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Session 1C: Geopolitical Tensions and Nuclear Temptations in Asia-Pacific

Major power rivalries have been intensifying including in the once dormant arena of territorial claims in both East Asia and Europe; and in new arenas, the cyber sphere and outer space (and in managing terrorism). Do these developments change the proliferation calculus for countries in the Asia-Pacific? Does nuclear deterrence have a role to play in helping manage these arenas of competition and tension? Or are current trends in relations between great powers hastening the erosion of the relevance of nuclear weapons.

Moderator:

Gareth Evans (Honorary Convener APLN / Former Foreign Minister of Australia)

Presenters:

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** All presenters and moderator are APLN members with the exception of Professor G. John Ikenberry.*

Chancellor Gareth Evans (former Foreign Minister of Australia)

There is no doubt that the present geopolitical situation globally and in this region is more uncertain than the times in recent history. In Russia, Mr. Putin has aggressively put forward territorial encroachments first in Georgia and then in Ukraine. Active military engagement in Syria in a way that has not been particularly productive have been making many waves in Europe and a wider field. In China, the big shifts in tectonic plates economically have now been matched by foreign relations as newly visible assertiveness especially in the South China Sea. The obvious reluctance of the U.S. to yield strategic ground to China and East Asia clearly has the potential to end in tears unless everybody is extremely careful. There is also the possibility of the White House being occupied next January by someone apparently quite willing to tear up the whole alliance structure. This contributed to further nervousness in this region. In East Asia, there is continued development of DPRK's nuclear program. In South Asia, there are tensions between India and Pakistan, which could flare up anytime into major conflict if there were any repetition of state-sanctioned terrorist attack we saw in Mumbai a few years ago.

In all these contexts, nuclear weapon issues have become more salient and central than it has been in a long time. In Russia, Mr. Putin has been using language about possible military use of nuclear weapons, which has frankly not been heard since the height of the Cold War. Russia and the U.S. are no longer talking about arms control measures in the nuclear area, and are

instead furiously modernizing their respective households. In Asia, the stockpile of nuclear weapons is actually increasing instead of decreasing at a smaller rate in all the existing nuclear weapons-possessing states: China, India, Pakistan, and the DPRK. There is a further problem in South Asia that Pakistan is moving towards the reliance of tactical nuclear weapons with India seriously contemplating following the suit. That would be profoundly destabilizing. Despite the efforts from President Obama in 2009 to move away from reliance on nuclear weapons, a storyline which is hoped to be repeated when he visits Hiroshima this week, it does seem that old Cold War mindset in believing the utility of nuclear deterrence is back in the minds of policy-makers in Asia and Europe.

I have three questions for discussion:

1. Are geopolitical tensions creating new nuclear temptations in Asia-Pacific region? First of all, for the existing major powers, the U.S. and China in particular, temptation to place greater rather than less reliance on nuclear weapons in their security doctrine. Is that kind of temptation at work? Also, in this context, is there growing temptation in non-NW states, in particular for partners and allies of the U.S. such as Japan, South Korea and Australia, to have nuclear weapons of their own or place greater reliance on more nuclear umbrella?
2. If temptations are real, what are the dangers? Does it mean growing closer to nuclear catastrophe or as some people argue, increased reliance would better stabilize the region?
3. If the dangers and risks are real and serious, what can we do to diffuse them? How can we get disarmament on track again?

President Chen, from the vantage point of research in the grand strategic landscape and in the context of all the tensions in East Asia and South Asia, does possession of nuclear weapons make these tensions worse or contribute to their management?

President Chen Dongxiao (Shanghai Institute for International Studies, China)

There is an old Chinese saying: when we look at trees we should not forget the trees and the forest. Nuclear development issues are closely interrelated to strategic tensions in a cycle of mutual feedback. On the one side, tensions are triggering factor for temptation of nuclear weapons in non-nuclear states in order to make some balance. Some of those voices have risen in Korea, Japan and other parts of Asia. On the other hand, rising nuclear temptation itself would re-enhance cycle of strategic tension.

Having more nuclear weapons will make the situation worse rather than manage security situations. DPRK's nuclear weapon itself is a good manifestation. DPRK tried to develop nuclear weapons based upon its analysis of improving security situation and management with countries such as the U.S. and ROK. However, the trajectory of this nuclearization itself has actually made situation worse in the region through uncertainty. It has made the Korean Peninsula one of the most potentially explosive areas. This is one of the most vivid examples

that nuclearization itself will lead to more uncertainty, misjudgment and over-reactions. It would be hard to find a counter-argument that nuclearization will contribute to stability. There are counter-arguments that if there were more nuclear weapons in Asia-Pacific, states would reach a balance. But such a logic is bookish. On one side, the balance is very fragile due to the technology of both defense side and offensive side. It is very easy to make this balance broken. This situation was seen in the Cold War era, and will continue to be seen in the current era when checking the situation of India and Pakistan. They always try to reach a balance, but it is very difficult to reach it to some extent. In the long run, misjudgment will cause miscalculation which in turn will cause a disastrous situation.

On the other hand, this kind of balance is based on limited rationality by decision makers. It is very difficult to control the whole process. Would it help nuclear states to make more compromise? However, the U.S. and DPRK have not managed the situation well in the past decade. DPRK has not had more possibilities to reach agreement or reconciliation with South Korea. So nuclear temptation or de-nuclearization is not a key factor that is conducive to calming down situations.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

What could China do to control or curve this nuclear temptation? Countries are nervous about DPRK, but it is also true that key state actors in this region are wary of China's increasing assertiveness and growing reliance on nuclear weapons as can be seen by modernization program, increasing program and talk of putting weapons on high alert.

President Chen Dongxiao

I will answer the question by dividing into two dimensions. On one side, it is about how China looks at nuclear strategy. For a long time, China has had a very stable strategy - to maintain minimum deterrence capability. While China has improved some of its quality, the principle has been maintained for many years. The main goal for Chinese is to keep China's strategic capabilities capable of second deterrent strike. This is minimum standard of nuclear capabilities. But at the same time, looking at this balance compared to the U.S., some of the foundation has been undermined gradually, particularly with the so-called rebalance to Asia-Pacific with more missile defense capabilities such as submarine deployment. That would make some Chinese scholars afraid on whether minimum deterrent capability of China is still capable. In the other dimension, what kind of role can China play to mitigate tensions in the hotspots in our neighborhood regarding nuclear temptations? Firstly, China will continue to assume bridge-builder among divergent or conflicted interests. On one side, there is the DPRK. On the other side are the U.S. and ROK. Even if China finds it difficult to bring all these countries to the same table together, given the zero trust and confidence the U.S., ROK, and DPRK have for each other, Beijing's role is very unique. China will always commit itself to being a convenor of those multilateral dialogues, no matter how many parties there are. But whether countries such as the U.S. and DPRK would want to cross this bridge is out of Beijing's control.

The second role that China could play is a facilitator of peace and stability of this region as a

whole. China could create more favorable conditions for more general conciliation and reach agreements. For instance, China's commitment to fully implement the latest ratified Resolutions of UNSC is very important. China's implementation of the Resolution is strictly done to the letter. But one concern is that there is too much emphasis on sanction, and no talks on how to resume to dialogue. Another concern is whether countries such as the U.S. and the ROK will continue to be interested in dealing with nuclear issues with the sitting regime of DPRK. It is important for China to know if the two parties want to change the regime first, and then to deal with disarmament.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

How consistent is China's role as facilitator of peace and security, when its actions in South China Sea which are showing anything but respect for the rule-based order and the norms of peace and stability as most of the rest of the world would apply?

President Chen Dongxiao

Please check Chinese media headlines and websites of Chinese diplomatic missions and office as Chinese diplomats are launching a very intensive campaign to reeducate the international audience regarding the root cause of the problem in South China Sea and why China's actions have been largely distorted. China has had a consistent stance towards South China Sea for many decades. It is other countries that changed the position and made the issue more complicated.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

How important is the nuclear issue in US-China relation from the U.S. perspective? Would there be a chance of reducing salience? President Chen mentioned how China wants to maintain survivability, or second strike military capability. In regards to that, the role further development of conventional long-ranged precise global strike is having an impact on China's position. Or essentially, the U.S.'s position. Are they helping or hindering in this context?

Professor G. John Ikenberry (International Politics, Princeton University)

Nuclear weapons have not been the actual cause of instability. They are implicated increasingly in the nature of the conflict, but the nature of the conflict and insecurity in East Asia that is driving a lot of the security dynamics is deeper than just nuclear weapons. In the background, there is a big shift of half a century of hegemonic order with extended deterrent and stability of nuclear side in the region and Asia-Pacific regional system based on trade and alliances that is giving way to a balance of power system. It is driven by the rise of China and growing insecurity about the U.S.'s position in East Asia. If Trump is elected, there would be a whole different set of conversations next year about the future of East Asia and the American position. In the midst of this unsettled region, defence spending is growing. Asia has surpassed Europe as the region with most defence spending. China's alone is growing 12% a year.

In the background, there is decentralized balance of power politics, and then there is the nuclear weapons problem and then China moving its position on it. For a few decades, China has been

the model state in the nuclear dimension. It had modest minimum deterrence, no interest in having weapons at high alert, and a small force and no first use. It was a general position that was very constructive. Along the way, China increasingly moved into the inner club of nuclear weapon states from a third world, the people's bomb, to working with the others in the inside trying to secure nuclear weapons and keep them at a modest level. Now the U.S. and China is engaging in modernization competition and view each other as the source of their problem. China has road mobile ICBMs and movement towards putting missiles in submarines, the SLBMs. The U.S. is keeping pace by developing a trillion-dollar modernization agenda over 30 years. This is not a traditional arms race, but it is still a modernization action and reaction. Scholars see this broader security competition in the region and define it as a security dilemma problem. Each side is being driven in a sense that they are responding to each other where they are defensive and the other is offensive. This is a situation where diplomacy is necessary. We need a bilateral nuclear dialogue between the U.S. and China.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

What are the benefits of the U.S. acknowledging mutual strategic vulnerability? It could be a worthwhile strategy, but the U.S. is deeply reluctant to do so in terms of China's position in that respect.

Professor G. John Ikenberry

Setting agendas is part of the process of dialogue focusing on transparency, nuclear forces, posture, and doctrines. There should be a Track 1 and a Track 1.5 with each side clarifying its positions and plans and acknowledging the other's strategic interest. Setting strategic vulnerability as the master concept is very important as opposed to strategic stability, which was a cornerstone of US-Soviet Union arms control. It would be a Track 1 dialogue with efforts to establish restraints and reciprocal process. There should also be a full doctrine to no first use because while the Obama administration has moved some distance from the Bush administration, there is still some more ways to go. So there are quite the opportunities for reciprocal restraint in this process of modernization following up with other issues such as cyber-space, missile defense.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

What are the possibilities of a high level Track 1 dialogue? While there has been quite the high level of strategic dialogue between the U.S. and China for some time, nuclear weapons have never been on the agenda for dialogue.

Professor G. John Ikenberry

I am unable to answer that question at this junction. But conditions are quite favorable right now. President Obama is visiting Hiroshima – there is a real American commitment here at the moment for real movement. Also, there have been around 10-15 years of Track 2 dialogue. There are lessons there. Finally, the entry barrier for strategic dialogue would not be great. It would be just about clarifying each other's position, sharing knowledge, developing protocols for launches. It could be about visiting each other's sites to explain technology. It could be built

upon real efforts in the Nuclear Summit process where China stepped up to its role with the U.S. in developing a lexicon of shared terms for understanding each other's weapons system. The dialogue would be about finding an inter-operable terminology and concept so that international communication could happen without getting lost in translation. The Track 1 could also be expanded to include efforts to constrain DPRK.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

How can Japan contribute towards a safer nuclear environment in East Asia? Japanese policy-makers have been traditionally ambivalent. While they do not want nuclear weapons themselves, they are very reluctant to reduce protection from nuclear umbrella.

Professor Tatsujiro Suzuki (Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University)

Unfortunately, the atmosphere of keeping the option alive is growing in political world. This means that Japanese policy-makers feel more threat and want more nuclear deterrence. Fortunately, an overwhelming majority of the public do not want nuclear weapons. I believe that the government should in fact establish new policies not depending on nuclear deterrence. RECNA has been going further to direct the situation towards a nuclear free zone. My proposal is a Northeast Asia nuclear weapon-free zone -- Japan, ROK, and DPRK should not possess nuclear weapons, and the U.S., Russia, and China will provide nuclear protection. Japan and DPRK should work together for mutual assurance that nuclear weapons are unnecessary and seek to reduce the nuclear umbrella. Furthermore, there should be a shift from Track 1 to Track 2. For instance, RECNA plans to establish an independent non-governmental Panel on Peace and Security in Northeast Asia (PSNA) and collaborate with other regional activities. The whole process will be called "Nagasaki Process," a Track 2 approach. Second, Japan has 48 tonnes of plutonium due to past reprocessing activities, but it does not have a plutonium surplus policy. There are some concerns in the region regarding its latent nuclear capability. As such, Japan should change long 50-year nuclear cycle policy and reduce stockpile by having a more flexible recycling policy. For instance, it could restrain reprocessing until its stocks are reduced more. Also, Japan could collaborate with other countries with large plutonium stockpile such as UK, France and the U.S., to jointly develop cost-effective, feasible options to reduce such stockpile. Third, there should be a multilateral approach to nuclear fuel cycle. There should also be a regional verification scheme to increase regional confidence and trust regarding each other's civilian nuclear programs in Northeast Asia.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

Japan's latent capacity to develop nuclear weapons is the highest in the world. It is a threshold state with more capacity than any other country. How close is the Japanese government in developing its own nuclear weapons?

Professor Tatsujiro Suzuki

Not very close. However, even then, to decrease the noise about Japan becoming a nuclear state, President Obama should use his influence at the Hiroshima visit.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

What is the possibility of Japan also undertaking unilateral actions on decreasing the reliance on nuclear deterrence?

Professor Tatsujiro Suzuki

Japan and the Republic of Korea should work together for mutual assurance that nuclear weapons are unnecessary.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

How is DPRK's threat perception in the Republic of Korea? Is the threat perception changing so much that Korea would want to go nuclear itself? How could the ROK government resist that temptation?

President Minsoon Song (Former Foreign Minister of the ROK)

The Republic of Korea is very concerned about geopolitical tensions between China and the U.S. because that contention is hindering each other's policy for peace in the region. President Obama's policy on the world without nuclear weapon has failed in Northeast Asia. China's statement for peaceful Korean peninsula has also failed. More specifically, ROK is concerned in regards to two levels: upper tier and lower tier. The upper tier is strategic balance between the U.S. and China. However, geopolitical tensions between them are giving more burdens to ROK. THAAD is a good example of ROK being pushed to stand at the frontline of strategic divide. At a lower tier, the inability to stop DPRK's nuclear program has had such great effect that public opinion is now more open towards the idea of ROK taking care of its own security. ROK is concerned that there is no serious engagement with regard to the nuclear development of DPRK. While there is rhetoric from DPRK that its nuclear weapons are to keep it safe from the U.S., there is popular perception in ROK that the former's nuclear weapons target ROK.

Chancellor Gareth Evans

What are realistically available policy options other than deterrence, containment, and keeping door open for dialogue? For instance, how realistic is a nuclear free zone in Northeast Asia?

President Minsoon Song

The lack of synchronization of actions taken by DPRK, ROK, and Japan led to bad implementation to what otherwise would have been good agreements throughout history. However, it was always the lack of synchronization and implementation that failed them. Russia, China, and the U.S. should all combine their efforts to enforce DPRK to follow up to their promises. Also, a nuclear free zone would not be acceptable for DPRK. DPRK wants normalization of relations between the U.S. and DPRK. If the issue of conventional weapons is addressed together, then DPRK may come back to dialogue again.

President Chen Dongxiao

China is all on board with the UNSC Resolution, but other countries should recognize that

sanctions are not the main goal and DPRK should ultimately come back to the table for dialogues. As such, other countries should also not give up on diplomacy and keep in mind that going straight for regime change will not be met with good will by DPRK.

President Minsoon Song

China should negotiate for a dialogue between the U.S. and DPRK, and in the meantime, DPRK should suspend its nuclear program to fully guarantee compliance. Otherwise, the U.S. will not believe that any talks with DPRK will succeed.

President Chen Dongxiao

DPRK is an independent sovereign state with its own decision-making process. China will not be able to fully guarantee what the international community wants. Also, external factors such as the tensions between the U.S. and DPRK during the Bush administration have worsened DPRK's views towards the former. For China to succeed its role as a bridge-builder, others will have to do their own part.

Professor G. John Ikenberry

More sanctions should be implemented as DPRK has not yet suffered high level sanctions in comparison to Iran. Countries cannot simply engage in strategic patience and wait for a good outcome. There should be coercive diplomacy – China should do more and the international community should place more sanctions and see if it can get a more comprehensive deal.

President Minsoon Song

DPRK's situation is different from that of Iran, as it has never been exposed to the international society. The Iran regime does not fear regime survival itself because it is not divided. While the U.S. has temptation to believe the sanctions will work and China is abiding by the UNSC Resolution word by word, there are many loopholes in the sanctions.

Transcribed by Sookyung Cho, APLN Program Officer