

Public Conference Report

Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) and the Geneva Centre for Policy Studies (GCSP) Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st Century Asia

On September 28 2010, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), in association with the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) organized a public lecture on the subject of Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st century Asia. The keynote speaker of the night was Dr. Muthiah Alagappa - a distinguished Senior Fellow at the East-West Centre. Along with Dr. Alagappa, the panel also included Ambassador Fred Tanner, Director of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). The chair of the discussion was Professor Keith Krause, Programme Director of the Small Arms Survey, Director of the CCDP, and professor at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID).

Ambassador Tanner opened up the lecture with a brief introduction of Dr. Alagappa's argument. He stated that while the proposed argument that nuclear weapons enhanced the national security of states that possess them and promote stability within Asia was provocative: it was certainly not new. Rather, the argument relies heavily on the notion of deterrence, which, as Ambassador Tanner argued, has been outdated in the West and has become a salient issue in other parts of the world. As such, today the emphasis in Europe and the United States is no longer on deterrence but on disarmament, and the move to reducing nuclear capability of nation states to zero.

Contrary to Ambassador Tanner, Dr. Alagappa's argument was that nuclear weapons are here to stay. While he is not as optimistic about the current nuclear disarmament project, he does agree with Mr. Tanner that 21st century Asia is the region where nuclear weapons will take the centre stage in the near future and not Europe. Dr. Alagappa argues that, contrary to common belief, the geopolitical context in Asia (broadly defined) is becoming more stable, predictable, and governable, and that nuclear weapons have played a key role in this process.

Stability, predictability, and rule governance are reinforced by nuclear weapons for a number of reasons. First, nuclear weapons provide deterrence for weaker states against stronger ones. As such, deterrence in Asia is asymmetrical and takes on an existential and minimalist form. Nuclear

weapons also stabilize conflicts and do not exacerbate them, and the introduction of nuclear weapons into the conflict dynamics ensures that issues are not dealt with through force. Nuclear weapons also have a restraining effect, in the sense that due to the military capability of strong states, weaker ones do not make it their priority to compete with the former or enter into an arms race. As such, the emphasis is on minimal deterrence. Finally, nuclear weapons reinforce the military and political status quo in Asia. The acquisition of nuclear weapons by certain countries has not upset the relationships between states, nor has it altered the lines of enmity and amity. Indeed, conflicts existed before the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region, and hence nuclear weapons are not the cause of disputes. Thus, rather than focusing so narrowly on the negative effects of nuclear weapons one has to take a step back and realize that nuclear capability may have positive side effects as well. Moreover, since most conflicts predate the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and since acquisition does not seem to alter dynamics, emphasis should move away from nuclear capability and focus more on the political context at hand.