

DISCUSSION PAPER: HOW TO PROMOTE ARMS CONTROL IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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The Asia-Pacific faces growing strategic security challenges. All the nuclear-armed states that are visibly expanding their nuclear arsenals—China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea—are in this region. U.S.-China competition, in particular, reshapes the regional security order and pressures other countries in the region to hedge against future uncertainties by developing new military capabilities and forging new security alignments. The growing military spending across the region threatens the public's social and economic welfare and reduces governments' investment to combat shared threats like climate change.

Against this background, this paper analyzes the underlying factors affecting substantive arms control cooperation in this region. It also discusses the important role of the general public to promote arms control thinking domestically in a bottom-up approach and to hold the governments accountable in making responsible national security decisions in line with their existing international legal obligations.

Responsibility of Major Powers

A major source of the looming disasters mentioned above is the competition between Washington and Beijing, who therefore bear a special responsibility to maintain a peaceful and stable regional order. If acting strategically and collectively, other smaller countries also have important roles to play and considerable leverage to force the major powers to make the right choices.

A key challenge is that both Washington and Beijing appear to have become increasingly disillusioned about the prospect of achieving common security. Believing that the political disagreements between them are too deep to be managed by dialogue and persuasion, they both focus on outcompeting the other in the economic, military, and international public opinion domains with a particularly strong attention to military competition. As the line between nuclear and non-nuclear military technologies becomes blurrier, the traditionally insulated U.S.-China nuclear competition increasingly spills over to competitions in missile defense, space, counter-space, anti-submarine warfare, long-range surveillance and strike, unmanned technologies, artificial intelligence, and cyber capabilities. This makes the risk of nuclear use harder to manage and the overall military competitive landscape even more dangerous.

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With no significant change of course, the current path of focusing on military competition has a growing risk of leading to a conflict. The two major powers need to reflect on their domestic mainstream assumptions that common security is no longer possible and that military competition is the only path to victory. Despite their public narrative on common security, they should acknowledge that the power-centric mindset has become the dominant domestic thinking in both countries and that this is going to cause serious clashes, as neither side envisages nor is prepared to accept its own failure in this strategic competition. If they agree this is a dangerous path, they should get much more serious about how to envision and achieve common security, especially about what their own country can do to promote it, including through potential arms control measures.

The first step is to acknowledge that one's own behaviors and policies have international implications and can influence threat perceptions in other countries. China, for example, has growing concerns about the establishment of regional minilateral security alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and the AUKUS trilateral security partnership. However, Beijing believes that Washington's aggressive hegemonic intent is solely driving these developments and that they have nothing to do with any of China's own behaviors or policies. Such dismissal of the others' threat perceptions is the first obstacle that must be overcome. This requires domestic self-reflections that should be provided by the country's own experts, scholars, and public opinion leaders who have a responsibility to challenge self-righteous domestic mainstream views and inject a dose of self-criticism into the public discourse.

One major source of instability is the real and growing risk of military conflict on the horizon. For instance, there is an increasing potential for the Taiwan Strait to become a war zone in the foreseeable future. As a result, the major powers and many other regional countries feel an unprecedented sense of urgency to seriously plan for a conflict or for being dragged into a major power war. This growing anxiety has become a key driver of escalating military competitions and strategic realignments.

The major powers have a special responsibility to reverse the increasingly popular thinking that war is inevitable. This means they need to explicitly renounce the option of using force to unilaterally change any territorial status quo. Taiwan and mainland China's acceptable endgames are increasingly irreconcilable. If Beijing insists on the right of unilaterally changing the status quo through force, it will lead to an uncontrollable arms race and potentially conflict, which will undermine all regional countries' fundamental interests. Washington also has a responsibility to engage China in a substantive political dialogue to ensure that American efforts to deter a Chinese invasion would not inadvertently start a war and make all regional countries less secure. All regional countries should make it a priority to defend and consolidate the basic principle that no one has the right to bring war and disaster to others in the pursuit of unilateral change of territorial status quo. Any such changes must be achieved through peaceful means, and regional countries should collectively impose as much political pressure on the major powers as possible to hold them accountable to such a common-sense principle.

A second source of threat perception is the popular belief that the international system is becoming more anarchic, where no country is really serious about norms and rules, and all countries must rely on their own power to survive and prosper. This reinforces the power-centric mindset in many countries, including China, and directly contributes to growing military spending. That said, the reason behind the popular perception about the anarchic nature of the current international system is that the members of the system have failed to defend existing norms and rules. In the case of China, Beijing itself does not call out Moscow's blatant violation of Kyiv's sovereignty and territorial integrity, which contributes to the lack of international confidence in common rules. This example illustrates that countries have a choice and can help achieve common security in the region if they first bring their own policies in line with the underlying requirements of common security.

In this regard, China has made the advancement of common security a key pillar of its foreign policy advocacy in recent years. Its paramount leader Xi Jinping has proposed his flagship foreign policy concepts of building "a community of shared future for mankind" and the Global Security Initiative. Both concepts place a heavy emphasis on achieving common security and cooperative security. What is needed now is a substantive program to implement common security through actual policy. A logical step is to place concrete arms control proposals in the front and center of such grand concepts to demonstrate credibility. As a rising regional leader with fast growing military capabilities, China is in the best position to lead regional efforts to explore cooperative arms control opportunities at both the conventional and nuclear levels. China should consider promoting a regional confidence- and trust-building process through greater military transparency and joint moratoria on the development of destabilizing military technologies. As China occupies such a central place in regional security dynamics, it is only natural that other countries should expect a Chinese leadership role in arms control to have a very positive cascading effect in regional security.

The Role of the Public

On the one hand, the lack of arms control progress in the Asia-Pacific is due to the governments' lack of will, interest, and experience in negotiating and implementing arms control agreements. On the other hand, it is also because the general publics in this region haven't played a significant role in bringing about cooperative security. Considering the impact of the peace movements in the United States and Europe on Cold-War-era arms control diplomacy, the lack of such contribution today from the populations in most Asia-Pacific countries is an important missing piece.

In many regional countries, the general publics are not fully aware of or genuinely concerned about the growing risk of instability and war. The human suffering in the Ukraine war is insufficiently reported and often dismissed as an inevitable result of a geopolitical game that happens in a faraway land. The international movement to highlight the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons has received little attention and has had limited influence in most parts of this region such as in East Asia. In many cases, a significant section of the public often demonstrates greater enthusiasm

than its government in wanting to use force to resolve disputes with neighbors and has been quite openly supportive of seeking military superiority through unilateral buildup. At the same time, the other part of the public does not appear to think it should have a voice or role in influencing government policy on security matters.

Importantly, in many of these cases, the public's underappreciation of the costs of war, the nationalistic enthusiasm for military capability expansion, and the lack of interest in arms control are very much a result of long-standing selective news reports by state media and systemic government efforts to cultivate domestic public discourse. The lack of civil society peace movements is also often related to governments' efforts to strengthen centralized control.

However, it is time that governments realize that their traditional policy deliberately or unconsciously fosters the public's power-centric mindset, which can seriously undermine their countries' own security interests by preventing a rational domestic debate and limiting the governments' freedom of seeking a win-win outcome through cooperative security. It is also useful to be aware that as members of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty all regional countries have a legal obligation to pursue disarmament in good faith. An argument can be made that this obligation means the governments have the responsibility not only to engage in interstate arms control negotiations but also to create necessary domestic conditions for promoting arms control policies. Given the highly secretive and centralized security policymaking in many countries, it would be useful to promote a regional gold standard or best practice in ensuring domestic transparency on defense and security policies to one's own citizens and ensuring institutionalized access to and participation in the domestic process of security policy deliberation by one's own civilian expert community, especially when it comes to issues related to weapons of mass destruction such as nuclear weapons.

In line with this responsibility, national governments should allow independent public opinion surveys to show how the population thinks about national security and arms control issues; it should allow academic institutions, civil society actors, and media organizations to host expert and citizen discussion and debates on such issues; it should promote transparency to its own citizens about military spending, capability development, and future planning; and it should allow academic and civil society organizations to provide education programs to concerned citizens. In fact, the governments' legal obligation to pursue disarmament would indicate they should allocate resources to fund training and education programs on arms control issues for relevant officials and concerned citizens and experts. At the end of the day, peace and stability in the region depend on national governments making internationally responsible security policies. The latter often depends on whether the public can hold its own government accountable in a democratic and transparent domestic decision-making process.

Conclusion

Promoting common security and arms control in the Asia-Pacific would require both inter-governmental and domestic level efforts. A direct driver of rising military spending

in the region is the growing sense of a far-reaching great power conflict on the horizon, especially over the Taiwan Strait. Regional countries still have time to work together in holding the major powers in the region accountable to the common-sense principle of not using force to unilaterally change territorial status quo. China, as well as the United States, should recognize the dominance of the power-centric mindset in their own domestic mainstream discourse as the main driving force toward a collision path. They should add credibility and substance to their advocacy for common security by engaging in direct arms control talks with each other, which is the least they can do to defuse a regional arms race centered around their bilateral security competition.

It is also time for the general publics in this region to fulfill their long-neglected role of ensuring accountable government decision-making by demanding basic military transparency and their rights as citizens to get informed and involved in critical national security policy debates. Under the growing interstate geopolitical rivalry, domestic checks and balances provide a no less important source of government accountability than international agreements on strategic military capabilities that can be particularly difficult and time-consuming to negotiate. In line with their legal responsibility to pursue disarmament in good faith, the governments should demonstrate their credibility by establishing domestic institutions to ensure their own citizens and experts are informed and involved in the deliberation and debate of key defense and security policies.