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THE CHALLENGE: Reviving nuclear arms control diplomacy

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Nuclear arms control has never been more necessary, and never more difficult to achieve. In all three of its dimensions – risk reduction, non-proliferation and outright elimination – the outlook ranges from desolate to hopeless. The important arms control agreements of the past are dead, dying or on life support. And the recent behaviour of the actors that matter most – the United States, Russia and China – has fed concerns that things can only get worse.

The nine nuclear-armed states possess between them over 12,200 nuclear warheads, with a combined destructive capacity of more than 145,000 Hiroshima bombs. Some 9000 of these are militarily active or deployed. Alarmingly, some 2000 US and Russian weapons remain on high alert, ready to be launched within a decision window for each president of four to eight minutes. The US and Russia, holding between them 90 per cent of the global stockpile, dramatically downsized their inventories after the end of the Cold War, but that momentum has completely stalled. Every nuclear-armed state is now modernising or increasing its arsenal, especially China, whose inventory has doubled in a few short years to nearly 600 weapons, with new land- and seaborne delivery systems.

More troubling still, the longstanding taboo against the use of nuclear weapons seems to be weakening, with Russia's President Vladimir Putin in particular talking up this prospect in the Ukraine war in language not heard since the height of the Cold War. A number of states are considering using nuclear weapons – especially so-called "tactical" weapons – not just for deterrence but for warfighting.

The big arms control agreements of the past, which – at least between the US and Russia – banned certain systems outright, set constraints on deployments and built confidence through transparency, are now either dead (the Anti-Ballistic Missile [ABM], Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces [INF] and Open Skies treaties) or dying (the 2010 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty [New START]). If, as seems likely, the latter expires in February 2026, Russia and the US will be without any limits on their nuclear forces for the first time in over fifty years.

Moreover, crucial multilateral treaties are on life support. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), though operating in practice, has still not been finally ratified. And the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is in as fragile a condition as it

has ever been. The loss of confidence in Washington's willingness to deliver on its extended nuclear – or even conventional – deterrence commitment to close allies has led to serious discussion in South Korea, and even in some quarters in Japan, about the need to acquire their own nuclear weapons. The US strikes against Iran's nuclear sites, without any pretence of a legally defensible imminent threat to Israel or anyone else, seems as likely as not to finally convince Tehran's leaders that actually building bombs is their best chance of survival. And any such move is bound to be contagious. The belief that Ukraine would not be in the trouble it is if it had not given back its Soviet-era weapons remains widespread.

The safeguards system of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is still reasonably functional, as are less formal restraint mechanisms such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). About the only other good news on the non-proliferation agreement front is that regional nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) treaties are continuing to hold their own in South-East Asia (with China recently, at long last, agreeing to join), the South Pacific, Latin America, Africa and the Antarctic.

While there is less to it than meets the eye, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), agreed by 122 UN member states in 2017 and in force since 2021, bans nuclear weapons outright, and has given new heart to anti-nuclear campaigners. But there is no prospect, for the foreseeable future, of this being signed or ratified by the states that matter – the nuclear-armed states, or the "umbrella" states (like Australia) believing themselves to be sheltering under their protection. Moreover, nuclear disarmament discussion has become more complicated in recent years with ever more dual-use systems in operation, especially ballistic or cruise missiles which could carry either nuclear or conventional weapons, and the emergence of real concerns about the development of weapons in space, hypersonic weapons, lethal autonomous weapons, cyberwarfare and the impact of AI generally. Multilateral agreements for most of these new areas have barely been even conceptualized, let alone negotiated.

For all the difficulties that confront the cause of nuclear arms control, it must never be abandoned. The starting point is for policymakers and those who influence them to understand – or be reminded, if they have forgotten – why this matters so much.

Making the case

The *moral* case – for not just reducing the risk of nuclear weapons use but eliminating them entirely from the world's arsenal – is compellingly simple. They are the most indiscriminately inhumane weapons ever devised. The almost indescribable horror associated with nuclear

weapon use informed the first resolution of the UN General Assembly, in 1946, and has been at the heart of all disarmament advocacy since.

Moreover, their full-scale use in a nuclear war would threaten the existence of life on this planet as we know it. The "nuclear winter" impact of a major nuclear exchange, even one confined to a single region like South Asia, would be globally devastating. With millions of tons of smoke lofted to high altitude and absorbing sunlight, surface temperatures and precipitation would dramatically fall, threatening a significant fraction of the world's food supply, and such "nuclear famine" would put at risk the lives of nearly a billion people.

The *legal* case – if not for total abolition, at least for banning the threat or use of nuclear weapons in all but the most extreme and exceptional circumstances – is also compelling. The 1996 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the *Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons* (I appeared in the case as advocate for Australia) decided unanimously that "[t]here is in neither customary nor conventional international law any specific authorization of the threat or use of nuclear weapons"; and by seven votes to seven (with the President's casting vote) that "the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law". Although the court added that it "cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake", it follows from its opinion that there is no circumstance in which a state can be sure that its use of nuclear weapons will be lawful. Their use plainly is unlawful in most circumstances – and may well be unlawful in all circumstances.

The *rational* case for a nuclear-weapon-free world matters more than any legal or even moral argument. Hard-headed policymakers unashamedly argue that the sheer awfulness of nuclear weapons is what makes them so effective as a deterrent. They need to be persuaded of the force of the practical strategic arguments against nuclear weapons: that the rewards for their possession are illusory, and far outweighed by the risks.

The illusion of reward

Nuclear weapons are at best of minimal, and at worst of zero, utility in maintaining peace, whether the context be deterring war between large nuclear-armed powers or protecting weaker states against conventional attack.

It is too often accepted as self-evident that the balance of nuclear terror between the United States and the Soviet Union maintained peace throughout the Cold War – and has been

important since in restraining other potential belligerents (including India and Pakistan, India and China, China and the US, and – in the context of the Ukraine conflict – NATO and Russia) from going to war with each other. But this argument is not nearly as strong as it might seem.

While of course "mutually assured destruction" (MAD) encouraged a degree of caution in how the Soviet Union and US approached each other, there is no evidence that at any time either side wanted to initiate war and was constrained from doing so only by the existence of the other side's nuclear weapons.

We know that knowledge of an adversary's possession of supremely destructive weapons (as with chemical and biological weapons before 1939) has not stopped war between major powers. Nor has the experience or prospect of massive damage to cities and civilian death tolls caused leaders to back down – including after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There is strong evidence that the key factor driving Japan to sue for peace was not the nuclear attacks; it was the Soviet Union's declaration of war later that same week.

But if nuclear weapons have not preserved the "Long Peace" since 1945, what has? A plausible explanation is simply that the major powers realised, after the experience of World War II (and given the rapid technological advances that followed), that the damage inflicted by *any* war between them would be unbelievably horrific, far outweighing any conceivable benefit.

What of the notion, more immediately relevant to today's Ukraine and Iran, that nuclear weapons are a strategic equaliser, necessary to compensate for inferior conventional capabilities? North Korea certainly seems to believe that possession of even a small number of nuclear weapons constitutes a deterrent against forcible regime change, with the experience of Serbia in 1999, Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011 and now Iran in 2025 no doubt reinforcing the perception that states without such weapons are vulnerable to attack.

But weapons that would be manifestly suicidal to use are not ultimately a very credible deterrent. Their retention by Ukraine after the break-up of the Soviet Union would not have stopped Russia's invasion, because Moscow knows that Kyiv would be no more likely than any of the NATO nuclear powers to nuke Moscow in response to a conventional attack: the risk of nuclear retaliation would simply be too great. A better deterrent for North Korea against any likely attack (and I have been told by some Chinese analysts in a position to know, albeit some years ago, that the Pyongyang leadership actually believes this, however much they enjoy their nuclear show) is its hugely formidable "ring of fire" artillery and rocket placements within close range of Seoul.

Despite the psychological comfort they give their possessors, nuclear weapons are not the stabilising tools they are commonly assumed to be. Conflicts have regularly occurred in which nuclear weapons could have played a part but did not. Consider the long list of wars in which non-nuclear powers either directly attacked nuclear powers or were not deterred by the prospect of their nuclear intervention: Korea, Vietnam, Yom Kippur, Falklands, the two in Afghanistan since the 1970s, and the first Gulf War.

Then there are the cases where both sides' possession of nuclear weapons, rather than operating as a constraint, has given one side the opportunity to launch small military actions without serious fear of nuclear reprisal, owing to the too-high stakes of such a response. The Kargil War between Pakistan and India in 1999 is an example, as perhaps are this year's hostilities over Kashmir. There is substantial quantitative as well as anecdotal evidence to support the "stability/instability paradox" – the notion that what may appear to be a stable nuclear balance actually encourages more violence. The old conservative line is that "the absence of nuclear weapons would make the world safe for conventional wars". But it may, rather, be the *presence* of nuclear weapons that has made the world safer for such wars.

If the cause of disarmament is to gain momentum, the nuclear-armed states – and those who shelter beneath them – will have to be persuaded that their security will not be prejudiced by relying on conventional weaponry rather than on inherently unusable weapons of mass destruction, and above all on intelligent, cooperative-security-focused diplomacy. It is not hard to make that argument rationally; the biggest hurdles will always be psychological, emotional and political.

The reality of risk

The strongest argument for the outright elimination of nuclear weapons is the enormous risks involved in their continued possession by anybody. As compellingly stated by those quintessential Cold War realists Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Bill Perry and Sam Nunn in their famous series of *Wall Street Journal* articles from 2007 onwards, whatever may have been the case in the past, in today's world those risks far outweigh any conceivable security returns.

The risks that the "four horsemen" (and many others) have identified go not so much to aggressive first use of nuclear weapons – though it simply cannot be assumed that calm, considered rationality will always prevail in the enormous stress of a real-time crisis. The prospect of a complete madman's finger on the trigger may be more fictional than real, but what cannot be discounted is the possibility of an impetuous, ill-informed and unconstrained

leader ordering a "minimal" strike, maybe in misconceived pursuit of an "escalate to de-escalate" strategy, with all the chance of the situation spiralling out of control that would entail.

The bigger risk is stumbling into a catastrophe through accident, human error, system error or sabotage. Throughout the Cold War, and particularly after 1960, when the US first deployed an early-warning system, there was – as comprehensively listed by the Federation of American Scientists in the *Washington Post* in June 2025 – an almost unbelievable series of falsely reported attacks which could easily have resulted in nuclear Armageddon, had there not in each case happened to be at least one or two cool heads in the room, prepared to wait for confirmation before triggering a reflex response. Among them, alarms of incoming missile barrages have been triggered in the US by a military exercise tape being mistakenly fed into the live warning system (in 1979) and by the failure of a single computer chip (in 1980, twice), and in the Soviet Union by the misreading of sunlight on high-altitude clouds (in 1983).

Potentially devastating mishaps have continued to occur in the post–Cold War years, not only involving the two nuclear superpowers. In 1995 Russian president Boris Yeltsin was advised to retaliate immediately against an incoming NATO missile, which proved to be a Norwegian scientific rocket. In 2007 the US Air Force mistakenly loaded six live-armed cruise missiles on a B-52 bomber, flew them cross-country and left them unguarded for a day with nobody noticing. In 2022 an errant Ukrainian missile landing in Poland was for hours mistaken for a Russian weapon deliberately targeting a NATO ally. In 2022, again, an Indian missile crashed into Pakistani territory – it was the result of human error by the launch crew but, in the absence of any explanation or communication between military leaders, triggered a high-alert response. In the most recent conflict between the two subcontinental nuclear powers, in May 2025, Indian drones went close to triggering a nuclear crisis by attacking a site very close to a key hub in Pakistan's nuclear command and control system.

Given what we now know about the Cold War United States–Soviet Union near misses and that we now have seven other nuclear-armed states compounding the danger; given what we know about the rather more uncertain command and control and mutual reassurance systems of the more recently nuclear-armed states; and given also what we now know, and can guess, about how much more sophisticated and capable cyber offence will be of overcoming cyber defence in the years ahead, the fact that we have survived for eight decades without a nuclear weapons catastrophe is not a matter of inherent system stability or great statesmanship – just sheer dumb luck. And there is no reason why that luck should continue indefinitely.

The Australia-initiated Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, in its 1996 report, stated the case for outright abolition with admirable succinctness: “So long as any state retains 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.”

The challenge of elimination

Despite the force of these arguments, none of the existing nuclear-armed states have shown the slightest willingness to give up their nuclear weapons. The testosterone factor – considerations of status, prestige and nuclear bragging rights, whether rationally well founded or not – continues to be in play for most, if not all, of them. And the optimism associated with the end of the Cold War has long since evaporated, with little or no sign now – among policymakers, publics or commentariats – of the abolitionist momentum captured by the Reagan–Gorbachev Reykjavík statement in 1987 that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”.

Russia’s aggression, America’s wavering commitment, France and the United Kingdom’s move to more nuclear cooperation in response, and anxiety about China’s intentions have all been game-changers. President Trump’s pursuit of a continental “Golden Dome” missile defence system, while just as fanciful as President Reagan’s “Star Wars” dream, has made its own contribution to ensuring that those potentially on the receiving end of US strikes want more, not fewer, nuclear weapons, to retain some serious retaliatory capability.

The hope that the nuclear ban treaty – the TPNW – would make a difference has proved illusory, partly because of its fairly obvious weaknesses. Drafted and negotiated more speedily than other arms control treaties of any significance, its aspirations were manifestly normative rather than practical, giving little confidence to countries abandoning their nuclear weapons that others would not take advantage of them.

It has three main problems, as seen by the nuclear-armed states. It is inattentive to the crucial question of verification, left to be addressed by an international authority to be designated by member states. (That said, progress on warhead dismantlement verification has been made by Norway- and UK-led research.) It is silent on the more crucial question of enforcement, understandable given that no one has a credible solution to the issue of how to respond to a rogue state breakout in a nuclear-weapon-free world. And the provision that nuclear-armed states joining the treaty submit to a time-bound schedule for the complete and

irreversible elimination of their stockpiles has not been accepted by states nervous about going to zero while others still have nuclear weapons.

All this is not to say that the TPNW has been either a waste of time or counterproductive. The idea of the ban treaty and the humanitarian consequences movement from which it was born has generated normative momentum. Global stigmatisation, delegitimisation and the will to prohibit nuclear weapons may not be sufficient for their elimination, but they are necessary conditions, and it is important that the effort be maintained.

The lesson that must be confronted is that "global zero" will remain for the foreseeable future an unattainable dream. But the arguments about the illusory rewards and obvious risks of nuclear weapons will remain indispensable in making the case for non-proliferation and risk reduction. These may be less ambitious nuclear arms control objectives, but in public policy one should never make the best the enemy of the merely good.

The challenge of non-proliferation

The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), in force since 1970, has been remarkably successful in defying President Kennedy's prediction in 1963 that as many as twenty-five states would possess nuclear weapons by the end of the 1970s. But it is as fragile as it has ever been. Consensus – in particular about measures to further strengthen the safeguards regime at its heart – is proving ever more elusive: for the next five-yearly Review Conference, due in 2026, the NPT Preparatory Committee sessions have been unable to reach agreement on any recommendations, and the prospects for a substantive final outcome document are dismal. India, Pakistan and Israel remain outside the NPT, and North Korea walked away from it in 2003. Fears of further breakout are increasing in North-East Asia and Europe due to the loss of confidence in Trump's America, and in the Middle East due to the prospect of Iran responding to the humiliation of the assaults by Israel and the US by rushing to a bomb of its own.

The basic dynamic undermining the NPT has long been 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 towards disarmament, notwithstanding that this was part of the bargain that the non-weapon states entered into in forgoing nuclear ambitions of their own.

The double-standards argument has acquired new resonance with the breathtaking hypocrisy involved in Israel – a state which never signed on to the NPT, and maintained a posture of "nuclear opacity" which enabled the US and others in the West to turn a blind eye to its development of a nuclear arsenal – launching, manifestly in breach of international law,

a military attack on Iran, an NPT member with a problematic nuclear program, but one which no serious intelligence reports found had ever decided to weaponise, let alone use to mount an existential attack on the Jewish state.

Moreover, the US under Trump did its credibility no favours, not only by tearing up in 2018 the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015 – a triumph of cooperative diplomacy by all the major powers, including Russia and China, which had effectively quashed fears of any Iranian breakout for the next fifteen years – but also in responding to this year's tensions. Once Israel's opening barrage gave Trump the sense that the door was open, he abandoned his previously stated preference for a diplomatic solution and, despite negotiations being active, opted for a quick military victory in which his insatiable presidential ego could bask.

At the time of this writing, in July 2025, the jury is still out as to what Iran's response will be. For all the damage that American bombs have done, and for all the difficulties of mounting a new clandestine program under US and Israeli intelligence eyes, Iran almost certainly retains a significant stockpile of enriched uranium, centrifuge capability and bomb-making know-how – as well as a fierce sense of national pride, shared by its population, however much the majority may despise the clerical regime. All of which could result in Iran being nuclear-armed within the next two or three years.

As head of the International Crisis Group in the early 2000s, I was heavily engaged in backchannel discussions in Tehran and elsewhere developing the "delayed limited enrichment" concept, which ultimately became central to the JCPOA. I was convinced then – and remain so today – that Ayatollah Khamenei's reluctance to approve nuclear weaponisation, as distinct from demonstrating a capacity to do so, was both rationally and religiously founded. But the actions of the US and Israel undercut the moderates and emboldened the hardliners. With Iran's head to the gun, it is possible that a JCPOA-Mark II can be negotiated – for example, with even tighter restrictions on enrichment, more intrusive inspections and an open-ended timeline. But nobody believes that will be easy.

If Iran goes nuclear, there is every prospect that the global non-proliferation dam will finally burst. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has vowed to follow suit, with Egypt and nearby Turkey also possibly joining an NPT exodus. In Europe, Germany and Poland have openly toyed with building nuclear weapons, not just relying on the UK and France to deter Russia if the US goes missing. In North-East Asia, the election of a more moderate government in Seoul has reduced concern about imminent nuclear breakout to counter perceived threats from North Korea and China, but public sentiment remains in favour (as it has been, at between 55 per cent

and 75 per cent, for over a decade) of acquiring a capability. If that happens, pressure for Japan to follow suit may become irresistible, notwithstanding its history and very reluctant public.

What might fix these potential cracks in the NPT dam wall? Its more fissiparous parties becoming less ideologically purist, and accepting the criticality of non-proliferation even if the weapons states remain insufferably hypocritical? All interested countries to use more effectively forums such as the UN and the G20 to put pressure on wavering states? "Rule-of-law supportive" states working harder on collaboration to similar effect? Maybe. But so long as the nuclear-armed states remain not only obdurately opposed to outright disarmament, but resistant even to lesser arms control measures, such aspirations seem founded more in hope than in realistic expectation.

The challenge of risk reduction

In an environment where the achievement of global zero remains out of reach, it makes sense for those advocating for a nuclear-weapon-free world to focus on risk reduction, as many are now doing. The object would be to find common ground with policymakers who still see nuclear weapons as an ultimate deterrent and security guarantor, but understand the risks involved and want to minimise them.

The most commonly proposed risk-reduction measures – and central elements in the "minimization" agenda proposed by the Australia–Japan International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND) in 2009 – may be described as the "4 Ds". They are *Doctrine* (getting universal buy-in for a "No First Use" [NFU] commitment), *Deployment* (drastically reducing the number of weapons ready for immediate use), *De-alerting* (taking weapons off high-alert, launch-on-warning readiness) and *Decreased* numbers (dramatically reducing the global stockpile).

In many ways the most game-changing of these measures would be the universal embrace of No First Use, meaning that each nuclear-armed state would make an explicit declaration that it will not use nuclear weapons either preventively or pre-emptively against an adversary, nuclear-armed or not, and keeps them only for use or threat of use as retaliation following a nuclear strike against itself or its allies. A less robust formulation of essentially the same idea is a declaration that "the sole purpose of the possession of nuclear weapons is to deter the use of such weapons against one's own state and that of one's allies", which was the formula embraced by President Obama, and supported by President Biden, until both were dissuaded by noisy opposition from some NATO and Asia-Pacific allies keen to preserve a first-use option.

Only China and India currently claim to be committed to NFU. Russia abandoned an earlier pledge in the 1990s; France has long maintained a first-use posture; the United Kingdom, Pakistan and North Korea have not ruled it out; and Israel, as ever, refuses to confirm that it has nuclear weapons. But there continues to be widespread support for it among advocates for nuclear sanity, and for good reasons. These include that retaining a first-use option is dangerous, because it runs the risk of an adversary misreading its intentions and, fearing decapitation, launching a pre-emptive strike, precipitating an avoidable nuclear war. And that it is unnecessary, because the major nuclear powers all have immense conventional firepower, amply sufficient to deter or respond to chemical, biological or other non-nuclear attack.

The objection that NFU declarations are not believable with any state able to reverse in an instant any such commitment, would be less strong if they were accompanied by measures like the three other "Ds" listed above. But even in their absence, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which military leaders do, in practice, pay close attention to others' declaratory policies, and the way in which these signals of intent shape the expectations of allies and adversaries alike, in what can either be a virtuous or vicious cycle.

All that said, too many of the nuclear-armed states show no willingness to come back to the arms control table, despite multiple calls for them to do so in UN and other multilateral forums, including at this year's Shangri-La defence summit in Singapore. The US is keen to negotiate an extension to New START, limiting the deployment of strategic weapons, but Russia is dragging its feet. China has the capacity to play a leadership role, given the credibility it has acquired over many years for its "minimal deterrence" posture and general restraint on nuclear issues, if not for its transparency. But it has been reluctant to do so while the size of its nuclear arsenal remains so much smaller than those of the US and Russia.

When it comes to nuclear risk reduction, the most crucial immediate need, as strategists such as Lawrence Freedman have pointed out, is to restore between the key players the dialogue – and the trust and confidence that flows from such contact – that has been the central value of past arms control measures. Even the most bitter antagonists have a shared interest in avoiding nuclear confrontation. It is important – not least at times of crisis – that senior officers and officials know each other and understand each other's concerns, and have easy and open lines of communication. On this front, unhappily, around the world, we are currently a long way from where we need to be.

Australia's role

On big global issues there is only so much change that can, realistically, be accomplished by even the most creative and energetic of middle powers, as Australia has periodically been over the decades. Any influence that we wield has to rely on diplomatic persuasion and coalition-building, not on the exercise of raw military or economic might. But we have made significant contributions in the past to nuclear arms control, as well as on other weapons of mass destruction issues, in particular bringing to a conclusion the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1993. And we can again, even in an environment as dispiriting as the one we now confront.

Our past achievements include the Keating government's initiation in 1996 of the Canberra Commission, the first international blue-ribbon panel – including political, economic, military and environmental leaders and experts from around the world – to argue effectively for global zero, and much quoted in international debate since; our lead advocacy role in the ICJ Advisory Opinions Case in 1996; the crucial role played by Ambassador Richard Butler in securing in 1995 (under the Labor government) the permanent extension of the NPT, and in 1996 (under the Coalition government) the adoption of the CTBT; the initiation by the Rudd government in 2007 of the joint Australia–Japan ICNND, which not only made a strong case for an ultimate elimination agenda but mapped a realistic step-by-step risk-reduction path to get there; and the co-founding in 2010 of the cross-regional 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, through the IAEA and other mechanisms, effective safeguards, nuclear security and test monitoring strategies, including concluding in 1997 the world's first IAEA safeguards Additional Protocol. This has been recognised, inter alia, by the election in 2021 of Dr Robert Floyd to head the CTBT Organization. Labor governments have been generous in supporting academic and non-governmental organisation efforts to advance the nuclear arms control agenda, including the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN) nuclear advocacy organisation in 2011, and the Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (CNND) at the Australian National University. And it should be acknowledged, even if the Morrison government ungraciously declined to offer congratulations, that the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize winner, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), was founded in Australia.

When it comes to advancing the case for nuclear *disarmament*, probably the best we can do in the present environment is make supportive statements at ministerial and diplomatic

level at the UN and elsewhere, spelling out – not looking anxiously over our shoulder at Washington – all the arguments summarised in this paper to the effect that whatever deterrent utility nuclear weapons may conceivably have had in the past, the risk of their continued possession by anyone, in today's fragile, multiplayer and increasingly cyber-driven nuclear world, far outweighs any benefit. If that means that we can no longer rely in a crisis on US extended *nuclear* deterrence (as distinct from extended *conventional* deterrence), that simply acknowledges what has always been the case: the US will never contemplate sacrificing Miami for Melbourne.

As to whether we should put our money where our mouth is when it comes to signing the TPNW, some of the concerns which have so far inhibited Australia from doing so have no substance. This treaty does not undermine the NPT, and its non-universality and technical weaknesses are not in themselves showstoppers: we could work from inside to rectify its problems and promote its wider acceptance. But the problem Australia does face is that the treaty quite specifically bans any form of assistance to nuclear-weapons-related activity, and this would make it impossible for us to continue to jointly host, in particular, the US early-warning, intelligence-gathering and targeting facility at Pine Gap, which would in turn be very much a showstopper for the alliance. While some would argue that is a consummation devoutly to be wished, it is rather a lot to bite off as the price of joining a treaty with no practical teeth.

When it comes to supporting nuclear *non-proliferation*, the commitment of successive Australian governments to the NPT – and to strengthening its regime in every way possible, including through universal adoption of the Additional Protocol on inspections – has always been clear and unequivocal, and that should obviously continue. As to whether the AUKUS nuclear fuel-propelled submarines project is at odds with that, whatever the force of the arguments (including deliverability, cost-benefit and impact on our sovereign agency) for ending this wholly misconceived project, its proliferation potential is not one of them: the new safeguards protocols being painfully negotiated at the IAEA should put at rest such concerns.

We should also maintain our commitment to CTBT/CTBTO implementation, the stalled Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty negotiation, and the kind of nuclear security measures recommended by the successive Obama-initiated Nuclear Security Summits. We should emphasise in all relevant forums our traditional support for nuclear-weapon-free zones, and lend our weight to the concept of a North-East Asia NWFZ embracing Japan, South Korea and North Korea (and perhaps also Mongolia), with accompanying guarantees from the US, China and Russia – hugely difficult as this will be to implement, recognising that the task for North Korea is no longer non-proliferation but disarmament.

What we should *not* do is respond to potential breakouts from the NPT with the illegal and irresponsible use of military force. If there is an Iranian nuclear threat, only cooperative diplomacy of the kind we saw in 2015 can end it, not US bombs.

When it comes to supporting nuclear *risk reduction*, our status as a close US ally and, as such, one of the "nuclear umbrella" states should give us a significant role. In the Trumpian world we now inhabit, where allies are at least as likely to be seen as encumbrances rather than assets, there may not be much room left for influence, but that should not stop us trying.

My highest priority would be to support the struggling but still growing international movement for the universal adoption of No First Use doctrine by the nuclear-armed states. It should not be a matter of pride for us that when both President Obama and President Biden were attracted to going down this path (or at least to its "sole purpose" functional equivalent), Australia was one of those nervous Asia-Pacific and East European allies who failed to support them. The failure to make progress then should not be seen as the end of the argument. One of the many peculiarities of the Trump administration is that the president seems to have a visceral distaste for nuclear weapons, and it may be that we would be pushing at an open door.

One final initiative would be helpful: Prime Minister Albanese should make a major speech comprehensively drawing together the key threads of the nuclear arms control story – commitment to the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world, to nuclear non-proliferation and to risk reduction – and explaining how Australia can, realistically, contribute to each objective. His government is not given to making big, visionary, conceptual statements but this would be a good opportunity to break out.

It has long been my belief that being and being seen to be a good international citizen – a decent country, committed to "purposes beyond ourselves", as Hedley Bull would put it – is a national interest in its own right, to be pursued not just as a moral imperative but for its soft power returns with the same commitment we show to the traditional duo of national interests in security and prosperity. There can be no more obvious way of demonstrating our decency than by making a clear declaration, at the highest political level, of our determination to contribute to ridding the world once and for all of the humanitarian horror, and existential risk to life on this planet as we know it, of nuclear war.