



INFORMATION SERIES

CONVERSATIONS ON NATIONAL SECURITY

HON. DAVID J. TRACHTENBERG, *Editor*
DR. MICHAELA DODGE, *Assistant Editor*
AMY JOSEPH, *Managing Editor*

Issue No. 484

March 31, 2021

Conversations on National Security is a series of interviews with key national security experts conducted by David Trachtenberg, Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy.

An Interview with The Honorable Douglas Feith, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the George W. Bush Administration.

Q. The Trump Administration's 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy focused on the reemergence of "great power competition" (i.e., China and Russia) as the most serious threat facing the United States. Do you agree? How do you assess the threats to U.S. security posed by China and Russia?

A. Threats posed by China and Russia are, I think, among the gravest facing the United States. China is moving aggressively to establish dominance in its region and beyond. Its leaders promote hostility against the United States on the grounds that, historically, we have worked to keep China down—economically poor and militarily weak—and currently we are the main impediment to China's achieving the predominance in the world to which it believes it is entitled. That historical point is untrue. On the contrary, U.S. policy for decades promoted Chinese prosperity and facilitated development of China's military strength. That Chinese officials misdescribe the history signifies a strong hostility that has different sources. Those officials say they favor "win-win solutions," but their actions show that they think of power in



the world as a zero-sum game, and they believe they can achieve what is rightfully theirs only by weakening and constraining America and our friends.

Russia under Vladimir Putin does not have China's capabilities or ambitions. It has been investing heavily, however, despite its relatively small economic resources, in modernizing its nuclear capabilities, and it has formidable abilities to conduct cyber warfare. Russia today does not have the superpower status that it had during the Cold War, or the Communist global ideological mission that drove much of its activity then, but it still threatens important U.S. interests, not the least being the integrity of the U.S. political system. Russia remains aggressive and a military threat in Europe and in Syria.

Q. Some observers have expressed concern that U.S. allies are losing faith in the credibility of U.S. security guarantees and may seek alternate ways of ensuring their own security, including possibly developing their own nuclear arsenals. Do you believe this is a legitimate concern? What would you advise U.S. policy makers to do in order to bolster the credibility of U.S. security guarantees to allies, including guarantees underpinned by the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent?

A. Alliances don't survive automatically. They require work—of various types. People who value them need to maintain popular understanding of their value so political support for the alliance is strong. And the allies need to maintain the military means to fulfill their alliance duties to each other.

America and its NATO allies are all responsible for deterioration in the alliance. For decades, U.S. officials have complained, more or less genteelly, that other NATO countries are underinvesting in the common defense and acting like free-riders. President Trump scored domestic political points for himself by berating our NATO allies because there were substantial grounds for his criticism of free-riding, notwithstanding the characteristic boorishness with which he voiced it.

The United States, on the other hand, can fairly be criticized by its various allies for failing to maintain military capabilities crucial to the credibility of our alliance promises. Our underinvestment in our nuclear weapons and their supporting infrastructure is a major example. The effect, as your question recognizes, is not only that our allies and partners worry about the integrity of America's nuclear umbrella, but some of them may be spurred to develop their own nuclear weapons to compensate.

Americans have an enormous interest in keeping the number of nuclear powers in the world very low. There were five such powers in the early 1960s and, amazingly enough, the number now, sixty years later, is still below ten. If nuclear weapons proliferate substantially, that number can be expected to grow very quickly and we could find ourselves within a decade or



so in a world with twenty, thirty or more nuclear-weapons powers. The risks then of a nuclear war somewhere in the world would increase greatly and could prove catastrophic for the United States even if we are not one of the warring parties.

Building up the credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent – through greater investment, credible stockpile management, cultivation of nuclear engineering talent for the future, and so on – is one of the most important tasks U.S. officials can perform to prevent nuclear proliferation – and to bolster our alliances.

Q. Foreign adversaries have reportedly become bolder and more sophisticated in their efforts to interfere in U.S. domestic politics, including through cyber efforts and the use of social media platforms. What can the United States do to counter these efforts and to prevent adversaries from inappropriately influencing U.S. actions and decisions?

A. This problem has been widely commented on. Many people have made the correct point that we need to develop ways to deter such interference by punishing it with strong and precise effects. Cyber aggressions and abuse of social media for ideological warfare are new phenomena. They are intellectually challenging for U.S. strategists. Just as nuclear weapons required new strategic thinking, so do these new phenomena. We need to clarify our thinking about what is normal and acceptable practice and what is activity that we should punish. We need to decide about proper and effective punishments, which should not be limited to retaliation in kind. And we need to develop the capabilities to inflict such punishments, overtly and covertly, as required.

Cyber threats are different from nuclear threats in important ways. Cyber threats and social media abuses/aggressions are with us and active on a daily basis. Nuclear weapons threats loomed for decades, but they didn't produce the kind of routine, daily attacks that now plague us in the cyber or social media arenas. The deterrence theory that was developed to deal with nuclear threats needs to be modified to address these new challenges.

Q. Arms control supporters argue that arms control is necessary to provide stability, transparency, and predictability in the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship; to fulfill U.S. obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty; to reduce the size of nuclear arsenals and the risks of nuclear use; to foster allied cooperation; and to maintain a bipartisan consensus in support of the current U.S. nuclear modernization program. Do you agree or disagree with these arguments? Has arms control been successful in fulfilling the objectives established for it?

A. Arms control does not necessarily provide stability, transparency or predictability. In fact, the history of nuclear arms control is full of examples where the Soviet Union used negotiations and agreements to undermine political support in the United States for defense programs that



contribute to stability and security – for example, missile defense. And Soviet officials were not truthful about their programs and violated treaty after treaty, so it is wrong to say that arms control necessarily promotes transparency. Often it produces obscurity and deception instead. The main thing that was predictable about arms control was that our adversaries would act in bad faith in ways that the United States, as a democratic country whose officials were subject to the rule of law and to various checks and balances, would not.

I'm not saying that arms control agreements are necessarily bad. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is an example of one that I think has done much good. I'm saying that one should not simply assume that arms control agreements contribute to peace, stability, transparency and the like.

Similarly, it is wrong to assume that an agreement to reduce levels of nuclear arms is necessarily good. It may be good or it may be bad, depending on the strategic circumstances. Less is not always more.

The National Institute for Public Policy's *Information Series* is a periodic publication focusing on contemporary strategic issues affecting U.S. foreign and defense policy. It is a forum for promoting critical thinking on the evolving international security environment and how the dynamic geostrategic landscape affects U.S. national security. Contributors are recognized experts in the field of national security.

The views in this *Information Series* are those of the author and should not be construed as official U.S. Government policy, the official policy of the National Institute for Public Policy or any of its sponsors. For additional information about this publication or other publications by the National Institute Press, contact: Editor, National Institute Press, 9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750 | Fairfax, VA 22031 | (703) 293- 9181 | www.nipp.org. For access to previous issues of the National Institute Press *Information Series*, please visit <http://www.nipp.org/nationalinstitutepress/information-series/>. © National Institute Press, 2021