The Evolving Nuclear Order: Implications for Proliferation, Arms Racing, and Stability

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The 25 years since the end of the Cold War have seen several notable shifts in the global distribution of nuclear capabilities:

• The Soviet Union (now Russia) and the United States have slashed their arsenals by roughly 75% from 20,000–30,000 warheads to 7,000–8,000.¹

• France and Britain have also made substantial cuts, reducing their nuclear forces from 500 weapons at their peak to roughly 300 and 200, respectively.

• Of the Cold War “big five” (the United States, Britain, France, Soviet Union, and China), only China has not reduced its stockpile, which is estimated at 250 warheads. Beijing has also made significant investments in modernizing its forces, developing new mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles as well as submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

• Three new countries (India, Pakistan, and North Korea) have joined the list of acknowledged nuclear weapons states, and one (South Africa) has been removed.

• Finally, in recent years a series of aspirants (Iraq, Libya, and Syria) have seen their nuclear ambitions foiled, while one (Iran) continues to press on toward the finish line.

What are the implications of these developments for the conduct of international relations, and, in particular, how are they likely to shape events in eastern Eurasia, a zone of strategic interaction that extends from the Korean Peninsula, down through the South Asian subcontinent, and into the Persian Gulf region? The essays in this roundtable have helped shed light on three aspects of this question: proliferation, arms racing, and stability.


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**Proliferation**

Regarding the further spread of nuclear weapons, the next chapters of the story in the broader Middle East will depend a great deal on what happens in Iran. If Tehran succeeds in developing nuclear weapons, other states may feel compelled to follow suit, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey. If it does not, Israel may remain the region’s only nuclear weapons state.

In East Asia, those states most likely to contemplate pursuing nuclear status are also anxious friends and allies of the United States. Japan, South Korea, and (albeit implicitly) Taiwan have until now been content to take shelter under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. But they could come to doubt the reliability of U.S. guarantees in the face of North Korea's new capabilities, China’s nuclear modernization programs, or, especially in the case of Japan, both developments taken together.

While this once-taboo topic has been discussed more openly in both Japan and South Korea in recent years, neither country shows any overt signs of moving to acquire its own nuclear forces. Still, as Noboru Yamaguchi explains in his essay, there is nothing in Japan’s “peace constitution” that absolutely precludes the possibility, should the nation’s leaders deem it necessary for self-defense. Like South Korea and Taiwan, Japan has shown an interest in acquiring rocket and cruise missile technology that could someday serve as the basis for an independent deterrent force. For the moment, however, the potential for further proliferation in East Asia remains latent.

**Arms Racing**

One of the main features of the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was the interaction between their respective armaments efforts, including their offensive and defensive nuclear weapons programs. Although there are a number of competitive dyads emerging in Asia, and while the possibility exists for even more complex arrangements, the degree of interaction among the actors to date remains limited. As Benjamin Schreer describes, China’s modernization of its long-range nuclear forces appears to be motivated in large part by a desire to reduce its vulnerability to a possible U.S. conventional precision strike. An increase in the number of weapons deployed, perhaps on multiple warhead delivery systems, could also reflect concern over the possible thickening of the U.S. national missile defenses. For the moment, however, there is no strong evidence to support the view that China aims eventually to
achieve nuclear parity with the United States. Nor are there any indications to suggest that Washington will respond to Beijing’s limited buildup with measures designed to retain (or reacquire) a viable damage-limiting option against China.

According to P.K. Singh, India and Pakistan are following distinct paths in developing their nuclear capacities, with the former seeking a secure second-strike force to deter attack on its troops or territory and the latter attempting to acquire weapons that could be used to offset its inferiority in conventional ground and air forces. Singh asserts that the two states are not currently engaged in a nuclear arms race, but he notes the possibility that their programs could become more closely coupled, especially if China continues to provide nuclear assistance to Pakistan while its own forces expand beyond currently projected levels. This development, in particular, would likely have an impact on the United States, and perhaps on Russia as well, setting in motion a genuinely multisided rivalry, with Pakistan and India responding to one another; China interacting with the United States and Russia, as well as India; and Russia and the United States once again engaged in an active nuclear competition.

Stability

Ultimately the most important question that must be asked about recent developments is whether they will increase or decrease the risk of war, including the possibility of nuclear war. As Rajesh Basrur makes clear, there are plausible theoretical arguments that can be made on either side of this question. On the one hand, it is possible that the mutual possession of nuclear weapons will impose extreme caution on states that might otherwise be prone to conflict. On the other hand, nuclear-armed nations may feel emboldened to engage in provocations or conventional aggression, even against other nuclear powers.

The empirical evidence regarding this issue is sparse and subject to varying interpretations. North Korea has behaved aggressively toward the South on several occasions since conducting its first nuclear tests, but it did so often in the past as well. For the most part, as Kang Choi’s essay suggests, the North Korean regime seems to regard its small arsenal as the ultimate insurance policy rather than a useful new tool with which to fulfill its grandiose self-proclaimed ambitions.

Pakistan’s leaders appear to believe that nuclear weapons reduce the risk of large-scale conventional retaliation and thus provide a backstop for their
continued support of terrorist groups operating against India. But Islamabad has not thrown caution to the winds, and, as Basrur suggests, both Pakistan and India may at times be tempted to manipulate the risk of escalation to get the United States to exert pressure on their behalf.

Even when its own forces were smaller and less secure, Chinese strategists appear to have believed that they were sufficient to discourage the United States from ever using nuclear weapons against their country. Beijing’s modernization programs may be intended simply to bolster that confidence in the face of growing U.S. precision-strike capabilities. Now that China is developing similar conventional capabilities of its own, however, it has options for the use of force that it previously lacked and that it may be more likely to exercise if it believes it can deter the United States from nuclear escalation. This is a possibility about which U.S. and Japanese strategists have begun to worry and to which they will likely devote more attention in the years ahead.

Is the world approaching “critical mass,” a point at which the number and size of nuclear arsenals and the dangers associated with them will grow with explosive speed? The evidence presented here suggests that the answer is mixed. While superpower stockpiles have dwindled, the roster of nuclear weapons states has grown, and further horizontal proliferation is a distinct possibility in both Asia and the Middle East. At least for the moment, the plans and programs of the nuclear powers remain loosely coupled, but this too could change quickly, resulting in a truly multisided arms competition that is more complex and potentially more difficult to control than the Cold War arms race. The acquisition of nuclear weapons (in the case of India, Pakistan, and North Korea) and the development of more secure arsenals (in the case of China) have not resulted in radically increased recklessness. But there are indications that states equipped with such capabilities may assess that they provide a backstop for greater assertiveness. Such beliefs could raise the risk of conventional conflict and bring the world much closer to critical mass than it appears to be at present.