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Panel: Nonproliferation

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Talking Points for: Richard Weitz, Hudson Institute

The trilateral ties between China, Russia, and the United States are the most important relationships affecting global nuclear arms control and nonproliferation. China, Russia, and the United States have the world’s most powerful nuclear forces and great economic, diplomatic, and military influence on global nonproliferation trends. Their industries are leading global suppliers of nuclear-related dual-use items and their means of delivery, while their governments strongly impact events in many of the world’s WMD-critical regions, such as the Middle East and East Asia. The United States considers the approaches of Russia and China toward North Korea, Iran, and other nuclear proliferation issues important tests of their commitment to global partnership. If Moscow broke with Washington on the Iran or North Korean nuclear proliferation issues, it would mark an unprecedented reversal of collaboration that persisted even during the darkest years of the Cold War. Moreover, if China does not address U.S. concerns in these areas, the two governments will find it difficult to achieve the “new model great power relationship” sought by President Xi Jinping, since such a relationship requires mutual respect and support regarding issues of vital national security interests for both parties.

The trilateral nuclear relationship between Russia, China, and the United States is also constantly changing. The recent deterioration in U.S. relations with both Russia and China has worsened arms control opportunities and threatens to harm their trilateral nonproliferation cooperation. Even before Moscow’s illegal annexation of Crimea, Russian and U.S. negotiators differed sharply on their preferred outcome for such contentious issues as further reducing their strategic nuclear forces, eliminating or consolidating nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Europe, constraining national and theater strategic defenses, and renewing conventional arms limitations in Europe. Furthermore, trilateral disarmament was stalled well before the crisis in Ukraine due to Russia’s refusal to commit to making further reductions in its nuclear arsenal and China’s position that it will not even consider constraining its nuclear arsenal until Russia and the United States bring their stockpiles down to Chinese levels.

For countering nuclear weapons proliferation to state and non-state actors, the prospects are brighter, given shared trilateral concerns in that area. More than any other time in their history, China, Russia, and the United States are pursuing similar nonproliferation goals

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within a shared, yet informal, set of institutions, rules, and principles. Although disputes and concerns remain in certain areas, the general record of China and Russia regarding the proliferation of WMD and their means of delivery has improved since the Cold War. Despite recent tensions, there has been continued nonproliferation cooperation in eliminating the chemical weapons stockpiles of Syria, discouraging further nuclear weapons-related activities by North Korea, and preventing North Korea and Iran from adopting nuclear weapons. A key indicator of future trends will be how well the three countries cooperate at the upcoming Nuclear Nonproliferation Review Conference.

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