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Stopping a Nuclear Arms Race between America and China

What is the problem?

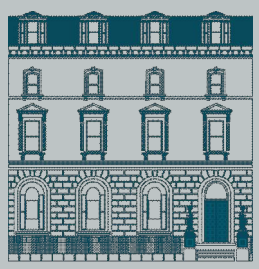
There is a clear risk that the US and China will start a kind of nuclear arms race which could pose serious risks to the future of their relationship and the security of Asia. As America upgrades its nuclear forces and builds missile defences, China may build more missiles to protect its ability to retaliate against any US nuclear attack. America may then further enhance its forces in turn.

Beijing and Washington therefore risk slipping into a destabilising strategic nuclear competition. This would increase the risk of long-term hostility, and increase the risk that any clash could go nuclear.

What should be done?

America and China could avoid all this by reaching a bilateral arms control agreement limiting the size and capabilities of their nuclear forces and defensive systems to consolidate a stable deterrent relationship.

This would require new thinking on both sides, fostering a sense of mutual respect for each other's interests and thus laying an essential foundation for peace in Asia in coming decades. Australia can take a lead in promoting this idea. It would not be easy, but the benefits of success would be immense, and the costs of failure slight.



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'On your marks…'

Australia's interests in a peaceful and stable Asia-Pacific region are threatened by the risk of intensifying strategic nuclear competition between the US and China. This may seem a little surprising in the post-Cold War world. We have perhaps allowed ourselves to assume a little too easily that nuclear weapons ceased to matter much in relations between major powers after the Cold War was over. We have worried much more about the risk that they will be acquired by new players – rogue states or terrorists – who might not respond to the incentives and threats that shaped nuclear strategy between major powers during the Cold War.

But strategic competition between major powers did not disappear with the end of the Cold War, and neither did their nuclear weapons. Despite post-Cold War cuts, many of the nuclear forces held by the old nuclear weapons states still lie in their silos and bunkers. It was always likely that these nuclear capabilities would find their way back onto centre-stage in major-power relations at some time – though most likely in ways rather different from the old US-Soviet nuclear standoff. That was shaped specifically by the circumstances of those two actors and of the times, so there is no reason to expect that to be re-run.

Between the US and Russia the danger of a resurgence in nuclear tension has been limited by the eclipse of strategic competition between them, and the reassurance that each side retains nuclear forces more than sufficient to deter any possible nuclear move by the other. In essence the Cold War deterrent balance between the US and Russia has outlived the strategic competition that created it, and still provides a strong measure of assurance that neither of the two old adversaries will upset the nuclear status quo between them. It would be foolish to assume that this equilibrium can be preserved indefinitely, as recent exchanges over missile defence forces in Eastern Europe remind us, but for the time being it looks secure.

Between the US and China, however, a different dynamic is developing. China has had nuclear weapons since 1964, but its nuclear forces have always been relatively small and primitive, compared with those of the other established nuclear powers. That has been in part because China has lacked the money and technology to do more, but also because China's strategic nuclear objectives have remained modest even as its financial and technical capacities have grown. Beijing has never aspired to strategic nuclear parity with Moscow or Washington, let alone superiority. It has aimed only to maintain a 'minimum deterrent' – the capacity to respond to any nuclear attack by inflicting relatively small but still unacceptable levels of damage on a nuclear adversary, sufficient to deter resort to nuclear weapons by a superior nuclear power.[1] China has believed that notwithstanding the small number of ICBMs in its arsenal and their relatively high level of vulnerability to US strikes, America could not be confident that it would destroy all of China's long-range missiles in a first strike. The risk that China would retain the capacity to mount a successful nuclear attack on even one or two major US cities would, they believe, deter any US nuclear strike. Some in the US strategic community have doubted the robustness of China's deterrent, but in general America has accepted

that, in the absence of serious strategic tensions between them since the early 1970s, an asymmetric but stable deterrent balance has been maintained.

But now China is growing, and its growth – economic, technological, military and political – poses a strategic challenge to US leadership in Asia. For both sides, the future of their strategic nuclear relationship is shaped by the strategic competition that is emerging between them. Both sides have an overriding incentive to prevent that competitive element growing to dominate the relationship, as they both benefit enormously from an economic relationship which is central to prosperity on each side of the Pacific. However it is clear that economic interdependence can coexist with a strategic and political competition, and there remains a risk that, if the relationship is mismanaged, competition could become predominant.

For America, that risk depends primarily on the choices that China makes about its strategic future.[2] American policy hedges against the possibility that China will try to compete with America for strategic influence in Asia by preparing to confront and contain China militarily if necessary to sustain US primacy. China, of course, recognises this: it hedges against the emergence of an adversarial relationship by preparing ways to limit US military options against China. Neither side wants to make the other a strategic competitor, let alone a military adversary, but both think it prudent to take precautions in case the other pushes the relationship towards hostility.

This is the background against which Washington and Beijing each view the development of one another's strategic nuclear forces. The bigger developments are happening in America's arsenals.

American force developments

Two key developments are now underway in America's strategic nuclear posture. One is the development of missile defence capabilities, including a national missile defence system designed to destroy ballistic missiles launched against the US homeland. The other is the evolution of America's own missile forces.

America's plans for its nuclear forces were set out in the 2002 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR). With so much attention focused on the War on Terror, the NPR and its implications for US strategy have not received much attention. But it constitutes a fairly significant re-orientation of US nuclear forces with important implications for US objectives and approaches in a nuclear confrontation with China.[3] Perhaps the most important measure proposed in the NPR is the development of new capabilities to destroy other countries' nuclear forces. While US ICBM and SLBM numbers have been cut significantly, America today still plans to field 450 ICBMs and 14 Trident ballistic-missile submarines in 2012. Newer Peacemaker missiles are being withdrawn, but older Minuteman III missiles are being upgraded, and the highly accurate re-entry vehicles from the Peacemaker missiles are being transferred to the Minuteman IIIs, in order to increase their accuracy to levels which make them highly effective against hard targets like missile silos. The D5 submarine-launched ballistic missiles are also being upgraded to improve their accuracy. Steps are also being taken to improve the warheads' capacity to

destroy hardened and deeply-buried targets.[4] Finally the US is enhancing its capacity to attack nuclear forces with conventional weapons, raising the possibility of a non-nuclear 'first strike' against China's nuclear forces. Together these measures mean that 'the American force may become quantitatively smaller in the years ahead, but qualitative improvements will further transform this force into a robust and highly lethal 'silo-busting' arsenal'.[5]

The other major development in US nuclear posture is the development and deployment of national missile defences. Despite the immense technical problems, the US drive for a national missile defence is not something that potential US nuclear adversaries can ignore. The system now being installed in Alaska and California aims at a modest capability, but the project has open-ended objectives. The Bush Administration no longer publishes its longer-range ambitions for national missile defences, but the Clinton Administration published plans for later phases involving the deployment of several hundred ground-based interceptors, designed to counter attacks of up to 50 warheads with advanced decoys and other defensive countermeasures.[6] It seems unlikely that the Bush Administration's objectives are more modest. Although the US has argued that the purpose of its NMD program is to defend against very small missile stacks by rogue states like North Korea, there is a clear possibility that the US would, if the technology works, build missile defences that could protect against larger forces like China's.[7]

Together, more accurate offensive forces and more capable defences would make a powerful combination which may present the US with some very attractive strategic options. The most obvious and immediate objective – spelled out in the NPR and elsewhere – is to destroy the forces of and defend against missile attacks from rogue states like North Korea and Iran. But the capabilities being developed offer something more than that. Recent academic commentary in the US and UK has suggested that the undeclared aim of current American policy is to achieve 'nuclear primacy' against established nuclear powers.[8] This means the ability to threaten and even use nuclear weapons without fear of retaliation, not just against Iran, Pakistan or North Korea or other future new nuclear states, but against the established nuclear powers, especially China and Russia. Plentiful highly accurate missiles with silo-busting warheads would allow the US to destroy large numbers of an adversary's missiles in a disarming first strike. Substantial missile defences would then have a high probability of shooting down whatever missiles the adversary had left to fire in a retaliatory strike.

Of course the strategic significance of this kind of capability is not that the US would actually plan to conduct such an operation. It is rather that the knowledge that it could do so would provide a great source of pressure on an adversary. The credibility of a US nuclear threat against China would increase because China's ability to retaliate against the US homeland would be that much less certain. That would make nuclear weapons again a source of immense political influence. Choosing to establish this kind of posture would mark a further stage in the underlying debate that persisted throughout the Cold War between those who believed that nuclear weapons could only be used to deter their use

by others – the idea underpinning MAD – and those who believed that they could be used (or their use threatened) to achieve more diverse political and strategic aims.[9] In retrospect it can seem that MAD was quickly accepted as the inevitable solution to the problems of nuclear strategy during the Cold War, but in reality US policymakers always wrestled with alternative nuclear strategies that would make nuclear weapons more useful. Most often, during the Cold War as today, this involved considering the development of more numerous and more accurate missile warheads, building missile defences, or both.[10]

Is this in fact what the Bush Administration is aiming at? A number of US scholars have reached the conclusion that the US is aiming for nuclear primacy, even against Russia[11]. Bush Administration officials have argued against this view[12], and some scholars are sceptical. Nuclear primacy against Russia does appear a daunting task. Russian strategic forces have declined sharply since the Soviet collapse, but Russia still has a lot of missiles and warheads. Nuclear primacy against China, however, may seem a credible medium-term goal for America. With upgraded offensive forces better able to attack hardened and deeply buried targets, America has a greater capacity to destroy most of China's now small and relatively vulnerable ICBMs in a first strike. Meanwhile its national missile defence system, if it works, would offer the potential to defeat surviving Chinese missiles or warheads before they could find targets in the US. Of course many are sceptical that America's national missiles defence system can be made to work, and there are no guarantees. But that is not much comfort to Bejing; they cannot be sure that NMD will not work. Press reporting of the classified NPR suggests that China (unlike Russia) was explicitly identified in the NPR as a potential future nuclear adversary. And it seems probable that US NMD will, if it works, be expanded to protect American cities from a depleted Chinese retaliatory strike.

Nuclear policy does not seem to get much high-level attention in Washington these days, and it may be the US is moving towards an attempt to gain nuclear primacy with China without senior leaders ever having taken a clear decision to do so, and without fully weighing the costs, risks and consequences of attempting to upset the deterrent balance that has been established and maintained between the US and China over the past few decades. It would place America in the position of upsetting the nuclear status quo, but it would be consistent with a policy of maintaining American power in Asia, and with the broader thrust of US strategic policy under the Bush Administration, which has emphasised a long-term aim to consolidate and if possible increase the US lead in all forms of military power. If China does become a strategic adversary of the US over coming decades, a policy of nuclear primacy would seem like a good investment. But that depends on whether the US can in fact achieve nuclear primacy over China, and whether it can do so without itself provoking precisely the kind of downturn in US-China relations which would make it necessary. And that depends on what China does in response.

Chinese force developments

China has a very modest capacity to mount nuclear attacks on the US. It has a relatively small number of nuclear weapons. Estimates

differ from as few as 200 warheads[13] to around 400. Of these there are only about 20 intercontinental-range missiles capable of reaching targets in the continental US, and one ballistic missile submarine of doubtful operational value.[14] Most of its current ICBMs are liquid-fuelled, which means they take many hours to prepare for launch, and are tied to elaborate launch sites. All this makes them easy to destroy in a surprise first-strike attack. China has however evidently been satisfied that secrecy about the precise number of missiles it has, and the uncertainty that afflicts any military operation, has meant that the US would be deterred from trying to disarm China for fear that one or two missiles would survive, still able to inflict massive casualties and damage to American cities.

China started to modernise its rather crude intercontinental nuclear forces over 20 years ago. It has developed a new generation of solid-fuelled intercontinental-range missiles, the DF 31 and DF 31A, but has been slow to field them. The first of these new missiles may only have become operational over the last year or so.[15] They are more accurate, more mobile, can be launched much more quickly, and hence are more 'survivable'. China is also developing a new and better submarine-launched missile, raising the possibility that it will eventually be able to deploy operationally effective submarine-based forces which would be much harder to find and attack than any land-based missile. Finally China has probably developed but not deployed the capacity to put several warheads on each missile, thus increasing the range of targets it can hit and complicating missile defence efforts.

Nonetheless these developments do not give China much ground for confidence about the future of its minimum deterrence posture in the light of the evolution of US nuclear forces. Many scholars – including Chinese observers – have noted that even with their new missiles, the combination of America's highly accurate offensive forces and expanding national missile defences will see it lose the minimum deterrent capability that it believes it has enjoyed hitherto.[16] Beijing's concerns probably focus most clearly on the way US nuclear primacy over China would affect the dynamics of a crisis over Taiwan. They may fear that the US, confident that it could defeat any Chinese counterattack, could credibly threaten a nuclear strike on China to force China to desist from conventional military operations against Taiwan. This would neutralise both China's most powerful sanction against a Taiwanese declaration of independence, and its growing conventional capacity to limit US conventional military options in support of Taiwan. For China there is a clear historical precedent for such action by America, from the era before China acquired its own nuclear weapons. In the confrontation over Quemoy and Matsu in the Taiwan Strait in the 1954-5, the US used explicit threats of nuclear attack against China to deter Chinese conventional operations to seize these disputed islands.[17]

So for China the stakes are very high. It seems most unlikely that China will simply allow the US to achieve nuclear primacy and to neutralise China's nuclear forces without vigorous efforts to counter American measures. It has been clear for some time that China has several options to respond to American nuclear force developments. The first is to accelerate production and deployment of its new, more

survivable missiles, and arm them with multiple warheads. What counts for China is numbers. The more missiles and warheads it has, the less confident the US can be that it will be able to destroy them all with the combination of its offensive strike and defensive shield. The arithmetic may be especially tough on US defensive systems: it could be easier for China to double the number of warheads it can launch towards the US than for the US to double the capacity of its defences.[18] Other sensible responses to American nuclear-force developments would include the expansion of China's fledgling submarine-based missile capability, the development of nuclear cruise-missile attack options, perhaps from covert platforms like commercial shipping, and the covert delivery of nuclear weapons direct into US ports aboard ships. China might also move from its traditional posture of only using its nuclear forces in retaliation for a nuclear attack to a more risky 'launch on warning' or 'launch under attack' posture. No doubt China is looking at all these options.

The problem of course is that any of these measures would attract a US response in turn. There is in fact a lively debate in the US about whether China's current nuclear-force developments do not suggest that it is already moving away from a minimum deterrence posture towards something more ambitious. Debates in China's strategic community about nuclear strategy have become more active, and some US scholars have queried whether China's evolving nuclear capabilities might be intended to underpin a shift away from minimum deterrence to a more active posture, more threatening to US interests and to America itself.[19]

The risks

There is a clear risk that China and the US will be drawn into an escalating and mutually reinforcing cycle of responses to one another's strategic nuclear developments. To preserve minimum deterrence in the face of US offensive and defensive developments, China is likely to expand the number, sophistication and variety of its offensive forces, and modify its nuclear doctrine. The US in turn may well interpret those measures as an attempt by China to challenge US strategic primacy, and to strengthen a nuclear deterrent screen behind which it can apply conventional military pressure in regional contingencies like Taiwan. It is therefore likely that the US would in turn respond by further enhancing its offensive forces and missile defences to stay ahead of China's countermeasures. As US forces grew, China would do more to counteract them, and so both sides would seem likely to be drawn into an arms race. This poses very significant risks.

First we need to consider whether increasing strategic nuclear competition between the US and China raises the danger that a regional clash between them would escalate into a nuclear exchange. Taiwan seems the most plausible spark for a US-China conflict, but other scenarios are also possible, including clashes between China and Japan or between Japan and Korea. It is clearly possible that such a conflict could escalate to a nuclear exchange[20], and nuclear strategic competition between them may make that more likely. One scary scenario is that China, under sustained conventional attack from US forces based in Guam, including, possibly, conventional precision-strike operations directed against

China's nuclear forces, might decide to risk a nuclear attack on Guam. Beijing might fear that it risked losing its nuclear forces to US conventional strikes, and might reason that because Guam is so remote from other US territory, and is primarily a military facility, a strike on Guam might not attract a US nuclear counter-strike on China's territory. A recent statement by a Chinese general seemed to hint at such reasoning.[21] Another risk is that the US might fear that China might think this way, and thus consider either conventional or nuclear pre-emptive strikes against Chinese nuclear forces.[22]

Fortunately these scenarios remain somewhat improbable. A second and more significant risk is that strategic nuclear competition between Washington and Beijing will amplify the already strong elements of competition in their wider relationship, and thus make it harder for the two giants of the Asian Century to negotiate a lasting and harmonious *modus vivendi*. The more the US is seen to be striving to neutralise Beijing's deterrent and achieve nuclear primacy over China, the more likely that China will conclude that America's ultimate intentions towards it are hostile. The more that Americans see China striving to preserve the capacity to overcome US nuclear defences, the more likely they are to see China as threatening, and the more reluctant they will be to seek accommodations with its rising power. This matters because Asia will only remain peaceful in coming decades if the US and China can avoid being drawn into a strategically adversarial relationship. America, it seems, is determined to retain its position as the leading power in Asia. China evidently expects and intends to exercise increasing regional leadership as its power grows. The adjustment of these potentially incompatible objectives to produce a mutually acceptable power-sharing arrangement which also finds space for Japan, India and others is no easy task, and success cannot be taken for granted. The tension and suspicion generated by an accelerating and increasingly overt nuclear arms race would make it all the harder. Failure would be a disaster for all of us.

A solution

Purists would say the best solution to the problem we have identified would be a global agreement to reduce and eliminate all nuclear weapons. But the specific risks that arise from escalating strategic competition between the US and China seem too great and too urgent for us to wait on the slender hope that this ideal solution can one day be achieved. Clearly there is a pressing need for the US and China to discuss frankly their perspectives and objectives on nuclear strategic issues, and proposals for such dialogue have been made fairly regularly.[23] A more ambitious and effective aim however would be the negotiation of a bilateral arms control agreement between them that would stabilise their respective nuclear and missile defensive forces at or near the current levels. The basic structure of such a deal is not very complex. Its core would be mutual agreement to levels of nuclear offensive and defensive forces on both sides. The agreement would need to allow the US to build missile defences sufficient to protect against the small 'rogue' nuclear attacks against which their NMD is ostensibly directed, and sufficient offensive forces to preserve its own deterrent. The agreement would need to allow China sufficient offensive forces to ensure that enough of them

would survive both a US disarming strike and the agreed level of US defences to give Beijing confidence that it could successfully attack a small number of high-value US targets, and hence preserve their minimum deterrent posture.

No doubt the detailed negotiation of a deal along these lines would be extremely complex. The old Cold War bilateral agreements between the US and the Soviet Union provide a deep reservoir of ideas and approaches that could be brought to bear on this new problem, but there will also be new issues, such as how to take account of US conventional silo-busting weapons. However, now seems a good time to look for solutions, because none of these problems will get easier with the passage of time. China for the next decade or two is obviously at a big disadvantage in any sustained nuclear arms race with the US, and has much to gain from a deal which preserves its minimum nuclear deterrent without requiring it to spend immense sums on an endless spiral of bigger and more sophisticated offensive forces. The US for now enjoys clear advantages of resources and technology, but Washington may realise that this may be a declining asset as China grows stronger and its technology base improves over coming decades. Better to make a deal with China now when it can negotiate from a position of strength than wait for China to close the gap and lose its present advantages. Indeed the next few years may provide a unique moment of opportunity: the point in the rise of China at which the present relative levels of power provide both sides with the maximum incentive to negotiate. Today, China has an incentive to negotiate because it knows America will retain an advantage for years to come, and America has an incentive to negotiate because it knows that its advantage will be steadily eroded. Within a few years, as China closes the gap, such calculations may start to change, making the idea of a deal less attractive to both sides.

However, this is not the most important reason to pursue a US-China nuclear arms control agreement urgently. The biggest risk of delay is that events and attitudes will overtake us. At present, US-China relations are in relatively good shape, thanks to sustained efforts and effective diplomacy by both sides. A US-China clash over Taiwan, territorial disputes with Japan or some other cause could provoke a freeze in US-China relations which would make the negotiation of any agreement much harder, if not impossible. Less dramatically, we cannot be sure that the overall temperature of the relationship will not fall as the US disengages from the Middle East and starts to recognise how much the strategic challenge from China has grown since 9/11. There may never be a better time than now.

Even so, the task would not be easy, because this kind of arms control agreement would be a huge step. First, it would require, especially for China, a new approach to nuclear strategy, relinquishing the benefits it believes it gains from secrecy, and opening up its nuclear forces to inspection and verification. More profoundly, a US-China arms control agreement would require something of a revolution in attitudes in both of the two countries themselves – in America's attitudes towards China and its growing strength, and in China's attitudes towards its place in the international system and its obligations as a great power. For America, a decision to reach this kind of deal with China would mean

moderating aspirations of unchallengeable primacy, and a step back from expectations that the unipolar moment can be extended indefinitely. For both Beijing and Washington, a bilateral nuclear deal would provide an opportunity and a framework to think deeply about where this most vital relationship is going, what each can realistically hope from it, and how it can best be managed. It would imply, and perhaps impel, recognition on both sides that the relationship, so full of promise, also carries serious risks that they have to find a way to manage together, cooperatively, through compromise and accommodation. That, in the end, would be the biggest benefit of a deal, and the biggest loss if the opportunity is allowed to pass.

An Australian initiative

The idea of a deal like this has been raised occasionally as a possibility in the academic literature for some years[24], and Kim Beazley sketched the case in a speech in Beijing in 2004[25]. But it is far from the political agendas in the US or China at present. That presents a challenge, and also an opportunity, for Australian diplomacy. I propose that Australia should take upon itself the task of actively promoting the negotiation of a bilateral nuclear arms control agreement between the US and China. Our aim should be to get the two sides to commit to negotiating such a deal. We should not present ourselves as an intermediary or a go-between in the negotiations themselves: Beijing and Washington are quite capable of negotiating such a deal without our help, once they accept the wisdom of doing so. Our task would simply be to nudge this firmly onto their agenda. This is perhaps the kind of role that John Howard had in mind when he delivered the inaugural Lowy Institute 'Australia in the World' lecture in 2005, where he spoke of Australia 'having a role in continually identifying, and advocating to each, the shared strategic interests these great powers [China and the US] have in regional peace and prosperity'.[26]

An Australian initiative would need to be preceded by careful thought concerning the implications for US allies in the Western Pacific. It might be argued that the kind of agreement being proposed here would undermine America's extended deterrent nuclear umbrella over allies like Japan and Australia. By leaving the US vulnerable to Chinese nuclear retaliation, it could undermine US capacity to deter Chinese nuclear attacks on American regional allies, in much the same way that West Europeans during the Cold War feared that US-Soviet agreements would have weakened their protection from the US nuclear umbrella.[27] This is an important question, posing complex choices for American allies. Would our security in Asia be better served by preserving strong extended deterrence, at the risk of deteriorating US-China relations, or by supporting steps to improve those relations, at the cost of weakening our deterrent shield? This question is critical for Australia. It can be tempting to think that cooler US-China relations strengthen the protection we derive from our US alliance. But a US-China conflict would be a disaster for Australia, so seeking security in Sino-American tensions is not a good strategy for us. US allies in Asia face complex choices on these issues, and none of them is risk-free. We cannot avoid those risks by relying on the preservation of old structures and arrangements in the new and very different

circumstances of the 'Asian Century'. Faced with two risky options, it makes sense to choose the course that offers a better long-term outcome.

Having taken that choice, Australia would need to be prepared to invest a lot of diplomatic effort, and a share of its credibility, in the enterprise. There would be three obvious elements to the campaign: in Washington, in Beijing and in the wider region. Let's start with our neighbours in the region. Australia's interests in a stable US-China relationship are shared by every other country in Asia. We will all depend on strong relationships with both powers for the kind of future we hope for. We therefore all need the US and China to get along, and to avoid the kind of competition or conflict that would require any of us to choose sides between them. It should therefore be pretty easy to persuade our regional neighbours in Asia to join us in pressing the US and China to do a deal on nuclear weapons. Strong and consistent support from the rest of Asia would make our message pretty hard for Americans and Chinese to ignore. Two countries in Asia would be especially important – Asia's other major powers, Japan and India.

For Japan the question of whether to support such a proposal would pose major issues. Like Australia, Japan would need to weigh the consequences for US extended deterrence of Chinese nuclear attack on Japan, facing the same choices that we do, but in a more intense form. Japan is challenged and intimidated by China's growing power, and by China's apparent reluctance to concede legitimacy to Japan's re-emergence as a 'normal' power. It has sought security against China by reaffirming its alliance with the US, implicitly endorsing a 'balance of power' model of Asia's strategic future in which the US, Japan and others cooperate to preserve US strategic primacy against China's challenge. Japan risks painting itself into a corner with this strategy. Its approach implies that Japan's future security depends on US-China strategic competition, because the more adversarial US-China relations become, the more important Japan is to America. Japan has long worried that the US will sacrifice Japan's interests in favour of building a closer relationship with China, but avoiding this by accepting, even promoting, disharmony between its two most important partners is hardly an ideal strategy. Persuading Japan to help press for a US-China arms control agreement would open a dialogue about Japan's options that may have wider value. The recent Australia-Japan joint declaration on security should open the way for such discussions.

India also seems content for US-China strategic competition to bubble along, as this helps offset the strategic challenge that China might otherwise pose to India. But New Delhi has other equities at stake as well. For India, China's nuclear force developments have implications for its own nuclear posture. India's nuclear concerns focus on China's shorter-range forces, and it could be argued that limits to China's intercontinental forces would free resources to expand China's medium-range capabilities. However, India might also be attracted to measures which stabilise US-China relations, and could welcome the precedent that a US-China deal might set for the eventual negotiation of China-India arms control agreements.

All these considerations should make the prospect of a bilateral agreement with the US more attractive to Beijing. For Australia to propose such a deal to Beijing would take our diplomacy there to a new level. Hitherto Australia has not really tried to engage China on strategic questions: our diplomacy has aimed to prevent those questions intruding into the trade and economic relationship, rather than try to influence China's views on them. But as China's power grows, Australia will need to develop a substantive and robust strategic dialogue with China if we want to be able to promote and protect our strategic interests. This seems a good time to start.

Finally, it would be in Washington that the biggest and most demanding effort would need to be made. America would be hardest to persuade. Superficially it is being asked to give up the most, at least in the short term. But Washington is a free marketplace for ideas, and its national policy debates are open to fresh thinking and bold proposals. Washington's approaches to China are driven by a deep conviction of America's unique destiny to lead the world. How that conviction can be reconciled with the reality of China's growing power and the Chinese sense of destiny that is growing with it has yet to be considered. But Americans are smart people – smart enough to see that an open and integrated Asian regional order built on compromise and accommodation would be better for America than a closed and competitive one built on power blocks and strategic confrontation. Taking the steps needed to promote this kind of new order in Asia – steps like the negotiation of an arms control agreement with China – would be a bold new departure for American policy. Pushing America to take such a step would be a bold departure for Australian diplomacy. Some in the US system would not welcome such an initiative, and question whose side Australia was on, America's or China's? But if everything that both sides say about the nature of our alliance is true, about its closeness and depth and strength, then who better to make that case to Washington than Canberra? What are we saying abut ourselves and the nature of our American alliance if, believing the case to be strong, we do not have the courage to speak truth to America's power?

And finally, what does Australia have to lose? Of course we might fail. But even a failed attempt to promote a nuclear arms control agreement between America and China would serve important Australian interests. Our promotion of the proposal would be a powerful way to promulgate Australia's views on the future of the international system in Asia. Australia accepts that as China grows its power needs to be respected and accommodated, and its role as a regional leader recognised – including by Washington. That is an important message to send to Washington. Equally we believe that China's growing power brings growing responsibilities, including the willingness to see its power circumscribed by the demands of wider stability and peace. Even a failed campaign for an arms control agreement between them would get their attention and ensure they know what we think. We have a right and a duty to be heard. Australia's future is at stake too.

NOTES

[1] For a concise account of the evolution of China's nuclear strategic posture, see Evan S. Medeiros, Evolving nuclear doctrine, in Bolt and Willner (eds.), *China's nuclear future*. Lynne Rienner, Boulder CO, 2005 pp 39-78.

[2] For an Australian view of the future of US-China relations, see Hugh White, In support of accommodation: an Australian view of U.S. policy toward China, in Jonathan D. Pollack (ed.), *Asia eyes America: regional perspectives on U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy in the 21st century*. Naval War College Press, Newport RI, 2007 pp 151-165 (Forthcoming).

[3] For a good overview of current developments in US nuclear posture, see David S. McDonough, Nuclear superiority: the 'new triad' and the evolution of nuclear strategy. *Adelphi Paper 383*. IISS, London, 2006.

[4] McDonough, Nuclear superiority pp 44-50.

[5] McDonough, Nuclear superiority p 45.

[6] Dean A. Wilkening, Ballistic-missile defence and strategic stability. *Adelphi Paper 334*. IISS, London, 2000 pp 29ff. See also http://www.globalsecurity.org/space/systems/nmd.htm

[7] McDonough, Nuclear superiority pp 50-56; Lindsay and O'Hanlon, Missile defense after the ABM treaty, *Washington Quarterly* 25 3 Summer 2002 pp 163-176.

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