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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **A Second Nuclear Age in Asia?**

By Kwa Chong Guan

### **Synopsis**

*Russian and US ratification of a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty marks the start of a new effort towards a "world without nuclear weapons". There will be renewed calls for Asia to accept denuclearisation. Asia, however, has a more complex multipolar nuclear strategic environment.*

### **Commentary**

ON SATURDAY 5 February 2011 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton exchanged the documents of ratification at the Munich Conference for a New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). This means that the two old Cold War superpowers can now jointly turn their attention to persuading other nuclear-armed states to also reduce their nuclear arsenals and work towards disarmament.

This New START, together with the agreements for nuclear security from the inaugural Nuclear Security Summit convened by President Barack Obama a year earlier, and the 62 follow-on actions agreed to in the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Committee, positions the US to further reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons for its national security.

China can expect to be a target of US and Russian persuasion to cut-back its nuclear inventory. Efforts to alternately persuade and coerce North Korea to return to the negotiation table to disarm will intensify. India and Pakistan will be faced with renewed persuasion to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). How will the Asian nuclear-armed states respond to these new pressures from the US and Russia to denuclearise?

### **Asian Positions**

The Chinese will probably remind that they are in-principle ready to join nuclear arms control talks after Russian and US nuclear forces decline to Beijing's level, or Beijing achieves parity with Russian and US nuclear forces. It is difficult to envisage either Russia or the US acceding to Beijing's position.

For North Korea, all the three major nuclear powers in Asia must ask themselves what is Pyongyang's interest to return to the negotiating table? Its potential nuclear capability injects a high degree of uncertainty into its games of bluster with Seoul and forces Beijing, Moscow and Washington to accord it the attention it craves for. Not only Beijing, but also the US are entrapped by these games of bluster and brinkmanship their allies engage in.

On the Indian subcontinent the three major nuclear powers are also ensnared by their different strategic interests in the regional security dynamics over which they have little influence. Do these developments indicate

the emergence of a second nuclear age -- as some analysts have termed it -- in Asia? This second nuclear age is to be characterised by discontinuity from the old Cold War logic of disarmament, non-proliferation and the non-use of nuclear weapons, or what has been called a "taboo" against the use of nuclear weapons.

### **Thinking the Unthinkable in Asia**

In the old Cold War an earlier generation of nuclear weapons strategists such as Herman Kahn pushed the US security community to think the unthinkable consequences of a nuclear war and go instead for détente with the old Soviet Union. The continuation of this thinking the unthinkable has led George P Schultz, William J Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn, who have become dubbed "the four horsemen", to issue their now classic op-ed essay in the Wall Street Journal of 4 January 2007 calling for a world free of nuclear weapons.

Has there been a similar thinking of the unthinkable consequences of a nuclear war by the Asian nuclear weapons armed states?

The continuing build up of not only nuclear warheads, but also their delivery systems by Asian nuclear weapon states suggests a rather different perception of the value and use of nuclear weapons. Two of the Asian nuclear-armed states, China and India, have publicly declared a no-first use of nuclear weapons, but the other Asian nuclear-armed states have not. For them, it would appear that nuclear weapons are not only to deter nuclear attacks by others, but also deter defeat in a conventional attack. This suggests a rather different logic driving the desire to possess nuclear weapons in Asia and understanding of their non-use from that encapsulated in the New START or the NPT and other arms control protocols.

Understandably the response of the two old Cold War superpowers to this more complex and multipolar nuclear strategic environment in Asia is to try to impose their Cold War logic of the NPT. This logic gives the right to only them, plus three others (who are perhaps not coincidentally, the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council), to deploy nuclear weapons -- and expect the rest of the world, including Asia to concur. For some of the Asian nuclear (and non-nuclear) weapons states these aspirational calls to sign the NPT and other arms control protocols smacks of hypocrisy.

### **Durability of Nuclear Weapons?**

The challenge for the non-nuclear weapon states of Asia must be what is their role in the strategic environment which nuclear multipolarity has made more uncertain and complex? Is their role to add to the aspirational calls to denuclearise and disarm? It is a given that we all must continue to persuade not only the nuclear-armed states, but all others to ratify the NPT and other International Atomic Energy Agency protocols for nuclear security. But what if the starting assumption is not the desirability of a nuclear free world, but the durability of nuclear weapons?

In such a scenario, then the non-nuclear weapon states and the multilateral regional institutions – the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – which they are members of, must then start thinking the unthinkable when their nuclear armed neighbours engage in brinksmanship which may spiral out of control. Can they, and if so, how do they crisis-manage a worst case scenario of escalating confrontation between their nuclear weapons armed neighbours? What can they do when another Cheonan class corvette, or Yeonpyeong Island incident or Kargil breaks and threatens to spiral out of control? Or, if the Chinese and US navies have another stand-off in the South China Sea?

How do they mediate and intervene in such a worst case scenario? The challenge for the non-nuclear weapon states is to not only join the aspirational calls for denuclearisation and disarmament, but also start thinking the unthinkable of how to crisis-manage a confrontation between their nuclear-armed neighbours.

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