

# Key Findings Report

## Seventh Meeting of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament

Virtual

September 21-22, 2021 (Asia)/September 20-21, 2021 (US/Europe)

USCSCAP and CSCAP Vietnam co-chaired the seventh meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament (NPD) in the Asia Pacific. The meeting took place virtually on September 21-22, 2021 (Asia)/September 20-21, 2021 (US/Europe). Approximately 50 senior scholars and officials as well as 4 Pacific Forum Young Leaders and Fellows attended, all in their private capacity. The off-the-record discussions focused on recent developments in arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament; the Korean Peninsula and denuclearization; and the “Nuclear Responsibilities Toolkit.” The meeting also featured an interactive exercise based on the “Responsibilities Framework.”

Key findings from this meeting include the following:

Strategic nuclear arms control has been—and, for the foreseeable future, will remain—a process driven by Washington and Moscow. The reason is simple: The United States and Russia continue to possess the vast majority of nuclear weapons in the world.

US-Russia strategic relations have been tense and difficult for years, especially since 2014. As a result, there have been several setbacks in strategic nuclear arms control, which regional states consider worrisome. The recent extension of the US-Russia New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (dubbed “New START”) and the resumption of strategic stability dialogues between Washington and Moscow is encouraging, however. Few regional states expect major deliverables from the United States and Russia any time soon; there was consensus that a new US-Russia strategic nuclear arms control agreement is unlikely to be concluded in the near future, for instance. Yet there is hope that Washington and Moscow could at least manage to “regulate” their strategic relationship, perhaps by focusing on developing crisis avoidance and crisis management mechanisms. Regional states believe that a more stable and predictable US-Russia strategic relationship is essential.

There was general agreement that “arms control,” as a concept, needs to be redefined. In current strategic parlance, it refers to formal, verifiable treaty arrangements. Yet this definition isn’t consistent with the one given by the original theorists, such as Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin. To them, arms control was a broader concept that encompassed formal *and* informal agreements, confidence-building measures, and even strategic dialogue. Regional states suggested that returning to the original definition of arms control was essential, for two reasons. First because, while important, concluding formal, verifiable treaty arrangements seems increasingly difficult politically. Second, because there is a growing need to include new weapon systems and even

domains beyond just nuclear, and it is easier to regulate many of these systems and domains with looser forms of control.

Expanding the arms control agenda to additional states is becoming an increasingly popular talking point. Some wondered when, and under what conditions, China will join the process, especially as Beijing is seemingly proceeding with a bigger and faster nuclear expansion than anyone had anticipated. (A few participants expressed deep concerns about recently released satellite photos that appear to show massive Chinese missile silo fields.) Many participants suggested that, at a minimum, crisis avoidance and crisis management should be high on the agenda if arms control with China is not in the cards at present. Others suggested that greater leadership from the P-5 diplomatic process is critical if there is to be any chance of multilateralizing arms control. By and large, the strategic community appears at a loss about how to proceed to make progress in this area. More research is urgently needed to break this deadlock.

The prospects for a successful Review Conference of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (set to take place in January 2022) appear bleak. It should not be surprising: major-power competition is intensifying, including in the nuclear domain; there is a significant gap between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states over disarmament (and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is now adding complexity to this dynamic); and important challenges to the Treaty remain, especially those posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Overall, there is no shared vision for the nuclear nonproliferation regime, and despite a few bright spots (notably apparent arms control progress by the United States and Russia), it seems that the best-case scenario for the Review Conference is renewed commitment to the goals and objectives of the Treaty.

The just-announced "AUKUS" framework agreement, a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States that promises high-tech military cooperation between the three countries, including the provision of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, is raising concerns about nonproliferation. At issue is not the possibility that Canberra engages in proliferation (Australia has stellar nonproliferation credentials), but that the agreement creates a precedent that others, notably Iran, could try and exploit. There was general agreement that AUKUS members should address this problem and, at a minimum, implement strong nonproliferation guardrails.

The Review Conference of the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material, which will be the first of its kind (and is scheduled to take place in March/April 2022), seems on a promising track. In recent years, a considerable amount of work has been done at the working level to strengthen nuclear security, and the Review Conference will be a chance to assess the status and adequacy of the Convention's implementation, and that of its Amendment. Of course, numerous challenges remain. Greater coordination is needed both among and within member states, for instance, and some member states lack implementation capacity. The hope is that the Review Conference will strengthen the bonds among member states and facilitate coordination and cooperation allowing for better (and faster) implementation of the Amended Convention. To assist this process, the Pacific Forum, in partnership with the Nuclear Threat Initiative and the Asia Pacific Leadership Network, will host an international workshop on this topic later this month.

The conflict on the Korean Peninsula, and particularly the denuclearization question, is still a major regional issue, even though it has remained under the radar in recent years. Perspectives differ over how to assess and address the problem, especially among Northeast Asian states. Yet there is apparent consensus that progress toward denuclearization will be possible only if there is simultaneous progress towards peace. Another important theme is the belief by most that the intensification of US-China competition will complicate the problem on the Korean Peninsula. Few believe that this problem could provide a cooperation opportunity for the United States and China, even though some contend that progress in the short to medium terms is within the realm of the possible. Regardless, regional states seem to have accepted that the Korean conflict will not be resolved any time soon and that while there will be occasional attempts to address it, deterrence will remain critical to maintain peace and stability.

Developed by the UK-based Programme on Nuclear Responsibilities, an initiative co-founded by BASIC (an independent think tank promoting dialogue to advance global security) and the Institute for Conflict, Cooperation, and Security at the University of Birmingham, the “Nuclear Responsibilities Toolkit” is a way of re-conceptualizing the approach to nuclear weapons. This approach, which its authors presented to the Study Group, shifts the focal question away from how certain policies and practices might fulfill a particular state’s *rights* in relation to nuclear weapons towards asking what that state’s *responsibilities* are in relation to these weapons, as well as how these responsibilities are fulfilled, and how they interact with the responsibilities of others. The Toolkit offers a model three-stage process to facilitate dialogue, enable stakeholders to better understand one another’s perceptions of their responsibilities, generate opportunities to clarify misperceptions and miscalculations, and create space to reduce and potentially build trust, leading to risk reduction policies and practices.

The Toolkit was well-received by the Study Group, and the interactive exercise subsequently conducted to help participants get familiar with its approach proved extremely successful. It sparked interest among participants, leading many to recognize that reducing nuclear dangers was contingent on *everyone* taking responsibility for this problem. This is significant in a region where, not so long ago, many deemed nuclear dangers (and by extension weapons-of-mass-destruction problems) to be someone else’s problem, notably the United States’. More work is needed to use the Toolkit in a way that will strengthen the will and ability of regional states to do more to address nuclear dangers.

*For more information, please contact the CSCAP NPD Study Group co-chairs David Santoro [[david@pacforum.org](mailto:david@pacforum.org)] and/or Minh T. Vu [[yuthuyminh@gmail.com](mailto:yuthuyminh@gmail.com)]. These findings reflect solely the views of the co-chairs and is not a consensus document.*