

041819 Air Force Association Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, National Defense Industrial Association, and Reserve Officers Association Capitol Hill Forum with Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation Christopher Ford, on “U.S. Power as a Non-Proliferation Tool”

(For additional information on AFA/NDIA/ROA seminars contact Peter Huessy at phuessy@afa.org).

MR. PETER HUESSY: Good morning, everybody, Peter Huessy here on behalf of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, NDIA and ROA, who are co-sponsors for this series that we began, as some of you know, in 1983. We have a wonderful guest today, Chris Ford, who previously was in the U.S. Senate and is now Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation. They gave him the easy job of dealing with North Korea and Iran.

Just so you know, next week we have the week of the generals. General Burg and General Alston were both head of 20th Air Force at one time, and they’re going to be talking particularly about the bomber and ICBM wing of the nuclear triad. Then we have two former STRAT Commanders, General Kehler and General Chilton, who will talk about overall strategic nuclear deterrence, and in particular deal with some of the issues that were raised at the March 6th House Armed Services Committee hearing with Frank Miller, Bruce Blair and Joan Rohlfing before the full committee.

For those of you who are interested, May 3rd is our next breakfast on “Space Power to the Warfighter,” and that’s on May 3rd. I also want to welcome our friends from the Netherlands, Zambia, Japan and Denmark who are here. I also want to welcome a number of my friends. Michaela Dodge is here from the Heritage Foundation. As you know, she took a stint working for Senator Kyl and does wonderful work at the Heritage Foundation. I want to welcome her as well. I want to thank our sponsors and supporters of the program.

With that, Chris, we’d like to welcome you here to tell us how you’re going to solve Iran and North Korea.

(Applause).

SEC. CHRISTOPHER FORD: Thank you very much for the kind introduction. It is a pleasure to be back at the club, and a pleasure in particular to see so many thoughtful folks coming here to discuss and pay attention to national and international security issues on a day in which so much of Washington is feverishly staking out the Department of Justice waiting for news. It is to your credit that you are here. I hope you don’t rush out just before 9:30 a.m., but it’s great to be here. Thank you so much.

In my line of work I frequently, of course, talk about the importance of the global

nonproliferation regime and about the security benefits of that famous life the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty provides to all their states parties. I would argue, in particular, that they provide security benefits -- this is often overlooked in the multilateral fora of the world -- the security benefits that the NPT and the nonproliferation regime provide especially to the non-nuclear weapons states, in part by making sure that their own neighbors and regional rivals don't weaponize. I also emphasize, of course, that it is the foundation of nonproliferation assurances that make possible the benefits that so many of these folks in these fora expect from the nonproliferation regime.

They talk about peaceful uses of nuclear energy. They talk a lot about disarmament, and of course it's almost impossible to imagine either of those things being agenda items with which the international community could move forward were there not a strong foundation of non-proliferation assurances. So I try to bring the discussion always back to non-proliferation and the regime. But I want to talk about a slightly different aspect today, and that is a piece, an element, an aspect of the non-proliferation regime that is not talked of quite so much as such, and I refer to the United States' alliance relationships and our military power, and the deterrence and reassurance dynamics that result from that power and our maintenance of a strong conventional and nuclear military posture.

U.S. officials, of course, as you all have many times heard here I'm sure, frequently refer to the impact of global extended deterrence relationships of the United States over decades and having important effects in helping prevent nuclear proliferation. But others speak of this less and I hear it very little in fora like the NPT Review process and so forth. So I think it's important to remember that, because I would submit that this aspect of the non-proliferation regime is exceedingly important and deserves to be discussed more widely.

So I'll dwell upon this theme a little bit here this morning, because I do think it's important to remember it, and to remember the impact of U.S. power as a non-proliferation tool. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that over time U.S. power has perhaps been the world's most successful non-proliferation tool and we should not let ourselves or others forget this.

Students of Cold War history will know that highly classified U.S. National Intelligence Estimates of proliferation potential undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s highlighted the danger that many countries would eventually develop nuclear weapons. A number of NIEs from the period have been declassified and publicly released and you can find them online if you're interested. It's not that hard to track them down.

If you do, you will see an amazing number of places identified during those years as ones likely to acquire the ability to develop nuclear weapons, and indeed perhaps increasingly likely actually to do so, especially as others started down that road. National Intelligence Estimates from that era discussed the possibility of deionization, and I'll give you a list here: Australia, Belgium, Canada, China, Czechoslovakia, France, East Germany, West Germany, India, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Japan,

Pakistan, Poland, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, and the United Arab Republic, which is to say modern day Egypt and Syria. That is quite a list.

Thank goodness, of course, nothing so dramatic as that actually occurred, although a small number of countries, alas, did end up eventually weaponizing. Commentators are correct to give much of the credit for this -- some of the credit for this -- to the Nonproliferation Treaty, which entered into force half a century ago next year, and to give credit to the institutions that have been built up around that treaty. Those things do deserve much credit.

But it's not the NPT alone that deserves credit for that proliferation cascade not occurring. I'll be entirely honest here too, some credit also goes to the Soviet Union, which helped by policing its own allies during the Cold War to keep them from developing independent nuclear weapons capabilities. Now you might have wished, of course, that Moscow had come to this realization a little bit sooner and had been less willing to support and encourage China's development of capabilities of a nuclear weapons program in the 1950s for example, but at least Nikita Khrushchev eventually saw the light and eventually thought better of fulfilling his previous promise to provide Mao Zedong with a prototype nuclear weapon just before Mao began starving millions of his subjects to death during the so-called Great Leap Forward.

But in fairness, on the whole the Soviets generally got this right. They quite properly recognized their own interest and a global interest in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. And Moscow was, on the whole, willing to act on this understanding, not least in cooperating with us in writing the NPT.

You might wish that modern China and Russia took these things more seriously, of course. Beijing's continued willingness to permit Chinese serial proliferators, such as Li Fang Wei, also known as Karl Lee, to engage in transfers in support of Iran's ballistic missile program -- one might wish this was not actually occurring. One might also wish that Moscow was not currently undertaking a multi-pronged diplomatic assault upon global institutions for WMD control and accountability in places like the OPCW in the Hague, the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency. These things are, in the context especially of the Soviet Union's role in helping prevent proliferation during the Cold War, those things of course are nothing short of shameful.

But whatever the reasons for that behavior, whether it is mere laxity when it comes to non-proliferation principles or a deliberate effort simply to appease their clients and mess with us, if you will, I do think history will not treat Moscow and Beijing kindly in that respect. But to give credit where credit is due, Soviet power back in the day does at least deserve some credit for helping forestall the cascade of proliferation that so many of the experts looking at these things in the '50s and '60s actually expected.

But that all being said, it is worth stressing the great and ultimately much more important role to which the United States' alliances and military posture, both conventional and nuclear, played a pivotal role in preventing the worst of what the CIA

worried in 1966 in an NIE, could be a cascade of, this is their word, “snowballing” proliferation. And so remembering the potency of U.S. global power as a non-proliferation tool, I would submit, is important not just so that we can understand this history properly, but also because U.S. power is still a potent non-proliferation tool in ways that would be unwise or perhaps tragic for us to forget or to dismiss or to let others forget or dismiss.

So if you think back to the list of the governments that I mentioned a moment ago in my little blizzard of names in the 1950s and ‘60s, identified by NIEs as potential future proliferators, I think it would be hard not to be struck by the extent to which many of them ended up being covered in various forms, in formal or informal ways, under the so-called U.S. nuclear umbrella of extended deterrence during the Cold War and thereafter. For quite a few countries U.S. security relationships were crucial factors in persuading them that, notwithstanding their growing degree of technological sophistication and their access to the requisite materials and technology, nuclear weaponization itself was unnecessary for them and needlessly risky.

As a serving U.S. government official I have to be a little bit careful about what I say about some of this history. Not all of it is officially public. But these issues have been discussed in the open source literature quite a bit and documented in the academic world for some years. And so I would encourage you to consult such works to fill in any gaps that I might have to leave today.

But, it is notably clear now that not only quite a few countries were forestalled from beginning to explore indigenous weaponization as the result of U.S. security guarantees, but also that a combination of U.S. security assurances and diplomatic pressure not to weaponize was instrumental in persuading a nontrivial number of countries actually to abandon nuclear weapons programs that were already underway. Nonproliferation norms do not enforce themselves, and it is important to remember the critical role that U.S. power and U.S. diplomacy have played in preventing the number of nuclear weapons possessors in the world today from being considerably higher.

The U.S. military posture helped forestall certain countries weaponization choices in various ways. One example is through NATO’s so-called nuclear burden-sharing, that entails the forward deployment of U.S. non-strategic weapons to Europe as a component of NATO’s nuclear deterrent. This was designed to enhance deterrence, of course, by confronting the Soviets with a higher likelihood of a nuclear response to territorial aggression against NATO partners, even if Moscow’s intercontinental assets were somehow to deter an American strategic response, because such a response might lead to retaliation against U.S. cities.

But this arrangement didn’t just serve deterrence. It had the clear purpose of promoting non-proliferation as well in as much as it helped persuade NATO allies that their security needs could and would be met without the need for indigenous nuclear weaponization despite the persistent threats they all faced from Moscow. NATO’s ultimate choice of this nuclear policy, in other words, augmented both deterrence and

non-proliferation, and in both cases I would argue, thankfully, quite successfully.

Tellingly, Moscow itself recognized and accepted this enormous non-proliferation benefit from NATO's so-called nuclear sharing policy, despite efforts by the current Russian regime to pretend otherwise. Now this can clearly be seen in now declassified NATO and U.S. documents, such as the records from the U.S.-Soviet Working Group that was negotiating the language that ultimately became Article I of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. To be specific, a September 1966 memorandum from that working group memorializes the Soviet delegation's abandonment of its previous insistence upon language that was not only have prohibited the transfer of weapons to another party, as the NPT currently does, but also would have prevented even consultation and planning for contingencies, such as NATO does.

Now this shift, of course, is why the NPT's Article I has never presented any legal bar to NATO's nuclear policy, notwithstanding efforts by the current Russian government to sort of historically revise those understandings. I think you can attribute Soviet concessions in this respect to Moscow's appreciation that NATO's approach was in fact key to dissuading countries such as West Germany from pursuing weaponization of their own, as well as to Moscow's understanding that the likely alternative to having nuclear sharing of that sort was a thing that they would have liked even less, and that is the much discussed at the time so-called multilateral nuclear force.

Now, the non-proliferation benefits to U.S. military and security policy was not, of course, limited in the NATO context alone. Elsewhere in Western Europe outside of NATO, U.S. security assurances helped lead to the abandonment of exploratory nuclear weapons programs in multiple additional countries, and in East Asia too. At least two governments abandoned their nuclear weapons programs as a result of a combination of U.S. pressure and U.S. military assurances.

So these various proliferation dogs that did not bark, if you'll forgive me for pulling from "The Hounds of the Baskervilles," are a critical aspect of our non-proliferation history. The nuclear weapons programs that did not happen, or the ones that stopped as a result of U.S. power and U.S. diplomatic engagement in deterring aggression and dissuading weaponization these programs today are thankfully, invisible. So it's hard to sort of study this because they didn't pop up, but it's important to remember that they didn't and why they didn't.

These are a huge part of the story of the success of the global non-proliferation regime and how it managed to prevent the parade of proliferation horrors about which so many U.S. NIEs worried so very grimly in the '50s and 1960s. So I think this is an important lesson for us all to remember today as we sit around at this breakfast talking about national security and international security issues and trends and developments in the area.

Many of the most challenging things that we face in the nuclear world today are somewhat novel. They relate to the re-emergence and resurgence of great power

competition and its various manifestations and nuclear postures, to be sure. Some of these dynamics are new, because we are clearly in a very different strategic place in 2019 than we were during the Cold War.

But as we Americans work to cope with the novelty of the strategic environment that we face and to relearn how to devise for ourselves a sober and effective competitive strategy in these respects, we must also not forget the past and why and how we got to where we are today. In particular, I would urge you to always remember the ways in which our own conventional and military power has historically served not merely our own interest, but also the broader interest of international peace and security, by helping forestall the proliferation of nuclear weapons and thereby reduce the risk of nuclear conflict. And this impact, of course, is not just historical because these dynamics continue to operate in today's world.

So as we contemplate how best to meet our national security needs and to help keep the peace in the world that we face today and in the years ahead, I would urge you to keep these lessons in mind and work to ensure that others do as well. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, for example, is quite clear about this. A strong U.S. nuclear posture not only defends our allies against conventional and nuclear threats, and defends us, but it helps allies forego any perceived need to develop nuclear weapons of their own.

We are resolutely dedicated to ensuring that the United States' strength in the world remains unquestioned, and that this might continue to be used both to protect the lives and interests of the American people and to reduce proliferation dangers worldwide. That's an important lesson that I urge you to draw from history, and I am grateful for the chance to have outlined it today.

I'd be happy to take such questions as you would like to ask me about the range of things we do at the International Security and Nonproliferation Bureau. I'm not sure I can say that we've solved the Iran and North Korea problems at this point, but I can assure you we're working on them, so I'd be delighted to take any questions that you have.

Thanks for having me.