

## Japan and Post-INF Nuclear Arms Control /Non-Proliferation



The Defense Department conducted a flight test of a conventionally configured ground-launched cruise missile, Aug. 2019, San Nicolas Island, Calif. (Photo Scott Howe/Department of Defense/UPI/AFLO)

Ten years have passed since US President Barack Obama called for a “world without nuclear weapons” in April 2009. However, after short-term progress and a surge in momentum, nuclear arms control and non-proliferation gradually turned sour.

Among the negative trends for nuclear arms control in 2019 was the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which had a significant impact on the international community. The INF Treaty has been regarded as one of the symbols of nuclear arms control; it was signed in 1987 by US President Ronald

Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who shared the ideal of eliminating nuclear weapons and the recognition that there is no winner in a nuclear war and such a war must thus never be fought, and it obliged the US and the USSR to reduce their nuclear arsenals under strict verification measures, including on-site inspections, for the first time in history. The United States argues that its withdrawal from this historic treaty was in response to Russia’s noncompliance with the treaty through the clandestine testing and deployment of 9M729 ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCM) as well as China’s possession of hundreds of

intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles.

In addition, the United States has yet to clarify its policy on the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which will expire in February 2021. If the treaty expires without any extension or successor treaty, US-Russian bilateral nuclear arms control, which has been in place since the Cold War era for maintaining strategic stability, will end after nearly half a century. Washington proposes that not only the United States and Russia but also China join the framework of nuclear arms control. Beijing, however, has not changed its stance that it will not participate in a nuclear weapons reduction process unless the United States and Russia, which together hold 90% of the world's nuclear weapons, drastically reduce their nuclear arsenals first.

Regarding nuclear non-proliferation, tensions over the Iranian nuclear issue have increased since the United States pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and re-imposed and steadily expanded economic sanctions on Iran. In response, Iran has gradually extended its partial suspension of JCPOA implementation

since July 2019. The situation with respect to the North Korean nuclear issue has also deteriorated from the positive atmosphere at the North-South Korean/US-North Korean summit meetings in 2018. The second US-North Korean summit meeting in Hanoi in February 2019 ended without any results, and the working-level talks in October were reported to have broken down. Pyongyang has not yet made a strategic decision to dismantle its nuclear weapons program.



A meeting of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Jul. 2019, Vienna. (Photo Xinhua/AFLO)

The worsening of the nuclear situation also cast a dark shadow on the third Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) for the 2020 Nuclear non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference. The US-Russian, US-Chinese and US-Iranian confrontations were brought to the PrepCom, where the respective parties criticized each other. The widening rift over nuclear disarmament

has become more pronounced between the non-nuclear-weapon states that had led the way in formulating the Treaty on the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and the nuclear-armed states and their allies that had opposed it.

The situation surrounding nuclear arms control and non-proliferation is unlikely to improve, at least in the near future, because the ongoing challenges arise from the faltering international system. In the power transition stemming from the re-emergence of China and the resurgence of Russia, rivalry over the international/regional order surfaces as great power/geopolitical competition. The nuclear-armed states, their allies and countries of proliferation concern that are involved in this competition have reaffirmed the political and military value of nuclear weapons for their national security, and become extremely cautious about accepting and strengthening nuclear arms control and non-proliferation that would oblige them to reduce their nuclear arsenals or to regulate their activities. Arms control and non-proliferation are oriented toward maintaining the status quo, in which the balance of power at the time they are enacted is fixed through quantitative and qualitative restrictions

on military power and the manner in which it is used. Where there is a high degree of uncertainty and instability regarding the prospects for the future balance of power among the major powers, and where intense competition is taking place over its maintenance and revision, there will be little incentive for the major powers to accept institutional restrictions on their nuclear weapons and policies.

In addition, changes in the balance of power have shaken the existing institutional foundations for nuclear arms control and non-proliferation, which were established under the bipolar structure of the Cold War era and maintained under US leadership during the unipolar moment after the end of the Cold War. The current US retreat from US-Russian nuclear arms control is partly due to the great power competition with China, which has rapidly modernized its military forces, including nuclear weapons. In the meantime, Russia has not concealed its reluctance to further reduce its nuclear arsenal, looking ahead to competition with the United States over spheres of influence and seeking to maintain its status as a nuclear superpower.

The passive attitudes of nuclear-weapon states toward nuclear arms control have also negatively affected the NPT regime. Despite the highly discriminative nature of the NPT regime, which divides the international community into five nuclear-weapon states and other non-nuclear-weapon states and which prohibits the acquisition of nuclear weapons by only the latter, it has achieved near-universality. This is partly because the “three pillars of the NPT” – nuclear non-proliferation, peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and nuclear disarmament – are incorporated into the NPT regime to alleviate this discriminative nature. In particular, non-nuclear-weapon states emphasize the importance of nuclear disarmament. Their strong frustration with the impasse on this issue made many non-nuclear-weapon states and civil society decide to establish the TPNW in order to create a norm for the legal prohibition of nuclear weapons, even though nuclear-armed states and their allies were highly unlikely to participate.

Given their absence, the TPNW would not be an alternative to the NPT as a framework for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, at least in the short and medium term. Nor can the

collapse of the NPT be expected for the time being. Once an international regime has been established, it has been argued that, even if the distribution of power and the structure of interests among the participating countries were to change, it would not be easily terminated because significant changes or termination impose a heavy burden on the participating countries; the legitimacy of regimes and the practice of adherence have been established through the acceptance of principles, norms and rules by the participating countries, and constraints such as the cost and criticism of deviant behavior would increase. However, it cannot be ruled out that the collapse of one of the “three pillars of the NPT” may weaken the cohesiveness and legitimacy of the NPT regime, and that actions that violate the principles, norms and rules of the NPT regime will increase in future using this as a pretext or as a result of a deterioration in the security environment.

Northeast Asia is the region with the greatest degree of instability and uncertainty surrounding nuclear issues, placing Japan at a critical strategic crossroads. The touchstone will be Japan’s policy planning on deterrence

as well as disarmament and non-proliferation in the “post-INF Treaty period.” While Japan and the United States do not possess land-based intermediate-range missiles, North Korea and China have acquired hundreds of such missiles respectively and enhanced them both quantitatively and qualitatively, posing potential and tangible threats to Japan’s security. In addition, China’s anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capability – in which intermediate-range missiles play an important role – has also been strengthened, eroding the superiority of the Japan-US alliance at the regional level. The Japan-US alliance needs to strengthen its deterrence capabilities, and careful and urgent consideration must be given to whether ground-launched intermediate-range missiles could be an option, what their advantages and challenges are, and whether there are alternatives, taking into account the situation after the demise of the INF Treaty.

At the same time, since Northeast Asia is the region where the world’s most intense great power/geopolitical rivalry is foreseen and the development of nuclear weapons and various missile forces, including ground-

launched intermediate-range missiles, is inextricably involved, Japan should contemplate how to develop arms control and non-proliferation measures in order to control and mitigate the negative impacts that nuclear weapons and missiles and their counter-measures may have on regional stability and security, with the same priority as policies on deterrence and counter-measures. Constructing a multilateral framework for countries with asymmetric and diverse capabilities and interests across a wide range of issues presents a conundrum that will take a considerable amount of time to resolve. However, arms control and non-proliferation of intermediate-range missiles in the post-INF Treaty period could indicate the way forward for a new/renewed paradigm of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime. It is therefore an important policy issue that Japan must actively address. ■