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Panel: Second Nuclear Age? (Session2)

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Talking Points for: Chun Yungwoo, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

The second nuclear age is not around the corner, if it means a significant increase in nuclear-armed countries. Beyond North Korea, no other country is on the horizon in pursuit of a nuclear weapons program. However, the last floodgate for containing the spread of sensitive fuel cycle activities will break down in the event that, as a result of the final nuclear deal in the making, Iran is allowed to retain a fraction of its on-going enrichment program in the name of research and development in return for freezing most of its enrichment program and foregoing future nuclear weapons programs. If a country with Iran’s level of energy security and size of civil nuclear industry is allowed to get away with enrichment, it will make no sense to restrict such right to any other country with a lower level of energy security and more nuclear power reactors. Henceforth, any countries with nuclear ambitions will try to emulate the Iranian model of acquiring their enrichment and/or reprocessing capabilities under the cloak of peaceful uses of nuclear energy. They are likely to choose to stay as close as possible to the nuclear threshold instead of actually breaking out of the NPT and crossing the nuclear threshold in order to hide their true ambitions and avoid international condemnation for the breakout. In short, the world is moving toward the brink of the second nuclear age without actually getting into it barring an unexpected turn in international security environment.

Nevertheless, East Asia is most likely region where the second nuclear age can break out. It is highly charged with tensions, fraught with the specter of history, rising nationalism, growing instability associated with a power shift and the return of great power politics. A military clash over territorial disputes between China and Japan is a readily available trigger for nuclear dominos.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.