

Averting an Arms Race in Asia

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Multiple images come up when Asian arms race is mentioned. These are of DPRK's nuclear weapons, of China's military build up, of US presence in the Asian waters, missile defence for Japan, of tensions in the Taiwan straits and further to the west of South Asian nuclear and missile issues. These are neither new and nor are they going to lead to a war in the immediate future. There is however another and more immediate arms race which is poised to gain dangerous momentum.

The first decade of this century has been marked by a massive surge in military modernization. The lessons of the 'shock & awe' operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to this, as much as the RMA which has greatly changed the modern battlefield

Military modernization need not be the driving element of an arms race. It becomes one when seen through the prisms of global power shifts. The Quadrennial Defense Review 2006 reads, "Of the major and emerging powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time off set traditional U.S. military advantages...." Recently concerns about China's military build up have been labeled as 'troubling' by the CIA Chief Gen. Michael Hayden. China, in his words, sees its "advanced military force as an essential element of great power status."

China's anti-satellite test in January 2007 and US demonstration of a matching capability in 2008 are examples of an action-reaction sequence resembling an arms race. Even before the Chinese space attack demonstration, US National Space Policy of 2006 had stated, "The United States considers space capabilities - including the ground and space segments and supporting links - vital to its national interests. Consistent with this policy, the United States will: preserve its rights, capabilities, and freedom of action in space; dissuade or deter others from either impeding those rights or developing capabilities

intended to do so; take those actions necessary to protect its space capabilities; respond to interference; and deny, if necessary, adversaries the use of space capabilities hostile to U.S. national interests.”

China continues to call for an arms control regime in space. China is however unlikely to agree to an arms control regime in space, until it becomes as dependent as the US on such assets. Wang Hucheng has argued, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief 51, June 2007), “for countries that can never win a war with the United States by using the method of tanks and planes, attacking the U.S. space system may be an irresistible and most tempting choice”. In a furious debate in the IISS Journal SURVIVAL (February-March 2008), Ashley Tellis pointed out that China’s counter space programs give it an asymmetric capability to overcome US military superiority that is heavily dependent on space-based assets. Shen Dingli joining the same debate argued that, ‘space arms control remains a goal for Beijing.’ However he added, “if the US considers that its military use of space is for peaceful purposes, as it has a right to self-defence and it is a benign country, then other states are entitled to the same reasoning and to access space militarily for peaceful purposes, especially when their legitimate national interest are already undermined by America...China will not threaten others, but will develop means for being less threatened itself.”

The reality of an arms race in Asia shifts according to the prism through which it is seen. At one end is the reality of technology driven momentum for military modernization. At another end is the reality of a search for military supremacy through actions that amount to weaponising space. The competitive development of military capabilities in space, if allowed to reach critical mass, has the potential of a destabilizing Asian arms race. This is especially the case when the prospects for arms control regimes either relating to space or to missile defence appear to be dim.

There are proposals existing on preventing arms race in space. PAROS has been on the agenda in the CD for long. In February this year, Sergei Lavrov tabled a Russian – Chinese proposal to Prevent Placement of Weapons (PPW) in space. The Outer Space Treaty, after 40 years of existence, is need of review and enlarging its scope. A protocol to prohibit weapons in outer space can be added to the OST. A convention to renounce

the deployment of weapons in space will be a constructive initiative. The observation in IISS' Strategic Comments (03 April 2008) that 'more than the western way of war is dependent on space' highlights the wide ranging implications of this arms race.

On the plus side US-China relationship, which is the key to peace and stability in the region, has remained relatively stable and one must not lose sight of the cooperative element in Sino-US relationship. There are also other cooperative signs both bilaterally and in multi-lateral dimensions. The Six Party Talks have been a trend setting initiative in handling a serious and sensitive security issue in Asia.

Economic interdependence is also strengthening cooperative security. Energy security and that of energy sea-lanes are a critical necessity in the coming decades. The security interests of the US and all of Asia rest on this. This provides an arena for shared and cooperative security.

As the only multilateral security institution in the region that includes all the major powers, the ARF has an important role to play in this regard. It has been suggested that an East Asia Security Forum would help in building better multi-lateral instruments. Such a forum would not supplant but complement the ARF by establishing a community of states pro-actively working together to solve issues of common concern.

The way forward lies in harnessing the various elements of the existing architecture and using each of them to create the conditions for peace and stability in Asia. What is needed is statesmanship which goes beyond merely counting strategic gains.