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Panel: Second Nuclear Age? (RR)

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Talking Points for: Robert Einhorn, Brookings Institution

Some observers believe we are headed toward a second nuclear age characterized not by the relative stability of the Cold War’s bipolar nuclear balance but by:

- the instabilities and dangers of a growing number of nuclear-armed states and regional nuclear rivalries;
- inadequately developed or understood “rules of the road” among new nuclear powers;
- the demise of, or at least long hiatus in, U.S.-Russia nuclear arms reductions and multilateral arms control (e.g., CTBT, FMCT) and the absence of nuclear arms control measures involving nuclear-armed states other than the U.S. and Russia;
- the wide dissemination worldwide of sensitive nuclear technologies, especially reprocessing and enrichment; and
- the vulnerability to theft or seizure of large amounts of weapons-usable fissile materials.

There are numerous warning signs that we may be headed in that direction:

- North Korea has renounced the goal of denuclearization, continues provocative behavior, and prepares for additional nuclear and missile tests.
- China pursues an ambitious but opaque strategic modernization program and engages in assertive regional behavior troubling to its neighbors.

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- Prime Minister Abe calls for enhancing Japan’s defense capabilities, while Tokyo’s plans for resuming plutonium production raise concerns within the region.
 - The ROK seeks reprocessing and enrichment capabilities for its civil nuclear program, while some South Korean politicians think out loud about the return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons or even an indigenous South Korean nuclear deterrent.
 - Prospects for a comprehensive nuclear agreement between the P5+1 and Iran are uncertain, with Tehran already in possession of a nuclear “breakout” capability and its neighbors deeply concerned about its intentions for the region.
 - States in the Middle East, most prominently Saudi Arabia, are suspected of mulling the option of acquiring their own nuclear weapons in response to the perceived threat from Iran.
 - There is a growing perception (incorrect in my view) that U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, resistance to becoming directly involved in Syria, and pressures for fiscal restraint signal a reluctance in Washington to respond vigorously to overseas challenges and to meet its security commitments to allies and partners around the world.
 - Even before the Crimea/Ukraine crisis, prospects for further U.S.-Russian nuclear arms reductions were remote, and China shows no inclination to participate in nuclear arms control.
 - South Asia is the scene of the world’s most active nuclear and missile competition, with Pakistan blocking the FMCT to permit the production of more fissile materials, including for tactical nuclear weapons, and India engaged in an election many predict will result in a less restrained nuclear doctrine.

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- Despite Fukushima, nuclear energy is expected to grow worldwide, with the prospect that sensitive fuel cycle technologies will spread and that nuclear security challenges will increase.

Although the warning signs are indeed troublesome, a dangerous second nuclear age is not inevitable. The worst of the risks can be avoided. But that will depend on key members of the international community stepping up to their responsibilities, working closely with others, and elevating the priority they give to reducing nuclear threats relative to other national objectives.

- Critical to averting a “second nuclear age” will be eliminating the nuclear threats from North Korea and Iran.
- North Korea’s five negotiating partners in the six-party talks must make clear to Pyongyang that its policy of simultaneously developing its economy and pursuing nuclear weapons is doomed to failure. China’s re-calibration of its policy toward the DPRK has not gone nearly far enough. In concert with other interested parties, it must be willing to use more of the leverage at its disposal to persuade North Korea to change course. Until North Korea re-commits to denuclearization and takes tangible steps to lend credibility to its commitment, it cannot expect beneficial engagement with the international community.
- The P5+1 countries must remain unified in encouraging Iran to accept a comprehensive nuclear agreement that significantly reduces its nuclear breakout capability and builds international confidence in the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. Such an agreement would require Iran to substantially reduce its current nuclear infrastructure and to accept monitoring arrangements that go well beyond the IAEA Additional Protocol. Until such an agreement is achieved, international sanctions pressure must be maintained.

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- While seeking to eliminate regional diplomatic threats diplomatically, the United States – despite budgetary constraints and the understandable wariness of the American public resulting from prolonged military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan – must continue to remain actively and strongly engaged in the security affairs of East Asia and the Middle East. Washington must reassure allies and other partners in those regions – through declarations, deployments, exercises, defense cooperation, and other manifestations of resolve – that they can continue to rely on U.S. security assurances and need not consider pursuing their own nuclear capabilities.
 - In the near term, further U.S.-Russian arms control measures are highly unlikely. Putin’s actions have created too much distrust of Russian intentions. The first priority must be to deter further aggression. Over time, if relations with Moscow can be stabilized, it may be possible to return to the process of reducing U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, which remain significantly larger than necessary to meet deterrence requirements. While other nuclear-armed states must, before long, join the effort to limit and reduce their nuclear capabilities, Washington and Moscow still bear a responsibility to do more on their own.
 - Avoiding a second nuclear age also requires preventing a Cold War-type competition between China and the United States. That will require China to respect the interests of its neighbors, resolve territorial and other disputes peacefully and in accordance with international law, and overcome habits of excessive secrecy about its strategic programs, which only increase concerns about its intentions. Promoting a stable strategic relationship also requires the United States to engage China in frank discussions about nuclear, missile defense, space, and cyber capabilities and to assure Beijing that, while the U.S. will meet its commitments to allies, it has no intention to deny China a secure deterrent capability.

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- Transparency and restraint by China would reduce incentives for India to continue its nuclear build-up but would not alleviate the Indo-Pakistani competition, which has a dynamic all its own. The South Asian protagonists should address the main drivers of their destabilizing competition. Pakistan should take firm measures to end the anti-Indian extremist threat operating from Pakistani territory, which gives rise to Indian conventional force deployments near the Pakistani border that Islamabad finds threatening. India, in turn, should constrain its conventional capabilities opposite Pakistan, which the Pakistanis cite to justify their sharp increase in nuclear capabilities, including in the area of tactical nuclear weapons.
 - The growth of civil nuclear power worldwide will be necessary to meet increasing energy demands as well as to promote greater reliance on clean sources of energy. But any nuclear energy renaissance, even if much less ambitious than once expected because of Fukushima, must be accompanied by policies designed to reduce nuclear proliferation and nuclear security risks. National and multilateral export controls and interdiction arrangements should be strengthened to impede illicit nuclear trade. The spread of enrichment and reprocessing capabilities under national control should be discouraged, including by promoting the reliability of the international fuel supply market and exploring regional fuel cycle arrangements (including in Northeast Asia). Efforts to reduce and secure potentially vulnerable stocks of weapons-usable nuclear materials – such as efforts given additional impetus at the recent Nuclear Security Summit at The Hague – should be accelerated.

So, the clear warning signs of a second nuclear age provide ample grounds for concern. But it is important to recall that, often in the past, there have been dire predictions about imminent waves of proliferation or the probability of nuclear terrorism (or at least a dirty bomb attack). But the pessimistic predictions did not materialize. The record of the global nonproliferation regime has been amazingly good. Twenty years ago, there were nine countries with nuclear weapons. Twenty years later, there are still only nine countries with

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nuclear weapons. And during that same period, several countries with programs to acquire nuclear weapons abandoned those programs, either voluntarily or under duress.

Still, despite this positive record, we cannot afford to be complacent. It will take the persistent and dedicated efforts of the entire international community to avert a second nuclear age.

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