

# POLICY BRIEF

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## NUCLEAR SECURITY: WHAT ELSE CAN AUSTRALIA DO?

### WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

*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.*

### WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

*Australia should support the new 'realistic idealist' push for nuclear disarmament, and not only through its co-sponsorship with Japan of a high-level Commission to generate ideas for action. Canberra should further invigorate its nuclear diplomacy, including by: building credible long-term capacity; offering strong backing for the new Commission; 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 should thus begin well ahead of the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.*



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**Introduction**

Australia's Labor government, elected in November 2007, has a strong policy platform on many aspects of the nuclear security agenda of arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. And Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has announced Australian sponsorship, with Japan, of an independent panel of international experts and eminent persons to generate new thinking about nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, in the 'second track' tradition of the Canberra Commission and Japan's Tokyo Forum.<sup>1</sup>

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.

There are questions over the new panel, the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, including about how bold might be its mandate, how balanced the geography of its membership, and how much material and political backing it may receive. But another set of questions – and the primary concern of this *Lowy Institute Policy Brief* and an accompanying *Lowy Institute Analysis* – revolves around what Australia can do to advance nuclear security through its regular government-to-government diplomacy. After all, the strategic and proliferation picture is bleaker now than in the window of opportunity for disarmament after the end of the Cold War.

**Nuclear dangers**

Established nuclear-armed powers are modernising their arsenals. Short-term prospects for US-Russia cooperation on disarmament are poor. India and Pakistan are entrenched as nuclear powers. Israel retains its weapons. Were Iran to develop nuclear arms, the Middle East would have its own dangerous and competitive nuclear weapons dynamic. The hard proliferation cases of Iran and North Korea are proving exceptionally difficult to solve.

Further concerns arise from the global expansion in demand for nuclear energy. This need not of itself constitute a weapons proliferation threat. But unless it can be internationally managed to limit the spread of sensitive uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing technology, the nuclear energy revival 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.

Of potentially even greater concern than an act of nuclear terrorism, however, would be a broader failure in 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 China and India could move away from their relative nuclear restraint. There are conceivable circumstances in which other Asian countries

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Rudd. Building a better world together. Kyoto University, Kyoto, 9 June 2008.

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could become nuclear-armed. And the choreography of future deterrence relations between the United States and a rising China is a worrying mystery, probably even to them.

Globally, 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 linked not only to the spread of weapons, but also to situations of geopolitical mistrust and the ways in which nuclear weapons might be employed in countries' security postures – for instance, under doctrines entailing the first-use of nuclear weapons in a crisis. The retention of thousands of US and Russian weapons on high alert is a needless state of affairs almost two decades after the end of the Cold War, and a dangerous one given the sort of tensions currently developing between Russia and the West.

Yet 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) has not entered into force. The 2000 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) struggled to agree on principles for progress on disarmament, and the subsequent one 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 global treaties. Under the Bush Administration, the focus has been skewed to non-proliferation rather than disarmament, and to its pursuit by means other than treaties, with greatly varying degrees of success. The mood in Washington, however, has begun to shift.

**Disarmament reawakened**

Recently there has been a global reawakening 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, disarmament is again a respectable topic for policy conversation in Washington. The rhetoric of both Presidential candidates reflects this.

The quartet has helped galvanise movement internationally. 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. And most nuclear-armed countries are at least elevating their disarmament rhetoric.

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

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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’.<sup>2</sup> 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’.<sup>3</sup>

Any credible contemporary vision of nuclear disarmament must have many parts. 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.

**What Australia can do**

The challenge for Australia is to identify where and how it can make a difference in the new global push for disarmament. One starting point is 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.

Canberra also needs to appraise its weaknesses. It lacks the large and well-resourced cadre of arms control specialists with which it used to be able to wield disproportionate influence in multilateral negotiations. This was allowed to deteriorate under the previous government and

will take time, training, experience and money to rebuild. Although the new Australian-Japanese Commission will require serious resources, this should not detract from the funding of Australia’s regular ‘first track’ nuclear diplomacy.

At the same time, Australia has an unusual mix of qualities it can enlist in revived nuclear security activism, including its strong Asian diplomacy, close US alliance, role as a uranium supplier and reputation from previous arms control efforts.

Australia’s nuclear security diplomacy could follow multiple and parallel tracks:

*Reinforce the architecture:* The April/May 2010 Review Conference for the NPT will critically test the durability of the non-proliferation regime. Australia could contribute by exploring new coalitions of interests, to cut across the blocs that have often obstructed agreement. One way could be through the ideas and composition of the new Commission.

*Fill the gaps:* Australia needs to help add the missing pieces to the non-proliferation game-board, notably a start to FMCT negotiations. Canberra needs to work with Washington to remove its opposition to making this treaty verifiable, and with Beijing and Moscow to remove their linking of the treaty with other issues. Australia should sustain and be prepared to expand its advocacy of the CTBT, and devote energies to encouraging more countries to accede to 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

<sup>2</sup> Max M. Kampelman, Bombs away. *The New York Times*, 24 April 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Michael Quinlan, Abolishing nuclear armouries: policy or pipedream? *Survival* 49 (4) 2007. p 8.

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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 UK-Norwegian efforts on verification research and to credible proposals for internationally-controlled nuclear fuel banks.

*Pursue a two-track approach on India:* Whether the current and contentious 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 arms control and disarmament processes. These should include bringing India to accept its global nuclear responsibilities, such as joining FMCT negotiations and making its nuclear testing moratorium binding. Opponents of the US-India deal have an obligation to propose viable alternative ways to bring India into the global nuclear mainstream, but governments that support it have a duty to pursue other measures 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. For instance, 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. These conversations should include efforts to encourage the United States to revisit CTBT ratification and FMCT verification, deepen nuclear-related dialogue with China, and reconsider questions of nuclear doctrine, posture and levels of alert. Australia-US dialogue should also include frank discussions about how the US might advance these objectives without reducing its or its allies' security.

*Play a lead in helping Asia lead:* Asia has lacked sustained efforts to build region-wide agreement on reducing nuclear dangers, and to bring a united region-wide voice to bear in global forums. Australia could creatively combine the arms control and Asian strands of its diplomacy to be a prime mover in changing this situation, including by encouraging dialogue among the region's leaders.

**An Asian initiative**

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. Despite the ARF's slow, consensus-based approach, its establishment of this new mechanism points both to the need and the potential for multilateral nuclear security dialogue in Asia. The ARF's very large membership, however,

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will likely impede progress. Another weakness is that the ARF does not include a leadership-level dialogue.

There may be more chance of consolidating and mobilising regional consensus on some nuclear security issues through another forum, the East Asia Summit (EAS): the ASEAN 10, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand. This offers 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.

Another virtue of this forum is that it is a summit. It would seem a logical vehicle for a discussion among regional leaders to identify, test and expand the common ground among their nations' interests and national thinking on nuclear security issues. 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'.<sup>4</sup>

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.

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. The goal of avoiding a nuclear arms race in Asia could be 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.

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. 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

<sup>4</sup> *Chairman's Statement at the Second East Asia Summit, Cebu, Philippines, 15 January 2007*: <http://www.aseansec.org/19302.htm>.

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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. After the Commission had reported, the EAS would be a logical venue for promoting its recommendations.

The idea of an Asian dialogue in pursuit of nuclear security, restraint and disarmament raises obvious questions. 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 on Australia and other non-nuclear US allies to explain how their acceptance of the protection of a nuclear-armed ally is consistent with their advocacy of nuclear restraint and disarmament.

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 21<sup>st</sup> Century make the need for regional and leadership-level engagement on these issues all the more urgent.

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