its economic development and perpetuate its perceived historical humiliation. China insists that it seeks to rise peacefully and poses no threat to the legitimate interests of its neighbours. The US insists that its 'strategic rebalance' to Asia is not containment but a contribution to order and stability. Neither has done a good job of convincing the other. The danger is not that US or Chinese leaders will choose war willingly, but that they will decide that it is inevitable, as did Austrian and German leaders in 1914 and Japanese leaders in 1941.

For the most part, the proverbial 'alphabet soup' of security organs in the Asia-Pacific region – APEC, ASEAN, ARF, EAS, ADMM, ADMM-Plus, SCO, and so on – have been marginal in managing these security challenges. In the case of North Korea, this is primarily because of the hermit kingdom's isolation. It does not participate in any of these forums, and none of them has any leverage over it. (China has the greatest influence, given Pyongyang's dependence upon Beijing for crucial energy supplies

and strategic materials, but China's fears of inadvertently hastening North Korea's collapse have thus far stilled its hand.) Japan, China and the US prefer to handle their security challenges themselves and neither encourage nor invite third parties to get involved. But even if they were willing to multilateralise management of these issues, progress would be impossible in the absence of agreement on the nature of the problem to be solved.

Lack of understanding

What is the underlying problem? It is lack of empathy. With regard to North Korea, the world's failure to anticipate trends and events in the dictatorship makes the global lack of understanding abundantly clear (and the ignorance is probably mutual). Without knowing how decision-makers in Pyongyang see the world – what they want, need, fear, perceive, judge and are willing to do or to suffer with equanimity – it is impossible to know which carrots or sticks might work and which might backfire. With respect to Chinese-Japanese and Chinese-American relations, empathy may be in short supply, but at least it is attainable in principle. Research that my colleagues and I at the Centre for

International Governance Innovation are conducting in the context of our project on Confidence, Trust and Empathy in Asia-Pacific Security indicates systematic, but correctable, overestimations of threat. What is needed is a frank, honest exploration of each other's interests, needs, fears and hopes for the future.

Sadly, the G7 is not well positioned to play a central role in bridging these empathy gaps. Japan and the US are the only two members of the G7 directly implicated, and they are two that enjoy high levels of empathy and trust. Except with respect to the defunct Six-Party Talks, Russia remains not much of a player in East Asian security, so even if recent events in Ukraine had not undermined Russia's trustworthiness and standing, the G8 would not be in a much better position to do so. The G7 does dominate the headlines once a year, however, and can at least help draw attention to the underappreciated lack of empathy in the region and to the importance of finding ways of addressing it. Perhaps the greatest contribution G7 leaders in Brussels could make is to help the governments and peoples of East Asia see that some of their most dangerous volcanoes are of their own making. ■