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NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Asia and Australia at the centre

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The Australia-Japan International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament is one manifestation of a genuine but still modest movement to have another crack at knocking nuclear weapons off their pedestal. In Prague on 5 April 2009, Barack Obama gave this enterprise a critical boost, committing the United States unambiguously to the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. Part of the background noise to Obama's speech was North Korea's countdown to a test of its long-range missile, thinly disguised as a satellite launch to avoid trouble with the UN Security Council. North Korea is a quantitatively trivial part of the nuclear puzzle, but the experience with them offers a clue to Obama's cautious observation that nuclear disarmament may not happen in his lifetime.

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The other so-called weapons of mass destruction – biological and chemical weapons – are now comprehensively banned. These are worrisome capabilities but the bans have been achieved because they were universally regarded as odious. Professional militaries did not like their unpredictability. Governments were aware that no status or prestige attached to possession of them. To the contrary, no government has trumpeted possession of these weapons or unveiled the capability with a test of some kind to capitalise on its political significance. The bomb, on the other hand, commands great respect, both in military circles and more widely as an indicator of technological, industrial and organisational prowess. One has to lurk in dark corners with chemical and biological weapons, but the Bomb has escaped the odium that surrounds these weapons. Despite the fact that the Bomb is in serious breach of both the main principles of international law concerning armed conflict – discrimination and proportionality – one can still ‘step out’ with the Bomb.

Getting to zero nuclear weapons, or even to agreement that they should be comprehensively banned, will be a long journey. It will be a long journey because a powerful instinct has developed around the Bomb that it is uniquely effective in inducing discipline and caution in the behaviour of states. As a recent official US document put it: “Because of their immense destructive power, nuclear weapons deter in a way that simply cannot be duplicated by other weapons.”¹

This instinct suggests that beyond that first detonation lies something incomprehensible: an abyss in which strategy, bargaining, winning and losing have no place, and which rational actors will seek at all costs to avoid. Getting to zero will really be an exploration into whether there is an alternative to the nuclear abyss as the foundation for a stable world order. The further question is whether we can get to that alternative from where we are now.

East Asia, and Northeast Asia in particular, illuminates the obstacles particularly clearly. East Asia encapsulates most of various roles that analysts consider nuclear weapons can play, and it does so in a context of powerful historical animosities, recent wars, drastic shifts in the strategic weight of key players and a condensed but complex geographic environment.

The US-China nuclear story, and its Northeast Asian context, lies at the heart of the issue. The US-China nuclear story was obscured by that of the superpowers during the Cold War and for some time afterwards. Now it has become commonplace to observe that the pivotal bilateral relationship in the 21st century will be that between the US and China. This gives the story particular saliency.

For 59 of the 64 years of the nuclear era, China has ranked among the countries whose behaviour the US has endeavoured to influence through a declared capability to bring nuclear force to bear against it.² The only period that was a complete exception was from 1945 until China intervened in the Korean war in 1950. Over the years 1950–66, China figured in US plans as an appendage of the primary enemy, the Soviet Union. Between 1966–82, China was a primary target in own right, before slipping out of this prominent category for 15 years (1982–1997). In 1997, China was re-instated as a primary nuclear target.³

The curious thing about this history is not only the qualitative variation in China's status within US nuclear war plans but the weak correlation between the dates of these variations and the dates of what most observers would identify as the key events that have punctuated US-China relations: entry into the Korean War in October 1950; the Sino-Soviet split in 1959; re-engagement with the US in 1972; and the combination of Tiananmen Square, the end of the Cold War, and the break-up of the USSR in 1989–91. Clearly, however hard it might be to become the subject of US plans for the targeting of nuclear weapons, it is harder still to change one's status within these plans, and hardest of all to escape from them altogether.⁴ The US-China story illustrates that rather elemental considerations determine whether another state should be positioned within or outside nuclear targeting plans. These basic judgements on whether another state is an 'us' or a 'them' tend to be relatively impervious even to quite dramatic developments in the contemporary political arena. Such developments tend to percolate for some years and then may or may not alter the more basic instincts that inform judgements about nuclear targeting.

The history of US-China relations from the perspective of nuclear weapons highlights the central role that America assigned to its nuclear capabilities in the formative years of the post-WW2 era. The US made strong commitments to the security of Western Europe, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan after de-mobilising its wartime forces to the extent that it had nothing resembling pre-eminence in conventional military power. Moreover, all of these commitments involved states on the other side of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. This enormously complicated the challenge of being persuasive when sending political signals that the US would resist military challenges to the

security of these states. Even though the US went on to establish a network of bases and/or continuously deployed naval and air power assets in distant locations on a scale without precedent in modern times, these capabilities were thousands of kilometers from the US homeland and, to that extent, always as much symbolic and psychological as they were substantive. This picture is so stark that one could legitimately question whether the US could have risked assuming so pivotal a role in the postwar world order, and look credible in doing so, in the absence of the Bomb. This observation is reinforced by the extraordinary focus and discipline that the US brought to bear decade after decade to present itself as a power that was entirely comfortable with the Bomb – and both able and determined to exploit its deterrent powers to the full.⁵

In a similar vein, despite sustaining an absolute taboo on the use of the Bomb post Hiroshima and Nagasaki, including through traumatic military reversals in two Asian theatres (Korea and Vietnam), the view is deeply entrenched in the US that the Bomb has made an indispensable contribution to deterrence and stability in those parts of the world that matter most to America, that is, to the American-led international order of the past 65 years. It is not so much that anyone can demonstrate conclusively that the Bomb made such an indispensable contribution. The point is more that the correlation between the Bomb and stability is so strong that it will be seen as imprudent to take the Bomb out of the equation and test the proposition that other factors generated the desired stability and can sustain it into the future. This inchoate support for the Bomb is among the more elusive forces confronting campaigns for nuclear disarmament.

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It would be counter-factual to argue that the world's major powers, in particular, have neglected their conventional military capabilities because of the Bomb. It did not take long for strategists to realise that the Bomb would be very hard to use and that conflict below the nuclear threshold with conventional forces could still occur on a major scale, and be of decisive importance. It is still very likely, however, that eliminating the Bomb will lead to significant and widespread re-evaluations of the balance of conventional military power and of the reliance that can be placed on military alliances. Geography and distance would reassert themselves as decisively important considerations.

East Asia is significant also because it is an arena in which America has extended a nuclear umbrella over its allies, a practice termed "extended nuclear deterrence". The US has been prepared to signal that its security obligations to allies will be fulfilled with all the means at its disposal. Nuclear weapons are rarely brandished but they are pointedly not excluded. The US nuclear umbrella is intended to reinforce deterrence of coercion and aggression against its allies and to leave states under the umbrella feeling secure enough to not think about getting their own nuclear weapons. Moreover, assurances of extended nuclear deterrence can be soft (as in the case of Australia) or be made louder and more explicit through the forward deployment of US forces, the basing of US forces in the allied state, and equipping these US forces with nuclear weapons.

Japan has been perhaps the most prominent consumer of extended nuclear deterrence from the US, particularly in the sense that it is not ensconced in wider groupings comparable to the EU and NATO. This posture has enabled the US to address its formal obligations to Japan's defence without deploying massive and prohibitively expensive

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conventional forces to Japan and its immediate environs. This US security guarantee has successfully suppressed any instincts that have arisen in Japan to acquire its own nuclear weapons and, in addition, have allowed it to be more responsive to domestic pressures and to regional sensitivities in shaping the size, composition and utilization of its conventional military forces.

On the Korean peninsula, the US offset the inferiority of South Korean and forward-deployed US forces by making clear that it could directly engage and defeat a North Korean invasion with tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons. Simultaneously, its strategic nuclear forces sought to heighten the risks for the USSR and China of (again) encouraging or assisting Pyongyang in such a venture. Over the past two decades, Pyongyang has progressively lost its clear preponderance in conventional military power and is itself looking to the Bomb to escape external pressures to take a new path. China committed to the Bomb because it judged that one could not become a great power without it, and, specifically, to resist US coercion and to escape reliance on the Soviet Union for this service. For its first 25 years as a nuclear weapon state, China found that it was the Soviet Union that was the more threatening, but the US was re-instated after the Cold War ended. Rather like the US and China in the 1972–1989 period, the Russia-China relationship today is that of two states that are like-minded on a range of contemporary issues but with limited indications of a transformation of deep-seated attitudes toward one another. Finally, China-India engagement is proceeding apace, but it is likely that China embraced this course to make it harder for the US to cement India into the role of counterbalancing China. Strategic rivalry over the longer term remains a prospect that both China and India take very seriously.

Even this thumbnail sketch points to a dauntingly complex and interdependent nuclear-based security regime in Northeast Asia. Teasing nuclear weapons out of this regime will require not only gold standard statecraft and diplomacy but for this gold standard to be sustained over a long period of time.

The number of players, and the variety of ways in which nuclear weapons play into their core security interests, highlights the critical importance of generating a shared perception that continued possession of these weapons could prove to be the greater threat to these security interests. That is, that a reassessment of the balance of risks is not just good international citizenship but rational strategic behaviour. The former condition of a global competition between two powers with obscenely large nuclear arsenals on continuous high alert no longer does the trick, although we should not lose sight of the possibility that this condition could reappear if we do nothing for long enough. The danger now attracting the most attention is the risk that someday, somewhere, somehow, a terrorist group will get its hands on one or more nuclear weapons and, in contrast to governments, be highly motivated to use them.

A further strand to the danger of accepting the permanence of nuclear weapons is that it is all but certain that new nuclear weapon states will emerge. This process will not only inescapably heighten the risk of terrorist acquisition of nuclear weapons, it will also progressively render impractical the established mechanisms for preserving regional order and stability. The Bomb is a sobering capability and it would be fair to infer from the past 65 years that every leadership group with the Bomb quickly learned that the circumstance in which its use could most readily be imagined was that of a threat to the very survival of the nation (often seen

as synonymous with the current regime). In any situation perceived as a threat to regional and possibly global security, it is the regional nuclear weapon state, not the intervening international coalition, that will see itself as facing a threat to its existence. Prospective members of an international coalition will assess that the regional nuclear power could get to the threshold of use of nuclear weapons relatively quickly and be correspondingly reluctant to get involved.

Each instance of nuclear proliferation compounds the difficulty of starting and sustaining the process of nuclear diminution. Proliferation means that there is a new group of neighbouring countries for whom the Bomb has become an immediate rather than a more distant reality and who may give absolute priority to acquiring a matching capability. Proliferation means that the unique interests and concerns of yet another state have to be explicitly addressed before nuclear diminution can proceed. Proliferation triggers a prolonged shakedown as other states, particularly other nuclear weapon states, come to terms with the new player, its likely political alignments and its ramifications for the distribution of power among them.

All these considerations underscore the critical importance, to nuclear diminution and more focused consideration of nuclear disarmament, of preventing North Korea from consolidating its nuclear status and dissuading Iran from acquiring an exercisable nuclear weapon option.

Any process of nuclear diminution will proceed very cautiously, possibly with long pauses to manage the perceived risk of inadvertently unsettling a particular situation and/or to gain confidence in the reliability of new mechanisms and arrangements for protecting interests and keeping the peace. Governments and

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bureaucracies will need a compelling narrative on the dangers of the Bomb to ensure that the process of nuclear disarmament is sustained from one generation to the next. Even so, we have to expect that it is unlikely that a compelling majority of members of the security elite in nuclear weapons states will readily coalesce around a case for nuclear disarmament based solely on hard-headed strategic reasoning. To the contrary, there will almost certainly be points along the road when the political leadership will have to act on 'gut instincts' or take a calculated risk to get the process past blockages and catch-22 style interdependencies.

As a middle power, Australia is not going to be a prime mover in how this puzzle of conflicting impulses unravels. But we have a compelling interest in how it does play out and a responsibility to ensure that the influence we can bring to bear is thoughtful and firmly grounded in what is good for Australia. The post-WW2 era of American dominance of East Asia has been good for Australia but the conditions that underpinned that era are transforming at an accelerating pace. We want to preserve strong and comprehensive US engagement in East Asia, not least to dampen any temptations that may arise in China to take undue advantage of its power, and to help Japan resolve its dilemmas about security and an appropriate national role in the region and beyond. We don't want the pressures of this transformation to

nudge core bilateral relationships toward animosity. We don't want these pressures, coupled with the re-configuration and diminution of nuclear forces to instigate a significant intensification of competition in conventional military forces. We don't want to see additional nuclear weapon states and the further proliferation impulses this will stimulate.

Australia will have to think very carefully about how to proceed while remaining credible and effective. We will have to balance our activism with an awareness that we are a nation with blissfully modest security challenges while urging others to take difficult and potentially huge consequential decisions about their future security. Nor should we forget that the trust and confidence of some of the countries involved, notably the US and Japan, is of immeasurable importance to Australia.

It is very probably a fantasy to pretend that the Australia-Japan commission (or anyone else) can think through all of this and chart a path to the elimination of nuclear weapons. What can be done is to identify some priority steps that are politically imaginable, together with things that we should not do - because they will surely compound the difficulties we encounter further down the road. A strong candidate for priority steps is to ask what package of actions and commitments by the established nuclear weapon states would restore their political authority to lead resistance to the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. As regards things that we should strive not to do: it seems pretty obvious that the selective national ownership of capacities to make fissile material could become a show stopper. It would be hard for even the most intrusive verification arrangements to erase suspicions about diversion to a weapons program or of a capacity for the sudden acquisition of the Bomb to secure unilateral advantage.

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We could, therefore, press for an acknowledgement that the commitment to nuclear disarmament will require that, eventually, all fissile material production capacities be brought under international control. Even if we cannot move in this direction in the short-to-medium term, we should at least strongly discourage moving in the opposite direction.

At the height of the Cold War, well over 50,000 nuclear weapons were deployed around the world. Today, the number is around 27,000. It may not be easier to imagine nuclear disarmament from this still lofty vantage point but more people are asking more penetrating questions about roles, risks and alternatives. We can be confident that the contours of nuclear disarmament and how to achieve it will come into sharper relief as and when we get to force levels that are more minimalist than they are today.

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NOTES

1. *National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, a joint report by the Department of Energy and the Department of Defense, Washington DC, September 2008, p.3.
2. A valuable source of basic information is Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris & Matthew G. McKinsie, *Chinese Nuclear Forces and US Nuclear War Planning*, The Federation of American Scientists & The Natural Resources Defense Council, Washington DC, November 2006.
3. It is worth drawing explicit attention to the fact that any discussion of nuclear weapon issues in particular that goes beyond platitudes tends to be completely dominated by facts, arguments, explanations and contentions that have US sources. The inescapable effect, as this paper makes clear, is to present the US as uniquely callous and belligerent, seemingly oblivious to the enormity of targeting other countries with extravagant numbers of nuclear weapons. The reader has to try to bear this in mind. The purpose is not to suggest that this image of the US is thoroughly misleading, but rather that the picture would be a good deal more balanced if other countries dared to be comparably transparent.
4. Recently declassified US records from 1964, when the Johnson administration was debating whether to commit unreservedly to a policy of preventing the further proliferation of nuclear weapons, attribute an illuminating comment to Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Rusk, probably playing Devil's Advocate, said he could 'conceive of situations where the Japanese or Indians might desirably have their own nuclear weapons, adding the rhetorical question: 'should it always be the US which would have to use nuclear weapons against Red China'? See the *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No.1* which can be accessed at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB1/nsaebb1.htm>
5. By 1964, the US had some 2400 tactical or sub-strategic nuclear weapons forward-deployed in the Western Pacific. The locations were Japan (Okinawa), South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines and Guam. These were in addition to the strategic nuclear forces assigned to targets in Asia, that is, the warheads on long range missiles deployed in the US or on submarines deployed in the Pacific, and bombs carried by long-range aircraft. The tactical nuclear weapons spread around Asia were progressively withdrawn as circumstances evolved: from Okinawa in 1972, from Taiwan in 1974, from the Philippines in 1977, and from South Korea in 1991.