

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2024: “Future of Asia: Prosperity and Security”
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Session: Concurrent Session 3-1 New Arms Race: Russia, China, North Korea and Japan

Date/Time: May 14, 2024 / 14:55-16:10

Rapporteur:

Francesca Frassinetti, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Moderator:

Timothy Martin, The Wall Street Journal

Speakers:

Tilman Ruff, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War

Randall Schriver, The Project 2049 Institute

Shin Beomchul, Former Vice Minister of National Defense, ROK

Tokuchi Hideshi, Research Institute for Peace and Security

Yao Yunzhu, Beijing Xiangshan Forum

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Concurrent Session 3-1, “New Arms Race: Russia, China, North Korea, and Japan” discussed major trends and implications of surging military spending in Asia. Mr. Timothy Martin, the Korea bureau chief for The Wall Street Journal, opened the session by asking the speakers to share their observations on intensifying security dilemmas in the context of military modernization and defense capability expansion carried out by many regional countries.

Dr. Tilman Ruff, a co-president of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, noticed that nuclear weapons stockpiles have increased and that all nuclear weapon states are involved in defense modernization. As important treaties have been suspended, Dr. Ruff stressed that nothing has been agreed upon to replace them while nuclear weapons have been used as instruments of policy. Dr. Ruff shared his concerns regarding the disrupting effects of disinformation, exacerbating current challenges to the existing nonproliferation regime. In spite of such a rather bleak picture of the global nuclear situation, Dr. Ruff reminded the audience of the significance of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which was negotiated in 2017 with current 93 signatories (Indonesia and Brazil are expected to sign the TPNW this year), providing a categorical and comprehensive set of prohibitions on participating in any nuclear weapon activities. Having said that, there has been a rather marginal degree of engagement with this treaty among the countries in Northeast Asia with the only exception of Mongolia.

While some countries in Asia are modernizing and investing a lot of resources in boosting their defense budgets, Mr. Randall Schriver, Chairman of the Board at The Project 2049 Institute, did not share the perspective that what we are seeing should be defined as an arms race. According to Mr. Schriver, there are revisionist states who are trying to shape the existing regional status quo in ways that are more favorable to them and that are engaged in arming for aggression. Against this backdrop, ongoing defense trends pose near-term dangers in terms of miscalculation and crisis escalation. Mr.

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Randall Schriver mentioned the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea as two regional flashpoints that represent a high risk for accidental incidents and in which the involved parties would have very poor escalation control and management. Given such unstable and unpredictable scenarios characterized by a high concentration of military assets, Mr. Schriver pointed to new levels of danger related to the introduction of new technologies that are not controlled by human beings. Finally, Mr. Schriver stressed the fact that due to the absence of cooperation between the United States and China at the political level, the only option as things stand is to strengthen deterrence also to prevent further horizontal proliferation.

When it comes to defense spending, Dr. Shin Beomchul, former Vice Defense Minister of the Republic of Korea, raised an interesting point relating to perception and framing. According to Dr. Shin, a serious and concerning problem is represented by the tendency of many government officials to not consider their countries’ current high level of military spending in terms of its contribution to driving an arms race. On the other hand, according to Dr. Shin, growing nuclear ambitions that have been observed in countries such as South Korea and Japan have so far been constrained by these governments’ reaffirming support to international treaties and commitments to non-proliferation. Finally, Dr. Shin shared deep concern regarding the great risks that the nuclear arms race poses for the future of the region and beyond. Since this trend is nowhere to end, Dr. Shin recommended that countries should continue to engage in non-proliferation efforts.

Prof. Tokuchi Hideshi, President of the Japanese think tank Research Institute for Peace and Security, touched upon Japan’s national defense efforts in the age of great power rivalry. In providing an overview of Japan’s regional security context, Prof. Hideshi stressed that Northeast Asia is at the forefront of great power rivalry and that Japan is surrounded by three nuclear weapon states. Second, Northeast Asia is part of international community of sovereign states but at the same time, hybrid warfare has increasingly shown that existing boundaries and borders have blurred. Third, the proliferation of unilateral initiatives that is underway in the region confirms the importance of cooperative efforts. Given such acute security challenges, Prof. Hideshi explained that the response of the Japanese government has been built upon three pillars: namely self-help, enhancing the U.S.-Japan bilateral alliance, and expanding partnerships with global partners. In responding to a question on the future of Japan’s national security efforts in the case of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s potential resignation, Prof. Hideshi foresaw a certain level of continuity on this front particularly considering the large consensus among the Japanese people on the need to strengthen the country’s military and defense capability.

Major General Yao Yunzhu, Beijing Xiangshan Forum, observed that the Asia-Pacific region has not entered in a comprehensive age of arms race. The United States, South Korea, and Japan have consolidated their military cooperation, especially in terms of extended deterrence whereas North Korea has been supporting Russia’s war efforts in Ukraine. With regard to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, China has been cautious in taking a position given that according to Major General Yao, it is not in the interest of China to see Northeast Asia being divided into two blocs. Moreover, Major General Yao argued that China and the United States are not outright enemies but that they are preparing to face a potential conflict in the case of a Taiwan contingency. Finally, Major General Yao

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agreed with the point raised by previous speakers on the game-changing nature of new and emerging technologies in war scenarios. In responding to a question posed by the moderator, Major General Yao explained that China has been modernizing its nuclear arsenal because Beijing’s second-strike capability is in danger based on the Chinese assessment. From this perspective, Major General Yao reiterated that the rationale behind China’s current defense and military efforts is to make sure that the Chinese retaliatory capabilities would be effective in deterring a first strike.

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