

# APLN-KNPS Webinar: The NPT and Security Dynamics in Northeast Asia

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Summary Report by Chris Gowe [APLN Research Intern]  
APLN-KNPS Webinar featuring the authors of the *7<sup>th</sup> Issue of the Korean Journal on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Energy*

Session 1 – 8 July 2021

Moderator: Tanya Ogilvie-White

Discussant: Marianne Hanson

Speakers: John Tilemann, Nobuyasu Abe, Bong-geun Jun, Tatsujiro Suzuki

Session 1 – 9 July 2021

Moderator: Young-jun Kim

Discussant: Na-young Lee

Speakers: Tong, Zhao Ramesh Thakur, Angela Woodward

## Summary

On 8-9 July 2021, APLN hosted webinars based on seven papers commissioned for the [special issue](#) of the *Korean Journal on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Energy*. In Session 1 on 8 July, John Tilemann, Nobuyasu Abe, Bong-geun Jun and Tatsujiro Suzuki discussed their papers covering the NPT, nuclear proliferation issues, and nuclear security in Northeast Asia. In Session 2 on 9 July, Tong Zhao, Ramesh Thakur, and Angela Woodward presented their papers on the responsibilities of nuclear weapons states vis a vis disarmament commitments, the current relevancy of the NPT, and the prospects of a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Northeast Asia. Broadly, speakers recognized the successes of the NPT while also acknowledging its shortcomings and the need to safeguard the treaty to meet the challenges of the evolving nuclear security landscape in Northeast Asia and beyond. Speakers noted the need for a security architecture in the Northeast Asian region where collaborative measures are lacking. A recurring sentiment was a recognition of the increasing complexity of nuclear issues in Asia given the number of nuclear armed states, nuclear threshold states, and flashpoints such as the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait.

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## The NPT 50 Years On

**John Tilemann** began the first session with a discussion of the NPT and the problem of nuclear latency—the status in which a country possesses the technology to quickly build nuclear weapons. He noted that the near universal acceptance of the NPT has lent great normative force to the principle of nonproliferation, which has significantly raised the opportunity cost of breaking out as a nuclear-weapon state (NWS) for threshold states and sidelined voices calling for nuclear armament. The international inspections system led by the IAEA, he said, provides mutual confidence that even countries with the most sophisticated nuclear capabilities are abiding by their nonproliferation commitments. Despite these successes, he chalked up a lack of information sharing and confidence building measures in Asia as a contributing factor to tensions in the region and noted the constructive role APLN could play in this area. Tilemann made the point that the NPT and the broader nonproliferation regime have been hugely effective in the past and will remain vital in the foreseeable future. He encouraged APLN to use its standing and influence to encourage support for ongoing regional commitments to the nonproliferation regime.

**Nobuyasu Abe** continued the session with a discussion about the relevancy of the NPT to containing and eliminating nuclear threats in Northeast Asia. He acknowledged that the NPT has had a mixed track record, but that it has been overall very successful in terms of having prevented many countries from obtaining nuclear weapons. The biggest failure of the NPT, he said, was its inability to stop the DPRK from becoming a nuclear breakout state and the corresponding failure of the UNSC to crack down on this breakout beyond imposing economic sanctions. This lack of enforcement sets a dangerous precedent for threshold states considering nuclear armament. He states that the international community may have to provide security guarantees to the DPRK at a steep cost (perhaps sacrificing the U.S. alliances in NE Asia and the U.S. nuclear umbrella) in order to denuclearize the DPRK. The solution may lie in a Northeast Asia peace and security framework that includes Russia, China, and the United States, and that works on building cooperation and mutual security in the region. Through such a system, eventually the perceived need for nuclear weapons may be reduced.

**Bong-geun Jun** followed with a presentation regarding the NPT and the DPRK's nuclear program. He discussed the continued relevancy of the NPT in protecting against nuclear breakout states in light of the failure of the treaty and the global community to prevent the DPRK from advancing its nuclear program. He pointed out that the DPRK is not the only country to have ever withdrawn from the NPT but is the only state actively exploring bombs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the fastest expanding nuclear program of any country. The DPRK also has the most aggressive nuclear doctrine, with a preemptive nuclear strike among their military options to deter their perceived enemies. Jun argued that states should learn from the DPRK's case to craft safeguards to the NPT, including

strengthening the treaty to make arbitrary withdrawal under Article 10 of the NPT very difficult. Despite the bleak situation with the DPRK's nuclear program, Jun spoke of what appears to be the DPRK's efforts to be acknowledged as a normal state, which may indicate an angle through which the DPRK could be pressured to move towards denuclearization if it considers its lack of NPT membership and nuclear pariah status as a hinderance to the goal of international legitimacy.


During the second webinar, **Ramesh Thakur** presented his paper covering the challenges facing the NPT fifty years after it took effect. In a recent piece of evidence demonstrating the fraying of the international arms control framework, Thakur referenced the United Kingdom's recent decision to increase its stockpile of nuclear warheads to 260 by the end of the decade due to the "evolving security environment." This is part of a broader trend in which nuclear weapons states such as the U.S. and Russia have been investing in upgrading and expanding their existing nuclear arsenals in response to spiking geopolitical tensions across multiple regions. The centerpiece of the international arms control framework is the NPT, and thus it becomes relevant to examine where it has worked and where there have been failings in light of these developments. Thakur argued that the NPT has been successful in terms of its nonproliferation pillar considering that the fears of the 1960s that there would be 20-25 countries with nuclear capabilities never came to fruition. The NPT, he noted, has managed to contain nuclear proliferation to the point that the only problem countries are those that actually have the bomb. However, on the other hand, the NPT's disarmament pillar has never been active, and not a single nuclear warhead has been dismantled under the auspices of the NPT. Thakur said this remains the biggest challenge, but that the recently effective TPNW or "Ban Treaty" may emerge as a vital complimentary force to the NPT that pushes the existing arms control framework towards eventual disarmament.

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## Northeast Asian Nuclear Security

**Tatsujiro Suzuki** presented on the topic of nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear security in light of the 2011 Fukushima Disaster. He spoke of structural changes in the nuclear energy market since the disaster, markedly the abandonment of nuclear projects and existing plants in Asia due to fears of accidents among publics and governments. China and Russia have become the leading nuclear equipment suppliers while the U.S. and its partners are losing their share in the global nuclear energy market. Suzuki also warned of resource constraints at the IAEA as a result of increasing demands for inspections and concerns regarding threshold states. Finally, he spoke of a need to address the increasing stockpile of nuclear materials, especially plutonium, from civilian nuclear energy programs, along with the risk of cyber-attacks and other domestic threats to nuclear materials. It is up to each country to introduce new safeguards, but global organizations and networks such as APLN can work to bring countries into alignment with this shared international goal.

**Tong Zhao** opened the second webinar with a discussion on steps for NWS to honor their disarmament commitments under Article VI of the NPT and reduce nuclear risk. Zhao advised that NWS heads of states should publicly and unequivocally announce their support for the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons and support nuclear arms control as a means for gradual disarmament. He acknowledged the barriers to achieving disarmament, including the tendency for the bureaucracy of NWS to continually work towards arsenal upgrades to strengthen deterrence. Zhao noted that even efforts to promote small changes like more nuclear transparency or modest self-restrictions on certain capabilities are very unappealing to operational level policymakers. He argued that NWS, especially those with centralized decision-making systems, will need strong top-down leadership in order to counter the bureaucratic inertia that works against disarmament efforts. In addition, Zhao called for a universal code of conduct to be adopted among NWS in which they agree to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategy and refrain from declaring that their nuclear weapons contribute to international prestige or great power status. Finally, Zhao called for a system to hold nuclear weapons states liable for accidents and environmental damage caused by the usage of nuclear-powered vehicles and nuclear weapons.

**Angela Woodward** closed out the second webinar with a presentation on the prospects of a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) treaty in Northeast Asia. She argued that a NWFZ could play a valuable role in reaffirming states parties' commitments under the NPT as they comprehensively prohibit activities that facilitate a state's achievement of nuclear weapons capability. NWFZ treaties also provide another avenue for the international community to reengage on nuclear issues while further imposing international law on the nuclear policies of member states. She asserted that the forum for dialogue facilitate by NWFZ treaties could be especially useful in kickstarting additional communication between NWS in separate forum from the NPT. The value of NWFZs, she argued, lies in their capacity to reaffirm the non-nuclear status of NPT member states and effectively limit the geographic spread of operational nuclear weapons, thereby reducing opportunities for nuclear arms racing, miscalculation, and nuclear risk escalation. One benefit of NWFZs is their capacity to compliment the NPT by allowing for additional region-specific restrictions on various nuclear activity in accordance with the characteristics of each region and the geopolitical dynamics therein. Additionally, Woodward noted that NPT adherence is not a prerequisite for joining a NWFZ treaty, which could bring non-compliant states into some form of an arms control regime even if they are not yet fully in alignment with the NPT. NWFZs are a powerful tool complimentary to the NPT that should be considered especially in Northeast Asia given the number of threshold nuclear states and flashpoints between nuclear and non-nuclear actors throughout the region. 

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