

RENEWING NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT

Framing Paper prepared by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC, Chair, Asia Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN), Distinguished Honorary Professor, ANU, and Former Australian Foreign Minister, for ANU Crawford Leadership Forum Panel Discussion, 6 September 2021

Nuclear weapons are not only the most indiscriminately inhumane ever devised, but one of the three great existential risks – along with pandemics and climate change – to life on this planet as we know it. The risk of their use remains omnipresent – not least from human or system error, miscalculation or sabotage – but the prospects for significant movement toward a nuclear-weapons-free world remain desolate. Getting serious again about nuclear arms control is a crucial necessity, and Australia has a small but important role to play in renewing that momentum.

Nuclear Disarmament: The State of Play

There are presently nine nuclear-armed states, possessing between them over 13,000 nuclear weapons, with a total destructive potential of close to 100,000 Hiroshima or Nagasaki-sized bombs. Over 90 per cent continue to be held by the United States and Russia (with around 6,000 each): the next biggest arsenal, China's, is around 350 (Table 1). Although the US and Russia dramatically downsized their inventories after the end of the Cold War, that momentum has completely stalled over the last decade (Table 2). Each is now engaged in a major modernization program; the UK recently announced that it would increase the cap on its stockpile by 40 per cent; and throughout the Indo-Pacific – with China, India, Pakistan and now North Korea – arsenal sizes, and associated missile and other delivery systems, are slowly but steadily increasing, as well as becoming more sophisticated.

Longstanding major nuclear arms control agreements between the US and Russia are now dead (ABM, INF, Open Skies) or on life support (New START), although Presidents Biden and Putin have now agreed at least to resume dialogue. Pakistan will not contemplate reduction for fear of India; India will not for fear of China; China will not for fear of the US – and there is no sign of that Gordian knot unravelling. A denuclearization deal with North Korea is not impossible, if Pyongyang could be confident of regime survival, but although both the US and DPRK have recently expressed cautious willingness to resume dialogue, such a deal is not remotely in current prospect. The UK and France each have national pride reasons – more obvious than security ones – for maintaining their capability. And Israel continues to refuse to acknowledge that it has any nuclear weapons at all to give up.

The coming into force in 2021 of the **Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)**, its negotiation supported by a substantial majority of UN members, is a normative step forward and has given new heart to anti-nuclear campaigners. But there is no prospect whatever, for the foreseeable future, of this being signed or ratified by the states that matter – any of the nuclear-armed states themselves, or the 'umbrella' states (like Australia) believing they are sheltering under their protection. This is partly because of technical weaknesses in the treaty text (including the absence of any provisions for verification and, especially,

enforcement), but more because of a dogged belief in the continued utility of nuclear deterrence.

That belief persists among policymakers despite the compelling argument – led by quintessential Cold War realists Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Bill Perry and Sam Nunn in their famous series of *Wall Street Journal* articles – that in today’s world the risks associated with possession of nuclear weapons by anyone far outweigh any security returns. Even more disconcertingly, there are signs in recent years that the longstanding taboo against deliberate use of nuclear weapons is weakening, with their employment under consideration in a number of states not just for deterrence but warfighting – especially using so-called ‘tactical’ (as distinct from ‘strategic’) weapons – in the belief that by their use a conventional conflict can be terminated on favourable terms.

Nuclear disarmament discussion has become even more complicated in recent years with the emergence of concerns about the development of weapons in space, hypersonic weapons, lethal autonomous weapons and cyber warfare, in all of which areas multilateral limiting agreements have barely been even conceptualized, let alone negotiated.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation: The State of Play

The **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**, in force since 1970, has been remarkably successful in defying John Kennedy’s prediction in 1963 that as many as 25 states would possess nuclear weapons by the end of the 1970s. But it remains fragile, with consensus – in particular about measures to further strengthen the safeguards regime at its heart – proving ever more elusive at the five-yearly Review Conferences (due again in 2020 but delayed by Covid). There are continued fears of further breakout in North East Asia (with South Korea the most likely candidate), and in the Middle East (fuelled here not only by Israel’s arsenal but potentially Iran’s). India, Pakistan and Israel remain outside the NPT, and North Korea walked away from it in 2003.

The basic dynamic inhibiting the effectiveness of the NPT is the unwillingness of its Nuclear Weapon States – and many of those supporting them (including Australia, at least under non-Labor governments) – to acknowledge that they have any serious obligation under Article VI of the treaty to take serious steps toward disarmament, notwithstanding this being seen by the Non-Weapon States as very much part of the bargain they entered into in foregoing any nuclear weapons ambitions of their own. Taking the position that one’s own security concerns justify nuclear weapons, but others’ concerns do not, is a brief getting ever less easy to argue.

Other non-proliferation related treaties that have proved their worth are those establishing Nuclear Weapons Free Zones (in South East Asia, the South Pacific, Latin America, Africa and the Antarctic), and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) adopted in 1996. While the CTBT is not yet formally in force because of its non-ratification by five required states, including the US (whose Senate has long made any treaty commitments impossible), it has been generally observed, and a highly professional organization (the CTBTO) has been established under it to develop a global network of seismic and other monitoring stations.

Iran remains the break-out story that hasn’t yet happened. Whether Tehran has ever seriously intended to require nuclear weapons – as distinct from just demonstrating its technical capability, and thumbing its nose at the West by not compromising on its ‘right to enrich’ under the NPT – is contested. What cannot be denied is the success of the Joint Comprehensive Plan

of Action (JCPOA], negotiated in 2015 with the P5 plus Germany, in stabilizing the situation; the total irresponsibility of the Trump Administration in walking away from it; and the crucial necessity for the Biden administration – as well as the Iranians – to show sufficient flexibility to restore it. The election in June of a hard-line successor to President Rouhani has complicated, but not necessarily set back, the prospects for JCPOA restoration.

Renewing Arms Control: The Way Forward

In an environment where the achievement of ‘Global Zero’ remains manifestly out of reach for the indefinitely foreseeable future, it makes sense for those advocating for a nuclear-weapon-free world not to make the best the enemy of the good, by rather focusing on **nuclear risk reduction**, as many are now doing – and finding common ground with those policymakers who may be uncomfortable abandoning what they still see as an ultimate deterrent and security guarantor, but nonetheless understand all the risks involved with nuclear weapons possession and want to minimize them.

The most commonly proposed risk reduction measures may be described as the ‘4 Ds’:

- Doctrine: getting universal buy-in to No First Use
- Deployment: drastically reducing the number of weapons ready for immediate use
- De-alerting: taking weapons off high-alert, launch-on warning readiness
- Decreased numbers: reducing the overall global stockpile to less than 2,000 weapons.

A world with low numbers of nuclear weapons, with very few of them physically deployed, with practically none of them on high-alert launch status, and with every nuclear-armed state visibly committed to never being the first to use them, would still be very far from perfect. But one that could achieve these objectives would be a very much safer world than we live in now.

If the Nuclear-Weapon States were to bring to the NPT Review Conference a package of commitments going down all or at least some of these paths, they would do much to break the impasse and change in a positive direction the dynamic of the non-proliferation regime. There is presently little sign of enthusiasm among them for any such package, but at least some glimmer of daylight with the Biden-Putin re-endorsement, at their June 2021 Summit, of the path-breaking Reagan-Gorbachev statement in 1985 that ‘a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought’.

Other useful risk reduction steps would be agreement on a range of **confidence building measures** between the major nuclear-armed states – including more transparency as to their strategic forces, civilian and military hotlines, agreements on the handling of incidents at sea, and the like. While more familiar in a bilateral context, there is scope and need to identify CBMs that would also help defuse even more complicated interlocking situations, like the China-India-Pakistan triad (or quad if one adds the US).

The politics, and geopolitics, of reaching even modest agreements on nuclear arms control are notoriously difficult. As between the US and Russia, there was a clearly welcome breakthrough in the June 2021 summit agreement of Presidents Biden and Putin to establish a ‘Strategic Stability Dialogue’ to ‘lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures’, but giving this any kind of serious practical content will be a long and complex process.

As to China, a crucial question is whether it will continue to commit itself to No First Use and a minimal deterrence posture (albeit modernizing its relatively small arsenal, and developing submarine launch capability to better ensure retaliatory survivability) – or whether it will move to try to achieve much greater numerical equivalence with the US. Beijing’s present unwillingness to participate in strategic stability talks with the US is not an encouraging sign, but on all this the jury is still out.

Australia’s Role

Consistent with its engagement from time to time as a creative and energetic middle power building international coalitions to effectively advance global and regional public goods, Australia has also periodically punched above its weight (in this context limited) in advancing nuclear arms control objectives, notably by:

- Initiating in 1996 the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, the first international blue ribbon panel to argue for global zero, with its mantra repeated endlessly in subsequent debate:

So long as any state has nuclear weapons, others will want them. So long as any nuclear weapons remain anywhere, they are bound one day to be used – if not by design, then by human error, system error, miscalculation or misjudgement. And any such use will be catastrophic for life on this planet as we know it.

- Bringing in 1996 , against difficult diplomatic odds, the CTBT to final adoption in the UN General Assembly; and
- Initiating in 2007 the joint Australia-Japan International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND) which not only made a strong case for an ultimate elimination agenda, but mapped a realistic ‘minimization’ (or risk reduction) path to get there.
- Co-founding in 2010 the cross-regional Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI) to take forward consensus outcomes of the NPT Review Conference.

We have also been among the global leaders in developing effective safeguards, nuclear security and test monitoring strategies – recognized, inter alia, by the recent election of Dr Robert Floyd to head the CTBTO.

Australia’s status as a close US ally, and as such one of the ‘nuclear umbrella’ states, gives us a particularly significant potential role in advancing some key elements of the risk reduction agenda sketched above. One especially important contribution would be to support the growing international movement for the universal adoption of ‘No First Use’ doctrine by the nuclear armed states.

President Obama was keen to go down the functionally equivalent path of a ‘sole purpose’ statement (viz. that nuclear weapons were held only to deter nuclear attack) but dissuaded at the time by his North East Asian, Central and East European – and Australian – allies, who all wanted to cling tenaciously to an all-embracing nuclear security blanket. If another opportunity arises, as seems likely, with President Biden, there will hopefully be less timidity.

Some Questions for Discussion

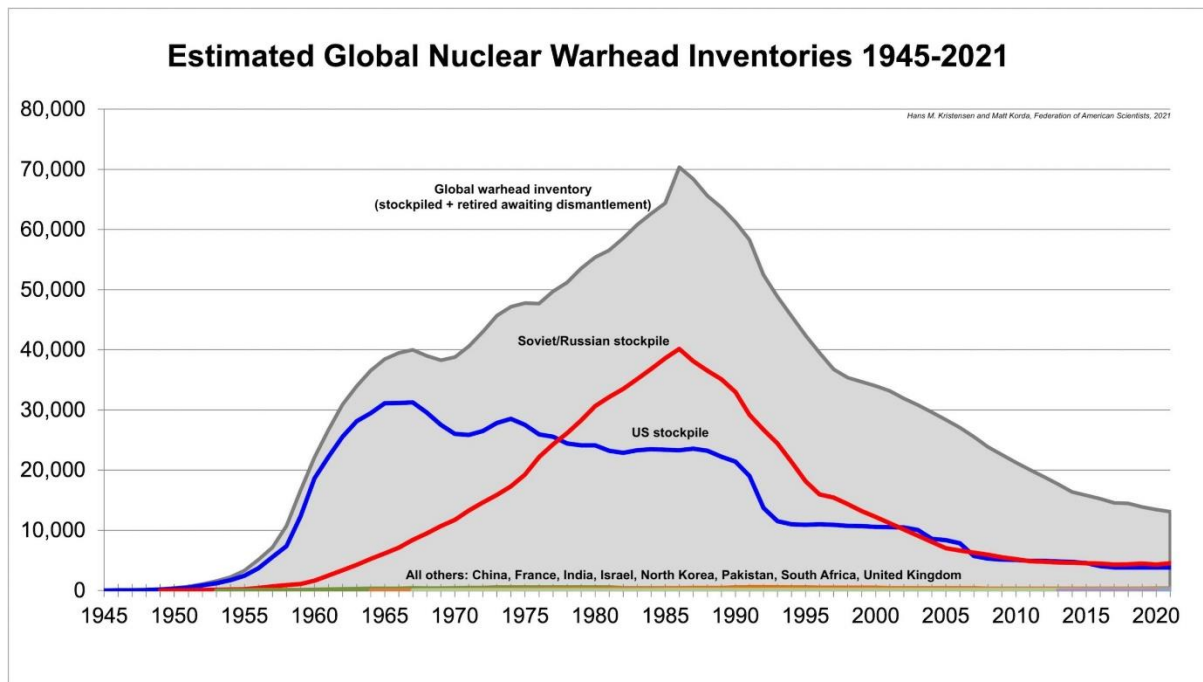
- What is the likely future trajectory of the US, Russian and Chinese nuclear weapon and missile programs?
- Can China – and India, Pakistan and Israel – be brought into nuclear arms control arrangements?
- What are the prospects for additional countries acquiring nuclear weapons, especially in the Middle East and North East Asia?
- Can the genie be put back into the North Korea bottle?
- What impact are new technologies having on global arms control arrangements?
- What impact can Australia have in advancing nuclear arms control? How hard should we try?

Table 1

Status of World Nuclear Forces 2021*					
Country	Deployed Strategic	Deployed Nonstrategic	Reserve/ Nondeployed	Military Stockpile^a	Total Inventory^b
Russia	1,600 ^c	0 ^d	2,897 ^e	4,497	6,257 ^f
United States	1,700 ^g	100 ^h	2,000 ⁱ	3,800 ⁱ	5,550 ^k
France	280 ^l	n.a.	10 ^l	290	290
China	0 ^m	?	350	350	350 ^m
United Kingdom	120 ⁿ	n.a.	105	225	225 ⁿ
Israel	0	n.a.	90	90	90 ^o
Pakistan	0	n.a.	165	165	165 ^p
India	0	n.a.	160	160	160 ^q
North Korea	0	n.a.	(45)	(45)	(45) ^r
Total:^s	~3,700	~100	~5,820	~9,600	~13,100

Source: Federation of American Scientists <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

Table 2



Source: Federation of American Scientists <https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WarheadInventories1945-2021-scaled.jpg>