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**Australia, US, China and the Pacific:  
*Cooperation or Competition***

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I start by linking my comments to the topic of our Symposium, and in particular the idea of ‘*Conflicting Perspectives in an Age of Tension*’ – and, I would add, in an age of unprecedented global nuclear threats and risks. Two perspectives are suggested, those of time and location.

## 1. Perspectives of Time and Location

### *The perspective of time*

Looking back there was every cause for optimism in the 1990s. That decade was undoubtedly the golden age of global collaboration in addressing nuclear threats. Stocks of nuclear weapons were being reduced through the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty of 1991; a treaty was negotiated with the aim of banning nuclear testing, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). Efforts were made to ban categories of inhumane weapons – the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) of 1996 which commands almost universal adherence, and the 1997 Ottawa Convention (or Mine Ban Treaty) which unfortunately is not yet so widely accepted.

At the same time the international nuclear safeguards verification regime of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), was strengthened in the wake of the discovery of Iraq and DPRK’s clandestine nuclear weapon programs. And a new international verification regime was created to monitor compliance with the CWC. (Regrettably, we have yet to develop a verification system for the Biological Weapons Convention.)

The 1995 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review and Extension Conference extended the life of the Treaty indefinitely. And major efforts were underway to stop nuclear proliferation by North Korea and Iran. \

Twenty years on, and optimism in nuclear affairs is hard to find. Critical nuclear and missile controls have been abandoned and the NPT is under pressure (though I will argue it remains the indispensable tool for global restraint).

### *The perspective of location*

While the consequences of these negative developments have had most immediate impact on the Atlantic arena they clearly have implications for our region which I will refer to as Indo Asia Pacific (IAP).<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that any weakening of global norms, such as those of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, carries global implications. Equally, evoking the use of nuclear weapons, anywhere, contributes to lowering the threshold for nuclear use, everywhere.

The President of Russia’s repeated threats to use nuclear weapons now matches President Trump’s bragging that his nuclear button was bigger than that of North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-un.

It is, moreover, apparent that the discarding of confidence-building measures in one theatre prejudices their appeal elsewhere. For example, the Open Skies Treaty of 1992, which at one time had 34 members in Europe and North America, has now been discarded by Washington and Moscow. The model could well have had relevance as a confidence-building measure in IAP, but the case will now be harder to make.

To recap: the multilateral achievements of the 1990s certainly offered benefits to the IAP: extension of the NPT had global significance, and the strengthened inspection regimes were important for security in East Asia. The 1996 CTBT brought a welcome end to French nuclear tests in the Pacific, and also to China’s testing programme.

Yet, arguably, the most significant gains of that decade were in the Atlantic theatre. Reductions in Russian and US strategic nuclear stockpiles did not alter the nuclear balances in the IAP region. The ban on nuclear tests did not bind India and Pakistan – nor North Korea which has continued to test its nuclear weapons. Other restraints such as Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) were largely linked to the US – Russia balance. And the range of confidence-building measures developed under the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) were not matched by similar developments in the IAP.

So, while it can be concluded that the greatest immediate damage done to arms control norms and mechanisms has been related to the Atlantic, this is of no comfort to IAP. Indeed, the opposite; global norms have been weakened and possible

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<sup>1</sup> This description is my solution to the ‘Asia Pacific’ versus ‘Indo Pacific’ squabble – a trifle clumsy, perhaps, but more manageable by its initials.

models of strategic collaboration and confidence-building discredited. I therefore turn now to consider the specific circumstances which we face in the IAP region.

## 2. The Context of Nuclear Threats in the Indo Asia Pacific

### *The Playground*

Our playground, the Indo Asia Pacific, is today undoubtedly the region of the greatest concentration of nuclear threats and risks – it has become the global epicentre of nuclear threats.

Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling over the conflict in Ukraine is serious, but it is occurring within what is essentially a bilateral framework of understandings built up over seventy years. Some even argue that the Ukraine conflict is a textbook case of deterrence successfully placing limits on a conflict to protect against escalation.<sup>2</sup>

The threats in our region arise from the chain of nuclear tipped tensions and confrontations in the arc from Northeast Asia, through the East China Sea and the South China Sea, and on to the Indian sub-continent. Such threats are manifest in nuclear and missile testing; in edgy and dangerous naval and air maneuvers; and in soldiers engaged in arm-to-arm combat on the glaciers of the Himalayas.

The playing field is large in area – and home to 60% of the world's population. So, who are the nuclear players?

### *The Players*

Critical to the complexity of nuclear threats in our part of the world is the fact that all the global nuclear powers apart from Israel are asserting a strategic stake in the IAP.

- The US nuclear presence has been continuous since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nuclear weapon use was contemplated for both the Korean and Vietnam wars. In the fifties and early sixties China was targeted for nuclear strikes as an extension of Russia. With military bases and associated facilities spread from South Korea through Japan to the Philippines, to Guam and Australia and across to Diego Garcia, the US maintains an extensive array of nuclear-backed trip wires.
- Russia's nuclear profile in the region has waxed and waned: but it has unresolved territorial disputes with Japan and indeed with China. And other elements of the regional balances suggest its strategic interests will continue to be engaged in mainland Asia as well as the Pacific and Indian Oceans.
- China is expanding its nuclear arsenal, arguably slowly, and improving its means for delivery, arguably quickly. I say more about China shortly.
- The triad India, Pakistan and China interact in a range of nuclear tipped confrontations. Both India and Pakistan are increasing their nuclear stockpiles at a steady if modest pace.
- It seems we have now lost any chance we might have had to stop the DPRK's nuclear weapon program, though the IAEA holds itself in readiness for a swift return if circumstances were to permit. DPRK missile capabilities threaten its neighbours, but also US regional facilities and probably mainland US targets.

And now we have to add to this list of nuclear actors those from Europe engaging under NATO's 'look east' policy.

- France is maintaining its strategic interests in the Pacific. In his recent tour of the Pacific, President Macron offered France as an 'alternative' for regional countries – presumably as an alternative to US or China.<sup>3</sup>
- The UK has suddenly re-committed to the region. First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff (Ben Key) was quoted as saying: "We consider that cost [of a permanent submarine presence in the Indo-Pacific] to be a price absolutely worth paying, for the signals we want to send and the obligations that we feel **out here** ..." (my emphasis)<sup>4</sup>

We might be excused for thinking it is beginning to feel a little crowded 'out here ...'.

I return now to the question of the challenge of living with China.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1218625/hiroshima-2023/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Macron-is-not-giving-up-France-s-role-as-a-Pacific-player>

<sup>4</sup> <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/U.S.-alone-can-t-police-world-U.K.-navy-chief-on-Indo-Pacific-tilt#:~:text=ABOARD%20THE%20HMS%20TAMAR%2C%20Japan,%3A%20white%2C%20red%20and%20blue.>

### *China: How to live with an emerging superpower*

Whether we call it a superpower or just a great power, China rightly dominates thinking about the future of the IAP.<sup>5</sup> China's military acquisitions are commonly depicted by Western politicians and media as unacceptable 'arms racing'. The budget numbers though do not seem to support this charge. Arguably China's defence spending is proportionate to its growing economic power and to its global interests and commitments.

Another line of argument is that China's military capabilities are inferior to those of the US and its allies. That is no doubt the case at the moment, but it is unrealistic to imagine that China will not be able, in time, to match or even exceed the best global technologies where they have not already done so. It will, moreover, achieve those capabilities regardless of the restraints imposed on technology-transfer to China. (The case of Iran seems to demonstrate the limited effectiveness of such controls).

And equally it is unrealistic to think that China would forego deployment of the advanced military capabilities it acquires – any more than Australia could to turn down the offer of US nuclear submarine-propulsion technology.

The reality is that China will increase its military reach and others will act accordingly. Already China's nuclear relationship with the US approximates 'mutually assured destruction' – though it is not clear that either side quite sees it that way. There can be no higher priority than engaging China in a regional dialogue on nuclear restraints.

But military might is not the only element that needs to be assessed. These nuclear and other military realities have to be placed in context. As discussed by Norwegian foreign policy analyst, Sverre Lodgaard, in a recent policy brief, military power operates within a framework of other capabilities and needs to take account of strategic purpose and political will.<sup>6</sup>

A broader awareness of national power is embedded in the US military mantra: DIME – expressing the tools of national influence: diplomatic, intelligence, military and economic – and as one recent INDOPACOM noted – it should be DIEM not DIME – with 'economic' coming before 'military'.

Australia too, in its recent Strategic Defence Review, has latched on to the idea of whole-of-government approach to the assertion of national interests. In doing this the Review invokes the term 'statecraft' and recommended that the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade be assigned role of coordinator of such a whole of government effort. The Australian Government has accepted that recommendation but, in the subsequent national budget, it failed to provide resources to allow a badly depleted foreign ministry to perform the role.

There are complex issues of rhetoric and intent involved here; and risks that the language of statecraft morphs into demands for national mobilization. But that is another discussion. Suffice to note the following:

- China also deploys a range of tools to promote its interests and win friends and influence people. It has had some successes but also failures.
- As long as Pakistan remains a favoured friend of China - and probably beyond that point - India will remain wary of China.
- As is to be expected, ASEAN countries are responding differently. President Bongbong Marcos has revitalized Philippines relations with Washington.
- Depending on who wins next year's Presidential election in Indonesia, China might find it is less welcome than it currently is in Jakarta.
- Vietnam remains on the defensive.
- Japan is traditionally very guarded.
- South Korea under President Yoon has created a bilateral Nuclear Consultative Group with the US and has invited visits by Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines, all aimed to reinforce the promise of US deterrence to a sceptical public which would welcome a South Korean nuclear-weapon capability.<sup>7</sup>

More generally, China has worked hard on its Central Asian links and has been assisted there by Russia's preoccupation elsewhere. The Belt and Road Initiative is an unwieldy catch-all framework for ambitious but often struggling infrastructure projects. The potential for things to go wrong is amply demonstrated by Sri Lanka's debt crisis and the slow implementation

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<sup>5</sup> (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3936751-china-a-great-power-but-not-a-superpower/>)

<sup>6</sup> <https://toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources/policy-briefs/major-powers-in-a-shifting-global-order.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/18/asia/us-navy-ballistic-missile-submarine-south-korea-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>

of massive investment projects in politically and security sensitive regions of Pakistan and Myanmar.<sup>8</sup> On balance it seems that China's domestic economic success has not been matched by its foreign policy achievements. China remains surrounded by major powers which, if not hostile, are cautious if not downright suspicious. China's reputation is perhaps better at a distance. In the developing world of Africa and South America, China's commitment to non-interference seems to be more credible. This has given China a substantial numerical base of support in the UN system which it uses to good effect – the campaign being waged in Vienna and elsewhere against the Australian nuclear submarine project is an excellent case study.

Against this background, what are the prospects for cooperation rather than conflict in the IAP?

### 3. Developing a Platform for Security Cooperation in IAP

The question is best addressed by first outlining some general conclusions about our region which can then be used to suggest a platform for strengthened regional security cooperation.

- First, as noted above, IAP is now the global epicentre of nuclear risks with eight nuclear armed actors operating in a series of interacting deterrence dyads and triads.
- Second, the region is hugely culturally and politically complex and marked by rapidly growing economies and expertise and consequently military capabilities.
- Third, by comparison with the Atlantic theatre, the region lacks the structures for managing strategic shifts. Planned to imitate NATO, the South-East Asian Treaty Organization SEATO was disbanded in 1975. The US instead manages its security relations in South-East Asia as it was doing in East Asia (and with Australia and New Zealand in ANZUS) - on the basis of a 'hub and spokes' model. The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led ASEAN Regional Forum and its outgrowth, the East Asia Summit (EAS) have remits to consider security issues. The promise is for these forums to move beyond information-sharing and dialogue to development of confidence-building mechanisms and ultimately preventive diplomacy. But these remain promises. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) deserves closer attention but is likely to remain focused on Central Asia.
- Fourth, there has been a decline in Western capitals of expertise in arms control issues and no apparent interest in investment in improving the situation. The situation is even more challenging in our region where there have always been very limited pools of expertise.
- Fifth, and linked closely with the last point, the region suffers a dearth of track-2 and academic interactions. US-European funding and outreach have been heavily focused on the Atlantic theatre – DPRK's nuclear and missile activity being the one exception to this general conclusion.

Against this background, how is one to assess the situation in IAP? In short it is bleak and there is little visible interest in tackling the growing challenges. There is no question that we shall see a continuation of both cooperation and competition in the IAP, and we will be very lucky if we avoid conflict.

The challenge is to find mechanisms to manage the inevitable shifts in regional power balances in a way that conflict is avoided. As Gareth Evans has observed, we have avoided nuclear war to date due to 'sheer dumb luck'. That conclusion was largely a reflection on the history of the Cold War. Given the complexities and lack of institutional frameworks in the Indo Asia Pacific, continued reliance on sheer dumb luck is not an option. So, what can be done?

### 4. What Can be Done at the Global Level?

First, start with what can be done at the global level. NPT norms on non-proliferation must be upheld. Engagement in the new NPT review cycle remains important. Clearly the nuclear-weapon States have not lived up to their promises, in particular under Article 6 which obliges all countries to negotiate in good faith with a view to achieving universal disarmament. The NPT remains the one legal hold we have over the five NPT nuclear weapon possessing states – it should be put to best use.

While the arms control outlook is dismal, international pressure needs to be maintained on the US and Russia to re-engage - despite the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-big-gamble-pakistan-10-year-scorecard-cpec#msdynttrid=VGDmgu42OJTnVW2eWhMFsQ92VeVm2R9MEw0QAVBKc6k>

The last nuclear US - Russia weapons control mechanism (New START) is on life-support and due to expire in 2026. While these arrangements do not directly impact the IAP, their failure will further dampen the prospects for developing control regimes in our region.

Regrettably, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is unlikely, for the foreseeable future, to be of practical benefit for the promotion of controls in our own region. The TPNW has not attracted support from any nuclear-armed state, and other key players in the IAP are sceptical.

Several coalitions of states have worked to advocate 'small steps' or 'stepping-stones' towards nuclear disarmament. However, these agendas have remained basically unchanged over 25 years and negligible progress to report. Common elements of these agendas have been:

- an end to production of nuclear weapon materials (so-called 'cut-off' treaty)
- no-first use undertaking
- de-alerting – allowing more time for parties to avert a crisis
- entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty
- making the most advanced nuclear safeguards standards a condition for export of nuclear items.

All of these goals are worthwhile, but for the most part they remain long-term ambitions and do not offer a path for easing nuclear threats currently facing the IAP. For example, we have discussed no-first use undertakings: clearly they raise issues for key states in our region – not least Pakistan, Japan and the Koreans. Cut-off is equally unacceptable to Pakistan so long as it feels at a disadvantage in relation to India. And five of the nine countries that are preventing the CTBT entering into force are from our region.

In short, the threats and risks facing the IAP will not be addressed by any foreseeable global level measures. Rather, we might conclude, regional approaches are what will be required.

At the recent Shangri-La Dialogue (June 2023), Australia's Prime Minister put on record his own long-held conviction of the need to tackle the threat to humanity posed by nuclear weapons. However, his ambition for IAP was limited to supporting President Biden's call for dialogue and 'guardrails'.

The 2023 AUSMIN communique tells us that 'Australia expressed support for renewed U.S. efforts to establish reliable and open channels of communication with the PRC to manage strategic competition and guard against conflict'.

Dialogue of course is an essential first step. And guardrails would be useful: but as one commentator has observed, guardrails are only useful when you have agreement about the route you are following. Both are needed immediately to avoid disaster.

It is also possible to imagine a more ambitious set of mechanisms and agendas, providing stairways to regional threat reduction and nuclear arms controls.

## 5. Regional Mechanisms

Regional mechanisms encompass a range of modalities – bilateral through plurilateral to overarching regional forums.

While there are many forums in IAP, they have yet to gain great institutional or structural force. Certainly, bilateral discussion is essential. While high-level political exchanges with China have recently become victim of diplomatic gamesmanship, we are given to understand that there has been an underlying 'sustained' communication between the US and Chinese militaries. Has this survived the recent ruptures?<sup>9</sup>

Bilateral exchanges are critical and would benefit from being accompanied by a measure of transparency and broader engagement. The hub and spokes model which has characterized the US approach to alliance management is being moderated to an extent by the development of new patterns of engagement – for example the '*Trilateral Strategic Dialogue*' (Australia, Japan, US) and the '*Quadilateral Security Dialogue*' (Australia, India, Japan, US). But although these mechanisms address regional strategic relations, there is no evidence to date that they have been used to consider nuclear threat reduction.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/08/17/are-china-and-the-us-falling-into-the-thucydides-trap/>

At the multilateral level, the ASEAN-centred arrangements deserve more attention as a potential framework for confidence-building measures relevant to nuclear threat-reduction. Australia has made a start in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) by fostering a series of official level workshops on nuclear risk reduction.<sup>10</sup>

The ASEAN-linked East Asia Summit is the one existing framework for high-level security exchanges engaging all key players. Its role needs strengthening.

Ultimately there will be a requirement for an overarching security framework along the lines of the OSCE – although that organization's current disarray severely damages its model.

Finally in considering the regional institutional framework we should encourage 'Track-Two' mechanisms. In a region of such diversity, and of limited and very unevenly spread resources, Track 2 arrangements are needed to build relations amongst the existing small communities of security and international relations experts around the region. Not only do these arrangements foster essential understanding, but they also serve as seed beds for ideas.

The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) has long made a contribution, but it needs revitalizing. The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is contributing but lacks resources and has yet to mobilise its key asset, its membership.

But strengthening regional institutional structures must go hand in hand with an agenda of practical measures to address regional nuclear threats. Indeed, it is generally the case that over time the demands of the issues to be addressed will determine the shape and strength of structures created. So, what might that agenda include?

## 6. The Agenda

From the above, we might conclude that, while our regional frameworks require strengthening, the lack of creative policy development addressing strategic nuclear issues is an even greater problem. The tactic might be to find a short agenda of achievable but substantive policy objectives to initiate the building of strengthened regional structures.

I suggest four such initiatives in the hope of stimulating discussion and refining these proposals and/or identifying more impactful proposals.

### - ***Leadership and high-level attention***

Nuclear threat and risk issues are not being addressed at the high level required. EAS communiqués barely mention the issue. The Hiroshima G-7 communiqué contained no proposal designed to address the current crisis of nuclear threats. One short-term objective might be to have nuclear threat-reduction as a free-standing agenda item for the EAS. This would require leadership and sensitive diplomacy on the part of one or more EAS members (Australia and Indonesia, for example).

### - ***Dialogue channels***

Resumption of US and China political and military links at the highest level is critical and urgent. But equally important are the channels for communications amongst other IAP countries engaged in confrontations with nuclear warfare implications. The matrix of hotline links should be transparent and monitored. This could be an agenda item for a Shangri-La Dialogue, exploiting this Track 1.5 framework engaging top regional military and diplomatic actors. The initiative would require champions; countries able to sensitively probe and evaluate existing arrangements and suggesting best practices.

### - ***Incident analysis and reporting***

Incidents in the IAP involving nuclear armed states are common, yet there is no independent mechanism for recording, analysis and drawing of recommendations. There are different models in the Atlantic theatre: but for IAP the function could be performed by a dedicated and plausibly objective international mechanism to monitor nuclear related incidents – perhaps created under a mandate from the EAS and with funding according to an agreed formulation (perhaps UN modified). APLN has done some work in this area which could provide a starting point.<sup>11</sup>

### - ***Tracks 1 and 2 diplomacy for agenda-building***

A project at both Track 1 and 2 levels, to generate options for an IAP agenda to reduce nuclear threats: this would require political commitment and resources and be managed preferably under the auspices of the EAS or ARF. CSCAP and APLN could be mobilized.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://ministers.dfat.gov.au/minister/tim-watts/speech/remarks-arf-nuclear-risk-reduction-workshop>

<sup>11</sup> See US State Department funded review of the risks of dangerous maritime incidents in the Asia-Pacific: [https://www.apln.network/projects/maritimeincidents?utm\\_source=Asia-Pacific+Leadership+Network&utm\\_campaign=01147b0e36-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2023\\_07\\_20&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_aeb9c6af3c-01147b0e36-461031401](https://www.apln.network/projects/maritimeincidents?utm_source=Asia-Pacific+Leadership+Network&utm_campaign=01147b0e36-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2023_07_20&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_aeb9c6af3c-01147b0e36-461031401)