

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
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Concluding Session

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Envoi: Asia and the Third Nuclear Age
Concluding Thoughts Presented at the Conference

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Introduction

The focus on nuclear stability at the 2016 annual Berlin Conference on Asian security was timely and generated a rewarding conversation on the unfolding geopolitical transformation in the continent. Although Asia is home to seven atomic powers (US, Russia, China, North Korea, India, Pakistan and Israel), the complex dynamic among them does not get the comprehensive attention that it deserves. The regional security debates are focused rather narrowly on the problem of nuclear proliferation in the Korean Peninsula and the Middle East and the stability/instability paradox that dogs the subcontinent's rivalry between India and Pakistan. The separate discussion each of these regions—that have so much specificity—tend to mask their relationship to a broader geopolitical dynamic unfolding in Asia. The discussions at the 2016 annual conference offered an important opportunity to locate the problem of nuclear stability in Asia within that broader context. What follows does not purport to be a summary of the discussions. It highlights a few important themes that emerged out of the rich discussion at the conference.

The Third Nuclear Age

The idea that a 'Third Nuclear Age' might be upon us figured in the dinner address Brig Gen Erich Vad, former military adviser to Chancellor Angela Merkel, at the opening session of the conference. The strategic community is familiar with the notion of the 'Second Nuclear Age' that was postulated by Paul Bracken of the Yale University. Bracken identified a number of features that distinguished the second phase from the first. The shift of the nuclear theatre from Europe to Asia, the extraordinary rise of nuclear nationalism in the developing countries, doubts about the Asiatic regimes adopting 'Western rationality' that limited nuclear conflict in the first nuclear age, the prospect for nuclear terrorism and the second mover advantages that lifted many of the technical and industrial barriers for the entry of new players into the nuclear club. Whether one agrees with all of Bracken's formulations are not, he captured the important shift from nuclear politics among great powers (all Western if

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you include Russia in that category) to proliferation of nuclear weapons in the non-Western world. Diminishing conflict among great powers after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to justify the shift away from questions of nuclear balance in the Euro-Atlantic domain and towards the spread of weapons of mass destruction to additional countries. The concept of the Third Nuclear Age, however, could help us better understand the current changes in global nuclear politics. The new dynamic includes renewed great power tensions, the modernization of Russian and Chinese conventional and nuclear forces, Moscow's challenge to the post-Cold War order in Europe, the breakdown of regional cooperation and conflict management in Asia amidst the assertion of Chinese power and the growing pressure on the Western alliance system and its various nuclear arrangements.

Nuclear Weapons and Power Shift

One of the central themes of the current global discourse has been the rise of Asia and its impact on the structure of international relations, including the changing nature of distribution of power between the East and West and within Asia itself. But rarely has this debate intersected with the post-Cold War debates on nuclear weapons and arms control. The nuclear narrative remains rooted in the framework that emerged in the interaction between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. That framework had two axes, bilateral arms control between Washington and Moscow (SALT and its follow on process) and their cooperation in the multilateral efforts to limit the spread of nuclear weapons to third countries (the NPT regime). Through the Cold War, Asia remained marginal to great power nuclear arms control and central to the proliferation question. Despite the enormous significance of the rise of China, the emergence of India and their impact on great power relations, there is little change in the ideas that dominate the nuclear discourse. The 2016 Berlin Conference on Asian Security may not have broken free from the old ways of thinking about nuclear weapons, but has helped us engage, if tentatively, with big questions on the possible impact of a shifting balance of power on nuclear stability in Asia.

Vertical and the Horizontal

One significant element of the Third Nuclear Age is the blurring of the traditional distinction between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of nuclear politics—the global and the regional. If the preoccupation in the first nuclear age was limiting great power arsenals, the second nuclear age about preventing proliferation, the third

nuclear age will begin to conflate the two seemingly separate sets of issues. Consider for example, the US decision to integrate India into the global nuclear order and offer some nuclear exceptions to Delhi. Beijing, however, has seen this as part of the US effort to draft India into the containment of China. As Beijing used non-proliferation argument to limit India's entry into the nuclear order, Washington and the Western powers justified it as strengthening the NPT regime. In the Korean Peninsula, the major powers agree on the goal of denuclearization but don't agree on the mechanics of getting there. Korea is in the front yard of China. That Beijing sees its relationship with the Korean Peninsula as that between 'teeth and lips' limits the possibilities of genuine cooperation between the United States and China. In the first nuclear age, Washington and Moscow, allies in the Second World War and rivals in the Cold War, had a shared interest in denuclearizing Germany and Japan. While they could not stop their war time allies France and Britain from going nuclear, the arsenals of Paris and London had little impact on the central balance. The situation is rather different in the Third Nuclear Age, where India and potentially Japan and Korea can significantly complicate the deterrence calculus of China and America.

US-China Nuclear Dynamic

One of the paradoxes of the current situation is the gap between the changing geopolitical dynamic and the inertia of the nuclear discourse. The global power shift has made the US-China equation as the defining one of our time. Yet the arms control debates remain riveted on the concepts devised to manage the US-Russian balance of power. The reassertion of Russian power would seem to justify the traditional focus on the reduction of strategic forces and limiting missile defenses. These emphases, however, do not capture the new complexities presented by the growing military tension between America and China. The ideas of parity and symmetry that tended to define US Russian arms control have less relevance in Asia, given the small size of the Chinese arsenal relative to the US. Missile defense is certainly an important issue for China but not necessarily in the same way as it matters for the Russians. Beijing has put special emphasis on space and cyber domains in the denial strategy that it has developed to counter the US forward military presence in East Asia. The US in turn is trying to blunt China's strategy by developing new military capabilities and doctrines to penetrate China's defenses. The nature of this new competitive dynamic, the problem of distinguishing between conventional and nuclear weapons and the danger of nuclear escalation have all become issues to ponder in Asia. Meanwhile the idea that US and China need a framework for arms control has begun to gain traction, but there is insufficient understanding of how that could be developed in a sustainable

manner and how it might differ fundamentally from the experience of regulating the strategic competition between the US and the Soviet Union.

Regional Challenges

Much of the concern in the Second Nuclear Age has been about the management of the nuclear challenges in three regions—Middle East, the Subcontinent and the Korean Peninsula. Although the Middle East was not on the agenda of this conference, the experience of the last quarter of a century in the region must serve as an important warning to the nuclear community. The post-Cold War obsession with the proliferation of WMD—often presented as the greatest danger to international security—had tragic consequences for the region and the West. The exaggeration of the WMD threat was at the source of the costly intervention in Iraq in 2003—President Barack Obama would later call it a ‘war of choice’—and an extended nuclear confrontation with Iran set the stage for a range of Western policies that brought the unipolar moment to a premature end, destabilized the region by upending the traditional political order and the military balance of power. The unintended political consequences from these policies are likely to be with us for many decades to come.

In the Subcontinent, strategic considerations of Western partnership with Pakistan and India at different moments have led to a different set of outcomes than the Middle East. The essence of these outcomes was the international acceptance of the Subcontinent’s nuclear weapons. Although concerns about a nuclear conflict in the Subcontinent endure, the capacity of the international system to address the sources of instability—Pakistan’s support to cross border terrorism and India’s inability to resolve the outstanding disputes—means the current South Asian nuclear stalemate is likely to continue. If the major powers have settled down to encouraging bilateralism in the Subcontinent, the pursuit of multilateralism has been the dominant approach to the reverse North Korea’s nuclear proliferation. Although there is consensus among the major powers on denuclearizing the peninsula, there is mounting frustration at the repeated failures to persuade the regime in Pyongyang to change course. If problems of regime security and regional conflict appear to be at the core of the problem in the three regions of the Subcontinent, the international discourse, both academic and policy, tend to focus exclusively on the structure of the nuclear arsenals. Plugging this gap remains the key challenge.

Extended Deterrence in Eurasia

The greatest challenge to nuclear stability is likely to come from a very different source than the regional proliferation that sucked up much political energy in the Second Nuclear Age. That source is the declining political credibility of America's extended nuclear deterrence in Eurasia. Since the end of the Second World War, the US military alliance system in Europe and the Far East with forward deployed conventional and nuclear forces was widely seen as the sheet anchor of the regional security system. The US also took a larger role in the Middle East after the British withdrawal from the East of Suez at the turn of the 1970s. That system is now fraying at the edges amidst the assertion of Russian and Chinese power and the popular ennui in America with expansive foreign military commitments.

What seemed an abstract discussion on US alliances and extended nuclear deterrence acquired a sharp edge during the 2016 election season in the United States. Donald Trump, the eventual Presidential nominee of the Republican Party, accused the European and Asian allies as free riders and questioned the utility of the NATO in Europe and the bilateral alliances in Asia with Japan and South Korea. Trump demanded that the allies pay more for American protection. And if they did not, he would withdraw US forces from Europe and Asia. To make matters worse, Trump also suggested he would have no problems if Japan and South Korea developed nuclear weapons to defend themselves. Although Trump was pilloried by the main stream establishment in the United States, it appears to have considerable popular resonance. Although the idea 'burden sharing' had long animated US alliance politics, it has acquired a new edge today amidst the shifting balance of power in Eurasia and the American fatigue with what Trump calls 'globalism'. This could be a mere passing moment or the beginning of a new phase, when the allies begin to question the value of relying on American umbrella for their security against regional hegemons. Even an incremental shift in that direction might begin to generate a powerful incentive for many non-nuclear allies to reconsider their abstinence. Assessing and addressing these challenges should be the most important preoccupation for the nuclear community in the coming years.

In the end, the recent developments in Asia underscore the need for fresh strategic thinking about nuclear weapons. The analytical tools developed in the first and second nuclear eras are not really helpful to understand the impact of a rising Asia. Instead of seeing Europe and Asia as separate theatres, we must begin to think of Eurasia as a single geopolitical space and begin to focus on the nuclear dynamics within it and between it and the United States.