



## **Key Findings**

### **Tenth Meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament in the Asia Pacific**

**Bangkok, Thailand, July 27-28, 2023**

USCSCAP and CSCAP Vietnam, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, co-chaired the ninth meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament (NPD). The meeting took place in Bangkok, Thailand on July 27-28, 2023. Approximately 45 scholars and officials, including members of Pacific Forum’s Young Leaders Program, attended, all in their private capacity. The off-the-record discussions focused on recent developments related to nonproliferation and disarmament, regional initiatives on arms control in Asia, developments in nonproliferation and disarmament regimes; nuclear energy and small modular reactors; and nuclear security governance in Southeast Asia. Key findings from this meeting include:

The Ukraine conflict has reinforced the paradox between the opportunities associated with nuclear energy and the potential dangers of nuclear weapons. On the one hand, the threat of using nuclear weapons has become a serious concern with threats of use, the alleged transfer of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, and renewed interest in nuclear sharing in Europe and beyond. On the other hand, the activity at the Zaporizhzhya power plant has reminded everyone of the importance of nuclear energy to Ukraine’s security and economy. These developments highlight the need for rethinking how to balance the value of nuclear energy for energy security and carbon reduction mandates with the downsides of nuclear weapons. Some expressed concern with the growing “casualness” with which world leaders talk about the use of nuclear weapons. Others argued that there is no evidence that pursuit of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes leads to a desire for the development of an arsenal of nuclear weapons.

The general decline in the number weapons in nuclear arsenals around the world has stagnated to nearly zero since 2010. In addition, Russia’s “suspension” of its participation in New START means that arms control is no longer a regulatory force in the international system. Meanwhile, there has been a significant increase in vertical proliferation in nuclear-armed states and blatant nuclear signaling; many nuclear-armed states are also embracing warfighting postures. Given that the United States and Russia continue to possess nearly 90% of all nuclear weapons, there is general agreement that they have the primary responsibility for leading the work toward a new framework for disarmament. However, participation and encouragement by others, notably China, which is engaged in an unprecedented nuclear build-up, could help facilitate a return to mechanisms designed to reduce the overall numbers and salience of nuclear weapons. Others argued that arms control was a political program, and that disarmament should be pursued through

the Conference on Disarmament. Many underscore that the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council should lead on nuclear arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament.

The most recent Nuclear Security Index published by the Nuclear Threat Initiative reported that the global nuclear security environment is “regressing” due to a lack of focus and adherence to norms. Nevertheless, some good news from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is that it has developed a new software tool that will enhance its ability to detect radiation sources at border and provide better protection for the public.

Multiparty risk reduction and arms control mechanisms have traditionally been resisted in the Indo-Pacific. While some of this resistance can be attributed to a lack of urgency regarding arms control and preference for “positive” confidence-building measures associated with cooperation related to comprehensive security concerns, the introduction of mini-lateral security mechanisms and an increase in spending on military hardware in the region might signal a change in attitudes toward these mechanisms. Areas that seem most likely to benefit from risk reduction measures include missile proliferation; maritime forces compliance, verification and enforcement (CVE); underwater vessel safety and security measures; Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ) treaty implementation; radiological and nuclear security initiatives; confidence building measures associated with implementation of the Biological Weapons and Chemical Weapons Conventions; and science diplomacy. Some argue that the ASEAN and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific are the only basis for confidence building in the Indo-Pacific. Others add that “process-oriented” confidence building measures would always dominate in Asia. More generally, many commend the significance of ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and others, as they collectively lay the groundwork for establishing important security norms and regulations, fostering inclusive forums that encourage the participation of all nations, while upholding ASEAN Centrality.

Participants were reminded of the devastating effects nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific has had on residents of the islands. While unpleasant, it is hoped that the images of the devastation will serve as basis for sustaining the existing ban on nuclear weapon testing and taking action toward disarmament. There are unresolved nuclear legacy issues, and likewise emerging nuclear waste issues, which are causing tensions between Pacific Island and nuclear countries.

With the end of the pandemic, review conferences for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) were held. The NPT review conference again failed to complete the substantive part of the final document. However, there were some areas of agreement: a better understanding of the language for the Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone, an agreement that nuclear war cannot be won, and an agreement to establish working groups for the purpose of enhancing the review process. The Ninth BWC Review Conference was successful in establishing a working group designed to improve implementation of the treaty and it expanded the size of Implementation Support Unit (even if only by one person). Some of the shortcomings of the BWC RevCon were the failure to agree on the Tianjian Biosecurity Guidelines for Codes of Conduct for Scientists, an inability to agree on a set of best practices for life science research, the failure to agree on methods to increase confidence-building measure submissions, and a failure to agree on equal representation for women.

Moreover, BWC verification is back on the agenda as a goal, even though the prospects for success are uncertain.

The potential role of small modular reactors, floating nuclear power plants, and microreactors have captured the imagination of proponents of nuclear energy as a potential solution for decarbonizing electricity production and providing a clean source of energy for a variety of uses, and for energy security purposes. While there is still uncertainty about the technology, the development of these capabilities has raised concerns about the capacity of existing nuclear safety, safeguards, and security standards for regulating their use. Politics and economic considerations will also play an important role in the deployment of these reactors, but governance mechanisms should be put in place before their initial deployment.

The ASEAN Network of Regulatory Bodies on Atomic Energy (ASEANTOM) has been making steady progress in promoting nuclear safety, security, and safeguards in Southeast Asia. Technical Working Groups have been formed on radiation monitoring, nuclear and radiological security, emergency preparedness and response, hazard modeling and assessment, and public emergency communication. ASEANTOM has also sought to develop a regional nuclear safety network under the auspices of SEANWFZ and with the IAEA to enhance nuclear-related activities in the region.

During the final session, the group discussed ideas for future work by the CSCAP NPD Study Group. Some suggestions include more work on confidence building as a means to address current challenges and develop specific suggestions for further consideration at the Track 1 level. Others highlighted the fact that several key member committees were absent from the Study Group, despite having been invited; their absence distracts from the value of the group to openly discuss areas of disagreement or misunderstanding. In that vein, several participants suggested that the involvement of China, Russia, and North Korea in CSCAP gatherings is essential to help enhance regional security. Another area that some feel deserved more attention is technology and its impact on arms control and nonproliferation and how it could influence future confidence building measures in the region; the point was made that there needs to be an interdisciplinary approach to address the increasing complexity of the newly emerged and emerging strategic landscape. Others suggested that the group address the issue of nuclear risk reduction and how the region defines and ranks strategic risks as well as the establishment of a CSCAP Biosecurity Experts Group, similar to the Nuclear Energy Experts Group, which sits under the umbrella of the CSCAP NPD Study Group and feeds its findings and recommendations into it. Finally, there was a suggestion that the group should examine conventional arms control issues, especially missile proliferation given its growing significance in the region.

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