

Leadership for a nuclear weapons-free world

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The Japan Times

Monday, September 24, 2012

CANBERRA — In a world beset by many grave problems that threaten to unleash a perfect storm at short notice, many people bemoan the dearth of responsible and high-quality leadership to point the way forward to a more prosperous, peaceful and just future.

Yesterday's leaders may no longer be in power but have much to contribute by drawing on their accumulated experience, wisdom and detachment from the everyday concerns of making and executing public and foreign policy.

The two great existential challenges of our time are climate change and nuclear weapons. With regard to the latter, between them, Russia and the United States hold 90 to 95 percent of the world's stockpile of nuclear weapons.

Their global inventories cast a strategic shadow over Asia through deployments, doctrines and targets. Asia also has three of the world's four non-NPT nuclear-armed states (India, Pakistan and North Korea, with Israel being the fourth). India's and Pakistan's stockpiles are growing

China, meanwhile, has yet to join any regime or plans to cut back on its nuclear arsenal, arguing that the numerical difference of its arsenal from that of Russia and the U.S. puts it in a qualitatively different category.

In recognition of the portents suggested above, around 30 former leaders last year established the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN).

The advocacy group brings together former senior political (prime, foreign and defense ministers), diplomatic (vice ministers, foreign secretaries, U.N. undersecretaries general), military (service chiefs) and scientific leaders from 14 countries from South to East Asia and Australasia. Convened by former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, the APLN's goal is to inform public opinion and energize high-level policymakers to "do everything possible to achieve a world in which they are contained, diminished and ultimately eliminated."

Meeting recently in Singapore, the APLN lamented the loss of momentum on the intertwined agenda of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. In a statement issued on

Sept. 13, 25 APLN members "expressed deep disappointment at the evaporation of political will" on nuclear disarmament over the past year, and called on governments to apply "new energy and focus to ridding the world of the most indiscriminately inhumane weapons ever built."

A four-pronged strategy could re-inject momentum into nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament: normative, operational, strategic and political.

- Normatively, the most crucial task is delegitimization of nuclear weapons. How morally defensible is the strategy of deliberately targeting millions of civilians?

Those with nuclear weapons have subverted the NPT from a prohibition into a non-proliferation regime. All countries that have and seek nuclear weapons, or are increasing the size and modernizing the quality of their arsenals, should be subjected to international opprobrium.

Far from prestige and respect accruing to the political, military and bureaucratic leaders, they should feel increasingly uncomfortable at being the object of disapprobation — tolerated until a better security system is created.

To seek non-proliferation from others, they must prepare for nuclear disarmament themselves. Bringing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into force and negotiating a new fissile materials cut-off treaty will also be powerful affirmations of the global anti-nuclear norm.

- Operationally, as argued by the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, this means a policy of progressive minimization of the numbers, role and visibility of nuclear weapons in the short and medium terms.

The decision-making fuse connecting the first detection of an enemy attack to the decision to use nuclear weapons in response must be lengthened so that second and third thoughts are given time to take over from the initial instinct to launch the bomb.

Nuclear warheads should be physically separated from missiles that will carry them to enemy targets.

More warheads should be deactivated, and more of the decommissioned warheads should be verifiably destroyed and converted into low enriched uranium (LEU) for use in civilian power generation.

On the last point, a remarkable statistic is worth noting and praising. The U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration has monitored the elimination of more than 450 metric tons of Russian highly enriched uranium (HEU) under a 1993 U.S.-Russia "megatons-to-megawatts" agreement that is now 90 percent complete.

The agreement is a prime example of the practice of "down-blending" weapons-grade HEU into commercial energy LEU.

The Russian weapons-grade HEU is fabricated into nuclear fuel and used in nuclear power plants to generate about 10 percent of the U.S. consumer electricity or nearly half of all commercial nuclear energy produced in the U.S.

The program is on track to convert the total of 500 metric tons of Russian HEU — equivalent to about 20,000 nuclear weapons! — to LEU by the end of 2013.

- Strategically, all the nuclear-armed states must recommit — publicly, firmly, unequivocally, and unconditionally — to the vision and goal of the elimination of all nuclear weapons and the conclusion of a universal and verifiable nuclear weapons convention that can take its place alongside the biological and chemical weapons conventions already in force.

Instead, plans for upgrades, modernization or increased numbers and destructive power of nuclear arsenals by all the nuclear-armed states indicate that none is serious about nuclear disarmament.

This will make holding the line to just nine nuclear armed states increasingly impossible. Either we roll back existing arsenals and eliminate them entirely, or we accept more countries (and non-state actors) getting them and someday — perhaps soon — using them again.

- Politically, the challenge is to make the bilateral, regional and global environments more conducive to deep cuts, disarmament and non-proliferation.

This will reassure those who feel threatened by neighbours or global powers, those who seek the comfort of the nuclear weapons of allies that their security needs will be met, as well as the nuclear-armed states that deep cuts and elimination of nuclear weapons will not make the world safe for major conventional wars.

Unfortunately, from the Middle East to East Asia and the South China Sea, the strategic

environment seems to have worsened recently, leading to a loss of political will for nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

But making disarmament conditional on a prior resolution of conflicts and disputes, the APLN leaders said, "is just another way of saying disarmament won't happen."

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