Seeking a path toward missile nonproliferation

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Seeking a path toward missile nonproliferation
A Japanese response

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Immediately after North Korea’s June 22 launch into high altitude of an intermediate-range ballistic missile, the UN Security Council strongly condemned Pyongyang’s ballistic missile launches. It was the fifth such condemnation this year. The Security Council noted (UN News Centre 2016) that “these repeated acts are in grave violation of obligations under the relevant resolutions” and that “these activities contribute to the development of the country’s nuclear weapons delivery systems and increase tension.”

But major nuclear powers such as the United States, Russia, and China constantly conduct missile tests to expand their offensive capabilities. In doing so, they provoke a sense of insecurity among other states (Gady 2015). The major powers’ advanced and precisely guided missiles only provide an incentive for other nations to develop nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons, meanwhile, drive the development of advanced missiles – inseparable parts of the weapon system.

Proliferators’ motivations for proliferating deserve more attention than they usually receive. Among the 31 countries that possess ballistic missiles (Arms Control Association 2014), nine are nuclear-armed nations that continue to strengthen their missile capabilities as an element of their nuclear arsenals. The other 22 either possess ballistic missiles as a legacy of the Cold War or are involved in extreme regional tensions that involve at least one nuclear-armed state.

East Asia, for example, is locked in a vicious cycle of missile proliferation. South Korea and the nuclear-armed North Korea have competed in ballistic missile acquisition and development since the 1970s. Recently, in response to North Korea’s fourth nuclear test and its test of an intermediate-range missile, Seoul agreed to deploy a US missile defense system, known as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, which prompted North Korea’s fifth nuclear test in September 2016. Japan began joint development with the United States of a ballistic missile defense system after North Korea’s 1998 test of a Taepodong missile (Toki 2009). And Taiwan, reacting to a massive deployment of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles by nuclear-armed China, has developed intermediate-range ballistic missiles capable of hitting valuable targets such as Shanghai (Nuclear Threat Initiative 2015). It is also worth recalling that both Beijing and Pyongyang, when they conducted their first nuclear tests, asserted that US nuclear threats and blackmail had compelled them to go nuclear.

Nations locked in tense situations such as these, and facing adversaries equipped with ballistic missiles, naturally perceive themselves as threatened (especially if their adversaries’ missiles are armed with nuclear warheads). So, they seek ballistic missiles of their own, both to gain a near-certain retaliatory ability in the event of a missile attack and to deter ground-based interventions (Barkley 2008). More to the point, they acquire ballistic missiles to defend themselves against weapons of terror – which is what missiles armed with nuclear warheads really are.

Making matters worse, nuclear-armed states are now developing “smart” nuclear weapons – more accurate, with lower yields, and thus more “usable.” This is an extremely dangerous trend. If “smart” nuclear weapons in combination with short- and medium-range ballistic missiles were deployed amid a tense regional conflict, one could easily envision a contemporary Cuban Missile Crisis developing. Urgent action – and a new approach – are required to address the very real risk of theater nuclear warfare.

New political approach
Unfortunately, existing institutional and legal arrangements for reining in the missile trade are inadequate and in danger of losing their relevance. The Missile
Technology Control Regime was established in 1987 as a voluntary mechanism to limit the spread of ballistic missiles and other unmanned delivery systems that could be used for attacks using weapons of mass destruction. While the regime is credited with having slowed or halted several missile programs, it has some weaknesses.

The regime involves no commitment to restrain existing missile arsenals or to achieve missile disarmament. It entails "no international monitoring or verification measures to detect and forestall interstate transfers" of missile technology and production. Its export controls on dual-use goods are strict and rigid, which stands in the way of civilian technology cooperation and frustrates the economic interests of suppliers and recipients alike (Gopalaswamy and Scheffran 2009). And because the regime is nonbinding, its implementation tends to be arbitrary – the United States and South Korea, for example, reached a deal in 2012 extending the maximum allowable range of Seoul’s ballistic missiles from 300 to 800 km, and their maximum payload from 500 kg to as much as 1.5 metric tons, far exceeding limits specified under the regime. Arbitrary enforcement undermines the regime’s legitimacy – and the regime’s salience seems to be fading, with missile proliferation nowadays receiving scant attention compared to security concerns such as nuclear security and terrorism.

Mechanisms such as the regime and the Wassenaar Arrangement have constrained and delayed ballistic missile proliferation, but they have failed to stop determined proliferators – especially non-regime members such as China, North Korea, Israel, India, and Pakistan. Any approach to missile proliferation that is merely technical and institutional may be doomed to fail. A new political approach is required – one that addresses proliferators’ motives for proliferating.

Nearly 30 years after the Soviet Union and the United States concluded the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, it is easy to forget how dramatic the treaty’s impact was. Negotiations toward the treaty succeeded because they replaced the previous decades’ spirit of confrontation with a spirit of mutual trust. Trust enabled comprehensive verification, on-site inspections, and actual reductions in nuclear weapons, which eventually and fundamentally disrupted the Cold War. Within a few years, the Berlin Wall had come down and the Soviet Union had collapsed. Arguably, the treaty played a key role in it all.

What is urgently needed now is a universal INF-style treaty, or a set of regional treaties, that would eliminate the twin threats of missiles and nonstrategic nuclear weapons. To be sure, negotiations toward such a treaty would be challenging. They would lack several advantages enjoyed during INF negotiations – the close balance between US and Soviet nuclear forces, for example, and the presence of a powerful antinuclear movement in Europe at the time. Today’s world is far different, not least because it contains so many asymmetrical missile confrontations. But what really made the INF Treaty possible was bold political vision and a willingness to eliminate entire classes of weapons all at once. With a similar boldness of vision, nonstrategic nuclear weapons and the missiles to carry them could disappear from Earth – just as surely as US and Soviet intermediate-range nuclear weapons once did.

Otherwise, as nuclear-armed states in tense regions engage in missile proliferation, a 21st-century Cuban Missile Crisis could easily be triggered – particularly if those regions lack solid platforms for confidence-building. In the Middle East and Northeast Asia, areas of prime concern, robust efforts to establish confidence are urgently needed. Remember, the INF Treaty was preceded, during the depths of the Cold War, by a decades-long confidence-building effort, often implemented through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (which has more recently been credited for its conflict prevention efforts in Ukraine). It is through persistent, long-term efforts at regional confidence-building that Asian or Middle Eastern versions of the INF Treaty might eventually be realized.

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