



Global Nuclear Disarmament: Too Much, Too Soon? by Ralph A. Cossa

Ralph A. Cossa (pacforum@hawaii.rr.com) is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS. A shorter version of this commentary recently appeared in the Honolulu Advertiser.

There is no country on earth more committed to global nuclear disarmament than Japan. Ever since experiencing first hand the horrors of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese government and people have been steadfast in calling for the total elimination of nuclear weapons from the planet.

Japanese were among the first and loudest to applaud a few years back when a group of senior American statesmen – former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Schultz, former Defense Secretary William Perry, and former Senator Sam Nunn; since dubbed the “four horsemen” – called for the United States to start honoring its nuclear disarmament commitment under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

While their pleas largely fell on deaf ears during the Bush administration, others found it hard to ignore the call by four confirmed Cold Warriors who were all seen as hawkish on defense and security issues. These are not tree-hugging idealists; all are hard-nosed realists who argued that America was safer in a word without nuclear weapons and that it was important that the United States be seen as leading the world in this direction, rather than ignoring or, at best, merely paying lip service to such calls.

President Obama was among those who were listening to and who agreed with the four horsemen’s logic. He spoke often during his campaign about the need to eliminate nuclear weapons. He now appears ready to take a big step in this direction. In a major address on nuclear disarmament in Prague on April 5, he pledged that his administration would take “concrete steps toward a world without nuclear weapons.” In an earlier meeting with Russian President Medvedev, he also pledged to begin talks with Moscow “on the terms and time frame” for a follow-on to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). The original START I agreement, signed in July 1991 by U.S. President George H. W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, led to the largest bilateral reductions of nuclear weapons in history. It is set to expire in December 2009 and reaching a new agreement has been high on the Obama administration’s agenda.

One would expect, therefore, that the Japanese would be delighted. Not so fast! True, many Japanese are still eager to see deeper, even drastic, cuts in the world’s two largest nuclear inventories; they see efforts to date as woefully inadequate and insincere. But others are concerned that rumored cuts – some are proposing both sides reduce their

respective arsenals to 1,000 or fewer nuclear weapons – would be “too much, too soon.” They are quick to remind President Obama about the other half of his “dual commitment,” namely that the U.S. would not unilaterally disarm and would maintain a strong nuclear deterrent until such time as all weapons could be verifiably eliminated.

Herein lies the core of their concern. If it was only the U.S. and Russia that had nuclear weapons, deeper cuts in both arsenals would make a lot of strategic sense. But the NPT recognizes five nuclear weapon states – the U.S., Russia, China, France, and Great Britain – and while most Japanese don’t lose a lot of sleep over French or British nuclear weapons (both countries have been unilaterally reducing their nuclear arsenals and are transparent about their future plans), they do worry constantly about China’s growing nuclear weapons capability and the impact that deep reductions in the U.S. arsenal would have on America’s “extended deterrent” – the nuclear umbrella we provide allies like Japan (and South Korea) who live under a nuclear shadow.

Then there’s North Korea, which along with India and Pakistan are self-declared (and demonstrated) nuclear weapon states. India and Pakistan (along with suspected nuclear weapon power Israel) never signed the NPT and thus claim not to be bound by its restrictions. Pyongyang signed the NPT, obtained nuclear technology, and then “suspended its participation” in the global treaty and detonated its first nuclear device (in what is widely believed to have been only a partially successful test) in 2006. (Iran is suspected of following the North Korea model, exploiting NPT loopholes – when not downright cheating – to develop a break-out nuclear weapons capability.)

The breakdown in Six-Party Talks has demonstrated how difficult it is to verify even the smallest nuclear holdings – Pyongyang is suspected, at worst, of having six to eight weapons worth of plutonium. Nonetheless, and despite the concerns of many Japanese to the contrary, America’s overwhelming nuclear and conventional force superiority renders the North Korean threat manageable. But can the same be said for China, especially if it continues to increase its nuclear arsenal in the face of reductions by the other four nuclear weapon states?

Today, China follows a “minimum deterrence” strategy. It claims no interest in expanding its arsenal to the levels currently held by the Russians or the U.S.; it just wants a force sufficient to deter others from using such weapons against China. Presumably then, significant reductions in U.S. and Russian inventories could be met with similar reductions in Chinese nuclear holdings. Perhaps, but Beijing’s position thus far on nuclear arms reduction efforts is “call us when you get down to our numbers and then we can talk.” (Of course, China has not officially announced what those numbers are, but

intelligence estimates put Beijing's holdings at around 300-400 weapons.)

At a recent Pacific Forum U.S.-Japan strategic dialogue, virtually every Japanese security specialist (and most Americans in the room, for that matter) argued that a drastic reduction in the U.S. nuclear arsenal (to 1,000 or fewer warheads) could tempt Beijing to start growing its nuclear arsenal in an attempt to achieve nuclear parity and the condition of "mutually assured destruction" enjoyed by the Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War. This could have a chilling effect on America's extended deterrent capability, they warned, and cause Tokyo to question the reliability of the American nuclear umbrella.

President Obama needs to take heed of these warnings. The time has come for Washington and Moscow, as they begin deliberations on further significant nuclear arms reductions, to insist that China and the others join the dialogue and place their own nuclear arsenals on the table. While it would be unrealistic to expect one-for-one reductions from those with smaller inventories, all should agree to equivalent percentage-based cuts; a 20 (or 50) percent cut in Russian and U.S. arsenals should generate a similar cut in Chinese, French, and British forces.

This, of course, will compel Beijing to finally become more transparent about its nuclear weapons holdings and future force development plans. Moving down the road (finally) toward genuine reductions and eventual elimination of nuclear weapons requires all the nuclear weapons powers, led by the five recognized nuclear weapon states, to move in unison, if real progress is ever to be made.

Washington will also need to keep the Japanese (and other concerned allies, especially South Korea) fully informed of the deliberations and its own intentions to ensure that others are not tempted to join the nuclear club out of fear that their own security interests are not otherwise being protected. Close consultation during the preparation phase of the 2009 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review would be a good place to begin.