LOWY INSTITUTE
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SEPTEMBER 2008 ANALYSIS

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Restraining Nuclear Arms in the Asian Century: An Agenda for Australia

Executive summary

Nuclear dangers are growing in Asia and globally. Nuclear-armed states are keeping and modernising their arsenals, many with first-use doctrines. Any state's possession of and reliance on nuclear arms encourages proliferation. Terrorism, nuclear energy expansion and geopolitical rivalries add to proliferation fears. The possibility of the use of nuclear weapons is small but not diminishing. It may even be rising. Against this, there seems fresh willingness by some states and statesmen – including both US Presidential candidates – to consider practical steps towards reducing nuclear dangers.

Australia's Rudd Labor government has a strong policy platform on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, and has made an intriguing start by setting up an international Commission, co-chaired by Japan.

Australia could further invigorate its nuclear diplomacy by: building credible long-term capacity; offering strong backing for the new Commission; supporting existing non-proliferation instruments; assisting British-Norwegian research on disarmament verification; talking with the next US Administration about reducing reliance on nuclear weapons; and building dialogue in Asia, including among leaders. The Asian initiative would pursue regional nuclear restraint and non-proliferation as well as a united regional voice in global forums. It would thus need to begin well ahead of the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

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Promises to keep

On 24 November 2007, Australia elected a Labor government under Kevin Rudd. Among those Labor foreign and security policy positions meant to be most distinguishable from those of the conservative John Howard government, a restored activism on the nuclear security agenda of arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament was prominent.

The policy platform adopted by the Australian Labor Party at its 2007 conference contained many disarmament commitments, including consideration of a global treaty to ban nuclear weapons, the creation of a 'new diplomatic caucus of like-minded countries' to reduce nuclear dangers, and pursuing the recommendations of the Canberra Commission, an international panel convened by Prime Minister Paul Keating in 1995-1996.[1] Reinvigorating Australia's disarmament diplomacy was among recommendations from a national 'ideas summit' hosted by Prime Minister Rudd in April 2008.[2]

And there are signs of change. Canberra put pro-disarmament wording into the February 2008 communiqué from its annual ministerial-level security consultations with the United States.[3] Australian diplomats' revised language in international nuclear arms control processes, notably preparatory meetings for the 2010 Review Conference (RevCon) of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), is consonant with Labor's platform.[4]

Importantly, Mr Rudd has announced Australian sponsorship, with Japan, of a new independent panel of international experts and eminent persons to generate new thinking about nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. This project, in the 'second track' tradition of the Canberra Commission and Japan's Tokyo Forum (1998-1999), is the Rudd government's first real initiative in nuclear security.[5]

The jury is still out, however, on how effective, ambitious and well-resourced will be the Rudd government's activities in pursuit of nuclear disarmament.

Two main sets of questions arise. The first relates to the new panel, the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. How bold and original will Australia and Japan be in defining its mandate? How can the Commission add value in what is already a crowded global stage of prominent voices urging disarmament? If such value derives primarily from the willingness of the sponsoring governments actively to support the Commission's recommendations, how can one be confident that Canberra and Tokyo will be willing to do so, even if this means questioning some of their own longstanding policies or indeed those of their US ally? The answers to these questions will become clearer when the Australian and Japanese governments shortly unveil the Commission project.

Another set of questions – and the primary concern of this *Lowy Institute Analysis* and an accompanying *Policy Brief* – revolves around what Australia can do to advance nuclear security through its official or 'first-track' diplomacy. Governments, unlike think-tanks, can have a much more direct impact on world affairs than the effects of sponsoring meetings of the good and the wise, or commissioning and promoting expert reports. So what else should Australia do?

The answers are not necessarily straightforward. Opportunities for practical progress in arms control are harder to find than in the window following the Cold War. The strategic and proliferation picture is bleaker now. This is why a Rudd arms control agenda is going to be difficult to develop, and why it needs to go beyond a reanimation of the words and methods of previous Australian disarmament campaigns.

Nuclear dangers: the new and the persistent

In the past decade, bad news has accumulated for the global non-proliferation regime and for the universally accepted goals of nuclear disarmament and preventing the use of nuclear weapons. The likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons in the near term remains very small. But on present trends, the chances are not diminishing, and may be growing. This is not only due to the proliferation of the weapons, or the ability to make them, but also has much to do with situations of geopolitical mistrust and the ways in which nuclear weapons might be employed in countries' security postures.

Arms retained

All the established nuclear-armed powers retain and are modernising their armouries. The 'nuclear weapons states' recognised under the NPT — the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France — remain a long way from eliminating their arsenals. American and Russian stockpiles are much smaller than at the height of the Cold War. There were about 70,000 nuclear weapons in the world of the 1980s; today there are about 26,000. The two former superpower rivals continue to dismantle old weapons, and have made progress, including through bilateral agreements, in reducing their numbers of deployed armaments, down to 1,700-2,200 strategic weapons per country by 2012, though this does not involve destruction of warheads or new verification measures. Yet even then they will possess numbers far in excess of their security needs, and many times larger than all the other nuclear-armed states put together.

In the aftermath of the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, there are fresh question marks over prospects for US-Russia co-operation on nuclear arms reductions, or indeed on any aspect of the nuclear security agenda. These deep uncertainties are compounded by US-Russia differences over missile defences, and by Russia's threats to reassign nuclear weapons to targets in Europe – a worrying signal that underlines the salience of nuclear arms in Russian defence policy.

While the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom and France have reduced their numbers of deployed weapons, others — China, India and Pakistan — are expanding their arsenals. Since their nuclear explosive tests in 1998, India and Pakistan have become entrenched as nuclear-armed powers and continue to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons. Israel has given no hint of giving up its nuclear armoury. Were Iran to develop a nuclear weapon, the Middle East would have its own dangerous and competitive nuclear weapons dynamic.

Proliferation fears

The hard proliferation cases of Iran and North Korea are proving exceptionally difficult to solve, and could prompt other countries to consider acquiring nuclear weapons for themselves. North Korea tested a nuclear device in 2006. The completion of its on-again, off-again co-operation with multinational efforts to dismantle its nuclear capability is far from certain. Iran's refusal to accede to international pressure to end its uranium enrichment program, along with its history of seeking to build nuclear weapons, leaves it under a cloud of suspicion and its neighbours seriously contemplating their security options.

The world is experiencing a nuclear energy revival, spurred by growing energy demand, concern about scarcity of and unreliable access to fossil fuels, and the need to reduce emissions to moderate climate change. Expanded nuclear energy production need not be a proliferation threat, especially if it can proceed in tandem with the development and distribution of new and potentially proliferation-resistant civilian nuclear technologies. But unless the nuclear energy revival can be internationally managed to limit the spread of sensitive uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing technology, it could mean the proliferation of parts of the latent capacity for more states to move closer to a nuclear weapons option, and for more states to possess materials that terrorists would need for a nuclear device. Keeping options open against a possible future nuclear-armed Iran is one of the reasons behind the growing interest in nuclear energy among some other Middle Eastern countries.

Concerns about nuclear terrorism are on the rise. After 9/11 there is no longer any doubt that there exists a kind of terrorist who would be willing to use a nuclear weapon. The chances of terrorists building or obtaining a weapon are often exaggerated, but not to be dismissed.

Nuclear competition in Asia

Of potentially even greater concern than an act of nuclear terrorism, however, would be a broader failure in nuclear non-proliferation and arms control: a world in which many states with geopolitical tensions and rivalries possessed large numbers of weapons, deployed them on high alert, were willing to brandish them in war-fighting roles, and failed to engage in confidence-building and transparency.

Australia's extended region of Asia would be vulnerable in such a future. It is plausible that, in addition to the United States and Russia, both China and India could move in this direction, abandoning their current positions of relative nuclear restraint. Much would depend on whether, as their wealth and interests expand, Beijing and New Delhi succumbed to highly competitive rather than cooperative relations with each other and the rest of the major powers, and moreover if they were to see nuclear weapons as an appreciating currency of influence. It is conceivable that, were Japan's strategic environment to deteriorate markedly and were Tokyo to lose faith in its US alliance, Japan could rapidly become a nuclear-armed state. A future united Korea could choose to build upon the rudiments of Pyongyang's bomb program rather than renounce it. Add ingredients of strategic competition, nationalism, unresolved historical differences and resource and territorial rivalries, and the Asian century begins to look fragile.

The United States and Russia do not see each other as the only potential targets for their nuclear weapons. It is reasonable to assume that US plans encompass other potential adversaries, including China. International attention has tended to fixate on risks of nuclear-weapons use in tensions between India and Pakistan. Looking ahead, however, there is at least as much reason to be alarmed about the prospect of nuclear competition and the possibility of confrontation between the United States and China. The choreography of nuclear deterrence in a US-China crisis is a mystery, probably even to Washington and Beijing. The two powers are reportedly commencing a dialogue on nuclear and strategic issues. This is a step in the right direction; there are depths of opacity and mistrust to be plumbed.

Alert and alarming

Nuclear dangers do not arise solely from the possession of weapons but also from the roles assigned to them. Most nuclear-armed states continue to rely on nuclear weapons as multi-purpose tools for national security. Thousands of US and Russian weapons remain on high alert. It is estimated that a few thousand warheads could be launched within somewhere between one and 12 minutes.[6] This is a needless state of affairs almost two decades after the end of the Cold War, and a dangerous one given the potential for current tensions to lead to a long-term downturn in relations between Russia and the West.

Non-nuclear armed states have long sought negative security assurances (NSAs) from nuclear-armed states: guarantees that nuclear weapons will be not used against them. Yet most NSAs come with caveats, and most nuclear-armed states retain doctrines that rely on nuclear weapons in multiple and sometimes ambiguous security roles. The United States, Russia, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and France retain policies entailing the first use of nuclear weapons against nuclear-armed adversaries and the right to use nuclear weapons in certain circumstances against opponents that do not possess nuclear weapons. In 2003, India followed their example to some degree, claiming the right to use nuclear weapons in retaliation for a chemical or biological attack. There have been claims that China has been contemplating moves away from its traditional no first use posture, which the Pentagon sees in any case as ambiguous,[7] even though Chinese explanations of the policy are emphatic.[8]

The combination of first-use doctrines and high levels of alert heightens the threat perceptions of those countries potentially on the receiving end. It adds to risks of misperception and premature threats or use of nuclear weapons in a crisis, and increases the risk of accidental or unauthorised launch. Moreover, it sends a message that nuclear weapons are useful. These are contributing factors, additional to the possession of the weapons, in other countries' seeing benefits in acquiring nuclear armouries themselves: in other words, incentives to proliferation.

Treaties in retreat

Since the mid-1990s, while nuclear dangers have persisted or worsened, progress has diminished in international efforts to reduce them through multilateral treaties. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) was concluded in 1996, but has not entered into force, given its rejection by the United States Congress in 1999 and the failure of some other key states to sign or ratify. The NPT was indefinitely extended in 1995; an accomplishment that, like the CTBT conclusion, may have had the unintended consequence of pushing India and Pakistan closer to proclaiming their nuclear-armed status. The NPT's 2000 Review Conference (RevCon) struggled to agree on principles to take forward the goal of nuclear disarmament, and the subsequent one, in 2005, failed even to get that far. Proposals for a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT), to ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, have languished. An Additional Protocol increasing the safeguards inspection powers of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) remains far from universally accepted.

Without US leadership, there will continue to be little movement in treaty-based arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. Under the Bush Administration, the focus has been on non-proliferation rather than disarmament, and on its pursuit by means other than treaties, with greatly varying degrees of success: the use of force (Iraq); dialogue involving key regional stakeholders (North Korea); sanctions (Iran and North Korea); secret diplomacy (Libya); selective inattention (Pakistan); accommodation through a contentious civilian nuclear trade deal (India); and practical, non-treaty-based multilateral co-operation (the Proliferation Security Initiative or PSI). The mood in Washington, however, has begun to shift.

The return of disarmament

In the past two years there has been a global awakening of interest in many aspects of nuclear arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. Much of this has developed in the United States, albeit outside government. With two prominent opinion articles published by the unlikely bipartisan quartet of elder statesmen George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry and Sam Nunn, signed onto by many other eminent and expert names, and supported by advocacy campaigns such as the Nuclear Threat Initiative, disarmament is becoming again a respectable topic for policy conversation in Washington.[9] The rhetoric of both Presidential candidates has added to expectations that the next US Administration, even a Republican one, will be more open to the idea that progress towards global nuclear disarmament is in America's interests.

The quartet's opinion articles have become a manifesto for a thus-far inchoate international movement, based around a recognition that more needs urgently to be done on nuclear arms control, that the challenges of non-proliferation and disarmament are linked, and that the crucial ingredient for progress is leadership. Some states, notably the United Kingdom and Norway, are beginning to play lead roles in allocating resources and diplomatic energies to improve conditions for nuclear disarmament.

Britain is now devoting nuclear expertise to researching methods and technology for verifying global nuclear disarmament, the first nuclear-armed state to do so. It is working on this with Norway, as a demonstration of how nuclear-weapons states and non-nuclear weapons states can co-operate. In addition, the UK has invited the United States, Russia, France and China to a conference of experts on verification. Norway, in addition, has convened global non-government experts to identify the outlines of a possible consensus on next steps in nuclear disarmament. Norway and, it should be noted, the United States, are prominent funding supporters of a proposal for an IAEA-managed nuclear fuel bank to help countries meet their nuclear energy needs without embarking on sensitive enrichment or reprocessing work themselves.

Other countries have at least elevated their rhetoric. France is hinting at reduced roles for its nuclear weapons. China, while gradually expanding its arsenal, has long declared itself in favour of universal nuclear disarmament and a no first use posture. Russia has claimed that many of the quartet's aims are in line with its aspirations. Speeches this year by India's foreign minister, vice president and others suggest that New Delhi is seeking to revive the legacy of Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 global nuclear disarmament plan.[10]

Realistic idealism: Moving from 'is' to 'ought'

In sum, arms control policy-makers in late 2008 are confronted with contradictory trends: a powerful array of nuclear threats, embedded in the apparent intent of some states to retain nuclear weapons and of others (and terrorists) to acquire them; and some modest signs of hope, manifested in an apparent fresh willingness by some states and statesmen to consider practical steps towards reducing nuclear dangers.

The gloomy evidence of continuing interest in, retention of and reliance on nuclear weapons suggests that nuclear disarmament remains a remote prospect. The more credible 'realistic idealist' wing of the new disarmament push does not ignore this assessment. Rather, it makes the case that leaders should pursue every opportunity to shift the debate away from resigned acceptance of current realities and towards a plan of ambitious but attainable steps in the direction of desired change; in the words of former Reagan-era nuclear negotiator Max Kampelman, 'from is to ought'.[11] The need, in the words of former UK senior defence official Sir Michael Quinlan, is to get beyond the sterile debate between 'dismissive realists' and 'righteous abolitionists'.[12] It is by no means inconsistent to recognise that the ugly logic of nuclear deterrence usually works, while at the same time to be guided by a deep concern that the possession of nuclear weapons in perpetuity is an incentive to proliferation and carries the risk that sooner or later they will once again be used, with catastrophic results.[13]

The multiplicity and complexity of the new nuclear dangers mean that any credible contemporary vision of nuclear disarmament must have many parts. Neither a US-Russia agreement nor a one-step global abolition treaty will suffice. As the Canberra Commission and Tokyo Forum reports argue, a step-by-step approach is required, underpinned by a leadership-level and unequivocal commitment to nuclear disarmament by all nuclear-armed states.[14]

What Australia can do

Against this backdrop, the challenge for Australia is to identify where and how it can make a difference in the new global push for disarmament, and to direct diplomatic effort accordingly. Canberra needs a clear sense of its priorities, an understanding of its relative strengths, and a commitment to properly resourcing itself for the task.

One starting-point is for Australia to recognise nuclear security — shorthand for the whole nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament agenda, including its interaction with nuclear energy — as a priority national security issue. These are not solely matters of narrowly-defined foreign affairs, defence, energy or environmental policy. Publicly affirming this priority, such as through a national security statement, could provide a coherent rationale for the long-term resource allocations an effective Australian nuclear security strategy will need.[15]

Canberra also needs to appraise honestly its strengths and weaknesses as a player in global nuclear diplomacy. Australia's reputation for its earlier disarmament achievements, such as shepherding the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention to its successful conclusion, remains a diplomatic asset — but a limited and diminishing one.

For the moment, Canberra lacks the large and well-resourced cadre of arms control specialists — diplomats, analysts, bureaucrats and scientists — with which it used to be able to wield disproportionate influence in multilateral negotiations. This national asset was allowed to deteriorate under the Howard government, in line with a tilt from multilateralism to bilateralism. It will take time, training, and experience to rebuild. Although there remain some highly skilled and experienced individuals in Australia's professional arms control community, little effort or co-ordination has gone into cultivating a successor generation. This needs to change.

Money will be needed, and the Rudd government has so far been reluctant to invest in the improved diplomatic capability Australia will require. But against other types of national security spending — military capabilities, intelligence collection, the costs of responding to crises — arms control diplomacy is a bargain. The 1996 Canberra Commission study, which set a new standard in global nuclear disarmament blueprints, cost about one million Australian dollars.

The establishment of the new Australian-Japanese Commission makes the need for proper funding of Australia's government-to-government or 'first track' nuclear diplomacy even more pressing. If the new Commission is to be funded from within existing diplomatic resources, it could divert precious capabilities needed for regular nuclear diplomacy. If, however, the new Commission receives dedicated additional resources, one effect could be to underscore the miserliness with which Canberra has become used to supporting its normal nuclear diplomacy. The challenge will be to find adequate resources for both.

Yet while Australia's under-resourcing of nuclear diplomacy has become a weakness, there are other changes in the way the country has engaged with the world over the past decade that could be strengths in future disarmament activism.

Australia today has strong and comprehensive links with a rising Asia — with China, Japan, India, South Korea and the Southeast Asian states, bilaterally and through regional forums. The emphasis on a close Australia-US alliance under Howard, and the broad continuity in this direction under Rudd, likewise offers openings for dialogue and influence.

And with the growing global demand for nuclear energy, Australia's uranium mining and export industry is expanding to a scale more in keeping with the size of the country's uranium deposits and the breadth of its international relations; China and Russia are likely to become major customers. This has further deepened Australia's experience in safeguards. In addition, Australia's status as a uranium exporter may be just as important as its history of disarmament activism in giving Canberra a voice in global debates.

Australia's multilateral arms control history and residual capacity, its position in Asia, its US alliance, its role as a uranium supplier, and the recognition internationally that the Rudd government has ambitions for creative and leadership roles in multilateral activism: these elements could all assist a reinvigoration of Canberra's nuclear security diplomacy, if supported by sufficient funding and policy creativity.

Such a strategy could follow multiple and parallel tracks:

Reinforce the architecture: The April/May 2010 Review Conference for the NPT will be a critical test of the durability of the non-proliferation regime. The credibility of the NPT and of nuclear-armed states' commitments to disarm cannot afford a repeat of the failures of 2005. Australia could contribute by seeking to build new alignments of interests, so that the process does not automatically founder on the usual discord between nuclear haves and have-nots, or between the increasingly outdated diplomatic allegiances of the Western Group and the Non-Aligned Movement. One way, but not the only way, Australia could help the international community transcend these stale alignments is through the new Commission – especially if its membership is geographically inclusive.

Fill the gaps: Australia needs to make a sustained and intensive effort to help bring into play the crucial missing pieces in the non-proliferation game-board, notably through a start to long-overdue negotiations on an FMCT. Canberra needs to work in particular with Washington to reverse the Bush Administration's opposition to making such a treaty verifiable, and with Beijing and Moscow to remove their linking of this treaty with other issues such as the 'weaponisation of space'. Australia should sustain and be prepared to expand its advocacy of the CTBT, especially given the possibility that the next US Administration will throw its weight behind bringing this treaty into force. And Australia should continue to devote diplomatic energies to encouraging more countries to sign and ratify the IAEA Additional Protocol.

Keep pressure on the hard cases: Australia should sustain strong support for efforts to thwart any nuclear weapons ambitions in Iran and North Korea, including through continuing an active role in the Proliferation Security Initiative. The involvement of the Royal Australian Navy in multinational exercises related to the better co-ordination of and sharing expertise on interdictions and boarding operations could be expanded.

Selectively support new initiatives: Australia should offer diplomatic, expert and material support to some of the innovative steps being taken by others, notably the UK-Norwegian efforts on verification and credible international nuclear fuel bank proposals. The domestic politics of being seen to be associated with the promotion of nuclear power should not be reason to shy away from enlightened support for efforts to increase international control of the nuclear fuel cycle and thus reduce the spread of proliferation-sensitive technology.

Pursue a two-track approach on India: The idea of a deal to give India a special status outside the NPT, such as the one that has been pursued by United States, is awkward for the Rudd government. Many non-proliferation experts see it as harmful to the NPT regime, given that it would allow civilian nuclear commerce with India despite that country's possession of nuclear weapons and non-membership of the NPT. On the other hand, India can be explained as a unique case: its non-signature of the NPT arises from exceptional historical circumstances; it has not proliferated nuclear materials or know-how to others (unlike, for instance, NPT-member China); a proposal such as the US-India deal would place an increasing majority of its nuclear reactors under international non-proliferation safeguards; and no long-term or global effort at nuclear disarmament will succeed without accepting India, one of the big three economies of the new century, as a part of the diplomatic mainstream.

Australia has not irreparably harmed its wider disarmament diplomacy by broadly assenting within the Nuclear Suppliers Group to allow safeguarded civilian nuclear trade with India. At the same time, whether the current US-India package or some other future international deal proceeds, Australia's engagement in ending India's nuclear isolation should occur in parallel with efforts to involve India in wider arms control and disarmament processes. This should include bringing India to accept its global nuclear responsibilities — such as joining the negotiation for a verifiable FMCT and making its nuclear testing moratorium binding. Just as opponents of the US-India deal have an obligation to propose a viable alternative way to bring India into the global nuclear mainstream, those governments that even indirectly support the deal have a duty to pursue other measures in their global nuclear security diplomacy to offset, or more than offset, any of the deal's perceived 'pro-proliferation' effects.

Talk frankly with Washington: If the Rudd government is serious about nuclear disarmament, it will raise the issue regularly in high-level discussions with nuclear-armed countries, and especially the United States and Russia, whose leadership remains an essential starting-point for a global process. As a uranium supplier to Russia, Australia would have an opening and a right to remind Moscow of its responsibilities to show leadership in reducing nuclear dangers. As a uranium supplier to China, Australia also has a platform to encourage transparency in China's nuclear posture.

But, as an ally protected by the US nuclear umbrella, Australia has a particular opportunity and obligation to concentrate on a disarmament dialogue with the United States. Canberra should already be talking with both the McCain and Obama teams about the next Administration's nuclear security policies. The aim should be to add to pressures within the US debate to help tilt it towards reducing reliance on nuclear arms. These conversations should include efforts to identify and encourage prospects for the United States to revisit CTBT ratification, return to a pro-verification position in promoting an FMCT, deepen nuclear-related dialogue with China,[16] and reconsider questions of nuclear doctrine, posture and levels of alert. Australia-US nuclear dialogue should include frank discussions of how the US might make progress on nuclear restraint and disarmament without reducing its or its allies' security.

Play a lead in helping Asia lead: In parallel with its conversations with Washington, Australia should also focus on its region, playing to its strengths as an accepted diplomatic partner in Asia. The remainder of this *Lowy Institute Analysis* sets out some initial thinking on one kind of regional initiative Australia might pursue.[17]

An Asian initiative

Asian countries have hardly been silent on nuclear security. Japan actively promotes non-proliferation and disarmament, a stance underscored by its tragic history. China has played a crucial role in the Six Party Talks involving North Korea. The states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have concluded a treaty for a Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapons-Free Zone (SEANWFZ). India has long advocated universal nuclear disarmament. What has been lacking, however, are sustained efforts to build region-wide agreement on reducing nuclear dangers, and to bring a united region-wide voice to bear in global forums: the NPT Review Conference processes, the Conference on Disarmament or the UN General Assembly.

Some recent modest progress on this front is worth noting. In July 2008, the Asia-Pacific's only formal and inclusive security structure, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established an officials' process specifically to encourage regional states to fulfil their non-proliferation and disarmament commitments.[18] This Intersessional Meeting (ISM) has a wide mandate, which ranges from promoting implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1540 (which requires all states to criminalise WMD proliferation and control relevant exports) to preventing regional nuclear arms races.

While the ARF is often rightly criticised for its slow, consensual approach and the underwhelming achievements of its 14-year history, the creation of its non-proliferation mechanism is not to be dismissed. It offers a platform for activist states like Australia to encourage common regional positions on issues of which some countries might otherwise prefer to take little note. It creates a new and non-discriminatory mechanism for engaging non-NPT states India and Pakistan on nuclear security as well as another venue for putting pressure on North Korea. And it compels the United States, Russia and China to explain to their Asian partners what they are doing to reduce nuclear dangers. The fact that the United States and China (with Singapore) will share chairing of the first round of these talks suggests that major powers do not deem this new forum's potential trivial. The ARF's very large membership, however, will likely impede progress. Another weakness of the ARF is that it does not include a leadership-level dialogue.

There may be more chance of consolidating and mobilising regional consensus on some nuclear security issues, notably the desirability of nuclear restraint, through the current membership of another forum, the East Asia Summit (EAS): the ASEAN 10, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, this region and forum offer a singular congruence for the pursuit of common Asian positions on nuclear restraint. Most of these countries have renounced nuclear weapons entirely. The two that possess them, China and India, have relatively small arsenals and relatively restrained postures and doctrines.

A twofold challenge and opportunity presents itself: to find ways to maintain and strengthen a regional norm of nuclear restraint; and to consolidate and mobilise regional opinion to influence global processes in the direction of nuclear restraint, non-proliferation and disarmament.

Australia could creatively combine the arms control and Asian strands of its diplomacy to be a prime mover in advancing these goals.

One way would be to encourage a regional leaders' dialogue on nuclear security. This might begin as a series of bilateral consultations between Australia and some key countries — perhaps Japan, China, India and Indonesia — leading to a multilateral leaders' discussion at one of the region's formal inter-state bodies, and preferably, given its membership and mandate, the East Asia Summit. Australia could attempt to use the ARF's new non-proliferation vehicle in support of and parallel with this approach.

The idea is at its core a simple one: a discussion among regional leaders, aimed at identifying, testing and expanding the common ground among their nations' interests and national thinking on nuclear security issues. This dialogue could be advanced with varying degrees of ambition, depending on what the regional diplomatic market could bear. The endpoint of the discussion would not be pre-determined or restricted by cautious national bureaucratic positions. A challenge as critical as nuclear security deserves direct leaders-level consideration. And a primary purpose of the East Asia Summit is 'open and spontaneous Leaders-led discussions on strategic issues of peace and stability in our region and in the world'.[19]

There should be scope in such a forum to craft an agreed declaration by regional leaders setting out principles for nuclear security. Non-proliferation would need to feature prominently, including affirmations of commitments to prevent the unsafeguarded transfer of nuclear weapons-related materials and knowledge, and to control the spread of proliferation-sensitive technology in nuclear energy programs. The leaders could endorse positions developed in the ARF non-proliferation meetings, such as on export controls and fulfilment of existing treaty commitments. The link between non-proliferation and disarmament – that progress in one supports progress in the other – could also be acknowledged. And a leaders' declaration might also recognise the need for rigorous standards, controls and transparency to accompany nuclear energy expansion in Asia.[20]

But a bolder approach could also be considered. The leaders' statement should agree on the need for a restrained and stable nuclear order — precisely the kind of order the region needs if it is to prosper and to manage strategic competition involving its rising powers. This could draw on some of the conclusions of the Canberra Commission, in particular affirming that the only acceptable role for nuclear weapons is to deter other nuclear weapons in the context of efforts to reduce nuclear arsenals. The goal of avoiding a nuclear arms race in Asia could be explicitly endorsed, and transparency and dialogue regarding nuclear capabilities and doctrines encouraged. There might even be potential to specify the need for a regional order based on assurances by nuclear-armed states that they have no doctrines or plans entailing the first use of nuclear weapons, and that they would under no circumstances use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. Such assurances are already sought by Southeast Asian countries through the SEANWFZ.

A united position identifying the powers of an increasingly wealthy and influential Asia as advocates of nuclear restraint and nuclear disarmament could have both regional confidence-building and global normative effects. It could help to cut across the barriers which have traditionally split global disarmament diplomacy into Western and Non-Aligned blocs and thus obstructed agreement. It might add to normative pressures on nuclear-armed powers beyond the region to reconsider their postures and doctrines. In particular, it could be a way of contributing fresh thinking and impetus to the 2010 NPT Review Conference process.

Given this, the timing of an Asian leaders' meeting would need to be before the end of 2009. East Asia Summit meetings are already scheduled for late 2008 and late 2009. Australia and others could work to ensure that either or both of these sessions were expanded to involve substantial discussions on nuclear issues.

In parallel, the Australian and Japanese governments could seek to support Asia-wide consensus in combating nuclear dangers by building an Asian focus into the work of their new disarmament Commission: the selection of Commissioners could reflect Asia's increasing centrality in global affairs, and their deliberations could identify the drivers of nuclear proliferation in Asia and ways to address them. The East Asia Summit would be a logical venue for seeking endorsement of the Commission's recommendations.

The idea of an Asian dialogue in pursuit of nuclear security, restraint and disarmament raises some obvious questions, which will warrant more exhaustive consideration. For instance, what are the pros and cons of not involving the United States and Russia from the outset? How far would India be willing to proceed in a discussion about its nuclear security posture without involving Pakistan?

How far would China be ready to take the conversation without directly engaging the United States and Russia?

Discussions on nuclear security in an Asian setting might require the region's nuclear-armed countries to consider and explain how they are contributing to global disarmament, beyond merely waiting for the United States and Russia to take the first steps. There might be a corresponding expectation for Australia and other non-nuclear US allies in the region to explain how their acceptance of the protection of a nuclear-armed ally is consistent with their advocacy of nuclear restraint and disarmament. But this is a question Australia and Japan will need to be ready to answer anyway. In raising their profile on disarmament issues by convening the new Commission, Canberra and Tokyo will realise that they need to be prepared at some stage to identify the circumstances under which they would be prepared to accept and encourage a more restrained US nuclear posture.

These are just some of the sensitivities that any serious discussion of nuclear security, whether in Asia or globally, will need to take into account. But deferring dialogue simply because it is difficult is not a sustainable option. The complications and dangers of the Asian strategic environment in the 21st Century make the need for regional and leadership-level engagement on these issues all the more urgent. The foregoing pages are offered as some preliminary thoughts on what such a conversation might entail.

NOTES

[1] Australian Labor Party, *National Platform and Constitution, 44th National Conference*, April 2007, ch 14, paras 66-77.

[2] Australia 2020 Summit, *Australia 2020 Summit: Initial Summit Report*. Canberra, 2008, pp 35-37.

[3] Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations. *AUSMIN 2008 joint communiqué*. 2008: http://www.dfat.gov.au/GEO/us/ausmin/ausmin08_joint_communique.html.

[4] Australian Permanent Mission to the United Nations. Statement on Cluster One Issues. Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Second Session of the Preparatory Committee, 30 April 2008.

[5] Kevin Rudd. Building a better world together. Kyoto University, Kyoto, 9 June 2008.

[6] Bruce G. Blair, De-alerting strategic forces, in *Reykjavik revisited: steps towards a world free of nuclear weapons*, ed. George P. Schultz, Sidney D. Drell, and James E. Goodby. Stanford, CA, Hoover Institution Press, 2008, p 25.

[7] Office of the Secretary of Defense. *Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China* 2006: http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/China%Report%202006.pdf. p 28.

[8] Li Bin, Understanding China's nuclear strategy (Zhongguo he zhanlüe bianxi). *World Economics and Politics (Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi)* 9 2006.

[9] J. Peter Scoblic, Disarmament redux. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scienists* 64 (1) 2008.

[10] *Ansari calls for global nuclear disarmament*. 9 March 2008: http://news.webindia123.com/news/printer.asp?story=/news/articles/India/20080309/904590.html, Pranab Mukherjee. Keynote address by the External Affairs Minister of India to the 10th Asian security conference organised by the Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis. New Delhi, 5 February 2008, K. Subrahmanyam, When hawks turn moral. *The Indian Express*, 21 January 2008.

[11] Max M. Kampelman, Bombs away. *The New York Times*, 24 April 2006.

[12] Sir Michael Quinlan, Abolishing nuclear armouries: policy or pipedream? *Survival* 49 (4) 2007. p 8.

[13] This is one of the central conclusions of major expert studies on nuclear disarmament in recent years, the 1996 Canberra Commission, the 1999 Tokyo Forum and the 2006 Blix Commission. Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, *Report of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons*. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 1996.

[14] Ibid.

[15] The author is indebted to Lowy Institute Deputy Director Martine Letts for this suggestion.

[16] See also Hugh White, *Stopping a nuclear arms race between America and China.* Sydney, Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2007.

[17] This proposal builds upon the author's suggestions made initially at a nuclear disarmament conference convened by the Norwegian government in Oslo in February 2008. These were developed further in speeches in Sydney and at a conference in New Delhi. Rory Medcalf. *Nuclear arms control and disarmament: what can Australia do?* Lowy Institute for International Policy 2008: http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=767. Elements of the proposal were also submitted to participants at the Australia 2020 Summit in Canberra in April 2020, and reflected in the final summit report. *Australia 2020 Summit - Final Report*. Commonwealth of Australia 2008: http://www.australia2020.gov.au/final_report/index.cfm. p 364, 367.

[18] *Chairman's Statement at 15th ASEAN Regional Forum*. 24 July 2008: http://www.aseanregionalforum.org/LinkClick.aspx?

fileticket=Hn4UnDG3WVY%3d&tabid=66&mid=1009, p 8.

[19] *Chairman's Statement at the Second East Asia Summit, Cebu, Philippines, 15 January* 2007: http://www.aseansec.org/19302.htm.

[20] For an outline of the East Asia Summit's potential as a forum for discussing the secure expansion of nuclear energy generation in Asia, including questions of fuel supply assurances and limiting the spread of sensitive nuclear technology, see Andrew Symon, *Nuclear power in Southeast Asia: implications for Australia and non-proliferation.* Sydney, Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2008.

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