Disarmament's dirty secret

Ron Huisken shows how the psychological threat of nuclear weapons makes them so useful

The International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, co-chaired by Australia and Japan, is one manifestation of a genuine but modest movement to have another crack at knocking nuclear weapons off their pedestal. In Prague on April 5, US President Barack Obama gave this objective a critical boost, committing the US unambiguously to the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. Part of the background noise to Obama's speech was North Korea's then 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 it offers a clue to Obama's cautious observation that nuclear disarmament may not happen in his lifetime.

The other so-called weapons of mass destruction – biological and chemical – are now comprehensively banned. These were worrisome capabilities but the bans were achieved because they were universally regarded as odious. Professional militaries did not like their unpredictability. Governments were aware that no status or prestige was attached to possession of them. To the contrary, no government ever trumpeted possession of these weapons or unveiled the capability with a test of some kind to capitalise on its political significance. The nuclear 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 the nuclear 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 it.

Getting to zero nuclear weapons, or even an agreement they should be comprehensively banned, 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." This instinct implies that beyond a nuclear 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 threat of nuclear abyss as the foundation for a stable new world order. And whether we can get to that alternative from where we are now.

Nuclear weapons, China and the US: a big story for the 21st century. Forbidden City, Beijing, 2006. Picture: JASON LEE, REUTERS

East Asia, and North-East Asia in particular, illuminates the obstacles particularly clearly. East Asia encapsulates most of the roles analysts consider nuclear weapons can play, and 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 North-East Asia context, lies at the heart of the issue. The US-China nuclear story was obscured by the bigger story 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.

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. The only period that proved an exception to this phenomenon fell between the end of World War II in 1945 and 1950 – when China intervened in the Korean war. Over the years 1950-66, China figured in US strategic thinking as an appendage of the primary enemy, the Soviet Union. Between 1966 and 1982, China was a primary target in own right, before slipping out of this prominent category for 15 years (1982-97). In 1997, China was re-instated as a primary nuclear target.

There are two curious things about this history. First, China's status shifted up and down. Second, since the Korean war, there is a weak correlation between these shifts and the dates of what most observers would identify as the key events that have punctuated US-China relations: 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 is to become a planned target for US nuclear weapons, it is harder still to change one's status within these plans and hardest of all to escape from them altogether. The US-China story illustrates that 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 impervious even to quite dramatic developments in the political arena. Such developments tend to percolate for years and even then may not alter the more basic instincts that inform judgements about nuclear targeting.

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The history of US-China relations from the perspective of nuclear weapons highlights the central role Washington assigned to its nuclear capabilities in the formative years of the post-WWII era. The US made strong commitments to the security of Western Europe, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan after demobilising 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 sides of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. This enormously complicated the challenge of being persuasive when sending a political signal 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 kilometres from the US and, to that extent, were as much symbolic and psychological as substantive. This picture is so stark one can legitimately question whether in the absence of nuclear weapons the US could have risked assuming so pivotal a role in the postwar world order, and look credible in doing so. This observation is reinforced by the extraordinary focus and discipline that the US brought to bear decade after decade to demonstrate itself as a power that was entirely comfortable with the bomb – able and determined to exploit its deterrent powers to the full.

In a similar vein, despite sustaining a 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 Washington 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 nuclear threat is among the more elusive forces confronting campaigns for nuclear disarmament.

It would be counter-factual to argue that the world's major powers have neglected their conventional military capabilities because of the bomb. It did not take long for strategists to realise the nuclear threat 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 decisive. It's still likely, however, that the new aspiration of 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 because it is an arena in which America has extended a nuclear umbrella over its allies. 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 not excluded. Washington's 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 that it is not sheltered in wider groupings comparable to the European Union and NATO. This posture has enabled the US to address its formal obligations to Japan's defence without deploying massive and prohibitively expensive 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 have allowed it to be more responsive to domestic pressures and to regional sensitivities in shaping the size, composition and utilisation 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 former USSR and China of (again) encouraging or assisting Pyongyang in such a venture. Over the past two decades, North Korea 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 it could not become a great power without it, 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 the Soviet Union was the more threatening challenge, but the US was re-instated after the Cold War ended. Rather like the US and China in the 1972-89 period, the Russia-China relationship today is that of two states which are like-minded on a range of contemporary issues but give limited indication of a transformation of deep-seated attitudes towards one another. Finally, engagement between China and India is proceeding apace. Although it's likely that China embraced this course in order 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 China and India take very seriously.

All this points to a dauntingly complex and interdependent nuclear-based security regime in North-East 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.

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 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 situation of a global competition between two powers with obscenely large nuclear arsenals on continuous high alert is no longer the driving fear, 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 most attention is the risk that 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.

In a further strand it is all but certain new nuclear weapon states will emerge. This will not only inescapably heighten the risk of terrorist acquisition of nuclear weapons, it will progressively render impractical the established mechanisms for preserving regional order and stability. The nuclear bomb is a sobering capability and it is fair to infer from the past 65 years that every leadership group with the device quickly learned the circumstance in which its use could most readily be imagined was a threat to the very survival of an opponent. 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 be concerned that the regional nuclear power could get to the threshold of use of nuclear weapons relatively quickly.

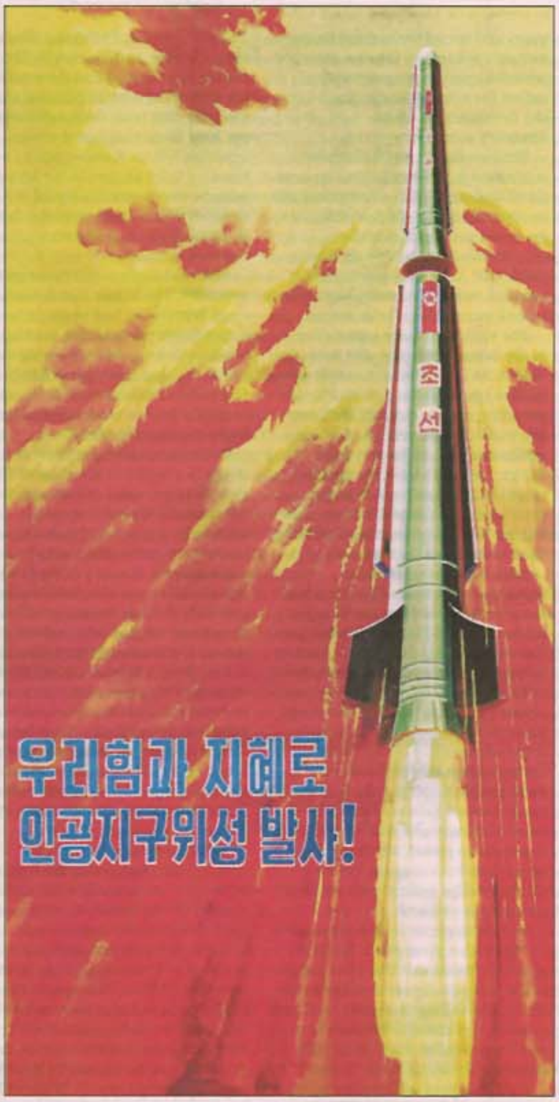
Each instance of nuclear proliferation compounds the difficulty of starting and sustaining the process of nuclear diminution. Proliferation results in a new group of neighbouring countries for whom the bomb has become an immediate rather than a more distant reality and who may give absolute priority to acquiring a matching capability. Proliferation means 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 an additional player, its political alignments and ramifications for the distribution of power among them.

All these considerations underscore the critical importance of non-proliferation to nuclear diminution and more focused consideration of nuclear disarmament. They underscore the importance 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 gain confidence in the reliability of new mechanisms. Governments and 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 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 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 interdependencies.

As a middle power, Australia is not going to be a prime mover in unravelling this puzzle of conflicting impulses. But we have a compelling interest in how it plays out and a responsibility to ensure the influence we bring to bear is thoughtful and firmly grounded in what is good for Australia. The post-WWII 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. Australia does not want the pressures of this transformation to nudge core bilateral relationships towards animosity. We don't want the diminution of nuclear forces to instigate an 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.



"First Sound of Gunfire from Big Power" according to North Korean text, left. Pyongyang poster for the Taepodong-1 missile, 1999.
Picture: AP/MAINICHI SHIMBUN

"A reassessment of the balance of risks is not just good international citizenship but rational strategic behaviour."

Australia will have to balance its activism with an awareness 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 the trust and confidence of some of the countries involved, notably the US and Japan, is of immeasurable importance to Australia.

It is a fantasy to pretend that the international nuclear commission chaired by Australia-Japan can think through all of this and chart a path to the elimination of nuclear weapons. What can be done is identify some priorities that are politically imaginable, together with things that should not be done – because they will surely compound the difficulties we encounter further down the road.

One priority 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. It seems obvious that 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. We could therefore press for an acknowledgement that the commitment to nuclear disarmament will require that all fissile material production capacities be brought under international control.

At the height of the Cold War, more than 70,000 nuclear weapons were deployed around the world. Now, the number is around 27,000. It may not be easy to imagine nuclear disarmament from this still-lofty vantage point but more people are asking penetrating questions about roles, risks and alternatives. At least we can be confident that the contours of nuclear disarmament will come into sharper relief as we get to weapons levels that are more minimalist than they are today.

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