

# Fourth Zermatt Roundtable on Current Security Issues in the North Pacific Region

Report on the International Seminar  
15-16 September 2015

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The Fourth Zermatt Roundtable on Current Security Issues in the North Pacific Region gathered some twenty participants - high level experts and Government representatives - mostly from China, the US, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Russia and Switzerland, on 15 and 16 September 2015 in the Alpine village of Zermatt, Switzerland. The international Roundtable is jointly organized by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland and the Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP).

The purpose of the Roundtable is to facilitate open and substantive discussions among participants from key countries on the evolving security situation of the Northern Pacific and ways to promote stability in the region. The first three rounds (2012, 2013 and 2014) were devoted to the multiple security challenges facing the region, the dynamics of the growing power competition and the impact of defense strategies on regional stability. The fourth round took place in the context of mounting tensions in the China Seas, the Russian “pivot” to Asia and China, the new security posture of Japan in the region, and nuclear threats from North Korea, and assessed the impact of these developments on the security environment and balance of power in Asia-Pacific.

The Roundtable was structured in five sessions on the following issues: developments and power shifts in the region; the territorial issues at sea; North Korean nuclear developments; cooperative security in East Asia; and confidence-building in non-traditional challenges.

In the first session devoted to the regional power shifts, participants discussed if the rise of China in a still US-dominated security order in Asia-Pacific, might fit with the Thucydides model of conflict generated by the rivalry between an established power and a rising one. Two arguments plead against this determinant, in the view of some participants. First, the increasing cost of war today makes this option less attractive, not least due to the presence of the nuclear factor on both US and Chinese sides. Second, the globalized world, and the interdependence between states and societies that derives from it, are powerful deterrents of conflicts, as the constructive theory of international relations shows: the two big powers, the US and China, are the largest partners for one another, and, the argument goes, they cooperate well together on numerous fronts, such as Iran, the North Korean nuclear issue, climate change etc.

But for other participants, the Thucydides model remains valid since, as 20<sup>th</sup> century history shows, interdependence did not prevent the outbreak of major conflicts. Whether the 21<sup>st</sup> century will prove to be different is an open question, and many indicators still appear worrisome: for instance, the growing rivalry between China and the US in the security, political and economic

fields and their correlated increasing mistrust; the defense posture of the two powers, which is largely aimed against one another (A2/AD versus US alliances); and their position on the regional – and global – order that brings them at odds. Indeed, while China argues for a multipolar world order, the US is the major initiator and benefiter of a unipolar world and strong advocate of the status quo in Asia-Pacific, even though for some it seems increasingly waning as a consequence of the tectonic shifts taking place in the region.

Furthermore, how the other regional actors will adjust their interests and position in this equation is a partly open question. It seems at this point relatively clear as far as Japan is concerned: it is strengthening its military alliance with the US, while shifting its defense posture towards “collective self-defense”. But it seems less obvious with regard to South Korea, which has shared economic and political interests with China. The same seems true for South-East Asian countries. Moreover, the implications of Russia’s shifting interests towards China and Asia as a consequence of Western sanctions are still unclear.

## Territorial issues at sea

The discussion on the territorial issues at sea unsurprisingly centered on the question of the “assertiveness” of China in its sovereignty claims. For many participants, China holds the primary responsibility for the current tensions in the East and South China Seas because of the intensity of its claims and reclamation effort, even though territorial claims have been expressed by all neighboring countries with various degrees of intensity and some reclamation work started before China engaged in this direction. Some participants were also critical of the non-military means used to promote the Chinese expansion in the South China Sea.

But these considerations of China’s assertiveness are contested by what other participants call a “diplomatic coup” by the US. According to this view, Washington is promoting a false picture of an assertive China at odds with its own narrative of peaceful rise. They stress that China is interested in the peaceful resolution of these disputes, through bilateral negotiations rather than arbitration - an option strongly supported by the US and Philippines inter alia, but which is rejected by China although it is part of the instruments envisaged by the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Another related issue is the qualification of the maritime claims of China. An increasingly promoted view in China is that the so called “nine dash line” claimed by Beijing, which covers the largest part of the South China Sea and overlaps with several Exclusive Economic Zones of neighboring countries, represents a “core interest”. This view was questioned by many participants who said this territorial claim cannot be compared to Tibet, Xinjiang or Taiwan, which are indeed declared a “core interest” by China. One participant, referring indirectly to the forthcoming summit between Barak Obama and Xi Jinping, stressed that territorial disputes, though important, should not be at the center of the US – China relationship.

## Korean nuclear issue

During the session dedicated to the Korean Peninsula, the discussions once again centered on the nuclear issue, while mainly focusing on the rationale for the apparent status quo and absence of dialogue for nearly seven years. Some participants pointed to the unwillingness of North Korea to resume negotiations and its determination to further its nuclear program against the will of the

international community and in breach of UN Security Council Resolutions. All participants supported the goal of a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula and expressed concern over the possible major failure of the efforts of the international community to enforce non-proliferation.

But many expressed particular concern at the incapacity of the international community to prevent the development of the nuclear program and the progress made by North Korea towards becoming a full-fledged nuclear power. All participants further expressed alarm at the reiterated nuclear threats from North Korea and the subsequent risks of lowering the threshold it implies. This development may profoundly alter the military balance in North East Asia.

Some participants stressed that the “spirit” of the Six-Party Talks has to be accepted by all participants as a minimum in order for the negotiations to resume. But others questioned the merits of the so-called “strategic patience”, a status quo like situation that does not help curb the advancement of the nuclear program. The efforts of the international community should be much more serious and resolute, claimed several participants, putting forward the Iranian nuclear agreement as an example of the achievements that can be reached when political will is present. They suggested that creative options be considered, such as engaging towards a freeze of the nuclear program or informally reactivating the Six-Party Talks mechanism. Some also expressed the view that denuclearization cannot be isolated from the broader context of the security situation.

## Cooperative security

The participants deplored the inadequacy of the security cooperation regimes in East Asia. The necessity of cooperative security mechanisms is well recognized, in order to better address the numerous traditional and non-traditional security challenges of the region. Various attempts have been made to develop platforms of security dialogue and security management, as the Six-Party Talks, the ASEAN Plus meetings, the NAPCI (Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative) of South Korea and forums like the Shangri-La Dialogue.

But most participants are critical regarding the limitations of these instruments, when it comes to actually manage security, beyond the primary purpose of enhancing dialogue. Indeed, some argued that the proliferation of dialogue mechanisms has not substantially helped advance the resolution of regional problems. They put forward various reasons for this inadequacy, such as the different perceptions of security threats between regional actors and, for some, the lack of interest of the big powers and the US – China competition. They also point to the lack of inclusiveness of many of these fora.

Whether the European experience may be of any use for East Asia was another question addressed. The OSCE may indeed provide a kind of model in terms of institutional security mechanism and inclusive platform for dialogue and collective action, which might be worth further consideration by the East Asian actors. Indeed, many participants called for enhanced dialogue between regional platforms, in order to take advantage of experiences learned, and suggested that further research should be promoted in this area.

## Non-traditional challenges

The participants referred to the common challenges facing the region, from cybersecurity to terrorism, pandemics and natural disasters. These require collective action and a revision of traditional strategic thinking, as a participant put it. Some argued that it is an area where the big powers could find a new constructive role to cooperate, beyond rivalry, in terms of providing leadership, enhancing information-sharing or developing existing but under-developed networks, as well as other related CBMs. Participants agreed that a lot remains to be done in this matter.

Another discussion centered on the “One Belt, One Road” Chinese initiative, which presents numerous non-traditional and traditional challenges in addition to the economic dimension of the project. As a participant put it, with its multi-billion investment in infrastructure connectivity, this initiative may place China at the center of Eurasia; but it may also draw China into security management well beyond its own neighborhood. That said European involvement in the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) demonstrates the global dimension of the project and Europe’s interest, in addition to Asia’s, in being part of it.