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ARMS CONTROL CHALLENGES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

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The evolving competition between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific is pushing the region towards a more intense and complex arms race. The emergence of new security partnerships, coupled with the growing influence of both regional and extra-regional powers in shaping the security landscape, alongside the increasing integration of emerging technologies into military capabilities by various states, may have rendered existing arms control arrangements less effective or even obsolete. Addressing these potential challenges requires innovative approaches that are practical, inclusive, and mindful of the impact of new technologies on the existing nonproliferation regime.

The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), which serves as the cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, has not succeeded in eliminating nuclear threats. The five NPT-recognized nuclear weapon states continue to make qualitative and quantitative improvements to their nuclear arsenals and are reluctant to fulfil the NPT's Article VI obligations. Moreover, the international community has not been able to develop a mechanism to integrate the three original non-signatories (India, Pakistan, and Israel) into the mainstream non-proliferation regime or to bring North Korea back into the NPT fold.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), negotiated amongst the non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS) without the participation of key stakeholders, is also unlikely to reduce the nuclear threats. Although the TPNW is the first legally binding

instrument prohibiting the development or acquisition of nuclear weapons, all its signatories are already compliant with the NPT and lack incentives to pursue nuclear weapons. The four non-NPT nuclear-armed states (India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea) and the five NPT-recognized NWS (United States, Russia, China, UK, France), along with their allies who continue to enjoy the protection of their nuclear weapons, have refused to join the TPNW, thereby making it a treaty negotiated by the NNWS, mainly for the NNWS.

Given the failure of existing arms control arrangements to eliminate nuclear weapons, and the fact that most key players in the Asia-Pacific region (United States, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea) are enhancing their nuclear capabilities, there may be a need to develop regional arms control approaches that can compartmentalize the proliferation puzzle, rather than seeking global solutions which could prove difficult to negotiate and implement. Such an approach could reduce, if not eliminate, nuclear dangers in the Asia-Pacific region.

One potential avenue, proposed by a group of scholars from the United States, China, India, and Pakistan, is to establish an arms control arrangement involving those four countries as part of a [strategic chain](#). This approach advocates that all four nuclear-armed states could engage across various levels to help maintain strategic stability. However, by excluding North Korea, this framework fails to address regional anxieties within the Asia-Pacific. Basing arms control on the concept of a strategic chain could also reduce the incentive for India to engage with Pakistan, since India can justify its military build-up as being aimed to deter China. It could similarly be used as an excuse by China to avoid engagement with India, as it can credibly claim that its nuclear build-up is meant to deter the US.

The integration of new technologies into military capabilities poses additional challenges for the future of arms control. The growing possibility of “conventional and nuclear entanglement,” along with the notion of “cross-domain deterrence,” where cyber, artificial intelligence (AI), and other emerging technologies could be used to deter adversaries, makes future arms control processes more complex and difficult to negotiate.

To address these emerging challenges, there may be a need for a new approach in the form of [integrated arms control](#), as proposed by researchers at the Center for Strategic

and International Studies in Washington, DC. This concept encompasses the various capabilities of different stakeholders in a highly interconnected, multidomain risk landscape to help “mitigate risks across both technical domains and levels of conflict.” Therefore, future arms control initiatives “must be adapted to the current security environment, account for rapidly evolving technological and informational factors, and consider alternative structures, modalities, and participation models.”

Such a process, which could include both the nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities of all states, seems interesting but difficult to negotiate due to the different capabilities of NWS and NNWS. The civilian and military applications of cyber and AI, involving both state and non-state actors, further complicate future arms control initiatives. Similarly, technologies like AI can be used to enhance the efficiency of arms control by improving verification and transparency measures, but at the same time, they can also be integrated into military systems. This dual-use feature of AI makes the use of it for arms control as important as the development of arms control mechanisms to regulate the military use of AI.

Arms control has always been challenging due to the conflicting interests of the state parties. Nevertheless, it remains essential to prevent uncontrolled proliferation. With the increase in nuclear-armed states and the emergence of new technologies, the challenges have multiplied, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. Hence, there is a pressing need to develop innovative and inclusive approaches that can help maintain stability and limit the possibility of an arms race in the region.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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