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ASIA-PACIFIC LEADERSHIP NETWORK
FOR NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

The Korea Times

MISSILE PROLIFERATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC: THE SHADOW OVER REGIONAL STABILITY

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29 May 2024

While the Asia-Pacific region continues to inch towards conflicts on multiple regional fronts risking broader regional instability, there is a structural shift taking place in the arms racing dynamics of the region with the increasing proliferation of missiles and associated technology. This shift is significant for two reasons. Firstly, several countries are seeking to acquire new missile systems with more advanced capabilities. Secondly, many of these countries are not satisfied with merely importing missile technology; they are actively working to bolster their domestic military-industrial capabilities for national security reasons and are also aspiring to become exporters in their own right.

The numbers are quite revealing. For example, Japan plans to double its defence spending as a percentage of GDP to 2% by 2027. Earlier this year in January, Tokyo purchased 400 Tomahawk missiles from the United States in a deal reportedly worth 1.7 billion US$. Japan's Defence White Paper, published in 2023, prominently outlined the development of its own anti-ship missile, the Type-12, as a key priority alongside the acquisition of American Tomahawks. While North Korea's missile program dominates the news, South Korea has also been building up its missile systems over the years through numerous acquisitions, primarily from the United States, and has been quietly developing its indigenous variants such as the Hyunmoo-3 Land Attack Cruise Missile (LACM).

However, these developments raise important questions: Why are Northeast and Southeast Asian countries developing a greater appetite for acquiring these weapons? What risks do they pose to broader proliferation concerns in the region? Can existing regulatory regimes moderate state behaviour in the region?

While the sale of the BrahMos missiles to the Philippines garnered considerable attention, symbolising a milestone in India's 'Make in India' defence program, other noteworthy acquisitions received comparatively less notice. One example is the Indonesian Navy's procurement of the Turkish anti-ship cruise missile, the Atmaca. These developments

suggest that the main motivation behind this recent surge in acquiring missile capabilities is the belief in the effectiveness of these weapons as deterrents in maritime settings. This explains why many countries in the region have placed emphasis on anti-ship missiles, viewing them as potential deterrents in an area marked by numerous maritime disputes.

As the dual-use nature of certain delivery systems increases, it is crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of existing regulatory regimes, like the 1987 Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), in preventing both the horizontal and vertical proliferation of ballistic missiles. Unlike treaties governing nuclear weapons, there is no specific treaty regulating ballistic missiles themselves; instead, they fall under voluntary frameworks like the MTCR and codes of conduct such as the Hague Code of Conduct (HCoC). Furthermore, it is important to note thar the HCoC's Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and other guidelines only cover ballistic missiles and exclude cruise missiles.

Another point worth considering is whether MTCR's current categorisation of export controls based on payload and range provides sufficient safeguards against proliferation concerns. For instance, while the export version of the BrahMos system acquired by the Philippines falls within the MTCR's range limit of under 300 km, one of India's other BrahMos variants has been tested to reach distances of up to 900 km. These varying capabilities of the same platform could potentially blur compliance lines in the future.

India's ability to adhere to export control requirements for sensitive technology is evident. However, it is essential to question whether these standards are sufficient for all actors. While it may appear logical to perceive these advancements positively as a means to counteract hegemonic influences and bolster strategic autonomy, such decisions could have long term impacts on the ability to curtail similar actions among pariah states and even potentially non-state actors. Especially worrisome is how these developments might influence the region if states traditionally viewed as outliers in the international system, such as Myanmar, choose to pursue similar paths. Myanmar's current situation in particular merits serious concern, as it is reported to be engaging in defence cooperation with North Korea. It is not inconceivable that Myanmar could be an exporter of missiles in the future if adequate steps are not taken to prevent such an outcome.

Additionally, evidence suggests that when countries attempt to reverse engineer an acquired missile, they frequently aim to extend its range and other capabilities gradually. These tendencies are part of the broader pattern of how missile technology is transferred, replicated, and subsequently re-exported to other countries. For example, Turkey's Bora missile, with a range of 260 km, originates from the Chinese B-6 missile it acquired from China. Subsequently, Turkey agreed to provide the Khan variant to Indonesia in 2022.

As tensions between the United States and China persist and China's maritime ambitions in the region grow, the Asia-Pacific region is poised to become highly volatile. Urgent attention is needed to prevent arms races from escalating and overshadowing economic, environmental, and humanitarian concerns. Regional organizations like ASEAN will need to play a crucial role in developing new norms to manage the missile threat in the region, as well as broader existential risks such as the threat of nuclear weapons.

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.

This commentary was originally published in the Korea Times, and on the APLN website.

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