



THUS BLOWS THE NUCLEAR WIND

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We are only two months from completing five years since President Obama made a landmark speech at Prague in which he expressed support for a nuclear weapons free world. Coming as this was for the first time from a sitting President, the speech was feted across the world by supporters of universal nuclear disarmament. The US Nuclear Posture Review that followed soon thereafter in early 2010 took some baby steps by reducing the role of nuclear weapons to 'last resort'. The May 2010 NPT Review Conference (RevCon) also identified as many as 22 steps that member states would take towards their commitment to elimination of nuclear weapons.

We are now only one year away from the next NPT RevCon, scheduled for May 2015. But nowhere near meeting the recommendations of the last RevCon, or the hope that President Obama ignited in 2009. Rather, the nuclear discourse in Washington is being shaped by the increasing military and nuclear capability of Russia and China. China's recent testing of hypersonic missiles, anti-ship missiles and other hi-tech weaponry, and Russian advances in BMD killer missiles are seen to challenge American technological superiority. And obviously, the US Department of Defence does not find this comforting.

Two lobbies are feeding further into this debate. The first, not surprisingly, comprises the representatives of the national nuclear weapons laboratories who are drawing attention to the ageing American nuclear and missile arsenal. They seek necessary budgetary approvals for refurbishing the labs that can support the retention of a safe, secure and robust nuclear arsenal and of a trained and experienced work force. Unfortunately however for the USA, its nuclear

infrastructure seems to be 'timing out' at a moment when the defence budget is facing recessionary pressures.

Meanwhile, the second lobby demanding that the US retain a powerful and effective nuclear deterrent, surprisingly, comprises the allies of the USA who are under its nuclear protection. The credibility of American nuclear assurances demands that the country stays invested in the requisite nuclear infrastructure that can protect the allies, especially in the face of a growing Chinese military capability and assertive behavior. Washington is well aware that it may have to face the prospect of a possible erosion of the NPT in case it was seen to be unable to fulfill its commitments of extended deterrence.

Indeed, countries like Japan and South Korea are not in any mood to brook reductions in American nuclear capability. In fact, both have seen a domestic debate on the need for development of their own nuclear capability. South Korea, for instance, rattled by DPRK's nuclear brinkmanship, has expressed a view, though currently only a minority, that favours the return of American tactical nuclear weapons to ROK. The minority could turn into a majority if US extended deterrence guarantees came to be doubted in face of persistent DPRK provocations. In any case, the country is skeptical of how effective or implementable the US prompt global strike could be and also worried whether the DPRK may not test it by undertaking non-strategic provocations. For the moment, the US and ROK are working towards an integrated BMD as one way of addressing the threat. A possible coordination of security cooperation between USA, ROK and Japan has also been suggested, but the challenge lies in doing so *with* the uncomfortable relationship between Japan and ROK, and *without* evoking a reaction from China that will perceive it as an attempt at containment.

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Japan, meanwhile, has doubts about the viability of US rebalancing strategy in face of budgetary constraints. Interestingly, despite the strong anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan, it is against any further US nuclear reductions since that would undercut the assurance of the nuclear umbrella.

Threats from DPRK and China are pushing Japan from being a reluctant recipient of American nuclear capability to a positive participant, with an increased role for its Self Defence Forces alongside American deterrent force. Meanwhile, US allies in the Middle East too, most notably Israel and Turkey, are absolutely keen that the US must retain a nuclear force, including its refurbishment, in order to maintain credible nuclear guarantees.

Faced with such demands, there is little hope of President Obama's Prague speech being able to fulfill the promise that it held out to the rest of the world. For the moment, the President's personal desire appears to have been stymied by a domestic lobby of weapons labs and his own allies. In fact, some Congressmen have lamented the fact that the speech has caused a fracture in a long standing Congressional consensus on nuclear weapons, which is manifesting itself in the inadequate budgets being approved to retain a robust deterrent.

For the time being then, the US focus appears to be in finding sufficient investments for building a modern responsive nuclear infrastructure that can nurture the next generation of personnel to ensure a safe, secure and robust nuclear deterrent till such time as is necessary. However, in taking such a view, Washington seems oblivious to the reality that it alone has the power and the influence to change the fashion in the nuclear world. "Till such time as is necessary" will have to be decided by the USA itself. For the present though, it seems in no mood to take the call.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

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