

EastAsiaWatch

Hiroshima at 75: Asia back on the nuclear centre stage

The nuclearisation of US-China rivalry has serious implications for regional security



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For the Straits Times

Seventy-five years after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on Aug 6 and 9, 1945, respectively, Asia is coming back to the centre stage of global nuclear politics as the tensions between the US and China acquire an atomic dimension.

An incipient arms race in Asia in strategic weapons promises to destabilise the security order in the region.

For Asia, that is a double tragedy. Meeting for the first time in 1946, at the dawn of the atomic age, the General Assembly of the newly founded United Nations in its very first resolution had called for the abolition of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction.

Since then, despite repeated diplomatic efforts, treaty commitments, major political moments like the end of the Cold War, mass protests, international court judgments that they are illegal and religious dicta on their immorality, there has been no consensus among the great powers on whether and how to eliminate nuclear weapons.

Second, Asia is no longer marginal to the nuclear dynamics among the major powers.

Asia had no choice but to contemplate the economic and political consequences of the unfolding contest between the US and China. But the region is yet to consider the implications of the nuclearisation of the Sino-US conflict. The 75th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Japan is a

good moment to begin that reflection.

THE MANHATTAN PROJECT

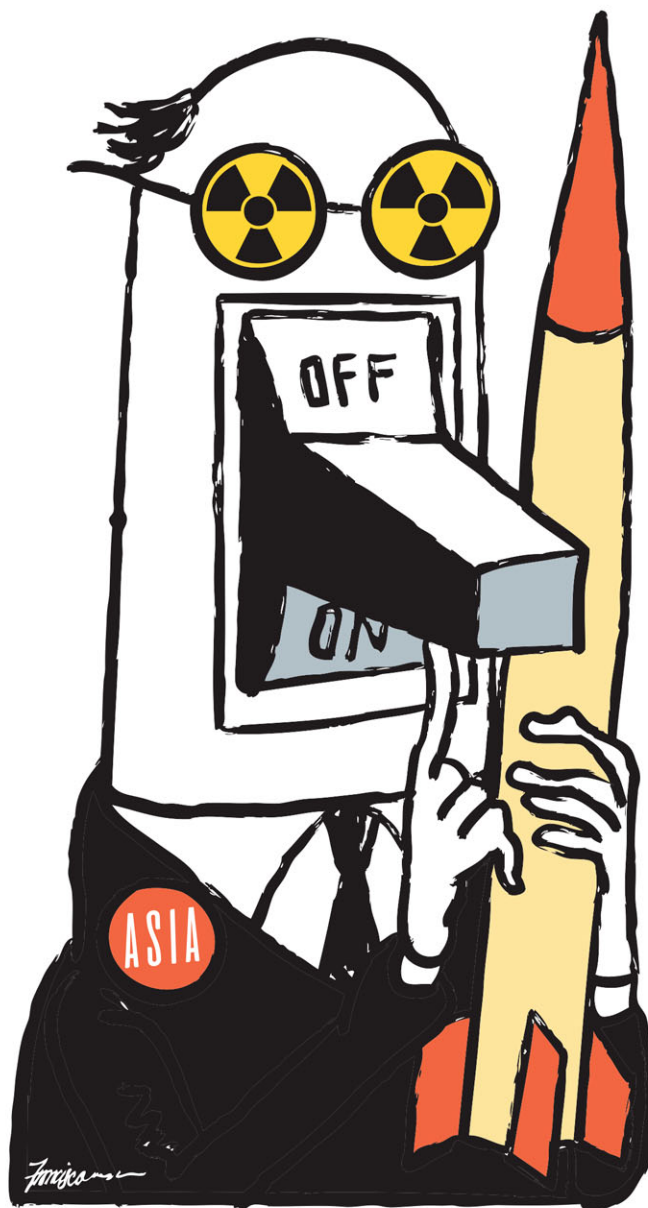
That Japan was the first and only target of nuclear weapons was perhaps entirely incidental. The race to develop nuclear weapons began a few years before 1945 amid concerns that Nazi Germany was developing nuclear weapons. As leading scientists, including Albert Einstein, drew attention to the emerging atomic threat in 1939, the Roosevelt administration embarked on the Manhattan Project to develop atomic weapons.

The first test of an atomic bomb took place on July 16, 1945, by which time Hitler's armies in Europe had been defeated. As the US began to consider using the new weapon against Imperial Japan, a number of scientists in the Manhattan Project, led by Dr James Franck, objected to its use. They pointed to the enormous destructive power of the atomic weapon and the inevitability of other countries acquiring them. They called instead for a public demonstration of its horrific effects and to initiate a process for their international control.

That advice was not taken by President Harry Truman. Since then, the principal justification for the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the claim that it was necessary to bring the war in Asia to an early close and save the valuable lives of American soldiers. But many revisionist historians question that claim. Although Japan was the victim of the atomic bombing, they argue, the real political target was the Soviet Union.

FIRST ACT OF THE COLD WAR

Some contemporary observers had called the atomic bombing of Japan not the last act of World War II, but the first act of the Cold War. Put simply, the argument was that the nuclear use in Japan was about excluding Soviet Russia from the post-war settlement in Asia.



In Europe, Washington had to share the political spoils of the war with Moscow. There was no choice, given the Red Army's role in defeating Nazi Germany. The US was eager, the argument goes, to avoid a similar outcome, given the plans for mobilising the Red Army to force Imperial Japan's defeat. Other historians argue that Emperor Hirohito was preparing to surrender in any case and there was no need for the use of atomic weapons against Japan.

Many historians researching the US' decision to use nuclear weapons against Japan do not concur with these views. But there was no question that the atomic focus quickly shifted to Europe as Soviet Russia was seen as an existential threat to the West. As the alliance between Russia and the West, forged during World War II, morphed into an all-out confrontation in Europe, nuclear weapons became quite central to the new tragedy that unfolded in Europe and across the Atlantic.

Russia followed America to test its nuclear weapons in 1949; Britain and France joined the nuclear club in 1952 and 1960 respectively. In the years that followed, the US began to deploy hundreds of nuclear weapons in Europe, in the name of deterring a Soviet aggression. As the military confrontation escalated in Europe, Asia became increasingly marginal to the nuclear calculus of the US and the Soviet Union.

To be sure, the Asia-Pacific

region remained a testing ground for American, British and French nuclear weapon development. As the nuclear contestation became global, many Asian nations became sites for the location and transit of nuclear weapons, and the affiliated infrastructure of bases and communication facilities.

The People's Republic of China tested its first atomic weapon in October 1964. India tested a nuclear device a decade later in 1974, and was later followed by Pakistan and North Korea. Israel never admitted to any nuclear test, but no one doubts the existence of its atomic arsenal.

Although many Asian powers crashed into the atomic club, they made little difference to the central nuclear balance between the US and the Soviet Union.

CHINA AND THE NUCLEAR TREATIES

The concerns of the great powers were about preventing the losers of World War II – Germany and Japan – from acquiring nuclear weapons. The US and Russia devised the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) in the late 1960s to codify this prohibition. The NPT, which came into force in 1970, also became an instrument to limit the spread of nuclear weapons to the developing world.

The normalisation of Sino-US relations since the 1970s significantly reduced American concerns about the dangers of Chinese nuclear weapons. China, too, sensibly chose not to imitate

the US and Russia in building a large nuclear arsenal. It was happy to focus on a small arsenal that was enough to deter attacks from the nuclear superpowers – America and Russia.

Given its marginality to the great power nuclear dynamic, China was left out of the agreements that sought to regulate the arms race between the US and USSR. The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (Start) set caps on long-range nuclear-armed missiles of Washington and Moscow and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty eliminated US and Russian medium-range missiles in Europe.

China, of course, was part of multilateral nuclear arrangements like the NPT. The end of the Cold War saw renewed attention to the problem of proliferation and provided a basis for collaboration between China and the US on limiting the nuclear dangers in the Middle East, South Asia and the Korean peninsula.

THE UNRAVELLING

This reasonably stable nuclear framework has now begun to unravel amidst the breakdown of the nearly four-decades-old US-China partnership. This is tied inextricably to China's rise and the growing American concerns about it. Consider two recent developments.

Last year, the US withdrew from the INF treaty. Washington argues that China's absence from the treaty had allowed it to develop an arsenal of medium-range missiles that now threaten US military primacy in Asia.

This year, amid a debate on the future of the Start process with Moscow, the Trump administration called for Chinese participation in the talks on nuclear force reduction. Beijing, of course, made it quite clear that it has no desire to join the nuclear talks until Washington and Moscow bring down their arsenals to its level.

China's long-range nuclear force of about 300 weapons is barely one-fifth of the permitted deployment of about 1,550 warheads each for the US and Russia. But the Trump administration argues that China's expanding nuclear forces are undermining the bilateral process between Washington and Moscow.

Writing in *The New York Times* last week, Mr James Anderson, a top administration defence official, warned that China was rapidly expanding its nuclear forces and could double the size of its atomic arsenal over the next decade.

"China's nuclear expansion and its refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue will affect stability on multiple levels," Mr Anderson said. "Increased US nuclear force requirements to ensure credible deterrence against China would affect the United States-Russia strategic nuclear balance and threaten to undermine the prospects for further negotiated reductions."

The size of China's nuclear arsenal is not the only issue bothering the US security establishment as it embarks on an expansive military contest with China in Asia.

DOUBTS ABOUT U.S. SECURITY UMBRELLA

As the People's Liberation Army becomes a powerful military force, there is growing concern about the

credibility of the US' "extended deterrence" to its allies in Asia.

Extended deterrence refers to the "nuclear umbrella" that the US offered to its Asian allies during the Cold War. The promise of the US use of nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet attack, America's Asian allies believed, would deter Soviet aggression. This framework has begun to weaken amidst the relative decline of Russia and the rapid rise of China as a great military and economic power.

Can the security framework designed to deter Russia work against China? America's own deep economic interdependence with China raises questions about the US' willingness to defend its allies against an assertive Beijing. Making matters worse has been President Donald Trump's questioning of the utility of alliances and his demands on South Korea and Japan to pay more for American military presence on their soil.

As the Asian nations question the reliability of the US' security guarantees and worry about China's muscular regional policies, there is a growing sense that they might have to beef up their own military capabilities in this uncertain security environment.

Might this mean reconsidering the nuclear weapon option that Japan, South Korea and Taiwan had considered in the past?

Although the nuclear option is tempting, few of them are expected to go down that route. But many East Asian nations are looking to develop or acquire strategic weapons systems, including long-range missiles.

NEW WEAPONS, NEW DANGERS

That brings us to the larger question of technological change that continually tested the stability of the nuclear balance in Europe and between the US and Russia. Asia is now likely to face a similar challenge as new technologies begin to stoke the rivalry between the US and China, as well as the long-term planning of Beijing's Asian neighbours.

New developments in lethal non-nuclear explosives, space weapons, missile defences, underwater drones, cyber warfare and hypersonic weapons that travel at five times the speed of sound are breaking down the firewall between conventional and nuclear weapons.

In the past, military technological advances travelled from the West to the East at a leisurely pace. Today, China is at the forefront of the development of some of these technologies and in some areas, the US is trying to catch up.

That China is a key actor in the current nuclear power play and Asia is the main theatre of great power jousting should wake up the region to think through the consequences.

Until now, Asia's nuclear worries were limited to atomic proliferation and its impact on sub-regional conflicts in the Middle East, the subcontinent and the Korean peninsula.

Like Europe in the Cold War, Asia must now engage with the consequences of a great power nuclear arms race centred on itself.

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