

PANEL #4

TOWARD A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN NUCLEAR WEAPONS POLICY

Is Nuclear Deterrence a Sustainable Policy?

by

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BLECHMAN: Well, thank you very much. It's a pleasure to be here. I was asked to address the question, is nuclear deterrence sustainable, is it a sustainable policy? And to summarize, I'm too old to say that anything is impossible and I've worked on international affairs for more than 50 years for my sins in Washington. And during this time, after 40 years of cold war, I saw the Berlin wall fall and Soviet Union come apart and more recently believe it or not, I lived to see Donald Trump become President of the United States. So, I won't say that anything is impossible.

So, yes, it's conceivable that threats of nuclear retaliation will continue to deter nuclear attacks and nuclear war throughout my lifetime and throughout the lifetimes of the many much younger people in the audience here. And perhaps even until the year that global warming brings an end to civilization as we know it today.

However, there are so many ways in which deterrence can fail, so many things that can go wrong. So, many complications in a proliferating world that I believe to continue to rely on nuclear deterrence is an extremely dangerous policy. One fraught with risks for all nations and for people throughout the world.

Now, most of you, I'm sure were here this morning, I apologize that I had a board meeting, I needed to be to. But those of you who were here, heard I'm sure about some of the flash points around the world that could lead to nuclear war, as well as about the dangers of accidental wars due to technical failures or misperception. And of course, we don't know about the risk of nuclear terrorism.

I'd like to speak more abstractly about the requirements of deterrence and illustrate how lucky we've been that deterrence hasn't failed yet. First of all, deterrence assumes informed and rational decision makers.

To give you some examples when this was not present. In 1973 at the height of the Watergate scandal, there was a war in the Middle East and the Soviet Union had introduced tactical nuclear weapons to Egypt, Israel had surrounded an Egyptian Army, and the Russians were mobilized. The Soviets were mobilizing airborne troops to go in and rescue the Egyptian Army.

In response, the President's cabinet Kissinger, Schlesinger and others met in a situation where the President, the decision maker, was drunk. I have interviewed almost everyone who is in that situation room and it's clear, he was much of that period at the end of his administration.

And Al Haig, who is the Chief of Staff, his job was to make sure President did not come to the situation room, because they were fearful of what kinds of decisions he might make. We did put our nuclear forces on a higher state of alert and there were some negotiations and the Russians backed down and everything ended peacefully, but it was an extremely dangerous situation for many reasons.

It was a similar situation, not quite as dangerous. With Mr. Yeltsin when he was President of Russia, there was a Norwegian rocket launched, the sounding rocket which was misinterpreted by Russian radars. And the President was told, we might be under attack and Mr. Yeltsin was as he usually was, like Nixon, drunk at the time. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and said, "Well, if the Americans going to attack us, it's not going to be with one missile." So, that's one dangerous assumption that we're going to have rational decision makers in these situations.

Secondly, deterrence assumes realistic perceptions on both sides of the capabilities and the will of the other side. For example, U.S. military leaders at the time of the Cuban missile crisis were urging, some of them at least, most of them I believe, urging an invasion of Cuba. We did not know that Soviet tactical nuclear weapons had already been deployed in Cuba, not the intermediate range missiles which tipped off the crisis, and that the Russian commanders had the authority to use those weapons if American troops invaded the Isle. So, there was no knowledge of the situation, a very dangerous situation. If President Kennedy had not chosen a less bellicose course and committed to invasion, nuclear weapons would have been used, we would have retaliated and who knows where it would have stopped at that point.

Similarly, President Truman underestimated the determination of China at the time of the Korean war and he disregarded signals that the Chinese would enter the war if we came too close to the Chinese border. He made nuclear threats in a press conference and still the Chinese persisted. Fortunately, China did not have nuclear weapons at that time. But again, a misunderstanding, misperception of the adversaries could possibly lead to the failure of deterrence.

Thirdly, deterrence assumes that leaders of the two countries, the two sides, can communicate effectively with one another. This is a kind of funny story, but just before the outset of the First Gulf War, Secretary of State Baker met with the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Tariq Aziz to sensibly try to resolve the conflict. In fact he gave Aziz a letter from President Bush, Senior Bush, warning in kind of nuanced terms that if the Iraqis used chemical weapons, we would retaliate with nuclear weapons. He didn't take that explicitly.

And this is often stated by supporters of deterrence as an example of how nuclear weapons can turn into chemical. After the second Gulf war, Tariq Aziz was interviewed extensively and was asked about this situation and he said, I never gave that letter to Hussein, he killed people that brought him news like that. So, effective communications.

And finally, deterrence and most importantly, depends on history and relative perceptions of the stakes involved in the situation. You just take some examples not from history, but potential future situations. Mr. Trump obviously does not recognize the intrinsic value of Taiwan to China

illustrated by his phone call at the very outset of his administration to the Taiwanese President.

So, what if there were a crisis involving Taiwan and China. The United States has commitments to Taiwan -- will China back down if we make nuclear threats. Taiwan is so inherent in their perception of themselves and of their role that I doubt that they would. Now it would be a situation where deterrence would be very likely to fail.

Flipping it over, the U.S. has been committed to the defense of Japan and South Korea for so many years and we've been so close militarily and economically. If there were a crisis or war, there would be a real danger of China making nuclear threats and misperceiving that we would likely ignore those threats and persist in depending our ally.

Take a third one, the Russians correctly understood that we would not go to war over Ukraine which is not a NATO member, but if the Russians were to invade a NATO country, one of the Baltic states for example, that would be a very different situation. And given our past behavior concerning Ukraine, the Russians could easily misperceive and deterrence again would be at least at great risk of failing.

So, these are all factors which determine when deterrence works and when it might fail and they're very important to keep in mind. So, yes, nuclear weapons may continue to deter nuclear attacks and nuclear war, but even without considering the risks of terrorism and technical failure, I for one believe that those who believe that deterrence cannot fail are people who are likely to believe in the tooth fairy.

Deterrence is not a scientific principle. It's not a law of nature, like gravity, it's a theory. The theory was made up in the late 40's or early 50's with the RAND corporation. The speculation about what might happen about how leaders might behave in a future situation whose details we cannot know. So, we know what happened in past situations, it's worked in some -- usually when combined with diplomatic sessions, but it could easily fail.

Those in Washington, those who argue for eliminating nuclear weapon are often labeled naive idealist. I think the shoe is on the other foot, it's those who believe in the magic of deterrence who are the naive ones. The risks of moving toward a nuclear weapons free world in my mind are probably lower than the risk associated with continuing to maintain stocks of nuclear weapon.

Indeed, with the renewed nuclear competition between the U.S. and Russia, the growing nuclear stockpiles in China, India, North Korea and Pakistan, with the residual risk of further proliferation in the Middle East, with worsening tensions in so many parts of the world, I believe the risk of nuclear deterrence failing is rising and rising precipitously. And that's why I support the ban movement and urge renewed efforts like this conference to mobilize worldwide populations in support of nuclear disarmament.

Thank you very much.