

Don't be disarmed by anti-nuke drive

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Talk of nuclear disarmament is making a serious comeback. Just in the past week, President Barack Obama received a Nobel Peace Prize for his work on the issue, and now yet another blue-ribbon commission -- this one co-chaired by former foreign ministers of Japan and Australia -- has issued a high-profile report calling for disarmament. The goal, of course, is superficially appealing and may even be achievable some day. But the US, Australia, Japan and America's other Asian allies would be well advised to think twice before embracing the report.

The paper released on Tuesday in Tokyo by the International Commission on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament is representative of international anti-nuke theology. Some of the ideas are useful, such as strengthening the International Atomic Energy Agency as a proliferation watchdog and beefing up safeguards and verification mechanisms. Creating international nuclear fuel banks and shared management of enrichment, reprocessing and spent fuel storage facilities would make nonproliferation sense as well as supporting civil nuclear power in energy-thirsty Asia.

But other suggestions would be dangerous. Capping US and Russian arsenals at 500 warheads is unrealistic given today's world. An unequivocal "no first use" declaration would weaken American deterrence. And the recommendation that the Proliferation Security Initiative, currently a coalition of the willing to interdict nuclear shipments, be folded into the UN is a surefire way to neuter a successful tool.

Such efforts ignore the fact that the world is an unfriendly place. And no part of it looks more Hobbesian than Asia, riven with unresolved Cold War tensions, rapid advances in military capabilities and growing competition among rising powers. Some of those governments maintain and deploy nuclear weapons. Others want them, break their treaty commitments not to acquire them and will want them whether the US has them or not. Look no further than North Korea.

This is why a credible US nuclear deterrent is so important. This is partly a matter of self-interest: Washington must prevent a major power from attacking the US or seeking to coerce it with a nuclear threat. But it also needs to be mindful of the effects of US nuclear policies on its Asian allies who face real threats -- North Korea among the most pressing. The US nuclear arsenal protects allies including Australia, Japan and South Korea, with whom America has treaty commitments. Not only does the US nuclear deterrent shape the behaviour of rogue nations such as North Korea toward these allies, but the US umbrella also removes the need for countries such as Japan to seek nuclear weapons of their own.

Maintaining an effective US nuclear deterrent will become even more important in Asia as China works hard to close the conventional military gap. This should be a top priority of the Obama administration's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review and should guide any response to the report. Deterrence is about holding at risk what potentially hostile governments value. So the US and its allies must make every effort to understand the leadership of adversaries or potential enemies.

The nuclear deterrent is not the only element of American commitment to the region, of course. Forward-deployed US forces -- in South Korea, Okinawa and Guam -- also contribute to security in Asia. As do combined exercises and missile defence systems. But the role of nuclear weapons is unique.

A credible US nuclear deterrent means having an operational force, with capabilities for real operations and an operational plan. Washington must retain forward-based systems in places where its allies view their presence as vital to their security -- even if US defence planners believe central strategic systems can do the job. Washington needs to maintain at least parity in strategic forces with Russia and must never allow levels to fall to a point where allies believe Russian or Chinese short-range nuclear arsenals will affect US decision-making in a crisis.

The sages who crafted Tuesday's report paid too little attention to all these realities in the name of a nuclear "peace in our time". In his Nobel Peace Prize speech, Obama proclaimed, rightly, that the US has helped underwrite global security for more than 60 years. He acknowledged that global stability rested on more than international treaties and declarations. The critical contribution of US nuclear deterrence was left unspoken.

Additional reductions in the US and Russian nuclear arsenals are possible, and indeed desirable. But this disarmament game is dangerous. Potential enemies will be deterred, and allies assured, only if the US is visibly confident in its nuclear posture. Asia's future stability and prosperity will depend far more on this than on airy dreams of disarmament.

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