

Working Group 6 Report: Regional Working Group – East Asia

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During the 62nd Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs held in Astana, Kazakhstan, Working Group 6 convened to address issues of regional security in Northeast Asia. Specifically, this group of 13 participants from the People's Republic of China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia, the United States of America, Norway, Germany, and the Netherlands discussed the DPRK nuclear and missile program, and potential future frameworks for regional security in the region. The working group also developed a set of recommendations (included in this report) for Pugwash action promoting a more stabilized and peaceful region.

The following report summarizes the key themes and topics discussed by the working group, and concludes with a list of recommendations for Pugwash action.

Discussion

Participants discussed current perceptions and misperceptions on the scope of the threat from DPRK's nuclear program, including those of the United States, People's Republic of China, and Russia. While the risk of intentional breakout of armed conflict between the U.S. and North Korea remains relatively low, these misperceptions have increased the possibility of inadvertent escalation into large-scale conflict. For example, differing understandings of North Korea's intentions behind its threats to attack Guam could conceivably lead the U.S. to consider a preemptive strike on North Korean military sites.

Updated technical capabilities of North Korea's nuclear weapons program were provided to the group, and the U.S.'s assessment of the program's threat to national security was discussed. In particular, while North Korea is likely only to employ its missile capabilities defensively, U.S. policymakers are largely of the opinion that a nuclear warhead capable of being delivered to the continental U.S. constitutes an existential threat. Recently planned crisis management dialogue between Chinese and U.S. military officials is a positive development, but also reflects the growing seriousness of the North Korean situation.

More generally, immediate tension easing actions among the major actors is a crucial element of any comprehensive action plan for achieving peace on the Korean Peninsula. This could begin with track II dialogue, facilitated perhaps under Pugwash auspices, to communicate the U.S. and North Korea's shared hope of avoiding large-scale conflict. Additionally, unilateral decisions from North Korea, South Korea, and the U.S. to gradually reduce missile tests and military exercises in the region would send positive signals that mitigate the risk of inadvertent large-scale conflict.

Beyond immediate actions to lower tensions in the region, much work lies ahead for creating conditions in which a more permanent Korean peace agreement can be reached. One approach could be dual-track discussions with distinct sets of parties and goals. The first track involves a return to six-party talks as a platform for an open dialogue on a range of issues, including a freeze on North Korean nuclear testing, a

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reduction of missile tests, a downsizing of U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises, and the easing of various sanctions regimes. The second, simultaneous set of discussions would be between North Korea, South Korea, and the U.S. concerning specifically the potential for normalizing relations with North Korea. The onus is on both the U.S. and North Korea to engage in some level of dialogue, eventually leading to the opening of formal discussions without preconditions.

Participants also discussed opportunities for regional economic cooperation as a driver for strengthening peace and security. Cooperation in the energy, transportation, and cyber security sectors could also provide avenues for strengthening economic unity in the region. This cooperation would enhance confidence building and provide an alternative path towards security dialogue.

One of the largest challenges to cooperative engagement at any level is mistrust concerning missile defense-related actions in the region. Genuine disagreements over THAAD capabilities continue to persist. Specifically, the technical aspects of THAAD's radar systems must be clarified before constructive discussions on the strategic intentions of the missile system can begin. More generally, any new missile defense deployment constitutes an added barrier to regional disarmament, and injects risks of both escalating a Chinese-U.S. arms race and incentivizing North Korea to develop more sophisticated missile delivery systems.

The implementation of these policies is critically dependent on the political will and courage of the involved parties to engage in good faith discussions and take further steps in these issues.

Recommendations for Pugwash Action

Pugwash should establish a **permanent working group on Northeast Asia security**. Given the state of tensions in the region, this group could play a critical role in a number of key issues facing the region. Potential actions this group could initiate are:

- Facilitating track II discussions between DPRK, ROK, and the U.S. in order to promote engagement on these issues from all three parties;
- Commissioning a paper on the technical capabilities of THAAD, and bringing together scientists and representatives from the U.S., China, and Russia to seek a resolution of differing views on the missile defense system;
- Convening a meeting on how neighboring countries and regional forums such as ASEAN can formulate and encourage potential resolutions to the North Korean issue;
- Encouraging further discussion of the parameters for a potential Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, building off the proposed 3+3 model, that would establish a legal framework under which the Korean Peninsula could eventually be denuclearized;
- Convening a meeting or commissioning a paper on how to improve economic ties in various sectors that would further stability and security in the region.