

Key Findings

Eleventh Meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament in the Asia Pacific Bangkok, Thailand, August 5-6, 2024

USCSCAP and CSCAP Vietnam, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, co-chaired the 11th meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on Nonproliferation and Disarmament (NPD) in Bangkok, Thailand on August 5-6, 2024. Approximately 30 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, disarmament, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The specific focus for this iteration of the study group included an examination of UN Security Council Resolution 1540, the implication of the decision by the UN Security Council Committee on North Korea Sanctions to terminate its Panel of Experts, perspectives on risk reduction in the Indo-Pacific, an examination of new technologies related to disarmament verification, and the significance of the growing interest in nuclear energy as a clean energy alternative. Key findings include:

The return of geopolitics and strategic competition among nuclear-armed states have had a disastrous impact on arms control. Russia and China are enhancing their nuclear arsenals through modernization for the former, and through modernization and unprecedented expansion for the latter. The United States is moving ahead with its replacement program and a discussion has started about whether there is a need for a bigger US nuclear arsenal. Most arms control treaties have been or are on the cusp of being abandoned. There is an increase in the threat of the use of nuclear weapons and renewed interest in nuclear sharing. For some, nuclear brinkmanship and threats have become a new normal. Meanwhile, several new alternative security arrangements have emerged even as the appetite for talks among the major nuclear-armed states has been muted.

The coordination process leading up to the 2026 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference has continued to show little to no progress. As was the case with the first Preparatory Committee, the recently concluded second PrepCom failed to produce any agreement—not even a factual summary of the events. Seemingly insurmountable disagreements remain regarding prioritization among NPT pillars, the status of North Korea's and Iran's nuclear programs, and the valorization of nuclear deterrence/sharing. More broadly, the failure of the NPT process reflects the fact that strategic competition has become a challenge to the existing global order that centers around contested leadership of international institutions and acceptable rules, processes, and norms. In that environment, existing treaties and agreements will be under extreme pressure.

Given the gloomy forecast, managing expectations is paramount with priority given to conditions for crisis stability and reassurance of allies to dispel misconceptions and increase understanding. Developing a shared sense of risk is an essential element in that process. In that context, excessive risk manipulation such as nuclear threats and escalating tensions should be called out, while norms such as non-use of force should be promoted. Another important initiative is the work being done under the auspices of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) on the

humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. Reconciling that work with today's needed focus should be a priority.

Multiparty risk reduction and arms control mechanisms have traditionally been resisted in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, separate narratives in the region have emerged: one on the need for transparency, the other on the need for formal "no-first-use" commitments. The opening of a risk reduction and arms control dialogue in the region would be an important first step to reconcile the separate narratives.

UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1540, which was adopted in 2004 and lays out guidelines for preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction to non-state actors, has become a key pillar of the international nonproliferation architecture. The 1540 Committee established pursuant to the resolution recently had its mandate extended to November 2032. Over the past 20 years there has been significant progress in implementing the resolution by individual states through political commitments, legislative prohibitions, and domestic control over WMD-related goods and technologies. However, full implementation has been hampered for a variety of reasons including a lack of political will, unclear implementation guidance, uncertainty regarding economic benefits associated with controlling goods and technologies, and a failure to take full advantage of shared experiences and regional expertise.

In March 2024, due to a veto by a permanent Council member, the United Nations Security Council failed to adopt a resolution to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts (PoE), which was established pursuant to UNSC resolution (UNSCR) 1718 (2006) to monitor compliance with, and enforcement of, the UN sanctions regime on North Korea. Although some states seem to have been scaling back support for the regime for several years, this decision marks a significant shift in efforts to monitor North Korea's nuclear and military ambitions. In response, some have called for a new approach that involves key member states and like-minded partners coordinating their efforts. Others were dismissive of the effectiveness of the regime, although the absence of several member committees from this NPD Study Group Meeting made it difficult to ascertain specific motivations and rationales for termination of the PoE mandate. Regardless of the reasoning, the elimination of the PoE eliminates a crucial source for providing an objective source for evaluating potential violations of the UNSCR.

Over the past 10 years, the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV), in partnership with a diverse group of countries and the European Union, has explored how to multilaterally verify nuclear disarmament. The group developed monitoring and verification procedures associated with a 14-step nuclear weapons dismantlement process. The toolkit includes technical monitoring, on-site inspections, and declarations and notifications. The initiative has shown great promise for future disarmament work and has been endorsed as an important confidence building measure since it has involved close collaboration between nuclear and non-nuclear-armed states. However, the lack of participation by all P-5 countries has cast doubt on the future work of the partnership.

There are several other initiatives by other organizations including several working groups established through the TPNW that are examining disarmament and arms control verification. Some of these initiatives have examined the potential role of emerging technologies in promoting

enhanced verification methods. One shortcoming, however, is the apparent lack of coordination among these efforts and the seeming difficulty with determining the most suitable international organization for assuming responsibility for verification. Some felt the International Atomic Energy Agency is the most suitable, while others opined that the initial coordination should occur within the Conference on Disarmament.

The potential role of small modular reactors (SMR), floating nuclear power plants, and microreactors continues to capture the imagination of proponents of nuclear energy as a potential solution for decarbonizing electricity production and providing a clean source of energy. Current trends in these areas led to identifying the following findings. First, the United States has taken steps to incentivize and support the development and deployment of new advanced nuclear technologies, including measures to streamline the regulatory approvals process. Second, the United States has signed new nuclear cooperation agreements with the Philippines and Singapore, while Russia has continued its pursuit of nuclear cooperation agreements in the region. Third, there has been a huge influx of investments over the past several years in fusion technology. Fourth, South Korea has sought to advance the commercialization of SMR-powered ships and floating SMR power generation platforms. Fifth, several regional countries are rapidly expanding their nuclear power capacity and actively pursuing new SMR technologies. While there is still a great deal of skepticism about the viability of these technologies (especially fusion), the momentum continues to appear strong for the adoption of nuclear power as a clean energy source.

Discussions about future work by the CSCAP NPD Study Group led to recommendations about focusing on confidence building as a means to address current challenges and develop specific suggestions for further consideration at the Track 1 level. Others highlighted that several key member committees were absent from the Study Group, which distracts from the value of the group to discuss areas of disagreement or misunderstanding. Yet others suggested that the group go deeper in addressing the issue of nuclear risk reduction and how the region defines strategic risk. Finally, several recommended a focus on proliferation financing, conventional arms control issues, especially missile proliferation given its growing significance in the region, as well as the opportunities and challenges posed by space, cyber, and artificial intelligence technologies.

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