

Another nuclear arms race is in the offing

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Since the end of the Cold War we have stopped worrying about nuclear war between the major powers, and have turned our concern to proliferation among rogue states and terrorists. But the big states still have big nuclear arsenals, and they are not standing still.

The United States and China are steadily developing their strategic nuclear forces. As they do so, they risk slipping into a destabilising competition for nuclear advantage against one another which may affect their wider relationships, and threaten peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. This matters to Australia, and there is something simple we can and should do about it.

The US is upgrading its missiles and warheads to make them more accurate and destructive, and building a national missile defence system. That raises the possibility that in future the US can destroy most of China's missiles in their silos, and the rest after they are launched.

Chinese strategists therefore worry that before long the US will be able to threaten nuclear attack on China without fearing nuclear retaliation, laying China open to nuclear blackmail over issues such as Taiwan. To avoid that, China is determined to maintain its "minimum deterrent" - the capacity to land at least one or two warheads on the cities of an adversary in retaliation for any attack. It will therefore respond to US plans by building more new missiles, so it has enough to ensure that some would survive a first strike and penetrate American defences.

The risk is that the US will respond by expanding its offensive and defensive systems, with China expanding its nuclear forces in turn. A classic arms race may begin. This carries two dangers.

First, strategic nuclear competition between Washington and Beijing would amplify suspicions and stoke hostility, making the already potent competitive elements in the relationship harder to manage. That would help lock them into an adversarial relationship that would destroy our hopes for the Asian century - the hope of a peaceful, integrated and prosperous Asia-Pacific.

Second, present trends increase the risk of nuclear war between the US and China. The balance of strategic forces which the two countries' nuclear programs seem likely to create may be inherently unstable. The longer they go unchecked, the greater the risk that, in a crisis over an issue such as Taiwan, one side or the other might be pushed across the nuclear threshold by fear that the other might strike first.

This has grave implications for Australia, but there is something we can do. The solution is simple but not easy. Short of eliminating nuclear weapons, the US and China can moderate their nuclear competition and reduce the risk of nuclear war by agreeing about the size and nature of each other's nuclear forces, offensive and defensive. The key to a deal would be limits on US national missile defences and Chinese intercontinental and submarine-based forces, set at levels that give China an assured capacity to respond to any US first strike by putting a few - but only a few - warheads on US cities.

A deal like this would require much of both sides. It would require China to accept that the US will remain by far the stronger nuclear power, and preclude China from entering full-scale nuclear competition with America. It would require the US to forgo the option of using its nuclear superiority to pressure China in a crisis, and accept that US cities must remain subject to Chinese nuclear attack.

Even more fundamentally, it would require the US and China to change the way they relate to one another, adjusting to the new realities and responsibilities of their relative power over coming decades. For China, this means accepting the responsibilities and restraint required of a major power. For the US, it means learning to treat China as an equal partner in managing regional and global affairs, one whose legitimate interests and perspectives need to be respected and accommodated to strengthen peace and stability.

Australia can play a part. We should try to push both sides to reach this kind of agreement. No need to play the go-between: Beijing and Washington do not need us to negotiate for them. But they do need to be nudged to recognise that agreement is possible, and that the benefits outweigh the costs and risks. We could try to build regional support for the proposal among other Asian nations: their interests are as closely engaged as ours.

Of course, we might fail. Even so we'd stand to gain. By promoting the idea, we'd send powerful messages about Australia's views on the future of the international system in Asia. Australia accepts that as China grows its power needs to be respected and accommodated, and its role as a regional leader recognised - including by the US. That is an important message to send to Washington.

Equally, we believe China's growing power brings growing responsibilities, including the willingness to see its power circumscribed by the demands of wider stability and peace. Even a failed campaign for an arms control agreement would get their attention and ensure they know what we think on an issue that is vital to us. What do we have to lose?

Hugh White is a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute and professor of strategic studies at ANU. He will be speaking on this topic tonight at Melbourne University.