

10th Berlin Conference on Asian Security (BCAS)

***Nuclear Stability in Asia
Strengthening Order in Times of Crises***

Berlin, June 19-21, 2016

A conference jointly organized by Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin
and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), Berlin

Discussion Paper
Do Not Cite or Quote without Author's Permission

***Session V:
The linkage between regional and global nuclear order***

Morgane Farghen
Foundation for Strategic Research (FSR)
Paris

The linkage between regional and global nuclear order: An EU perspective

*Morgane Farghen*¹

Reviving nuclear tensions in the Asia-Pacific region

North Korea's fourth nuclear test, currently subject to analysis, is a reminder of the regime's persistent nuclear ambition, as well as the failure of the international community to compel it to dismantle its program with the aim of maintaining regional security and global stability. Pyongyang inexorably pursues its nuclear plans, in defiance of the United Nations Security Council, and despite a series of sanctions.

China could play a more decisive role. It has the leverage to do so and has officially declared its opposition to North Korea going nuclear, but its exertion of influence is still modest as reflected by this latest test. Beijing's convenient non-committal stance scarcely hides the reality of China's strategic interests. China prefers the longstanding alternative of a reunification of the peninsula at its own conditions, to the short-term prospect of a potential collapse of the hermit regime.

China pretends to have a relative small nuclear arsenal, but it pursues its three decades old military modernization that also benefits its strategic component. China is seeking to improve the mobility and the survivability of its nuclear component. And it now guarantees a nuclear retaliation to a first strike of that kind. The modernization of its military apparatus provides China with more assertiveness and self-confidence when it comes to its interests at the periphery.

In face of the evolving nuclear threat and reviving nuclear tensions, South Korea and Japan are asking for reassurances from their American ally. And consequently, they've adjusted their defense policy unilaterally and within the alliance.

The developments in North East Asia are inextricable from the ones in the nuclear triangle in South Asia. Encouraged by China's developments, India reshapes its strategic programs consequently, and Pakistan follows the same path with a persistent yet discreet support from China. In a couple of decades, China has moved from being a major supplier of sensitive technologies to being a major stakeholder in the regional arms race. The developments in China drive those in South Asia.

¹ Visiting Fellow at the Foundation for Strategic Research (FSR), Paris

Nuclear challenges in the Asia-Pacific - Opposite dynamics

The Asia-Pacific region follows an opposite trajectory compared to the current general trend that supports disarmament and non-proliferation. The general trend in Asia is nuclear proliferation and emerging arms race between regional competitors. And none of the nuclear states, established or aspiring, shows appetite for limitation.

The American initiative to promote nuclear disarmament, reflected in the speech President Barrack Obama delivered in Prague in 2009, did not influence nuclear policies in Asia. It could have been an incentive, but it did not have any knock-on effect neither in North East Asia nor in South Asia. China pursues its strategic developments both in quality and quantity no matter how much the US reduces its nuclear arsenal, or the role of nukes in its nuclear policy. And it still refuses to engage in a constructive nuclear dialogue, even if the objectives fixed up were minimalists. The attempt to establish a strategic stability with China led to opposite results. Instead of exalting cooperation, Beijing responded with more defiance.

China pursues its military developments and modernizes its strategic arsenal. As far as China does so, India pursues them as well, and Pakistan stays on track.

And beyond programs, recent evolutions in deterrence doctrines raise new deterrence challenges. The evolving role of nuclear weapons in deterrence policies in China and Pakistan and the hostility from North Korea raise new risks of escalation, a trend that is more destabilizing than stabilizing, and should be considered as such.

The connection between different regional sub-groups

The close intertwining between various regional nuclear policies precludes any chance to consider one sub-group separately from the other. First, it has become a common ground to assert that China has become a key driving factor in the regional technological competition and the emerging arms race. In less than two decades, China has moved from being a major proliferator of sensitive technologies to driving the regional arms race and technological competition. Persisting investments and successful progress encourage other states at the periphery to follow the same path.

Second, China also influences the evolving strategic landscape in North East Asia. Its reluctance to influence nuclear proliferation in North Korea in a more decisive way, also encourages the militarization in South Korea. Seoul recently rethought its defense policy unilaterally, and within its alliance with the United States.

The deterioration of the regional security landscape

Tensions at the boundary on the Korean peninsula and tensions over disputed territories at China's periphery have degraded the security landscape in the Asia-Pacific region. Momentarily, South Asia has been overshadowed by the developments in North East Asia and South East Asia, but the stability remains fragile and versatile.

The evolving role of nuclear weapons in the foreign and defense policies of the different states in the Asia-Pacific region has become a major source of concern. Along with its relatively small number of nuclear weapons and the no first use policy, China could have set apart from the trend that prevail in Pakistan and to a lesser extend in North Korea, but it has not. As a result of recent doctrinal evolutions in China's overall deterrence policy and in the military strategy, the role of nuclear weapons has shifted from discreet to obvious. The nuclear doctrine has become less defensive, and "ambiguity" has become a core concept of the national military strategy. As a result, at a time of creeping expansionism, the nuclear component supports assertiveness. The nuclear threshold secures low provocations in territorial disputes, while the inherent risk of nuclear blackmail or nuclear bluff create new nuclear dilemmas for the opposite side. China thinks it can manage escalation, but in fact, its behavior at the periphery with more risk taking than previously have increased the risk of escalation, for the reason that crisis management is not a perfect science, and above all under ambiguity.

In parallel, the evolution of the Korean leadership's stance, which is more aggressive, not to say hostile, reflects the negative effects of nuclear developments on the peninsula. Whether virtual or not, nukes favor provocations.

In these cases, the evolution of the role of nukes in national strategies are more destabilizing than stabilizing. And also in South Asia there is a risk that Pakistan considers the nuclear option to respond to a conventional escalation.

The linkage between arms control/ deterrence and reassurances

Reviving nuclear tensions in the Asia-Pacific region have relegated the need for arms control to a second priority behind the need to stop proliferation, and to restore peace and stability that has become urgent. To adapt deterrence to cope with the risk of escalations has become a prime priority.

The adaptations of the American deterrence policy to the recent doctrinal developments in the Asia-Pacific region should then account for the measures that will be essential in creating the conditions for a future architecture for arms control.

Rethinking deterrence or extended deterrence under the backdrop of reviving nuclear tensions in Asia can no more be considered from the conventional perspective. Rethinking deterrence needs to consider the role of nukes in the general deterrence policy. How to cope with the raising risk of the use of nukes by adversaries on the theater level? How to avoid an escalation with a nuclear competitor? How to adapt deterrence, to deter low provocations to avoid the escalation are key questions.

The future of the nuclear relationship with China

The future of the nuclear relationship between the US and China will shape the future of the Asian nuclear landscape. Conversely, any thinking on arms control in Asia cannot put China aside as it has become a key parameter in the regional dynamics.

To engage China on nuclear issues is essential in order to generate a positive dynamic, but to gather other states at the periphery, it requires a twist in the general policy toward a less compliant approach which also needs to be more demanding.

China's role in the technological competition and its lack of support when it comes to influence non-proliferation in North Korea have made it necessary to pressure China on that regard. If China is a key driving factor in the regional arms race, then let's consider it as such. If China's reluctance on non-proliferation implicitly supports proliferation in North Korea, then let's consider it as such. And if China's nuclear policy is less stabilizing than destabilizing, then let's say it clearly.

Pre-requisites for arms control

Thinking arms control under a degraded backdrop drives to the most minimalist option that would only consist in creating the prerequisite for a hypothetical future architecture, once the conditions would have been met for such a purpose.

A more focused approach on China that would be less compliant and more demanding, could not only reassure American allies, but discourage them to increase their defense. And it would encourage other stakeholders to such a project.

A more focused approach on China could begin with establishing a more demanding relationship that emphasizes the lack of transparency, underlines the ambiguity of its nuclear deterrence, and notices the destabilizing effect it has on the regional landscape.

Let's ask China to improve the visibility over its nuclear arsenal, to give details on its size and scope, even if China is likely to respond that the opacity compensates the asymmetry of force with the US. But asymmetry of forces is no more an excuse.

If China agrees to lift the opacity and to better communicate its strategic forces, while becoming more effective in the regional non-proliferation, there might come a moment to consider a more serious regional architecture for arms control.

Which leadership to centralize authority?

When a leading power along with other traditional powers attempt to initiate an impulsion in the name of their shared values of peace and stability, the challenge is less to impose such objectives than to be followed up by others. The Prague Agenda is a vivid illustrative of it as the American leadership did not curb trends in Asia.

The leverage of traditional powers has eroded and their influence has decreased at a time when soft power has proven less efficient to curb trends. But a renewed approach could try to encourage Western powers to find a common ground on the belief that the stabilization of nuclear relationship in the Asia-Pacific region will benefit global stability.

The P3 could play a leading role, as it reflects the traditional Western nuclear states, but the EU could also be more vocal, provided it defends a balanced approach between every dimension of nuclear policies, it does not sacrifice the need for deterrence, and it reconnects the architecture of nuclear policies to strategic realities.

Japan, South Korea, and India could offer a strong and complementary support to defend such a cause. The three of them have a high international profile when it comes to proliferation, and they distinguish themselves from others for that reason (Cf. the Abdul Kader Khan network/and North Korean proliferation in Middle East).

Conclusion

Nukes are inseparable from the contemporary history of the Asia-Pacific region. Evolutions in this highly strategic field go along with shifting powers and provide access to the challenges of tomorrow. As the nuclear center of gravity is moving towards Asia, these developments deserve the most scrutiny and the best attention.

Ongoing evolutions will define the regional order in Asia, with potential impacts on the global order. Reviving nuclear tensions under the circumstances of persisting proliferation and raising powers have relegated the need for arms control behind the more urgent priority to restore peace and stability within the region.

China has become a key-driving factor in the regional technological competition and remains a latent supporter of nuclear proliferation. This prism holds a lot of potential to address nuclear challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, provided we refresh

our communication tools and adopt a step-by-step approach to pursue minimalist steps, nonetheless realistic ones. Engaging China on nuclear issues with a more demanding approach is the pre-requisite for any rethinking on arms control.