BRITISH AMERICAN SECURITY INFORMATION COUNCIL EVENT

Strategic Dialogue on Nuclear Posture

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Summary of a Strategic Dialogue between Janne Nolan, Research Professor at George Washington University and Senior Fellow at the Association for Diplomatic Studies, and Christopher Ford, Director, Center for Technology and Global Security at the Hudson Institute.

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Introduction

The BASIC Strategic Dialogues are set up to discuss normally divergent strategic policy perspectives with a focus on nuclear weapons in a manner that identifies common threads of agreement as well as differences. This was the second such dialogue and the following summarizes several key themes raised during the discussion.

The need for improved understanding of what a nuclear posture is, and its purpose

Dr. Nolan began the dialogue by describing the lack of clarity within Washington over what a nuclear posture is, what nuclear weapons are for, and what they are meant to deter. She described the division between declaratory policy - what we talk about; and operational policy - what we would actually do in the event of a nuclear crisis or even a war. Most of the discourse in Washington, and the Obama Administration's Nuclear Posture Review, falls into the camp of declaratory policy. Although the President sets the broad guidelines of the nuclear posture, the substance of the posture is ultimately the result of "serious food fights" among a small number of expert officials and bureaucratic interests. She is especially concerned that Americans, even within Washington, do not agree on the utility of nuclear weapons. Do they keep the peace, deter war, project power, or are they the source of discord and proliferation?

She added that serious dilemmas have haunted the United States from the beginning of the nuclear age, including divisions over what to target and for what reason; how to harmonize political and military objectives; how to judge what an adversary values most; and managing varied and continuing requirements for prompt response. In more recent history, the United States has faced the challenge of how to communicate deterrence in a complex multi-polar world. There has also been a breakdown in the architecture that grew up between the two superpowers. The United States does not have a similar patchwork of relationships and understandings with the rest of world. Moreover, Dr. Nolan raised the essentially post-9/11-focus of how to deter "the undeterrable" - facing actors who might not change course under the threat of nuclear retaliation.

Dr. Ford sees clear and numerous uses for nuclear weapons, including and particularly for deterring great power war; deterring the use of nuclear weapons and other forms of WMD; for bargaining and war termination; and for re-enforcing alliance relationships with partners who feel threatened, and persuading them away from temptations to possess or proliferate nuclear weapons. While a smaller arsenal could be nice, Dr. Ford said he would rather have a larger posture than a smaller unstable one . Dr. Ford also saw potential problems with de-alerting because it could worsen crisis-stability. He would also retain the Nuclear Triad because he values the flexibility of having more options, the unique advantages of each leg, and their overlapping reassurance; and he does not see anything broken enough in the international system that would clearly and directly benefit from the United States lowering the numbers in its arsenal.

Considering whether the United States has a responsibility to lead on nuclear disarmament

It is often assumed that the reason the United States would want to lead on nuclear disarmament would be to encourage other nuclear powers to also reduce their arsenals and to persuade the international community of states to better collaborate in tightening up on the international non-proliferation architecture. Both Drs. Nolan and Ford agreed that U.S. nuclear reductions do not directly cause other countries to give up the pursuit of nuclear weapons. Dr. Nolan referred to the cases where states gave up nuclear weapons programs, noting that the unique reasons for foregoing these programs were varied and complex. She explained that the reasons for the United States raising the importance of nuclear disarmament is in part for managing non-proliferation politics, and that political credibility is placed in doubt when the United States calls on other countries to forego nuclear weapons and accept stringent inspection regimes without making clear a long-term commitment to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its own posture.

Dr. Ford recounted that when he was representing the United States at the United Nations, other states did not give credit to the United States for having reduced its nuclear arsenal by about 80% since the end of the Cold War. He found that the post-Cold War consensus on nuclear non-proliferation disappeared after the superpowers had slashed their arsenals. Disarmament leaders like Abdul Minty and Sergio Duarte made it absolutely clear that the disarmament community would not give credit to the United States for getting rid of nuclear weapons that it already deemed were no longer necessary. Dr. Ford was told that the United States would only get credit for nuclear disarmament if it were to give up weapons that it still perceived that it needed, which he understood to mean that the United States would receive acknowledgement for disarmament measures only when it was willing to make itself less secure; though this could alternatively be interpreted as being willing to place greater faith in other means of achieving security.

Overall, Dr. Ford considered the case for further reductions had become harder because the United States could go only so far before radically changing its nuclear posture. Dr. Ford asserted that the number one priority for the United States should be non-proliferation and counter-proliferation, with other priorities being modernization of the U.S. arsenal (enabling us to achieve stability at lower numbers if possible (though erring on the side of caution); and greater transparency and confidence-

building measures between states with nuclear weapons; Zero is really for the rest of the world. He worries that people are not prepared to talk about non-proliferation without hurting U.S. security.

Dr. Nolan explained that Obama's Prague Vision (the agenda of a nuclear weapons-free world) does not have operational significance right now, and it remains an aspiration. She emphasized that there has been too much fixation over the relevance of numbers in nuclear weapons debates rather than looking more closely at the utility of nuclear weapons. She has never seen such a lack of consensus around nuclear weapons issues as in the interpretations of the President's Prague Agenda. Groups have greatly concerned themselves with the prospect that the Vision either would, or would not, be implemented in a unilateral manner.

Questioning the utility of targeting based on counter-value or counterforce

Deterrence in a multipolar world is not only more complex for systemic reasons, it also means that you have to have multiple strategies backed up with adequate capabilities, given the diversity of actors you face. Both Drs. Nolan and Ford agreed that the distinction between counter-value and counter-force is not always useful. Dr. Ford said he could understand counter-force planning from the point of view of launching a strike, and added that there is justification for leaders to focus on military targets in part because they could come under more international pressure if their intent were clearly and simply to cause the most civilian casualties. He acknowledged, however, that it would be difficult to go to lower numbers without giving up the current counter-force approach and that maybe the United States needs a bottom up review, and to know which targets are actually prosecutable. Who you are deterring is a critical point.

Thus, the dialogue included some agreement on a possible future exploration around deterrence, because by definition deterrence is counter-value (to deter most decisively one has to target the things an adversary values most, such as the capital city, their own life, the stability of their regime, or key elements of their industrial capacity). Counter-force strategies are more about fighting a nuclear war decisively than about deterrence. Dr. Nolan pointed out, however, that we do not understand well enough what adversaries of the United States value most. It might also be added that there is a deep disagreement in the United States over the impact of deterrence and counter-value postures and whether they assist or harm negotiations over both arms control and other issues that require international cooperation.

Considering modernization and the future of the arsenal

Of the range of issues relevant to the nuclear posture, Dr. Ford held out modernization as the most promising for its potential to build consensus in the short-term. Yet Dr. Nolan warned that there has been a lack of clarity over what modernization means – with people referring to everything from implementing urgent safety measures (which do attract widespread support) to increasing the military capabilities of weapons (which do not). Similar to some of the issues mentioned above, she believes that there are problems with building a consensus because of the sheer misunderstanding and lack of agreement around key definitions. A first step would be to clarify the issue.

Dr. Ford believes that modernization should be the highest priority for the nuclear posture (after non-proliferation and counter-proliferation); and for him this includes ensuring that the nuclear arsenal is safe, survivable, flexible and effective. He believes that the safety and security of the arsenal is good, but these weapons were designed in the Cold War, where rapid reaction and explosive power where prioritized. Warheads must be well-suited for their current military purpose in order to make the U.S. posture credible. If the United States can have a state of the art arsenal, to be confident of weapons reliability and to have in place the ability to sustain a first-class workforce for the nuclear weapons complex, then the United States might be safe with making further reductions, whatever the long-term objectives will be for the nuclear posture. Dr. Ford asserted that reactive capacity of the nuclear weapons complex to increase output was an important part of the deterrent, and that the United States should prioritize its modernization accordingly before trying to go to a "minimum" deterrent.

Dr. Nolan said that the most urgent priority for modernization of the arsenal should focus on the safety of weapons, and perimeter-site security. She admonished the audience to remember that on modernization, the United States is up against huge budget imperatives and the need for prioritization. Ultimately everything is going to be dwarfed by money problems. Modernization plans, whatever they may be, will be competing with other security issues for money.