

CHAPTER NINE

Worlds Apart

NATO and Asia's Nuclear Future

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This chapter addresses NATO's new Strategic Concept adopted at the November 2010 Lisbon Summit and ongoing discussions under the Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) in the context of nuclear weapons strategy in Asia. In particular, it examines how different trajectories of Asian nuclear weapons development could influence future deliberations over nuclear weapons and international security.

The new NATO Strategic Concept revisits nuclear weapons policy in light of major changes in European security and U.S./NATO-Russia relations since the previous strategic review in 1999. The 2010 Strategic Concept embraces two central if seemingly contradictory principles—that NATO is committed to creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons in accordance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); and for as long as there are nuclear weapons NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.

The United States and its alliance partners seek to appreciably reduce the role of nuclear weapons in international security without undermining their essential deterrence function, while also pursuing deeper nuclear reductions and enhanced transparency in future arms control agreements with Russia. NATO's DDPR is also exploring options to further reduce the numbers and functions of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) in Europe, thereby more fully aligning NATO policy with the conclusions of the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR).

NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN ASIAN SECURITY

Overview

With the exception of China, the indigenous development of nuclear weapons in Asia is a recent phenomenon. Although the aggregate number of nuclear weapons in the region represents a very small portion of the global nuclear inventory, the

CHAPTER NINE: KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ At a time when NATO's nuclear posture, missile defense, and other means of strategic deterrence and defense are under review—including possible next steps with Russia—regional nuclear realities in Asia are moving in very different directions.
- ▶ China is in the midst of a long-planned strategic modernization program—intended to enhance the survivability and reliability of its nuclear forces—including new land-based ICBMs, developing a sea-based deterrent, and adding regionally oriented land-based missiles.
- ▶ In a little over a decade, three additional Asian states—India, North Korea, and Pakistan—have decided to openly pursue nuclear weapons. The decisions of all three states have appreciably altered regional security dynamics, often in very destabilizing ways.
- ▶ Any decision by Asian powers to restrain the growth of their nuclear forces or even to forgo particular weapons alternatives will require considerable heightened strategic trust among Asian states and between regional states and outside powers. Such trust is in very short supply.
- ▶ Although the nuclear agendas are very different in Europe and Asia, NATO's DDPR must be explicitly mindful of how decisions in NATO could influence nuclear thinking in Asia.
- ▶ Major changes in NATO nuclear strategy and further agreements with Russia could establish important precedents for Asian states that have yet to make binding choices on their nuclear future. These shifts will require unprecedented information disclosure and large-scale reductions in NATO and Russian nuclear capabilities if the resulting agreements are to generate meaningful support among Asian states.
- ▶ Any redeployment of Russian NSNW from Europe to Asia would be threatening to China. Agreements to enhance U.S./NATO-Russia missile defense cooperation could also markedly amplify Chinese strategic suspicions and influence the scope and pace of China's future nuclear programs.

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numbers are growing while the numbers of weapons decline elsewhere. There is also no forum within Asia where the region's nuclear weapons states discuss (let alone negotiate) their respective nuclear capabilities and future plans. Nuclear programs and policies operate in largely autonomous fashion. There are undoubted possibilities of major crisis in all the regional settings where there are now nuclear-armed states in Asia.

Three principal characteristics of the nuclear equation in Asia stand out. First, the equation is extremely complex. It involves four separate states who zealously protect their national sovereignty, are not members of an alliance, are not subject to any negotiated constraints on the numbers or characteristics of their weapons, and are not obligated to disclose the composition or location of their nuclear forces.

Second, Asia's nuclear weapons primarily represent new capabilities, compared to the far larger legacy forces of the United States and Russia, and (to a lesser extent) those of the United Kingdom and France. India and Pakistan decided to openly pursue active nuclear weapons programs in the late 1990s, and North Korea followed suit shortly thereafter. South Asia and the Korean peninsula already involve the largest concentrations of conventional military power anywhere on the globe, and nuclear weapons (despite their posited deterrence function) inject heightened instability into inherently dangerous circumstances. Although tensions across the Taiwan Strait have ameliorated in recent years, the latent possibilities of major armed conflict persist there, as well. The enhancement of Chinese military forces (including short range missile forces targeted against Taiwan and ballistic and cruise missiles intended to impede or deter potential U.S. military operations); Taipei's efforts to counter Chinese emergent military capabilities; U.S. arms sales to Taiwan; and the potential role of U.S. forces in a future conflict underscore the continued risks of a major regional crisis.

Third, there is a wide range of possibilities in Asia's nuclear future, depending on how various states assess the longer-term role of nuclear capabilities in national security planning. The factors shaping Asia's nuclear future are highly diverse. China's ongoing nuclear modernization; the decisions of India, North Korea, and Pakistan to pursue nuclear weapons development; the increased prominence of ballistic missile defense within the region (including the extensive role of U.S. forces both regionally and in homeland defense missions); the expectations of U.S. Allies for strengthened extended deterrence commitments; and Russian strategic equities beyond Europe interact in complicated ways, creating a highly complex and unsettled picture.

Asia's Strategic Transition

Asia is in the throes of an extraordinary long-term power transition. The rise of China is central to this process, but the region's economic, political, and military transformation encompasses much more than one country. Although U.S. military predominance remains unquestioned, many regional states have undertaken

major military modernization programs that will redefine power relationships within Asia and between regional states and outside powers. Continued momentum in nuclear weapons development will pose added risks to strategic stability across the region.

U.S. policy is also a crucial factor in Asia's strategic transition. American policy presumes enhanced security collaboration with China in areas of overlapping interest, focused primarily on nontraditional security and on maritime security cooperation. But the U.S. Department of Defense argues that Beijing's extant nuclear, space, and cyber warfare capabilities already have global strategic implications, and it voices increasing concern about China's pursuit of advanced coercive capabilities. China, however, views military modernization (including nuclear modernization) as necessary to deter, deny, or inhibit America's military reach into locations abutting the Chinese homeland. Chinese officials express ample wariness about U.S. strategic intentions and future weapons plans, including U.S. pursuit of prompt global strike capabilities. There is almost reflexive Chinese skepticism or outright opposition to U.S. military deployments and reconnaissance and intelligence gathering activities along China's periphery.

While European states are reducing their nuclear inventories and moving toward increased military transparency and more inclusive security concepts, Asian states are steadily enhancing their strategic autonomy and at most imparting partial information about their longer-term nuclear strategies and capabilities, and (in the case of North Korea), none at all. Although some Asian governments voice support for a nuclear weapons free world and endorse nuclear weapons-free zones, any such initiatives must acknowledge that nuclear weapons are now a central factor in regional strategy.

Asia thus confronts the paradox of increasing economic integration and much denser societal and institutional ties while strategic trust and strategic restraint are conspicuously lacking. Regional military advancement continues without letup, with states unprepared to entrust their national destinies to expectations of a more cooperative world.

Asia's Nuclear Dynamics

CHINA. There is no single pattern to nuclear weapons development in Asia. As the region's first indigenous nuclear power and one of the world's five nuclear weapon states according to NPT criteria, China possesses the most developed and diversified nuclear capabilities of any regional power. From its earliest years as a nuclear weapons state, however, China has pursued a minimalist nuclear strategy. It has limited its nuclear deployments to very modest numbers (prevailing estimates of its operationally deployed warheads range between 150–200, although some estimates are as high as 400 and with 55–65 intercontinental ballistic missiles). It has also consistently adhered to a “no first use” (NFU) policy stating it would use nuclear forces only in response to a nuclear attack against China.

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China's principal goal, in the event of receiving a nuclear first strike, has been to ensure a survivable means of retaliation with sufficient force to inflict unacceptable damage on an attacker, and it has never wavered from this fundamental objective. With continued advancement toward a somewhat larger, modern, diversified force that relies heavily on concealment and mobility, China appears determined to ensure that it can ride out a major attack in light of far superior U.S. and Russian capabilities. Deploying a sea-based force would render China even less vulnerable, although it will introduce unprecedented command and control issues that Beijing has not had to face in the past.

Any Chinese decision to depart from a minimal nuclear posture would reflect a major reassessment of China's strategic circumstances. It would presumably reflect an appreciably heightened perception of threat from the United States but also possibly from Russia (especially if Russia were to deploy some of its NSNW assets away from Europe and closer to China); the ultimate need to counter Indian nuclear capabilities should the latter's forces grow considerably in numbers, range, and quality; acceding to the inexorable logic of a more mature and diversified nuclear force; or in response to heightened risks of nuclear instability in countries located near China. To date, there is no evidence that China is planning for a substantially larger force, although an incremental increase in the number of deployed weapons does not seem implausible as older missile systems are retired and newer models are introduced.

Chinese strategy, however, has long focused less on numbers of nuclear weapons and more on the objectives and strategies they are intended to serve. Nuclear war fighting has never generated meaningful interest in Chinese strategic circles; indeed, for many years Chinese analysts even viewed nuclear deterrence in highly pejorative terms, associating it with concepts of nuclear coercion developed during the Cold War. But some Chinese analysts (including some military officers) are questioning the continued relevance of a strict NFU doctrine, arguing that U.S. precision strike capabilities blur the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear use, and could inhibit China's capacity to respond in a future armed conflict, even if it were limited to conventional weapons. Others call attention to U.S. ballistic missile defense capabilities that could degrade China's means of retaliation, although China continues to heighten development of various countermeasures designed to deflect or confound U.S. capabilities, and presumably Russian systems, as well.

The United States argues that its missile defense capabilities are far too limited in numbers and capabilities to undermine China's nuclear deterrent. At most, the United States believes they could be used in the event of an accidental or unauthorized launch from Chinese or Russian territory, but analysts in both countries give very little credence to American assurances. This seems especially the case for China, given that its strategic forces are vastly smaller than those of Russia. The Chinese also retain an abiding respect for U.S. technical and military prowess, believing that future defense R&D breakthroughs could one day render their

limited retaliatory forces far more vulnerable. Thus, despite the maturation of Chinese capabilities, there is a persistent anxiety within Chinese strategic circles that its nuclear forces could be degraded or that the United States is intent on other steps to diminish the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent. The prospect of heightened U.S.-Russian missile defense collaboration (including technology sharing and collaboration on early warning) could appreciably amplify Chinese strategic suspicions.

The perceptions of malign U.S. intent (although paralleled by comparable judgments in U.S. circles about malign Chinese intent) reinforce ample Chinese wariness about U.S. calls for heightened nuclear transparency. To Beijing, opacity or obscurity about its nuclear forces offer the best guarantee that they will remain invulnerable. China sees no reason to impose negotiated restraints on its nuclear programs (although the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which China has signed but not ratified, would constrain Chinese nuclear modernization—as has China's self-imposed moratorium on nuclear testing during the past 15 years). It also attaches far more importance to how nuclear forces operate than to their absolute numbers, making the survivability of a retaliatory capability China's defining nuclear requirement. This suggests that China could ultimately be prepared to enter into discussions about nuclear strategy that might also encompass other highly sensitive topics, including missile defense, military operations in space, long-range conventional strike capabilities, and cyber warfare. But this day has yet to arrive.

The persistent issue inhibiting Sino-American strategic relations is the absence of strategic trust by either side. For example, Beijing's unwillingness to enter into detailed discussions about nuclear strategy feeds American suspicions in some quarters that China is waiting until U.S. and Russian forces are reduced to far lower levels, which would then presumably enable China to build up its forces to rough numerical equivalence with the world's dominant nuclear powers. But there is no evidence that China aspires to such equivalence. For the present, a Sino-American nuclear relationship where the U.S. retains a superior nuclear force appears a tolerable outcome for Beijing, whereby China would sustain its commitment to a minimal but more secure nuclear force. It seems very likely that Beijing would contemplate serious strategic discussions with Washington only when it feels less disadvantaged militarily, and when it concludes that the United States is fully prepared to accept China as a legitimate major power in all respects.

INDIA. India's nuclear goals warrant comparison to those of China. India long contemplated and prepared for a nuclear weapons program, but deferred an unequivocal decision until internal realignments in political leadership enabled it. From the outset leaders in New Delhi restrained domestic voices urging highly expansive nuclear goals. Like Beijing, New Delhi articulated and has sought to sustain a minimal deterrence strategy. It adheres to a NFU policy that is enshrined in

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Indian nuclear doctrine and has yet to accumulate fissile material on a scale that would enable a large-scale nuclear program.

New Delhi's long-term nuclear goal is to build a force that will cement India's standing as South Asia's dominant power so that its strategic interests will not be undermined or directly challenged by either Pakistan or China. Pakistan is undoubtedly the more immediate priority for Indian defense planners, with a need for India to prepare for a full spectrum of military operations. India believes that the ability to reach targets throughout Pakistan (in conjunction with India's conventional superiority) will deter risk-taking by Islamabad and require Pakistan to accept Indian dominance of the sub-continent. But these assumptions have not been validated. There has been a succession of terrorist activities against major governmental and commercial targets in New Delhi and Mumbai (many believe with the knowledge, if not complicity, of Pakistani military authorities) and additional instances of Pakistani risk-taking, against which India has opted not to retaliate. Moreover, Pakistan (as discussed below) seems fully prepared to match or exceed Indian nuclear capabilities.

Should New Delhi decide to embark on a more expansive set of nuclear goals, realizing nuclear sufficiency would be both daunting and open-ended. If anything, the logic of an Indian minimal deterrent seems more persuasive in relation to China than it does in relation to Pakistan given the highly adversarial relationship between New Delhi and Islamabad. A credible minimal deterrent capability against China nonetheless presupposes a full testing program for longer range missiles and perhaps additional efforts to mate warheads to delivery systems. (India's total weapons inventory probably approaches but very likely does not exceed 100.) Some prominent figures in the Indian defense R&D community continue to advocate a much more ambitious weapons program, up to and including an ICBM capability encompassing thermonuclear weapons. There have also been repeated intimations that the results from India's nuclear tests in 1998 fell well short of expectations and that further nuclear tests will be needed to fully validate Indian weapons designs. But India's political leadership remains uneasy about more ambitious strategic nuclear goals. It is also not prepared to advocate additional nuclear tests, which would invalidate understandings in the Indo-U.S. nuclear agreement and almost undoubtedly prompt Pakistan (and perhaps China) to undertake additional tests, as well.

India's decision to unambiguously cross the nuclear threshold was nonetheless highly validating within the country and ultimately to the country's international standing. Although the ensuing friction in the U.S.-Indian bilateral relationship took years to resolve and could be renewed if India were to resume nuclear testing, the nuclear tests ultimately did not preclude major advances in relations with the United States, including the signing of the Indo-U.S. nuclear agreement, despite India not being a signatory to the NPT. At the same time, Sino-Indian relations have advanced significantly over the past decade, although Indian officials remain vexed that China looms much larger in Indian eyes than India does in Chinese

eyes. But it is far from certain that accelerated nuclear weapons development would garner major strategic advantages for India.

A far more achievable outcome is incremental nuclear modernization leading over time to an approximation of Sino-Indian strategic equilibrium, although not requiring numerical equivalence between the two states. Such an outcome would afford much better prospects for longer-term stability in relations between Asia's two largest powers. It might also enable New Delhi and Beijing to constrain an open ended military competition, even as the military capabilities of India and China will undoubtedly continue to grow. But this outcome would be contingent on both states demonstrating mutual accommodation and strategic restraint on nuclear weapons and on regional geopolitics more generally. This suggests the obvious basis for strategic discussions between both powers, although it is doubtful that either is yet prepared for such talks. But the logic seems persuasive, lest either or both are locked into a longer term strategic competition that neither seeks.

NORTH KOREA AND PAKISTAN. Not even guarded optimism is warranted in the cases of North Korea or Pakistan. In different but closely related ways, the nuclear programs of these two states pose the greatest risks for building a more predictable nuclear order in Asia. This judgment reflects more than the long record of illicit nuclear commerce between the two countries as well as the respective involvement of Pakistani and North Korean scientists in the transfer of nuclear technologies and materials to other states, of which the conduct of Abdul Qadeer Khan was by far the most widespread and egregious. Pakistani and North Korean behavior reflects the continued domination of adversarial belief systems within the leaderships of both countries, which pose longer term risks for two primary sub-regions of Asia where the possibilities of major armed conflict persist and (if anything) have grown.

Pakistan's nuclear ambitions and activities are much more extensive than widely realized. Its accumulation of fissile material is leading to a significant expansion of its weapons stockpile, which is growing more rapidly than that of any other nuclear weapon state. According to one recent estimate, Pakistan's holdings of highly enriched uranium and its ongoing construction of two additional plutonium production reactors will enable the expansion of its warhead inventory of between 90–110 in 2011 to 150–200 within a decade, although some estimates range even higher. The lower range estimates of Pakistan's stockpile in another decade would be roughly comparable to the projected size of the U.K.'s stockpile. Depending on the scope of China's nuclear modernization plans, some experts believe Pakistan's inventory of nuclear weapons could even exceed that of China in another 10 years. Armed with a growing array of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and nuclear-capable aircraft, Pakistan has adopted a war-fighting nuclear strategy intended to compensate for India's conventional advantage. Its military doctrines presume early use of nuclear weapons

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in any serious armed conflict with New Delhi. Although there has been repeated international concern about the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and about its command and control procedures, the gravest risks reflect the country's apparent readiness to use nuclear weapons in a future war. Its exceedingly problematic record in the transfer of nuclear materials and technology adds another very worrisome dimension to this picture.

North Korea's nuclear capacities remain small in numbers but their development and longer-term precedents are also deeply worrisome. It is the only state ever to withdraw from the NPT, and it has reneged on every denuclearization accord it has ever signed. Having twice tested nuclear devices in defiance of adversaries and benefactors alike, it now claims equal standing with all nuclear weapon states. North Korea asserts that its entire inventory of plutonium has been weaponized, likely resulting in an inventory of six to eight weapons; it has also revealed the existence of a modern facility for uranium enrichment, thereby enabling development of an alternative means of fissile material production.

It is impossible to discern Pyongyang's ultimate nuclear ambitions. But its weapons breakthroughs demonstrate how a small, isolated regime confronting grievous economic shortcomings proved able to defy the world's most powerful states and sustain pursuit of nuclear weapons, first covertly inside the NPT and overtly following the withdrawal from the treaty. North Korea is located in the heart of Northeast Asia, a pivotal region in global economics and politics, and its strategic reach (primarily with medium range ballistic missiles) extends to all neighboring states. Senior U.S. officials also believe Pyongyang may one day successfully test a long-range ballistic missile capable of reaching U.S. territory, thereby raising the prospect of North Korea as a direct national security threat to the United States. In addition, Pyongyang has long standing political, technological, and military ties to states with highly problematic nuclear and missile histories, including Iran, Pakistan, and Syria.

Many observers question North Korea's longer-term survivability, but the system has a resilience and durability that the outside world frequently fails to grasp. Even though the North's economic circumstances may seem dire, it does not consider its nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip that it will trade for economic assistance, even as it clearly seeks the latter. North Korea's leaders view nuclear weapons as central to the state's identity and security planning. The sinking of a South Korean corvette and the shelling of a South Korean coastal island in 2010 suggests that Pyongyang believes that its nuclear capabilities provide an added measure of protection from retaliation, even as South Korea insists that any future use of force will not go unanswered. The open-ended prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea locked in deeply adversarial relations with South Korea and Japan and unprepared to abide by its international obligations presents a deeply disquieting picture. It underscores the extraordinary risks posed in a region where nuclear weapons are now an inescapable and growing feature of the strategic landscape.

The future nuclear trajectories across Asia are thus unsettled and potentially very worrisome. Equally important, it may well prove increasingly difficult to reconcile the possibilities of a significantly diminished dependence on nuclear weapons in Europe with a raised nuclear profile in Asia.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NATO

As NATO conducts its ongoing DDR, it must be highly mindful of the disparate factors at work in Asia and the absence of a regional framework to adjudicate these issues. The alliance also needs to be aware of how decisions coming out of the DDR could affect nuclear security in Asia.

Russia's NSNW assets constitute a relevant example of the relationship between the strategic debate within NATO, its implications for Asia, and the possible unintended consequences of arms control agreements in Europe. Any agreement that encourages or requires redeployment of Russian NSNW to storage locations in Russia's interior (as distinct from their outright dismantlement) would not eliminate NSNW so much as it would relocate them. Although Russia today can redeploy its NSNW anywhere it chooses, such a NATO-Russia agreement could increase NSNW deployments east of the Urals and opposite China and other Asian nations. Rather than diminishing the role of NSNW, it could breathe new life into these capabilities, which would be decidedly contrary to the larger objective of diminishing reliance on nuclear weapons. Similarly, attempts to cooperate with Russia on missile defense could also affect the strategic equities of different Asian states—in particular China, which would view increasing missile defense capabilities in the United States and Russia as a threat to its minimum nuclear deterrent.

For most of NATO's history (even when the United States maintained significant tactical nuclear deployments in South Korea and on board U.S. surface ships), Asia has been an afterthought in nuclear planning within the alliance. U.S. extended deterrence commitments to Japan, the South Korea, and Australia have always included a nuclear component, but these commitments have been bilateral rather than multilateral, and rarely elaborated with much specificity. Paradoxically, in an era when the United States is seeking to diminish its reliance on nuclear weapons, Asia's increasing nuclearization has generated interest within some U.S. Allies for more clarity in American nuclear policy. There has neither been an Asian equivalent of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group, nor are there nuclear-sharing arrangements in Asia similar to those undertaken within NATO. There is neither a regional forum where nuclear issues can be fully and openly deliberated, nor is one imaginable under prevailing circumstances. Strategic thinking about nuclear weapons among U.S. regional security partners has also remained very underdeveloped, in as much as the United States has repeatedly sought to inhibit consideration of nuclear weapons by America's regional Allies.

To fully achieve the nuclear policy objectives outlined in NATO's new Strategic Concept, shifts in strategy and operational policy emerging from the DDPR—including those intended to affect Russian nuclear strategy and policy—must be approached in holistic fashion. These shifts will also require unprecedented information disclosure and large-scale reductions in NATO and Russian nuclear capabilities if the resulting policies and agreements are to generate meaningful support among Asian states, as distinct from reinforcing the views of those favoring more nuclear weapons rather than less. Even major changes in NATO and Russian strategy may prove largely immaterial to the nuclear calculations of Asian states, which are largely shaped by a combination of national level security concerns, internal leadership, and bureaucratic support within various states for nuclear weapons development.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

NATO has reached a moment in its history where it is able to weigh major changes in nuclear strategy and doctrine that were unimaginable in the era of Soviet-American confrontation. It is seeking to disentangle from the cumulative nuclear inheritances of the Cold War in cooperation with Moscow. The nuclear policy changes outlined in the new Strategic Concept and under examination in the DDPR could include unprecedented levels of transparency with Russia and even sharper reductions in weapons that no longer serve any conceivable military purpose.

Comparable circumstances do not apply in Asia. China still believes that the disproportionate size and capabilities of U.S. and Russian nuclear forces compared with its own and the prevailing strategies of both countries leave it at a pronounced disadvantage, even if it is not seeking to emulate the strategies of either. It insists that it is incumbent on the world's two dominant nuclear powers to undertake strategic assurance and strategic restraint toward China. This leaves Beijing with fewer incentives to contemplate bilateral or multilateral arms control discussions, and this applies even more fully to Asia's new nuclear entrants. All are intent on enhancing their still nascent weapons programs. None are prepared to forgo capabilities that have been built at great cost and which all believe ensure vital national goals. As a consequence, many of the steps under consideration in NATO do not seem transferable at this stage of nuclear development across Asia.

The broad trends, however, within the alliance seem clear, lending a virtual if seldom acknowledged schizophrenia in global strategic debate. NATO and Asia are very much out of phase: as NATO continues to emphasize a reduction in the roles and risks of nuclear weapons, the reliance on nuclear weapons increases to the east. But within Asia the maximalist strategies of North Korea and Pakistan are juxtaposed against the more measured paths pursued by China and India. These contrasting possibilities underscore the very divergent directions that are

shaping strategic thinking in Asia. With states in Asia on the cusp of longer-term decisions on their nuclear futures, NATO's new Strategic Concept and the DDPR at least provides the power of example, if not a precise model to emulate. Building a nuclear order in Asia is largely a challenge for the states of Asia to determine, and this work has barely begun.

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