

Position Vacant: Nonproliferation and Disarmament Leader, Asia by Tanya Ogilvie-White

Dr. Tanya Ogilvie-White (tanyaogilvie-white@aspi.org.au) is senior analyst in international strategy at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) in Canberra.

During the past few weeks, there have been some striking discussions in the international media about the future strategic order. One of the most interesting is an article by Ralph Cossa and David Santoro, which was originally published as a *PacNet* (*PacNet* #77, Nov. 26, 2012) and was then picked up by the *Japan Times*. Two short sentences half way through the piece particularly caught my eye: “The United States has limited power and influence to shape the major power agenda in the Asia-Pacific. The future of this agenda will be determined by decisions made in Beijing, New Delhi and Islamabad – not in Washington.” This is true over the longer-term, and the implications for world order are significant. It brings to mind William Walker’s new book, *A Perpetual Menace*, which raises concerns about the weakly-defined Asia-centric system of military engagement that is likely to replace the Eurocentric one. The big questions are: how will peace and stability be achieved as US preeminence wanes, and what values will underpin the new Asia-centric system?

This discussion is becoming urgent, including in the nuclear context. One problem is that the existing nonproliferation regime has been largely shaped by the Eurocentric system (the Western powers and the Soviet Union/Russia) that is currently in decline. At the heart of this regime, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) has expanded and deepened its original role, achieved almost universal membership and withstood serious challenges, primarily because its strategic and political value has been recognized by the states that have dominated the Eurocentric system. Of these, the US has had the most significant impact on the Treaty’s success: when it has offered proactive support, great strides have been possible; when it has dropped the ball, as it did most dramatically during the George W. Bush years, the consequences have been serious.

As power continues to shift eastward, it is likely that the nonproliferation regime will eventually slip out of the United States’ grip. Critics of the US may welcome this development, but the danger is that the leadership role will pass to a more ambivalent successor or be left vacant altogether. In a world in which states still dominate, and in which international governmental organizations, legal frameworks, and norms are dependent upon the support of the most powerful states, this would have huge implications, threatening to unravel a critical security regime that has taken nearly 50 years to build.

At the moment, it is not clear whether the nuclear nonproliferation regime can be embedded into an Asia-

dominated strategic order. It is not even clear that Asia’s potential superpowers want this to occur, or whether they would consider a future of further horizontal and vertical nuclear weapons proliferation as fairer, more equitable, and possibly even more stable than the current uneasy compromise between nuclear haves and have-nots. It’s a worrying situation, which in the worst-case scenario could trigger the same kind of short-sighted and dangerous nuclear brinkmanship that characterized the early years of the Cold War. Only this time there would be some appalling additions: more powerful weapons, new platforms, fragile nuclear-armed states, and nonstate actors that seek nuclear materials for use in terrorist acts.

What Asia needs is leaders who possess the right combination of influence, vision, and courage to champion non-nuclear norms and create and sustain nonproliferation and disarmament momentum. What Asia has is rather different.

China has often shown a blatant disregard for nonproliferation instruments and norms, and is expanding and modernizing its nuclear arsenal. India, which has steadfastly refused to join the NPT on the basis that it is discriminatory and does not serve its strategic interests, is linked into a nuclear triangle with China and Pakistan, from which it is unable and unwilling to detach itself. The only states in the region that currently show leadership potential lack the necessary strategic clout to back it up, and must rely on others. ASEAN is an important international actor in this respect, although it has not always been consistent where nonproliferation advocacy is concerned, and the organization’s future is increasingly vulnerable to divisive great power ambitions. Diplomatic coalitions that operate within the NPT review process are another important source of leadership, but – as Japan and Australia may discover in spearheading the Nonproliferation and Disarmament Initiative – they are notoriously difficult to manage and even harder to sustain over the longer-term.

Where does this leave us? First, it leaves us more acutely aware of the need for the US to make the most of its remaining years at the helm and for other states, coalitions, and organizations to do what they can to support its leadership efforts. Second, it alerts us to the need to bring China more firmly into the nonproliferation and disarmament fold, and to make it understood in Beijing that with power comes greater international responsibility; the same holds true for India. Third, it leaves us more conscious of the importance of nonproliferation and disarmament education, especially in China and India, where tomorrow’s global leaders are being born.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.