

RORY MEDCALF
Program Director
International Security
Tel: +61 2 8238 9130
rmedcalf@lowyinstitute.org

WICKED WEAPONS: NORTH ASIA'S NUCLEAR TANGLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The new international push against nuclear weapons needs to be pursued with care lest it paradoxically worsen nuclear dangers in North Asia. This region, where the interests of great powers intersect, presents a 'wicked problem': fixing one aspect risks aggravating others. Two linked dilemmas stand out: how China and others can turn North Korea away from the nuclear path without increasing regional instability; and how the United States can engage China on nuclear disarmament without increasing Japan's strategic anxiety.

A way out will demand mutual and coordinated concessions. Washington has led the way, and President Obama's chairing of a special summit of the United Nations Security Council on 24 September 2009 will provide an opportunity for next steps. China should explain its long-term nuclear intentions, declaring an end to its non-strategic nuclear arsenal and a cessation of fissile material production. Beijing and North Korea will need assurances that US strategic capabilities are not intended for coercion. Japan will have to accept that the US nuclear umbrella is not meant to counter every kind of threat. And Washington will need to convince Tokyo and Seoul that it can defend them even with reduced reliance on nuclear weapons. All of this will be more feasible with China demonstrably leaning on North Korea.

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The Nuclear Security Project was launched by the Nuclear Threat Initiative and Stanford University’s Hoover Institution to galvanise global action to reduce urgent nuclear dangers and to build support for reducing reliance on nuclear weapons, preventing their proliferation and ultimately ending them as a threat to the world. The Project builds on the January 4, 2007 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former Defense Secretary Bill Perry and former Senator Sam Nunn. The op-ed links a vision of a world free of nuclear weapons with urgent steps designed to reduce nuclear dangers. The Project involves all four authors and NTI serves as the General Secretariat of the Project.

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WICKED WEAPONS: NORTH ASIA'S NUCLEAR TANGLE**Introduction¹**

On 24 September 2009 US President Barack Obama will take the unprecedented step of chairing a United Nations Security Council summit session focused on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. This will mark a new high point in the recent wave of global interest in reducing the threats from nuclear weapons. Yet in North Asia, the region where the interests of the world's great powers most deeply intersect and clash, these are times of risky strategic change and gathering nuclear danger.

Media attention concentrates on North Korea's threatening nuclear behaviour, and the frustrating quest for disarmament on the Korean Peninsula exposes some of the strategic tensions in the wider region. But uncertainties also surround the nuclear future of China and, in its own way, Japan. The positive steps happening globally on nuclear arms control, led by the United States, need to be handled with great care lest they create new dangers in North Asia. The strategic and nuclear challenges in this region, so critical to world security and prosperity in the 21st century, present a 'wicked problem': one that is complex and close to intractable, because fixing one aspect typically worsens or creates others.

The following observations draw on discussions with scholars and officials in China, Japan and South Korea, in April and May 2009.² These regional views amount to a reality check for optimists on nuclear disarmament.

Prague to Pyongyang

First, the good news: In April this year, a US President unveiled an action plan for a world without nuclear weapons, endorsing the call of elder statesmen, renowned Realists among them.³ The Prague speech helped pave the way for multiple initiatives. Washington and Moscow have embarked on negotiations for deep reductions in their arsenals. The Obama Administration wants to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US national security and to put missing building blocks into the global nuclear treaty wall. It is working towards ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). In May, the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva agreed after 11 years of deadlock to begin negotiating a verifiable treaty to ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), although Pakistan subsequently blocked further progress in the current year. Importantly, China has eased its preconditions for parallel treaty processes on other issues such as the prevention of an arms race in outer space.

New thinking on disarmament is emerging, including through the Australian-Japanese sponsorship of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND), launched in September 2008.⁴ This gathering of the eminent and the expert has been tasked to chart a way to protect the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which is due for a Review Conference next year, as well as to design a longer-term and more inclusive blueprint for nuclear disarmament. Britain and others are committing scientific resources to researching

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new methods of verifying disarmament. Many civil society campaigns are underway.

All these hopeful processes and conversations were punctuated crudely by North Korea's missile launches – including on the day of Obama's Prague speech – followed by what was apparently its second nuclear explosive test. For citizens of Japan or South Korea, in range of large numbers of North Korean missiles and long protected by the US nuclear umbrella, it must be strange comfort at this time to hear President Obama talking of a world without nuclear weapons, possibly starting with reductions in US nuclear forces and their roles. No wonder Tokyo and Seoul have been desperate for reaffirmation of Washington's willingness to defend them with all means – assurances they have received.

An optimist might opt for a longer, broader view, and see North Korea's deeds as at least a timely reminder of the urgent need to devalue the currency of nuclear weapons in world security. But for now North Korea's actions continue to raise the very anxieties in Japan, South Korea and the Pentagon that will impede nuclear disarmament.

In any event, North Korea's bomb is not the only nuclear weapon to worry about in North Asia. The challenge now is to ensure that progress towards nuclear disarmament does not have destabilising effects.

Twin dilemmas: A wicked problem

The concept of a wicked problem well fits the nuclear insecurities of North Asia. A wicked problem occurs in a social context and tends

not to have a technical solution. Fixing one aspect could worsen others or even generate fresh problems. While the complex intersection of fears and interest in North Asia give this region's wicked strategic problem many parts, two elements stand out.⁵

The first of these twin dilemmas deals with the challenges facing the United States if it is serious about engaging China and Japan in its push for global nuclear disarmament – which it must if that quest is to have even a chance of success. China wants certain assurances from the United States, notably on the No First Use of nuclear weapons and a willingness to negotiate on missile defences. Yet these appear precisely the concessions that Japan – or at least the Japanese security establishment and much of the Japanese population – has long been loath to see its ally make.⁶ Policymakers in Washington are well aware that in an extreme cascade of circumstances, a weakening of the extended nuclear deterrent over Japan or even South Korea could bring either or both of those countries closer to a decision to pursue their own nuclear weapons.

Yet what if the United States instead opts to provide maximalist reassurance to these North Asian allies? This might manifest as ever-more explicit extended deterrence, strengthened missile defences, enhanced conventional strike, and increased sharing of information and technology including in space-based surveillance and targeting. One consequence would be to heighten China's fears, which would prompt it to further upgrade its nuclear and conventional forces, resulting in increasingly provocative capabilities and postures. Such is the dilemma Washington faces.

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The second part of the problem is predominantly a dilemma for China: the challenge it faces in deciding how to handle North Korea. If Beijing continues largely to disregard Pyongyang's nuclear, missile and chemical weapons efforts, the result could well be major defensive reactions from Japan, South Korea and the United States that could harm China's interests. These might include not only the renewal of extended deterrence, but also the expansion of missile defences, surveillance and conventional strike capabilities, along with greater coordination, including steps towards genuine trilateral military coordination among Washington, Tokyo and Seoul.⁷ Beijing presumably weighs these factors against its fears of what might transpire were it to apply an excess of pressure to North Korea. In the minds of both Chinese and Western analysts, these possibilities include deep internal instability, possible regime collapse, waves of refugees entering China, potential South Korean and US intervention in the North, and Korean reunification on terms bad for Beijing.⁸ Of course, China attempts to manage its day-to-day North Korea policy along a continuum of modest measures. But the worst-case scenarios resulting from both inaction and action on North Korea are equally dangerous for Beijing.

The combination of just these two parts of the regional security puzzle – Washington's China-Japan dilemma and China's North Korea dilemma – add up to a seemingly intractable problem, even when isolated from other elements such as the Taiwan issue.

Change*As danger*

Yet this does not mean that the region is automatically safer with the strategic and nuclear status quo. That is because it is not a stable equilibrium. Changes are afoot, the dangers of which are magnified by the ways they interact.

Most obviously, power balances are shifting, including with China's rising wealth, weight and confidence; Japan's strategic anxiety in the face of its relative decline; the United States still dominant but stretched globally; the United States, China and Japan all powerful at the same time, an unprecedented dynamic; South Korea's becoming more confident and capable; and North Korea's seeing nuclear weapons as its way to matter on this changing game-board. Meanwhile Russia wants to be recognised as an enduringly important regional player.

Second, militaries are modernising in directions that are potentially destabilising. China is upgrading its small nuclear arsenal, more through advances in survivability and mobility of delivery systems than an expansion in numbers of warheads at this stage. This involves a shift to road mobile, solid-fuelled long- and medium-range missiles, along with the establishment of an operational fleet of nuclear-armed submarines, after decades of subsisting with a single symbolic and unreliable boat. An increase in warhead numbers is likely to follow in the near future unless Beijing's strategic judgments profoundly alter.

The United States and Japan are improving their missile defences, conventional capabilities,

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surveillance and coordination, to the extent that some analysts in China worry that China's minimal nuclear arsenal – of probably around 200 warheads – will no longer be a meaningful deterrent. They fear that its effect would be negated by the combination of a US conventional first strike and US and Japanese missile defences mopping up much of the remainder during a Chinese attempt at retaliation.

Moreover, conventional and nuclear military modernisation and deployments are interacting in risky ways. For instance, China is developing conventionally-armed medium-range ballistic missiles to target US warships – a destabilising development, not least because these would be indistinguishable from nuclear-armed missiles until impact. Another cause for concern is the disturbing increase in incidents at sea between US and Chinese ships. One noted episode this year apparently arose from Chinese efforts to interfere with US surveillance in the vicinity of the new Chinese nuclear submarine base on Hainan Island. This illustrated that the contest for information and advantage in the nuclear balance can lead to maritime confrontations that in turn raise mistrust and risks of conflict.

So the nuclear conundrum is entangled with wider changes in the North Asian security equation. The powers involved need to look for ways to manage these problems peacefully, and in the context of endeavouring to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the region's future.

As opportunity

Not all the prospective changes are necessarily dangerous. A few signs of movement and changed thinking are worth attention for their potential, if handled properly, to create

opportunities for progress towards reduced nuclear dangers.

One area of movement is the historic change of government in Japan in August 2009. The Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has a stronger pacifist and antinuclear support base than does the Liberal Democratic Party. Yet it also lacks experience in power. Debate will endure as to whether the DPJ's accession is a net benefit for Japan's, or the region's, security. What matters for the present analysis is that a DPJ government could well create space for new ideas in Japanese security policy, including about the role of nuclear weapons.

Another potential area of movement is in dialogue between China and the United States. There is reluctance on both sides. Some in Washington are concerned that serious arms control talks with Beijing would be seen as the first step in accepting China as some sort of nuclear peer. Yet as China's power grows, bilateral talks on respective nuclear arsenals, postures and doctrines are probably only a matter of time, even if it will be a long time. A hint of things to come may be the inclusion of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament on the agenda of this year's high-level strategic and economic dialogue between the United States and China.

Admittedly, it is not only US voices that question the desirability of arms control talks with China. Some Chinese security analysts wonder if efforts to encourage dialogue with China on nuclear weapons issues might be counterproductive for both powers. The logic behind their warning is that the more that Chinese policymakers are exposed to US and Western ways of thinking about nuclear

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weapons, the more they might be attracted to nuclear capabilities and doctrine more expansive than those for which China has long settled. Dialogue and transparency might accelerate China's nuclear weapons program, not restrain it. But while this may be a reason to take care with the pace and content of dialogue, it is hardly a conclusive argument to avoid it altogether. After all, it is not as if the Chinese strategic community currently lacks access to the vast and open literature on Western theories of deterrence and US nuclear forces.

Ways forward

How then to proceed? Disarmament diplomacy involving the region's powers is not a futile endeavour. But it will need to be cautious and calibrated, taking account of strategic realities, especially Chinese and Japanese threat perceptions. With that in mind, the following are some judgments on the near-term outlook as well as modest prescriptions on desirable next steps in addressing the twin dilemmas of North Asia's nuclear wicked problem.⁹

North Korea

On North Korea, the clear balance of indications is that the current regime is not ready to begin negotiating away its nuclear program. Goodwill gestures in July and August 2009, such as the release of US journalists and the revival of North-South family reunions, were followed by fresh sabre-rattling – notably claims of successful plutonium bomb weaponisation and the existence of a uranium enrichment program. Whatever the truth of these boasts, the basic fact remains that the North refuses to return to the Six Party Talks

on the nuclear issue. The aim of its on-again, off-again diplomatic strategy seems largely to keep its neighbours divided and off-balance, and to thwart real progress on disarmament. Pyongyang wants nuclear weapons, whether for national defence or regime survival, or a smooth transition to a new generation of leadership, or as its only ticket to status, or because this is what the military wants and the regime needs the military – or, most likely, for many or all of these reasons. How should the region respond?

Solidarity matters. Washington's recent about-face in accepting bilateral talks with Pyongyang will unnerve Japan, South Korea and China, and risks undermining the political impact of this year's tightening of the non-proliferation net around Pyongyang. The North's nuclear test in May led to stricter sanctions under UN Security Council Resolution 1874. South Korea's decision to join the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which helps coordinate and share information on interdictions of WMD-related cargo, will also make a material difference in impeding North Korea's nuclear and missile ambitions. It carries powerful symbolism, not least because Seoul has effectively called Pyongyang's bluff. The North had threatened that the South's joining PSI would be tantamount to war; Seoul proceeded regardless. Meanwhile UNSCR 1874 has the added benefit of strengthening the legitimacy of the PSI.¹⁰ It also provides opportunities for a wider range of countries to be involved in directly constricting North Korea's WMD and missile activities. The risks of interdiction leading to military confrontation diminish with distance from North Korea, given its limited military reach, so it makes sense for states such as India and Singapore to play a more active

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role, as they appear to be doing since the passage of UNSCR 1874.¹¹

But the role of China remains central. China's growing tolerance of the PSI is valuable, as is its support of UNSCR 1874. Beijing's frustration with the North Korean regime, and its wish to be seen as a responsible power on this issue, is mounting. This is reflected in the hardening tone of its public utterances on the matter, including officially sanctioned public opinion polling.¹² If polls published in the Chinese press now categorically conclude that a nuclear North Korea is bad for China, observers can assume that this finds at least some echo in China's official policy and analytical circles – in addition to serving as a warning to Pyongyang. It would seem that China now sees a real need for change in North Korea: not regime change as such, but movement towards engendering greater respect for China's wishes, whether from the current leadership or a post Kim-Jong Il order.

Ultimately, China would have powerful leverage through its economic relationship with North Korea, if it chose to exert it to the full. It could cut off food and oil supplies, with attendant risks. Or it could set out to influence North Korean society through accelerated economic opening. Given that Pyongyang guards against any commercial interaction that smacks of ideological contagion, China would stand a better chance than other countries – including South Korea – of thus altering the nature of the North.

Either way, China will need reassurance from the United States, Japan and South Korea about how they would respond to instability in North Korea. The Six Party Talks may no longer have

life or purpose, but there is plenty of work ahead for a five party process. This would be a logical forum to talk about how to manage North Korea's future. In parallel, it would make sense for the United States to begin a frank and confidential bilateral dialogue with China about North Korea contingencies and coordinating national responses, to match the conversations one hopes and assumes Washington is already having with Seoul and Tokyo. Such consultation would help the United States reduce the concerns in Japan, China and South Korea prompted by its new-found willingness to deal bilaterally with the North.

In the end, the more that China can credibly do to reduce the North Korean threat to Japan, South Korea and the United States, the more it can reasonably ask of those powers to provide reassurances about its own security.

The US-China-Japan strategic triangle

The possibility of a grand bargain under which China seeks assurances from the United States in return for pressuring North Korea leads the analysis back to the other dilemma: the nuclear and broader strategic challenges among the United States, China and Japan. For each of these powers to gain the assurances it wants, it will be necessary to offer concessions and policy changes. This will be a delicate and dangerous ballet involving mutual reduction of threat perceptions.¹³ Treating nuclear capabilities in isolation is a recipe for deadlock: strategic intention, non-nuclear capabilities, and general levels of dialogue and transparency will all need to be taken into account.

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Washington has created much of the global momentum on nuclear disarmament, and is best placed to lead in reducing the associated strategic risks in North Asia. The imperative now is to embed President Obama's global nuclear disarmament vision in a realistic appraisal of the Northeast Asian situation. A logical place for his Administration to begin would be separate but parallel talks with China and Japan about what the regional strategic equation can cope with: clarifying what reassurance each power requires, and what concessions are worth contemplating.

Precursors to these conversations have already begun. High-level talks have commenced with Japan to improve US and Japanese understanding of each other's imperatives on nuclear-related strategic issues: the first round of a 'nuclear umbrella forum'.¹⁴ With a new government now in place in Japan, the dialogue needs promptly to be picked up again, and sustained. In parallel, the United States should seek to deepen the strategic aspects of its political and military-military dialogues with China, indicating a willingness to consider more comprehensive talks about both sides' intentions and capabilities, including nuclear weapons and missile defences.

Of course there is much more that the United States will need to consider sooner or later in its nuclear relationship with China. These issues include whether the United States should declare limits on the role of nuclear weapons, such as a No First Use undertaking, and further clarity about the extent of US ambitions for missile defences, including in terms of cooperation with Japan and potentially others,

notably South Korea. Scope for movement on the No First Use question should become clear in the course of the current Nuclear Posture Review, due by the end of 2009. There is real debate in Washington about how to actualise the goal of a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons.

A draft resolution in circulation ahead of the 24 September UNSC summit suggests that Obama will clarify that US policy is not to use or threaten the use of nuclear weapons against any NPT member state that does not possess nuclear weapons.¹⁵ This policy, which reaffirms a so-called 'negative security assurance' issued in 1995, would amount to a promise not to launch or threaten a nuclear strike against North Korea were it to give up its nuclear weapons program and rejoin the NPT. The threat perceptions of US allies will be a large factor in whether Washington is willing to take reduced reliance much further than this. And North Korea's latest nuclear and missile tests and belligerent rhetoric will engender caution. It is unlikely that a categorical No First Use declaration will emerge from this year's deliberations in Washington. But a feasible halfway option might be a statement that the US does not *plan* for the first use of nuclear weapons.

Regarding missile defences, the funding limit recently set by the Obama Administration is itself illuminating: at USD\$10 billion a year, this represents the pursuit of a serious capability against the likes of North Korea, but one that will hardly negate China's nuclear forces. This message needs to be understood in Beijing. The approach the United States takes in discussing missile defences with Russia in the context of a START replacement treaty is

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another way to signal non-threatening intent to China: the US announcement on 17 September 2009 that it is abandoning plans for land-based missile defences and radar in Poland and the Czech Republic is a major development in this regard.

China

Given that the United States has made the first moves on several fronts this year, it is time that Beijing responded. China has belatedly taken a first step in addressing President Obama's Prague initiative, with a speech by its foreign minister to the Conference on Disarmament in August 2009.¹⁶ Disappointingly, this offered nothing new. Instead, it reiterated Beijing's longstanding undertakings on No First Use and its vague willingness to join a global nuclear disarmament process when US and Russian arsenals reached much lower levels. This may seem a reasonable set of policies in abstract terms, given how relatively small and restrained China's nuclear weapon capability has traditionally been in comparison to the forces of the United States and Russia. But it hardly advances a solution to the region's nuclear-strategic dilemmas. Beijing is squandering a chance to show fresh leadership, creativity and responsibility, and is starting to lose even the rhetorical moral high ground it has long claimed. The onus is on China to explain more precisely how it plans to join a global nuclear disarmament process, including what additional and early steps of confidence-building it is ready to take. President Hu Jintao has an opportunity to do this on 24 September in New York.

A new approach by China could begin with modest and symbolic steps, taking advantage of

the fact that this country is starting from a very low base in the transparency of its nuclear capabilities. Chinese observers complain that even deep cuts in the US and Russian arsenals simply mean the decommissioning of redundant weapons. But China should have at least a little scope to play that game too. It could announce the decommissioning of any non-strategic nuclear weapons still in its possession, notably old gravity nuclear bombs. There are credible unclassified estimates that it developed about 40 such weapons in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁷ Perhaps China long ago decommissioned these weapons – which would, after all, have little chance of achieving a retaliatory strike, and therefore serve little purpose under a No First Use policy. In that case, Beijing could simply declare them already out of its arsenal. Whether one small step for transparency or one small step for disarmament, such a move would incur zero cost for China's national security.

Another early move towards openness by China would be an announcement – long overdue – that it is no longer producing fissile material for nuclear weapons. This would help advance FMCT negotiations and put fresh pressure on those few states that continue to produce such material, notably India. Most observers believe Beijing already has such a moratorium in place, but the Chinese government has refused to confirm or deny this. A strengthening of assurances by the United States that its missile defences are not intended to negate China's nuclear weapons should help Beijing in deciding to cap its fissile material stocks and thus the size of its future arsenal. In addition, China should also make absolutely clear its willingness to ratify the CTBT if the United States does.

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China rejects military transparency at least in part because it does not want to show present weakness. This logic, presumably, is that if China tells the world how many and what kinds of nuclear weapons it has, then a superior adversary would better be able to locate them, identify them and target them in a crisis, reducing both China's security and international stability.

But a broader view of nuclear transparency would be in everyone's interests, including China's. This is because what worries many other countries – not just the United States and Japan but also Russia, India, South Korea, Australia and others – is not how many nuclear arms Beijing has now, but rather how many it will have in the future. The four other NPT-recognised nuclear weapon states are clear about both the size and nature of their current nuclear arsenals and what they expect their nuclear force to look like years and decades from now, as they proceed with consolidation and reductions in warhead numbers. But the future of China's nuclear armoury is a mystery. Sooner or later, this sheer lack of information will impede further reductions in US or Russian forces, spur expansion in India's forces, and cause troubling uncertainty for others, particularly Japan, as they consider their future defence needs – including missile defences and strike options. None of these consequences is remotely in China's interests.

So it makes sense for China to begin dialogue with others, especially the United States and Japan, about its intentions for its future nuclear force. What sort of capability does it envisage having by, say, 2030, and what might be its role and doctrine then? One way of influencing US and Japanese decisions in positive ways

would be for Beijing to present several trajectories: defining how its force might develop under one scenario – for example, were there to be an acceleration of US and Japanese missile defence research and deployment – and how it would differ if that scenario did not come to pass. This kind of 'future transparency' could make a profound difference to US, Japanese and others' perceptions, and thus to a global process of nuclear restraint and disarmament.¹⁸

Japan

Japan has responsibilities too. It is vital for Tokyo to sustain momentum in frank and confidential discussions with Washington about extended deterrence, including as to how the United States can continue to protect Japan under conditions of reduced reliance on nuclear weapons. Japan needs to be prepared to adapt: to review and debate the nature of the extended deterrent under changing global and regional circumstances. Such dialogue and adaptability is unlikely to lead to a rapid change in Japan's official attitude to No First Use. But it is not unrealistic to ask for Japan to accept that the US nuclear deterrent is not designed to counter every threat. In any case, a reaffirmed US negative security assurance will begin to force the issue. Japan's security and foreign policy establishment will need to be open-minded in considering the many options short of nuclear retaliation that are at the disposal of Japan and the US-Japan alliance in countering such threats as conventional attack or coercive deployment of North Korean chemical weapons.

The election of the DPJ would seem to open up fresh space for these debates. After all, some important figures in the DPJ, including former

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Secretary General and now Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada, have openly endorsed a US policy shift towards No First Use as being in Japan's interests.¹⁹ On the other hand, there are conservatives in the DPJ too: the party's election manifesto was vague and non-committal on nuclear disarmament and the nuclear aspects of the alliance. That said, some within a ruling DPJ may well push for reduced reliance on nuclear weapons in Japan's defence policy. But they will have a serious fight on their hands, and not only because of differences within their party. Tokyo's powerful foreign affairs and security establishment has been keen to tighten the extended deterrence relationship with Washington in light of North Korea's threatening weapon testing and China's military modernisation. Tokyo could thus be in for an unprecedented internal struggle on nuclear-alliance policy.

Finally, the fact that the DPJ is now in power does not mean the end of efforts by some in Japan to generate a very different debate – whether Japan should have its own nuclear deterrent in case the alliance cannot be relied upon in a dangerous future. After all, Japanese politics is now in a state of flux unknown for decades. If the DPJ government were to attempt some radical change in Japan's defence posture, towards reduced reliance on nuclear weapons, it is possible that there would be pushback from the security establishment and the conservative side of politics. This is especially likely if a DPJ government experiments with a more pacifist form of foreign and security policy at a time when the strategic environment is looking more threatening, not less. With the wider political consensus associated with LDP rule breaking down, there is no reason why nuclear issues will be somehow quarantined

from the new fluidity in mainstream public debate. Conformity within the LDP has previously tended to stifle attempts to put the nuclear weapons question on the national agenda, such as the short-lived comments by Taro Aso, as Foreign Minister, following the first North Korean nuclear test in October 2006.²⁰ Party discipline is unlikely to hold so firm during a prolonged period in opposition. All the same, the likelihood of Japan's moving far or fast in the direction of considering its own nuclear arsenal remains small. There would need to be a major discontinuity in the regional security environment, coupled with a large decline in confidence in the US alliance, for this judgment to change. Politically, such a shift would be extremely difficult and painful. It would cause profound rifts in Japan's polity and society. Abhorrence of nuclear weapons – in large part a legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – remains strong among much of the population, even while anxieties about North Korea and China deepen.

Activism, caution

Change is stirring in North Asia's nuclear-strategic landscape. Whether it turns out for good or ill will rest not only on the strategic aims of the key powers involved, but to a considerable degree on the quality of diplomacy that is brought to bear. Doing nothing is not an option. But activist diplomacy, however well intentioned, carries risks of increasing nuclear dangers as well as hopes of diminishing them. This observation merits special attention in Australia: a country which aspires to making a difference in regional affairs while enjoying a degree of security no North Asian country can

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take comfort from – and with its own spot under the US nuclear umbrella.

Within months, the Australian and Japanese governments are likely to receive the first report of their blue-ribbon disarmament panel, the ICNND, and consider its recommendations, including those relating to Asia. However logical, bold or articulate they find such advice, Canberra and Tokyo will need to wield exceptional strategic and diplomatic judgment if in their subsequent actions they are to make a net contribution to the safe loosening of North Asia's nuclear tangle.

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NOTES

¹ This publication is based on lectures given at the Lowy Institute, Sydney, on 24 June 2009 and to a 30 June 2009 workshop of the Australian Research Council project on Australia's Nuclear Choices.

² These regional consultations were supported by the Lowy Institute's partnership with the Nuclear Security Project. Several of the ideas in this paper also draw upon: the interventions of various participants in the Beijing consultative meeting of the International Commission for Nuclear Non Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND); input from Lowy Institute Research Associate Fiona Cunningham; research on mutual threat reduction by Nobumasa Akiyama of the Japan Institute of International Affairs; and research support for the ICNND by Ron Huisken of the Australian National University.

³ Remarks by President Barack Obama, Hradcany Square, Prague, Czech Republic, 5 April 2009: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Barack-Obama-in-Prague-as-Delivered/; George P. Shultz, William A. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, Sam Nunn, Towards a nuclear free world, *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 January 2009: http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/atf/cf/%7B1FCE2821-C31C-4560-BEC1-BB4BB58B54D9%7D/TOWARD_A_NUCLEAR_FREE_WORLD_OPED_011508.PDF.

⁴ Joint Statement by Gareth Evans and Yoriko Kawaguchi, Co-Chairs, 25 September 2008, ICNND website: http://www.icnnd.org/releases/080925_js_evans_kawaguchi.html.

⁵ For a more thorough study of the nuclear complexities of Northeast Asia and their historical evolution, see Ron Huisken, Northeast Asia: A nuclear Gordian knot?, *ICNND Research Paper*, April 2009:

http://www.icnnd.org/research/Huisken_NEA_Final.pdf.

⁶ The Liberal Democratic Party government had sharp concerns about these issues; the views of the Democratic Party of Japan government, elected in August 2009, are not yet clear, though could prove more flexible.

⁷ By mid-2009 Japan and South Korea appeared to be achieving an unusual degree of like-mindedness on regional security issues, marked by the unprecedented trilateral meeting of their defence ministers with the US Secretary of Defense at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, a summit between President Lee and Prime Minister Aso, and an agreement on defence cooperation. David Kang and Ji-Young Lee, Japan-Korea relations: Pyongyang's belligerence dominates, *Comparative Connections*, July 2009, pp 126-128:

<http://csis.org/files/publication/0902q.pdf>.

⁸ In the minds of some Chinese observers, another possibility – however implausible it might seem to foreigners – might be a North Korean tilt towards the United States. Claudia He, China: North Korea not so dependable, *The Interpreter*, 16 September 2009:

<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/09/16/China-North-Koreas-dependence-not-so-dependable.aspx>.

⁹ These are preliminary recommendations. The Lowy Institute is conducting more comprehensive research into these dilemmas as part of its wider work on the constraints to security cooperation in Asia, including under its MacArthur Foundation Asia Security Project:

<http://www.lowyinstitute.org/AsiaSecurityProject.asp>

¹⁰ Emma Belcher, A tighter net: Strengthening the Proliferation Security Initiative, *Policy Brief*, Lowy Institute, August 2009:

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¹¹ No nuclear materials found on detained North Korean ship, *Global Security Newswire*, 14 August 2009:

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¹² In a mid-2009 opinion poll by the nationalist tabloid *Global Times* newspaper, 75 percent of respondents said that a nuclear North Korea undermined China's security. Zhu Feng, North Korea issue divides China, *Macarthur Asia Security Initiative Blog*, 17 June 2009: http://asiasecurity.macfound.org/blog/entry/north_korea_issue_divides_china/.

¹³ Nobumasa Akiyama, 'Mutual assured threat reduction as a possible way for bringing Northeast Asia in global nuclear disarmament', unpublished paper, presented at the meeting on Multilateral Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia and the Relevance of the OSCE Experience, Vienna, April 23-24 2009.

¹⁴ Todd Crowell, Of Japanese umbrellas and mushroom clouds, *Asia Sentinel*, 11 August 2009: http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1999&Itemid=164.

¹⁵ Laura Rozen, Obama's UN non-proliferation resolution: the text, *Politico*, 14 September 2009: http://www.politico.com/blogs/laurarozen/0909/Obamas_nonproliferation_resolution_to_the_UN_the_text.html?showall.

¹⁶ Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Expounds on China's Policy on Nuclear Disarmament at the Geneva Disarmament Conference, 12 August 2009: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t578645.htm>.

¹⁷ Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, China's nuclear forces 2008, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol 64 (3):

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¹⁸ The case for future transparency has been put forward by several leading international non-proliferation scholars, including Alexei Arbatov and Francois Heisbourg. Admittedly, as my colleague Raoul Heinrichs has noted, asking for China to accept both transparency and restraint in the growth of its arsenal may be a tall order: it has traditionally been so secretive about its nuclear weapons precisely because the arsenal was relatively weak. At the very least, however, Beijing will have to accept that strengthening its arsenal while maintaining opacity will deepen suspicions in the United States, Japan, India and elsewhere, influencing their own defence decisions and obstructing global nuclear disarmament.

¹⁹ Okada meets ICNND co-chair Evans, press release on DPJ website, 27 May 2009: <http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/key-issues/nuclear-weapons/issues/capabilities/PDF%20files/Chinese%20Nuclear%20Forces%202008.pdf>.

²⁰ Aso keen to explore nukes but Abe says debate is 'finished', *The Japan Times*, 19 October 2006: <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20061019b3.html>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rory Medcalf directs the international security program at the Lowy Institute. He has previously worked as an intelligence analyst, diplomat and journalist. From 2003 to 2007 he was with the Office of National Assessments, Australia's peak strategic analysis agency, where his work focused on power relations in Asia. Prior to that, Mr Medcalf was an officer of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. His diplomatic experience included a posting to New Delhi, a secondment to Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, policy development on the ASEAN Regional Forum, and a range of assignments in the field of arms control. He assisted the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons in 1996 and helped draft the report of the subsequent Tokyo Forum in 1999. He is a consultant for the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament and manages the Lowy Institute's partnership with the NTI Nuclear Security Project.

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