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US Nuclear Summit: Nuclear Warheads Vs Nuclear Energy

Alvin Chew

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Given the new dimensions of security threats triggered by climate change, the United States needs to be forward-looking in its policies to deal with rising energy demands.

THE JUST-CONCLUDED US Nuclear Summit in Washington is a significant step taken by President Barack Obama towards global nuclear disarmament. It is to be welcomed by the global community as it will, if it achieves its goal, ultimately make the world a much safer place -- devoid of nuclear weapons. This "new" thinking is being reinforced at a time of a nuclear energy renaissance in response to the threat of global warming.

The demise of nuclear weapons

Nuclear warheads have been developed to achieve nuclear deterrence during the Cold War era. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world has moved towards a more cooperative approach to foster international security. As the known nuclear arsenals are found in various countries, though mainly in the US and Russia, disarmament efforts require the consensus of these 'nuclear-powered' states to reduce their nuclear stockpiles simultaneously. After all, the costs of nuclear weaponisation could have been channelled to generate more energy supply.

Russia shares an equally compelling reason to reduce its nuclear arsenal. The plutonium to be recovered from Russia's unclassified nuclear stockpile would be more useful if it were to be used in the civilian domain. As weaponisation had contributed to a crumbling of its economy in the past, it is now on the path to becoming a global 'energy supplier' if those fissile reserves are put to better use to meet its energy needs.

With the two biggest states concerting their efforts in reducing nuclear arms, it is hopeful that other nations would follow suit, most notably China and Iran. The example taken by Russia and the US can be interpreted as a strategy to pressurise other nuclear-weapon states to forgo their weapons

development programmes. In the case of China, American and Russian efforts will hopefully encourage more transparency for it to declare its weapons ambition. As for Iran, regardless of any evidence of a weapons programme, it is clearly an innovative attempt to motivate the Middle Eastern state to forgo its enrichment facilities.

New Players

Both the nuclear industries of the US and Russia had suffered tremendously from the two biggest nuclear accidents in the past – Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, respectively. The levels of social acceptance for nuclear energy dipped substantially and the nuclear industry has been cast in a negative light. Efforts to revive nuclear energy will require decades of confidence building.

In addition to the two nuclear accidents that had dogged their respective nuclear industries, the US had rubbed salt to the wound of its own industry by conflating the security dimension of nuclear energy with non-proliferation issues. It has adopted the 123 bilateral agreements with aspiring nuclear states, most of whom have decided to pursue civilian nuclear capabilities, to agree on non-proliferation practices. While such an agreement can improve regulation in the industry, it has inadvertently weighed down the US' own nuclear industry from regaining its leading status.

Hence, it is clear that the major constructors of nuclear reactors are now France, and recently South Korea, after Seoul won the bid to build the first civilian nuclear plant in the Gulf region. China, with an already available domestic market to meet the construction of its nuclear reactors, will likely emerge as a serious contender in the global arena if its reactors prove cost-competitive. South Korea's winning formula not only resides in its sterling operational safety track record, it is also more forthcoming in the area of technology transfer and adopts a more discernable approach in its nuclear deal that focuses on nuclear energy, rather than non-proliferation.

The rising use of nuclear energy

While the US concentrates its efforts to dissuade the use of nuclear technology, the rest of the world is looking more favourably to the use of civilian nuclear power as an alternative source to deal with issues of energy demand and global warming. It is evident that if the US and Russia do not leverage on their rich experience in harnessing and managing nuclear energy, they will then lose their stranglehold in the emerging industry.

In order to steer its nuclear industry back to the recovery path, the US now has the extra task of decoupling nuclear energy from non-proliferation issues – an additional impediment that they had created for themselves earlier. Critics have long understood the clear distinction between nuclear energy and nuclear weaponisation. The US policy of conflating these two issues has stagnated its industry, while not convincing the world to abandon the nuclear energy option. The US policy of not pursuing the reprocessing option has made it lose out to its nuclear counterparts like France and Japan.

To promote the use of nuclear energy, the US will need to review its previous stance and make changes to its nuclear posture. Neutralising its nuclear arsenal is seen as a move to segregate the distinct objectives of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy. It is sending a signal to the world that while these two issues coexist, the separate policies of non-proliferation and civilian nuclear energy are pursued on different grounds.

The step towards disarmament in the new century shows that nuclear arsenals are no longer a good deterrence factor in a globalised economy. Instead, nuclear energy will be used to address imminent issues of energy security and climate change. In doing so, the US is taking a bold approach to recalibrate its nuclear policy. It has moved from the state-centric security of harbouring nuclear weapons, to one that promotes nuclear energy to deal with the non traditional security challenges, such

as rising climate temperatures. It is about time that the US reflects the importance of the new security dimension in its policies.

Alvin Chew is currently a Visiting Researcher at the Gulf Research Centre in Dubai and an Associate Fellow of the Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS) Centre at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore.