

Rudd is needed at nuclear summit

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Barack Obama's America is making a genuine bid to reduce nuclear dangers. It is time for friends like Australia to get on board, in deed and word.

The White House has unveiled a revised policy showing the way Washington might contemplate deploying or using its nuclear arsenal. And the Nuclear Posture Review shows a refreshing degree of self-restraint.

The fundamental role of America's nukes, says Obama, will be to deter other nukes. The US will work to forge the conditions where it can guarantee not to use nuclear weapons first in any conflict - even if, for now, that cannot be offered to the nuclear outlaws Iran and North Korea.

It is a far cry from the 2002 review, which envisaged new weapon designs and provocative first-strike plans.

Obama offers more than promises. This weekend he and the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, will sign a treaty committing to the largest verifiable weapons cuts since the Cold War ended two decades ago. From a 1980s peak of 70,000 warheads in the world, strategic arsenals deployed by the US and Russia will now stand at 1550 each.

These laudable steps set the scene for two key global meetings. On Monday world leaders will meet in Washington to find new ways to prevent nuclear terrorism and proliferation. In May there will be a crucial conference to shore up the faltering nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Yet there is no guarantee Obama will succeed.

Iran and North Korea show no sign of abandoning their illegal nuclear weapons programs, and both rattle their neighbours, which may yet seek atomic insurance of their own. Russia, France and Britain continue to find nuclear arsenals invaluable in the face of relative decline. Israel clings to the bomb for reasons it sees as existential security.

China suspects Obama's motives, and continues to modernise its small, secrecy-wrapped nuclear force. India is big on Gandhian disarmament rhetoric but looks to its atomic defences against China and Pakistan. Islamabad, fearing India, obstructs global treaty efforts to cap nuclear bomb-making - instead expanding the very arsenal that could one day fall into terrorist hands.

Amid this fearsome muddle, Obama is trying to show leadership that combines realism - a recognition that nuclear deterrence will be around for a long time yet - with an idealist's vision of a world where nuclear arms are no longer front and centre in national security.

Domestically, he has had to strive, gamble and compromise to craft his new policies of nuclear restraint. So these will only endure, and pave the way to a safer world, if other powers now do more to reciprocate.

For now, some key US allies, such as Japan and South Korea, accept Obama has their security interests at heart. But this could change soon without progress in drawing China into being more transparent about its nuclear plans and strategic goals.

A huge test will be whether Obama can deliver on his undertakings to secure - within four years - all nuclear materials against leaks to terrorists and the shadowy proliferation market.

This will mean much stronger global co-operation in the unglamorous work of export controls, container security, surveillance, interdiction, infrastructure and monitoring. It will mean finding money to fund properly the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Obama needs to muster stronger support - including from Russia, China and developing nations - to pressure, isolate or contain Iran. In all of this, Obama needs all the friends he can get.

One of Kevin Rudd's most touted foreign policy initiatives has been an international panel on eliminating nuclear dangers, co-chaired by the former foreign minister Gareth Evans. Yet diplomacy should be about much more than commissioning independent reports, however weighty.

Japan was Australia's partner in that commission, and its Prime Minister is heeding its recommendations and supporting Obama's bomb-curtailing drive. He is flying to Washington for Monday's summit, as are leaders from China to South Korea to New Zealand.

Yet, strangely, there have been mixed signals this week about whether Kevin Rudd intends to join them. If he is serious about reducing nuclear dangers, he will. Of all his foreign policy aspirations, this one can hardly be dismissed as a flight of fancy.

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