

Nuclear Dominos in Northeast Asia

Session: Grand Ballroom 1
Date/Time: February 20, 2013 / 09:00-10:15

Moderator: John Park, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Speakers: Jor-Shan Choi, Berkeley Nuclear Research Center
Kim Young Ho, Korea National Defense University
Li Hong, China Arms Control and Disarmament Association
Miles Pomper, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies

Rapporteur: Tristan Volpe, George Washington University

Session Sketch

In the wake of North Korea's third nuclear test, will other states in East Asia decide to acquire nuclear weapons? If Japan or South Korea proliferate, will there be a nuclear domino effect in the region? The experts arrayed on this topical panel offered a simple and resounding answer. The nuclear dominos in East Asia will not fall. Regional proliferation is very unlikely in the near term. But significant changes to the political and security environment in the next ten to twenty years might catalyze a domino effect. Conflict between China and Japan could be a proliferation 'game changer' than drives Japanese demand for nuclear weapons. Major realignments in alliance commitments from the United States might also interact with the rise to China to drive regional proliferation in East Asia. Yet barring these future worst-case conditions, the non-nuclear status quo will remain stable for Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Moderator John Park, Stanton Nuclear Security Junior Faculty Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, challenged the panelists to identify specific tipping points that might cause each country in East Asia to acquire nuclear weapons. Jor-Shan Choi, associate director at the Berkeley Nuclear Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley, and Kim Young Ho, professor in the Department of International Relations at Korea National Defense University, both focused on Japan as the key domino. Japan is the closest to going nuclear in

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East Asia right now because they have significant nuclear fuel cycle technology and stockpiles of fissile material. South Korea and Taiwan have the technology, but they need more time to produce a nuclear weapon than Japan. Under the extended deterrent protection of the United States nuclear umbrella, continued provocations from North Korea will not spark a proliferation cascade. If, however, Japan and China found themselves in a military conflict, lack of support from the United States might cause Japan to rethink its nonproliferation bono fides. Since Japan has been trusted with sensitive nuclear fuel cycle technology, its decision to proliferate would render the Nonproliferation Treaty ‘useless’.

Li Hong, vice president and secretary-general of the China Arms Control and Disarmament Association, and Miles Pomper, senior research associate at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, examined more closely the dynamics between the United States and its allies in East Asia. Japan has an equal need to balance North Korean and Chinese nuclear capabilities. Miles Pomper emphasized that the threat to Japan from North Korea presents a straightforward problem for the United States to counter. The rise of China is much harder. How much will the US risk for the defense of Japan against a growing China with increasingly modern nuclear weapons capabilities? For South Korea, the challenge is more directly from North Korea. Would a nuclear deterrent help South Korea take Seoul out of hostage? Not likely. The basic deterrence calculus is not going to change. Since nuclear weapons offer little security benefit to these major East Asian players, the optimal situation will be for Japan and South Korea to make sure the United States maintains its security commitments, and to remain nonnuclear states under the American nuclear umbrella.

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