
RELEASE EMBARGO DATE: April 22, 2014 at 9:00 AM

Panel: Second Nuclear Age? (RR)

Date/Time: Tuesday, April 22, 2014 / 14:30-15:45

Talking Points for: William Tobey, Harvard University

- Barack Obama’s 2009 Prague speech alluded to William Butler Yeats’ 1920 poem *The Second Coming*, which keened:

“Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; . . .

The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

- To avert such calamity, President Obama advanced a radical vision—a world free of nuclear weapons.
- An earlier American president also foresaw a growing nuclear peril.
- In 1963, John F. Kennedy foretold of a world ten years hence in which his successor would face 25 or more states armed with nuclear weapons.
- President Kennedy based his warning on a then-secret memorandum authored by his Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.
- Four of the states that McNamara cited as having “nuclear weapons capabilities” later built such systems, but *19 others did not*, although many were then thought to be capable of conducting a nuclear weapons test within five years.
- Today only nine states possess nuclear weapons.
- How did this happen? Why was the first nuclear age as modest as it was?

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

-
- McNamara himself offered some reasons in his memorandum to JFK:

“The motivations not to undertake programs are clearly strong. They include the high cost of weapons (and especially of sophisticated delivery systems), lack of clear military need, legal restrictions, concern for international repercussions, moral pressures, lack of effective independence in the case of the satellites to undertake a program, and the hope that diffusion will be halted.”

- In some ways, the factors affecting nuclear proliferation are even more hopeful than they were fifty years ago.
- First, the Nonproliferation Treaty has proven remarkably durable.
 - It entered into force in 1970 and was extended indefinitely a quarter century later.
 - The Treaty, and the norms which support it, are widely accepted—surpassed only by the United Nations Charter in adherents—and now numbering 190.
 - As a result, across many regions and even whole continents, there is effectively zero risk of proliferation.
- Second, the United States built a series of alliances, which included extended nuclear deterrence, greatly diminishing the perceived security benefits from independent nuclear weapons programs.
- Third, proliferation does not, ineluctably, beget proliferation.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

-
- The number of states with nuclear weapons is the same today as it was 25 years ago—with South Africa renouncing its program and North Korea finally confessing its covert effort.
 - Indeed, it has proven possible to reverse the spread of nuclear weapons, in the cases of South Africa, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.
 - Does this mean there is no real danger from nuclear proliferation?
 - No. The threat of nuclear proliferation is acute, but limited.
 - With Syria beset by civil war, it is now limited to North Korea, which has tested nuclear weapons, and Iran, which has tested the international community.
 - Although both countries pose serious threats to international peace and security, they are essentially alone.
 - But, what of the risk of a proliferation cascade, set off in response to North Korea and Iran?
 - Remembering four points can help us steer past this disaster:
 - First, Iran and North Korea’s neighbors have every incentive to threaten proliferation in hopes of evoking stronger action against Tehran and Pyongyang.
 - In short, diplomats sometimes bluff.
 - Second, extended deterrence remains vital to preventing further proliferation. Today, Seoul and Tokyo rightly rely on strong alliances with the United States.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

- To the extent that President Obama’s vision of a world without nuclear weapons calls into question the credibility of U.S. security guarantees, it will undermine the his policies designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.
- Third, we must do better at balancing nonproliferation goals with other foreign policy interests.
 - In Belarus, U.S. criticism of the government’s human rights practices caused Minsk to scupper a deal to give up its highly enriched uranium. Human rights are a fundamental American interest, but could we have held off our criticism until after the fissile material was removed?
 - Similarly, in the interest of nonproliferation, Ukraine is owed a better response in defense of the Budapest Memorandum than Europe, the United States, and Northeast Asia have yet mustered.
- Fourth, pretending to believe those who merely pretend to disarm is not a viable policy.
 - The true tests of a deal on the Iranian nuclear program relate to Tehran’s willingness to come clean on what the International Atomic Energy Agency calls the “possible military dimensions” of its nuclear program, and to abandon covert nuclear technology procurement. Anything less, would be cosmetic.
- Can the center hold? Can the NPT survive? Yes, if the best hold their conviction, and with prudent and honest policies in service of nonproliferation as a high priority.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.