

**Toward a US-China strategic partnership on nonproliferation and nuclear security?** by David Santoro and Federica Dall'Arche

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The deterioration of US-Russia relations conceals the increasingly bad shape of US-China relations. In the strategic realm, relations between Washington and Beijing are not good and, arguably, they are worsening. Yet there are areas where US-China cooperation is possible and where policymakers on both sides should focus their efforts.

At the core of growing US-China tensions is the South China Sea. Beijing's expansive claims, backed with significant island-building and naval patrols, have driven the United States to send military ships and planes near the disputed islands to ensure access to key shipping and air routes. After the Permanent Court of Arbitration [ruling](#) against Chinese claims last July, there have been fears that the area could become a military flashpoint. Another important source of tension is the US-South Korean [planned deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense \(THAAD\) anti-missile system](#) in South Korea, which Washington and Seoul argue will help counter the nuclear threat posed by Pyongyang; Beijing opposes THAAD deployment on the Peninsula, saying it threatens its security. More generally, and as came out in a recent track-1.5 dialogue on "China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics," important areas of contention linger: military modernization, nuclear doctrine, transparency, and ways to maintain strategic stability.

There are areas fertile for US-China cooperation, however. One stands out: nonproliferation and nuclear security. Identified in a [2012 study](#) as promising to foster cooperation between Washington and Beijing and described by Chinese officials and experts as a potential basis for building the nuclear dimension of Xi Jinping's "new type" of relations between the United States and China, the Pacific Forum CSIS explored the matter in a series of workshops in 2014-2016 with the support of the US Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration. The project, which brought together experts from the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia, compared and contrasted US and Chinese perspectives and looked at ways to strengthen cooperation in this area in two regions: Northeast and Southeast Asia.

What have we learned? For starters, while nonproliferation and nuclear security are often lumped together, the prospects for [US-China cooperation](#) differ in each. Building nuclear security cooperation is easier than

building nonproliferation cooperation, despite the [Cox Report](#), which many Chinese continue to regard as a hurdle to expanding bilateral nuclear security work. While Americans are more worried about nuclear terrorism than Chinese, the gap in threat perceptions has narrowed. Since the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, China has paid much greater attention to nuclear security. China's new Nuclear Security Center of Excellence (COE), a US-China initiative which [opened earlier this year](#), also offers an important platform to help Chinese agencies meet training requirements and promote bilateral and regional good practice exchanges. More generally, Americans and Chinese agree that there is an urgent need to strengthen cooperation to prevent and manage nuclear accidents and incidents.

In contrast, while Americans and Chinese agree on the goal of nonproliferation, they do not give it the same priority. It is a first-order priority for Americans. Chinese, however, describe it as "important, but not urgent." Moreover, Americans and Chinese do not see eye-to-eye on proliferation dangers. Americans, for instance, are concerned about Iran going nuclear, despite the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action concluded last year. For their part, Chinese fear Japan's alleged new military activism and worry that it could go nuclear quickly given its large stockpiles of nuclear materials. Another divergence is that Chinese view China as favoring diplomacy to deal with nonproliferation noncompliance and the United States as quicker to use other tools, including sanctions or, if necessary, force.

These differences were reflected in our [work on Northeast Asia](#). Identifying ways to strengthen nuclear security cooperation in this region was straightforward. Given their advanced civil nuclear programs and strong performance to strengthen nuclear security, it is natural to encourage the United States, China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) to join forces and take over the nuclear security agenda after the fourth and presumed final [Nuclear Security Summit](#) in 2016. Actions for Northeast Asian countries could include improving security at existing plutonium and reprocessing sites, concluding a renewable five-year moratorium on commercial reprocessing, or cooperating on spent-fuel storage disposal and research. Other actions could include an ROK-Japan agreement on a bilateral highly-enriched uranium (HEU) free zone, a Chinese commitment to disclose and down-blend civil HEU holdings, a tripartite effort to convert HEU overseas, or a tripartite commitment to support the development of alternatives to high-risk radioactive sources.

The [Japanese, ROK](#), and Chinese nuclear security COEs could also cooperate to build capacity through human resource development. This process has started but should be strengthened and focus on the development of standardized curricula, courses, and certification, the exchange of good practices, and transportation security. This would help build a

nuclear security culture in Northeast Asia and beyond, supplementing the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Finally, there are opportunities for Northeast Asian cooperation to improve the prevention and management of nuclear accidents and incidents. The nuclear accident at the Japanese Fukushima plant in March 2011 has shown that accidents happen even the most fully prepared countries and, as dialogue participants all recognized, a similar problem in North Korea would be much more difficult to handle. Contingency plans need to be discussed and prepared.

Identifying areas of cooperation on nonproliferation was more challenging. Americans, Chinese, Japanese, and South Koreans are all concerned with Pyongyang's increasing nuclear capabilities and efforts to proliferate sensitive technologies (maybe even nuclear materials) to third parties, including non-state actors. Yet political obstacles stand in the way of cooperation to thwart these activities and, in the context of the [Karl Lee affair](#), there are even suspicions about Beijing's commitment to nonproliferation. Too often, the discussion went in circles: Americans (along with Japanese and South Koreans) insisted that they want greater cooperation from China, and Chinese retorted that Beijing is doing everything that can be reasonably expected, especially given its support of [United Nations Security Council Resolution 2270](#) last March, the latest round of UN sanctions against Pyongyang.

Our findings suggest two ways out of this deadlock. One is to compare and contrast proliferation threat assessments on North Korea to reach tighter alignment on the extent and depth of the problem and, in turn, improve action against it. This exercise has begun in [our track-1.5 dialogue on "China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics,"](#) with promising yet inconclusive results so far. Another way to build nonproliferation cooperation in Northeast Asia is to focus on fixing "technological" loopholes rather than seeking solutions to "situational" dangers. This boils down to avoid framing the discussion solely around North Korea and, instead, exploring ways to improve strategic trade controls (STC), sanctions implementation and, more generally, promote a nondiscriminatory nonproliferation regime. Much work can be done in these areas, notably to enhance information sharing on the detection of violations and enforcement of controls.

Our [dialogue in Southeast Asia](#), meanwhile, revealed that while regional governments have not been inactive to strengthen nonproliferation and nuclear security, there is room for improvement and the United States and China can play a leading role to drive that process. The region's focus has been norm-building via the Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone ([SEANWFZ](#)) and, more recently, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy, or [ASEANTOM](#). While progress has been modest (and regional governments have focused mostly on getting the nuclear-weapon states to endorse the [SEANWFZ protocols](#)), it has not been nil. This work has been complemented by that of the new [Indonesian nuclear security COE](#), which, like similar centers, has sought to develop a nuclear safety and security culture in the region. Finally, Southeast Asian governments increasingly implement national STC programs and UN sanctions, particularly those imposed

on North Korea, and several have ramped up efforts in this direction.

Southeast Asian governments can do more, however. With regard to nuclear security, actions could include making ASEAN an HEU-free zone, developing region-wide management standards for radioactive sources, or strengthening nuclear forensic cooperation. Improving nuclear disaster response is also essential. Regional initiatives such as the [ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance](#) that have focused on natural disaster relief should broaden their mandate to incorporate human-made/nuclear disasters, especially since responding to such disasters would require similar efforts. Alternatively, a separate nuclear crisis center should be created. With regard to nonproliferation, in addition to improving UN sanctions implementation, which continues to lag in Southeast Asia despite recent progress, efforts to set up national STC programs should be enhanced. So far only Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand have adopted robust STC legislation. Moreover, while there is no strong rationale to establish a common, region-wide STC program in Southeast Asia given the disparate levels of economic development, greater coordination and harmonization is possible under the auspices of the ASEAN [Economic Community](#) and [Single Window Initiative](#).

Since Southeast Asian officials identify the lack of capacity as the primary—increasingly the only—reason why they have not yet taken many of these initiatives, there are opportunities for the United States and China, independently or jointly, to assist them. The Chinese nuclear security COE is an obvious platform for helping build capacity for nuclear safety and security governance in Southeast Asia. The United States and China could also help build STC capacity in the region and, while it may be more difficult, work together to assist with UN sanctions implementation. Such assistance could take the form of mapping sanctions requirements, developing checklists, improving monitoring of the North Korean diaspora in the region, strengthening cargo inspection, erecting tight financial barriers, and promoting better information exchange and analysis on suspicious trade.

While there are important [challenges](#) to comprehensive bilateral nuclear cooperation, the United States and China have an opportunity to promote nonproliferation and nuclear security in Northeast and Southeast Asia and possibly beyond. Establishing a US-China strategic partnership on these questions is timely as Beijing aims to become a [major exporter of nuclear power technology](#). Fleshing out the details of that partnership should be a priority.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*