

DISCUSSION PAPER: HOW CAN COUNTRIES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION COLLABORATE TO COMBAT FURTHER NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION?

By Amir Hamzah Mohd Nasir¹

October 2022

Introduction

The clock was ticking. It was almost midnight. The President of the 10th Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) would soon gavel for the last time, signaling the closure of the conference as well as the review cycle. Delegations who gathered at the United Nations General Assembly Hall, representing States Parties of the NPT, would then part ways to their respective capitals, shouldering the responsibility of trying to preserve international peace and security. But one key question lingered: Was each NPT State Party still robustly guided by the prophetic preamble of the Treaty, “...*declaring their intention to achieve at the earliest possible date the cessation of the nuclear arms race and to undertake effective measures in the direction of nuclear disarmament*”?

Unfortunately, NPT States Parties could not come to an agreement in reviewing the Treaty’s implementation and charting future undertakings. With the soon to begin preparatory work for the 11th NPT Review Conference, States Parties must come to a solid realization that the business-as-usual approach will no longer be acceptable. Future deliberations among NPT States Parties during the upcoming review cycle should be premised on the urgent and pressing need to ensure the Treaty’s full and effective implementation across its three pillars: disarmament, nonproliferation, and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

The Proliferation Threat in the Asia-Pacific Region

Among all regions around the world, the Asia-Pacific stands out for its rich history, potential for further growth and sometimes convoluted political intricacies. Above all, the Asia-Pacific region continues to face a looming threat from the continued possession of nuclear weapons and their proliferation, both horizontally and vertically.

The question of further proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Asia-Pacific region-at-large is inadvertently intertwined with the perception of national security of the countries in the region. For as long as countries feel the necessity and value of nuclear deterrence, the region will continue to face real and imminent threats from nuclear weapons and their proliferation. After all, states must be reminded of the grand bargain serving as the backbone of the NPT: that the non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS) committed not to receive, manufacture, or otherwise acquire nuclear

¹ This paper was commissioned by the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) and the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) to inform discussions related to NTI’s Global Enterprise to Strengthen Nonproliferation and Disarmament. The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the author’s employer. The views also do not necessarily reflect those of NTI, APLN, or of other participants in the Global Enterprise.

weapons or other nuclear explosive devices in exchange for commitments by the nuclear-weapon states (NWS) to work toward nuclear disarmament in accordance with the Treaty.

The prospect of nuclear weapons proliferation in the Asia-Pacific region relies heavily on the persistence of nuclear armament and nuclear deterrence. Though Article VI of the NPT clearly stipulates States Parties must pursue negotiations in good faith on nuclear disarmament, policymakers continue to face a dilemma so long as there are countries in the region still benefiting, either directly or indirectly, from nuclear deterrence and policies. In other words, so long as nuclear weapons remain in the concepts, doctrines, and policies of certain countries, the region will not be entirely free from the threat of nuclear weapons and their proliferation.

Recommendations to Combat Further Proliferation in the Asia-Pacific

Efforts to combat nuclear weapons proliferation in the region will not bear fruit until accelerated efforts are made to spark tangible progress on nuclear disarmament. This is a mounting task and particularly difficult to implement in the existing environment, given the current geopolitical temperature and pressure points. Nonetheless, all is not lost. Several specific steps can be taken in the meantime by countries in the Asia-Pacific region to combat potential further proliferation of nuclear weapons.

First, in considering the complex and unpredictable developments around the Korean Peninsula, we should begin by giving due credits to the age-old wisdoms of the people of the region. In trying to decipher each move and decision made by the DPRK, we should be guided by the views and perspectives of its closest neighboring countries. No academic theory or empirical analysis can defeat the power of human psychology and deduction. Interpretation of any political move will only be complete if we also consider the accompanying cultural context, historical nuances and intended symbolism. As such, efforts to reignite the Six Party Talks, if viewed as timely and pertinent by parties from the region, should be supported by others.

Second, countries which are geographically farther away from the DPRK, namely members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), should continue to play a constructive role through preserving existing platforms for dialogues on the issue. ASEAN has been a pivotal player in Asia-Pacific political developments. Its influence will continue to grow, in tandem with its exponential economic outreach. The well-established ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is a credible and strategic multilateral platform that deserves continuous attention and political investments. ARF is particularly unique, inter alia, as it facilitates the participation and engagement of representatives of both Koreas.

Third, ASEAN countries should intensify ongoing efforts to resolve all outstanding issues in accordance with the objectives and principles of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty. Of the utmost priority is for ASEAN countries to make tangible progress towards having the signatures and ratifications of the SEANWFZ Treaty's Protocol by the NWS, as soon as possible. It is worth highlighting that the Protocol to the SEANWFZ Treaty provides for legally binding security assurances from the NWS not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons within the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone.

Unless and until the Protocol is signed and ratified by the NWS, ASEAN is not only exposed to external threats, but is also susceptible to potential armament and proliferation of nuclear weapons. Though ASEAN countries should aim for signatures and ratifications of the SEANWFZ Treaty's Protocol by the NWS without reservations, that is akin to setting the highest target in an ideal world, which is far from the reality of today and the foreseeable future.

As such, ASEAN countries could look at and learn from successful stories of other nuclear-weapon-free zones, which have attained the necessary negative security assurances from the NWS. As opposed to retaining the status quo, ASEAN countries may wish to reassess the status and prospect of signatures and ratifications of the SEANWFZ Treaty's Protocol by the NWS from the practical standpoint of collective safety and security of the region as opposed to any other competing interests.

Fourth, for decades we have observed a distinctive trend in international relations of countries recalibrating their positions and priorities according to a set of changing variables. The realm of international security and nuclear weapons proliferation is not exempted. Countries have shifted, and will continue to amend, their policies depending on related developments and circumstances. As such, we should not resort to the notion that policies and norms are forever fixed and carved in stone.

On the contrary, the changing demographics and social constructs of today mean that public opinion and activism have a growing influence and potential to change the calculus of policy makers. The population of the Asia-Pacific region, especially among the youth and technologically connected, will gradually be given the power to coalesce and drive the cause of combating nuclear weapons proliferation. It is not unthinkable to envisage a future when society will view nuclear weapons and deterrence with total dismay. When that day comes, policymakers will be left with no choice but to listen to the voices of the many.

The Asia-Pacific is a region of great promise, with abundant natural resources, thriving economic markets and growing human capital. The region will unleash its full potential only if it can maneuver through the ensuing thorny labyrinth, comprising security threats from the outside and from within, destabilizing discords and political enmities. The region's continued peace and security will depend, first and foremost, on the collective action of its countries.

Today, countries of the region have a choice: opt for the quick-fix and short-term gain of nuclear proliferation that might appeal to some domestic audiences, or to strive towards a more courageous and principled path of championing non-proliferation and disarmament of nuclear weapons, which may seem unfathomable to some domestic constituencies in the short-term but will bear precious fruits in the long-term through the preservation of regional peace and security.

Conclusion

Fast-forward to the 11th NPT Review Conference. The clock has been ticking and hitherto it has yet to stop. Delegations of NPT States Parties once again convene at the United Nations General Assembly Hall. While awaiting with anticipation the signature gaveling by the President that marks the closure of the conference,

delegations are unwittingly reminded of the lingering key question. Is each NPT State Party still robustly guided by the prophetic preamble of the Treaty, “...*declaring their intention to achieve at the earliest possible date the cessation of the nuclear arms race and to undertake effective measures in the direction of nuclear disarmament*”?

For the answer to be “yes”, NPT States Parties, including those from the Asia-Pacific region, will have to show unyielding commitments and tangible actions that begin now.