

BRITISH AMERICAN SECURITY INFORMATION COUNCIL EVENT IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE HUDSON INSTITUTE

Strategic Dialogue on Nuclear Deterrence

Washington, DC - May 8, 2012

*Summary of a Strategic Dialogue between **Christopher Ford**, Director, Center for Technology and Global Security at the Hudson Institute and **Barry Blechman**, Co-Founder of the Henry L. Stimson Center.*

Introduction

The BASIC Strategic Dialogues are set up to discuss 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 first such dialogue, held in association with the Hudson Institute, and the following attempts to summarize principal points of agreement and disagreement during the discussion.

The purpose of nuclear deterrence

Dr. Blechman believes that the main purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons by Russia and to a lesser extent China. In contrast, Dr. Ford believes that nuclear weapons are most useful in deterring non-nuclear force in a general war (this was the U.S. position in Cold War Europe) and that “it is preposterous to suggest that the ‘sole purpose’ of nuclear weaponry is to deter the use of nuclear weaponry.”

Both agreed that Russia had good reason to be wary of Chinese expansion and probably maintains a large secret arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons specifically to deter the Chinese. This will complicate bilateral negotiation between the United States and Russia on tactical nuclear weapons (TNW). On the U.S.-side, there was consideration during the Nuclear Posture Review of the use of nuclear weapons to destroy deeply-buried targets containing biological weapons – some believe that nuclear weapons may sometimes be the only sure way to contain the biological weapons threat. Both speakers acknowledged that such a scenario was highly unlikely, and that intelligence would need to be watertight, but that we should still consider such a possibility arising. Dr. Blechman was skeptical that a U.S. President would be able to give the go-ahead for such a use.

Dr. Ford suggested that the United States was in a muddle over its nuclear weapons policy, facing in both idealistic and pragmatic directions, and with a number of outstanding issues – such as targeting policy and missile defense – still up in the air. And yet he also said that such an ambiguous policy, hedging in both directions, was probably desirable.

Disarmament and investment in the nuclear infrastructure

Both experts agreed that there was little chance of major disarmament of nuclear weapons in the near future, but equally both believed that there was no significant danger arising in the foreseeable future from a weak U.S. nuclear arsenal in comparison with other powers, and that there was no need for the United States to further develop new nuclear warheads with a greater military capability. On the other hand, both saw a need for some U.S. investment in the safety and security of its nuclear weapons, given their likely continued possession for at least a couple of decades. The existing warheads were designed at the height of the Cold War when long-term storage capabilities, safety and security were

not a top priority. The level of necessary investment in the warheads and in particular the delivery vehicles was clearly an area of continuing debate, one reflected between the two.

Dr. Ford fears that the United States would be almost irrevocably locked into a commitment not to test even if it needed to after ratifying the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), leaving others such as China or Russia more freedom because of interpretation or sheer gall. He highlighted a fear that some on the more hawkish-side of the debate believe that the political room for maneuver would be closed. Dr. Blechman disagreed, believing that such a commitment would hold strong influence on all states that had ratified, and that U.S. ratification would encourage others such as China to follow suit.

Rising Asia

Dr. Ford, having recently returned from China, expressed skepticism about declarations by Chinese officials that they cared little about Indian nuclear and missile expansion on the ground that they are not a strategic threat to China. In contrast, Dr. Blechman interprets Chinese nuclear weapons policy as a minimalist approach. Both agreed that Pakistan's nuclear weapons presented perhaps the greatest global nuclear danger, being particularly vulnerable to attack, theft and transportation to other countries by extremist groups.

The link between disarmament and non-proliferation

The meeting coincided with the second week of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Committee, and Drs. Ford and Blechman were asked about the links between disarmament and non-proliferation. Dr. Blechman expressed his belief that there is such a link, not because disarmament would directly lead to other states forsaking ambitions for nuclear weapons, but rather because serious and credible articulation of a commitment to disarmament is essential to create the necessary constituency to build and sustain the NPT; third parties would be more willing to cooperate in establishing stronger verification and enforcement mechanisms. Dr. Ford believes that the evidence does not strongly support this link; despite disarmament by nuclear weapon states, 'rogue regimes' have not been won over and continue to pursue nuclear capabilities in the face of tougher sanctions.

Future Prospects

Dr. Ford expressed his admiration for the Herman Kahn approach, to focus on building capacity for adaptability and to plan for the unexpected. He would like the United States to move toward a reliable smaller nuclear force with the capability to quickly expand if needed, whilst improving transparency and relations between nuclear actors. He believes in a similar approach to missile defense; he knows missile defense would not protect the United States from a large-scale nuclear attack, but would help to deter would-be proliferators and smaller nuclear powers.

In contrast, Dr. Blechman concluded by pointing out that deterrence can fail, especially in the confusion of a crisis situation, or when there are no available face-saving exit routes. Nuclear weapons therefore present an unacceptable threat to humanity and that we should devote significant political capital to the task of abolishing them.