

Session 7: Engaging China and Russia on Nuclear Disarmament

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Summary

The general consensus among all three panelists was that the United States' current and potential conventional deterrence capabilities – that is, the concept of a conventional prompt global strike capability and missile defense system - might be impairing nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Russia and China are wary about nuclear disarmament because the US might gain an overwhelming conventional superiority, which would reduce their own deterrent capabilities.

As Lora Saalman remarked, disarmament is not a new concept, but the US framework for disarmament as articulated in Obama's Prague speech, is. Both China and Russia have expressed their apprehension towards nuclear disarmament, while still recognizing the importance of both disarmament and strategic engagement with each other and the US. Saalman in particular emphasized that China is conflicted, but still committed to disarmament. Both states fear the newer potential for a conventional prompt global strike concept in addition to older worries about missile defense systems. Saalman's research has found that absolute security and hegemony rhetoric involving the US has increased since the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, indicative of the view that nuclear reductions will actually be destabilizing because the US will gain relative superiority and lose mutual vulnerability. Jeffrey Lewis echoes this sentiment, noting that Russia and China believe that it is easier for the US to discuss nuclear disarmament because they can rely upon their conventional capabilities. The United States maintains that these two potential capabilities (conventional

prompt global strike and missile defense) are actually aimed at “rogue states” and are unable to affect Chinese and Russian deterrents. Lewis agrees that there is evidence that CPGS would not in fact be used for the same missions as a nuclear capability. He underscores earlier comments from Elaine Bunn that CPGS is currently just a *concept* and only in the research and development stages. Even so, the Russian and Chinese concern is sincerely held, and the US response should take this fact into account in future discussions. He acknowledged that there is the probability that such technology might *eventually* progress to threaten Chinese and Russian deterrents. Interestingly, Saalman notes that the Chinese often use CPGS as a catchall to talk about conventional superiority, rather than the specific boost-glide capability concept that is being researched in the US. This distinction might inform some of the disarmament dialogue between the US and China.

Alexey Feneko suggested that China, Russia, and the US must necessarily work together in disarmament talks. Saalman concurs, highlighting the importance of China to any disarmament discussion, while also pointing out that China currently has little incentive to take the lead in such discussions.

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