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**THE CHALLENGE OF NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL: RESPONDING TO MELISSA PARKE,
ALLAN BEHM & ALEX BRISTOW**

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Melissa Parke and Allan Behm both get it, but Alex Bristow remains in denial. About the indefensible inhumanity of any nuclear weapons use; about the existential risk that any large-scale nuclear exchange would pose for life on this planet as we know it; about the risk of use flowing as much from human or system error as deliberative aggression; about the essentially illusory nature of nuclear deterrence in today's world; and about the utility of Australia re-engaging in serious nuclear arms control diplomacy.

In the Parke and, especially, Behm comments, but conspicuously absent in Bristow's, there is a strong moral as well as rational dimension. That must remain the starting, if not finishing, point in this debate. Yes, massive damage can be inflicted by conventional weaponry and, as Bristow insists, by cyber-attacks and sabotage. But nuclear weapons remain in a class of their own, the most indiscriminately inhumane ever devised, and the only ones posing an existential risk to our common humanity. They deserve to be regarded with even more of the instinctive horror the world seems to currently reserve for biological and chemical weapons, both effectively now universally banned.

I share Parke's passionate commitment to complete abolition, and would be delighted if the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) could ever become the vehicle for achieving that. The support of its current adherents – more than half the world's states – of course matters, as she insists, and I fervently hope that the treaty continues to expand its base and build normative momentum for change. My point is simply that here, as so often elsewhere in public policy, the best should not be the enemy of the good. Given both the treaty's own structural flaws, and the total hostility of all the present nuclear armed states to ever embracing it, our campaign priorities would be more productively focused on nuclear risk reduction, starting with universal commitment to No First Use (NFU).

For Australia to join the TPNW, as Parke so strongly advocates (and to stop ducking and fudging the issue as the Albanese government has been doing), would certainly do wonders for our global anti-nuclear credentials. But the difficulties this would pose for our US alliance really are currently insuperable. Much more than a Philippines-style 'reconfiguration' would be involved, given the ever-increasing scale of the commitment we have now made to American nuclear strike capability, with new submarine and B52 bases in Western Australia and the Northern Territory now joining Pine Gap. I am one of the many Australians whose belief is now much less reflexively strong that it used to be that, in this Trumpian age, the benefits of the alliance outweigh any potential costs. But I can only repeat my conclusion that putting ANZUS at risk 'is rather a lot to bite off as the price of joining a treaty with no practical teeth'.

Alex Bristow's comment makes three major criticisms, all demanding reply. The first is that I 'prefer to work in the familiar conceptual surroundings of mutually assured destruction, rather

than grapple with a world in which limited nuclear war is possible.’ Nuclear weapons enthusiasts, always keen to make their use more rationally feasible, have long been enchanted with the idea of winnable limited nuclear war, and the viability of ‘escalating in order to de-escalate’. It goes back to Herman Kahn and Albert Wohlstetter in the 1960s and 1970s (whose approach has been characterised aptly as replacing MAD with NUTS: ‘nuclear utilisation target selection’). And it has in recent years been embraced again in US Nuclear Posture Reviews – and by the Pentagon’s legion of Australian acolytes in ASPI and elsewhere. The idea is that nuclear warfighting operations using lower yield ‘tactical’ weapons can be conducted with cool precision and control, with the adversary reading the signal of limited use as intended, and responding with appropriate restraint.

But there is an extensive body of analytical literature questioning that assumption, and referring to multiple wargames in which supposedly calibrated attacks have almost invariably resulted not in capitulation but escalation. Add to that the implications, for ‘limited-damage’ enthusiasts, of the reality that modern ‘tactical’ nuclear warheads have yields up to many times those of the weapons used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And even more alarmingly the implications, including for non-proliferation, of breaching the longstanding taboo against any use of nuclear weapons, challenged recently by Russia, but still critical for nuclear risk reduction.

The second issue which divides us is the notion that China’s military build up, ‘reshaping its own arsenal for coercion’ demand nothing less than nuclear deterrence from the US and its allies and partners. As with so many of his like-minded colleagues in the defence and intelligence, think-tank and conservative media community, Bristow over-eggs the China-threat pudding. There is certainly much in China’s behaviour to warrant regional security concern. But most of it is no more than can and should be expected of a hugely trade-dependent economic superpower, resentful of any continuing claim by America to unchallenged primacy in regional and global affairs, and wanting to claim its own strategic space, and to generally reassert some of its historical greatness after more than a century of wounded national pride.

There is no reason to assume that China would ever contemplate outright military aggression – Hitler, Tojo or Putin-style – against any of its sovereign neighbours, let alone the United States. Taiwan remains a special case, a flourishing democracy and distressingly vulnerable, but recognised by no-one as a Kuwait or Ukraine style sovereign entity. Military preparedness of course has to be based on potential adversaries’ capability, not their presumed intent, but for the foreseeable future America’s immense conventional firepower, combined with that of its potentially affected allies and partners, should be amply sufficient to deter any conceivable kinetic threat.

Bristow’s third criticism is that my risk reduction agenda, with NFU its centrepiece, is ‘ineffective or counterproductive’, and that ‘it is not in Australia’s interest to rule out the credible threat of nuclear first use’. But I remain wholly convinced that retaining a first-use option is dangerous, both for wider global peace and security and often for nuclear-armed states’ own interests, and that advancing it should be Australia’s highest arms control priority.

A nuclear-armed state that keeps a first-strike option runs the risk of an adversary misreading its intentions and, fearing decapitation, launching a pre-emptive strike of its own, precipitating

an otherwise wholly avoidable nuclear war. Again, a nuclear-armed state that fears a surprise first-use attack from another which has kept open that option is more likely to put its own forces on extreme launch alert, thereby increasing the risk of human or system error or miscalculation causing a launch which precipitates the very catastrophe it is trying to avert.

Moreover, refusing to adopt no first use encourages nuclear proliferation. Vertically, because it incentivises potential adversaries to upgrade their own nuclear forces to deny their opponents a first-use advantage or gain one themselves: thus fostering nuclear arms races, with all the multiplication of risk these necessarily involve. Horizontally, because when a state with any kind of conventional capability insists that it needs nuclear weapons to deter or defeat non-nuclear attacks, it necessarily concedes that right to any other country fearing, or claiming to fear, such attack.

The bottom line of my article's argument remains this: that for all the psychological comfort nuclear weapons seem to give their possessors and advocates, the risks associated with their possession by anyone – not least the risks associated with system or human error, which Bristow acknowledges not at all – far outweigh any potential rewards. But I acknowledge that the force of that argument is anything but self-evident to a great many people, and I welcome the opportunity *Australian Foreign Affairs* has given me and my three spirited commentators to debate its merits in these pages.

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