

Key Findings

Fifth Meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament in the Asia Pacific Seoul, Republic of Korea, April 4, 2018

USCSCAP and CSCAP Vietnam co-chaired the fifth meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament (NPD) in the Asia Pacific. The meeting took place in Seoul, Republic of Korea on April 4, 2018, on the front-end of the ASEAN Regional Forum Inter-Sessional Meeting on Nonproliferation and Disarmament (ARF ISM on NPD). Approximately 40 senior scholars and officials as well as 10 Pacific Forum CSIS Young Leaders attended, all in their private capacity. The off-the-record discussions focused on recent developments in nonproliferation and disarmament, the Korean Peninsula and denuclearization, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), and ways to enhance collaboration between nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-armed states on nuclear risk reduction. Key findings from this meeting include:

The current strategic nuclear landscape is worrisome. The bipolar nuclear order of the Cold War has given way to a world of many nuclear-armed states. In this new multiplayer system, it is not clear that deterrence will hold as it did in an environment dominated by two states. Moreover, the emergence of new tools of strategic significance in addition to nuclear weapons, such as precision-guided and hypersonic conventional weapons and missile-defense systems, as well as new domains of engagement, notably space and cyber, make arms races and escalation more likely and deterrence and arms control more difficult.

A related problem is the deterioration of the international security environment, including among major nuclear-armed states (read: between the United States and Russia). Nuclear brinkmanship is becoming the new normal and the US-Russia arms-control relationship may soon be in jeopardy. It is unclear if there is even enough political will in both capitals to extend the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. The downturn in US-Russia relations is affecting regional stability in Northeast Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East.

There is general agreement that achievements in arms control and nonproliferation should be preserved. The principle should be “do not harm” the existing, functioning instruments. Arms control has brought much stability between the United States and Russia, and the nonproliferation regime and its associated initiatives, such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran’s nuclear program, have been a success. If building upon these achievements is currently out of reach, efforts should be made to preserve them, at a minimum.

India has recently joined the Missile Technology Control Regime, the Wassenaar Arrangement, and the Australia Group. New Delhi is also seeking membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, which has been resisted because India is not a party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). From an Indian perspective, membership in all four multilateral export control regimes is a rightful acknowledgement of its responsible nuclear behavior, and will benefit nonproliferation.

Defining good (or bad) nuclear behavior is difficult and unlikely to be universally accepted. Strict disarmament advocates, for instance, argue that nuclear-armed states are, by definition, irresponsible. The concept of “nuclear responsibility” is an area for future research.

The 2018 spring of summits with North Korea is raising both hopes that a solution may be found and fears that diplomacy could fail and lead to war. While all agree that denuclearization is the goal, it is unclear what each party means by “denuclearization” and the conditions each would demand for it to happen. The current situation puts a premium on coordinating positions to avoid misunderstandings.

Until there is a breakthrough on the Korean denuclearization issue, UN sanctions against North Korea will remain in place. Significantly, the sanctions regime has been strengthened considerably over the past two years in the context of North Korea’s “race to the finish line” with its missile and nuclear testing. Some argue that these enhancements have the effect of an economic blockade, while others note that sanctions implementation is lagging and that Pyongyang has consistently improved its evasion tactics.

Discussions about the CTBT usually revolve around the outstanding accession of Annex 2 countries, which is required for the Treaty to enter into force. Yet states have much they can do now to improve the international monitoring aspects of the CTBT, notably by improving data collection and analysis, and they stand to gain not only from nuclear explosion monitoring but also from natural disaster monitoring and other civil and scientific applications. In that context, there is a need to enhance capacity-building efforts.

Since 2012, there has been no apparent progress made on getting the nuclear-weapon states (NWS) to ratify the Protocol to the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ). To resolve the deadlock, an open discussion between ASEAN and NWS is critical. Establishing a SEANWFZ Center that would focus resources on the issues covered in the treaty could be an important first step in moving the process forward.

While there is growing division between the deterrence and disarmament communities, notably in the context of the recently concluded UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (or “Ban Treaty”), research is needed to “bridge the gap.” At the most basic level, both communities share the goal of reducing nuclear dangers and preventing nuclear use or war. The work of the “Group of Eminent Persons on the Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament” spearheaded by Japan, which is intended to make recommendations in the run-up to the 2020 NPT Review Conference, is one of these initiatives.

The Ban Treaty’s relationship with the NPT remains unclear and could potentially seriously undermine the global nonproliferation regime, especially because of its failure to adequately address verification and monitoring standards. The Treaty could also have a negative impact on military and commercial cooperation between the NWS and their allies. Research is needed to better understand the implications of the Treaty.

For more information, please contact the NPD Study Group co-chairs Carl Baker [carl@pacforum.org] or Viet Anh Vu [bbganhv@yaho.com]. These findings reflect the view of the co-chairs and is not a consensus document. A full summary of the workshop proceedings is being prepared and will be available upon request shortly.