Host: Tong Zhao
Guest: Richard Weitz

Episode 119: U.S.-China-Russia Cooperation in Mitigating Nuclear Threats
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Tong Zhao: (00:26)
Hello, welcome to the China in the World podcast. This is Tong Zhao. Today we're happy to have Dr. Richard Weitz from the Hudson Institute with us to discuss how the U.S., China, and Russia can cooperate to mitigate nuclear threats. As we all know, the trilateral relationship is at an interesting juncture. Previously, China worked with the United States during the Cold War to contain the Soviet influence. But today the U.S.-China strategic competition estratégico/rivalry is growing very quickly. Kissinger even suggested that U.S. should develop a closer relationship with Russia to contain the growing Chinese influence. But on the ground, we see China and Russia quickly developing a very close defense and security cooperation relationship. So, the triangular relationship is in flux, and nuclear is a very important component of this triangular relationship. And that, friend, we also see a lot of interesting developments. Russia has reviewed a number of interesting new nuclear weapons systems, global-range nuclear power, nuclear cruise missiles, intercontinental-range, self-navigating nuclear torpedoes, and maybe even nuclear-armed hypersonic weapons. And to counter this increasing threat, in the most recent Nuclear Posture Review report, the United States re-emphasized the importance of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons to counter the so-called Russian strategy of "escalating to de-escalate." And seeing all these, I'm sure there will be a lot of debate in China about how China should respond. Maybe China should follow suit to pursue some similar capabilities. So, the nuclear relationship is at a very unstable phase. And not only will that increase risks at the nuclear level, but could also have important spillover effects onto, for example, conventional military relationships. It will affect their capability to cooperate to address important regional nuclear non-proliferation threats or their capability to cooperate against nuclear terrorism. So, to discuss these issues, we have, again, Richard Weitz, who is senior fellow and director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at the Hudson Institute. His research includes regional security developments relating to Europe, Eurasia, and East Asia; as well as American foreign and defense policies. Welcome, Richard.

Richard Weitz: (03:34)
Thank you very much for hosting me.

Tong Zhao: (03:37)
So maybe I will start by asking you an initial question. Maybe you can briefly explain to us, based on your recent research on this topic, what are the major risks and opportunities for cooperation among the three countries in the area of nuclear arms control?

Richard Weitz: (03:55)
Right—so, I look at the field in terms of three areas. The first area is limiting, reducing or measured increases in the nuclear arsenals of the existing countries. And here, Russia, the U.S., and China are very important because Russia and the U.S. have the largest arsenals and China has
a lot of potential to increase its nuclear arsenal. But I'm not very optimistic in this. I think there's just some fundamental disagreements between the countries about where to go next. The second area, as opposed to limiting existing arsenals, is to keep other countries who don't have nuclear weapons from getting them, the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In that area, I am more optimistic. And particularly because of developments in Korea, I'm much more optimistic than I was last year in terms of the possibilities to make progress in limiting and hopefully eliminating the North Korean nuclear arsenal, and that requires strong Russian-Chinese-U.S. cooperation to succeed. And then Iran is another potential country that could pursue nuclear weapons. And even as the U.S. withdraws from the previous agreement limiting Iran's nuclear activities, it's still going to have to work with Russia and China to keep Iranian nuclear activities limited, perhaps even to missile activity. And beyond that, I'm pretty optimistic that none of these three countries want other countries to pursue nuclear weapons. And then the last area, the first being limiting existing arsenals, second being preventing other new countries, the third is keeping these nuclear materials and nuclear weapons away from non-state actors, particularly terrorists, also criminals. There, it's different in that all the countries pretty much agree on the importance of doing this. There's not any country favoring nuclear terrorism and so on. But there's a concern that there may not be an enough attention and enough resources to address this issue, since it's a very low likelihood, but very very very high-consequence issue. So those issues are hard for governments to manage generally.

**Tong Zhao:** (06:42)
Thank you, great. I think maybe we should go into one important external variable that will affect this countries' capability to do arms control and to maintain their existing strategic stability relationship among themselves, and that is missile defense. Especially I think that this upcoming U.S. Missile Defense Posture Review report is likely to call for a policy of more investment into development and deployment of missile defense, including in this region of Northeast Asia. That is going to cause a lot of concern in China about the credibility of Chinese nuclear deterrent capability. I know you have focused a lot on the Russian-U.S. experience of engagement and dialogues to address the Russian concern of U.S. missile defense. Those dialogue exchanges took place at various levels for a very long time. Many different proposals were raised, including, you know, the data fusion center technical information exchanges, better transparency on future plans, on missile defense, etc. So, my question is, how would you evaluate the impact of this engagement on mitigating Russian concern and lessons that you can draw from the U.S.-Russian engagement experience to the U.S.-China engagement on this issue? Because I believe that if we want to stabilize U.S.-China nuclear relations, in the future we have to address this rising Chinese concern about U.S. missile defense.

**Richard Weitz:** (08:44)
Right. Yes, so just to reaffirm what you've said that the U.S. is now soon to release its report of all new administrations, it's now the Trump administrations preparing this one, on what its policy should be towards missile defense. And the thinking is that the administration may differ from
previous ones. In the past there was always a statement that U.S. missile defenses are not designed or capable of, you know, hitting Russian or Chinese missiles, and are really designed for Iran and North Korea. And the thinking is now that it may be somewhat more restrained, saying there's not an intent to interfere with Russia's or China's strategic missiles, but shorter-range systems are may be acceptable. And the U.S., Russia, and China all have missile defense programs. I mean, China has the grounded midcourse system that some Americans think may also have an anti-satellite function. Russia has had the longest-running missile defense system, although its effectiveness is not well understood. It's limited mostly to Moscow. The U.S. has had a lot of variables going up and down, how much it's willing to put into this. It probably isn't going to be a priority for the Trump administration. The ideal would be to have missile defenses that are effective at preventing North Korea or another country from being able to threaten the United States or its allies with missile defense, but not so effective that they cause China and/or Russia to further reinforce their offensive forces in an effort to overcome them. The U.S. and Russia tried for several years through various talks, confidence-building measures, even at the point of a proposal for a joint system that they would jointly operate over the northern hemisphere, and none of those proved successful. It's so difficult because in order to shoot down a missile, you have to make an instant decision, and therefore you can't wait for the other countries' approval. If you share insights about how your missile defense system works, there's a fear that then that information would find its way towards the country that wants to use a missile against you and so could overcome it. And just a series of problems. That was not seen as helpful. So, I think it's best to try and think about what would be a level that the three countries would feel comfortable, would help them, defend them from possible nuclear missile attacks, but wouldn't destabilize to the other. And China is the hardest one to deal with, since its offensive nuclear forces are less than those of Russia and China and therefore the threshold is a bit lower. So far, the Chinese, like the Russians, have relied on having effective offensive forces. China is developing submarines to do this, and so we've all pursued the same policy of diversifying our nuclear offensive forces to overcome any missile defenses, but it's going to be a challenge to manage going forward. I think that in the short term, the thing we can best do to mitigate, to keep these tensions limited is to focus on preventing North Korea from testing its missiles or nuclear weapons because that's really the main driver at the moment of the U.S. defensive program which is causing these anxieties in Russia and China.

**Tong Zhao: (12:59)**
Great. I think another threat to a stable nuclear relationship among the big powers comes from new military technologies. All three countries are developing hypersonic weapons that can be armed with conventional nuclear warheads. Some countries, especially Russia, are developing a global range of nuclear power: nuclear cruise missiles and intercontinental-range nuclear torpedoes, etc. How do you think we can realistically incorporate these new strategic weapons systems into some arms control mechanism in order to make their potential impact on nuclear stability? How about some possible confidence-building measures?

**Richard Weitz: (13:54)**
Right. The best work on this question has actually been done by Carnegie experts, James Acton and others, and it's something we do need to address now because missile defenses are now becoming available to all three of our countries. And all three have hypersonic delivery system programs, somewhat different types, but still the same technology. Yet, we haven't deployed these systems. So, if you're going to have arms control, the best time to do it is before you start building them, because once you start, it's harder to look for constraints. But because of the differences between the countries on a range of issues, it would be hard to have an agreement that would just focus on one of these technologies. So, in principle, it would be ideal, and it would certainly be easier to address hypersonic systems than strategic defenses or let alone strategic offenses, because this is new. But the arrangement would probably focus more on transparency, making sure that each side had an understanding of what these systems could do, so they don't trigger some kind of surprise or launch on warning or any kind of destabilizing crisis policies, and, in particular, limiting the spread of this technology to other countries. So, it would be something like the Missile Technology Control Regime, but China would have a lead role in constructing the regime because of its different status now. But I think that if we keep the technology limited to Russia, China, and the United States, that's a challenge, but it's a lot easier than if, you know, everybody has this: North Korea, Pakistan, whatever, because then it really is a concern to me. I mean, the problem with hypersonic systems is it's not necessarily ballistic path that makes it easier for them to overcome missile defenses, but it also makes it a little uncertain about, if you're attacked with one of these, you don't quite understand: is it a nuclear armed or conventional armed system? What might it be able to do in some scenario, some crisis? So, there are unknowns, like cyber, like anti-satellite weapons. It may have to enhance deterrence because of the uncertainty, but certainly in a crisis, it prevents problems and challenges for crisis management, limiting escalation.

Tong Zhao: (16:52)
Okay, as you said, it's best to look at one of these systems, so maybe let's look more into the hypersonic weapons for a moment. Any prospect for cooperative restraint on the development and deployment of hypersonic weapons, for example, renouncing the option of arming them with nuclear warheads? Or at least do you think there would be interest among these big powers to cooperate to prevent the further proliferation of hypersonic weapon technologies to more countries?

Richard Weitz: (17:34)
Right. I'm not aware of any active effort of the three countries to limit their own systems. The Trump administration is still undergoing its review about what it wants in New START or other types, so it may decide that it wants to try and achieve a different type of arms control agreement and that should include hypersonic systems. The Russian government has actually been leading the effort to try and include these systems, but I'm not aware of a concrete proposal to eliminate. And in fact, one of the systems that Putin announced, or maybe actually be several, are hypersonic delivery systems. And China's program is, I mean, it's interesting because this is an area where China is equal to the other countries. It's not lagging, unlike in some of the other systems. But I'm
not aware of a concrete proposal or the form in which we could do this. But that said, if you're trying to think of an area where we could initiate some kind of trilateral arms control, this would be the perfect, or, you know, the best system amongst those currently available, because our countries are leading developers of hypersonic systems. And we would all suffer if other countries were to get them. So, if we can't prevent them or agree on what they can carry or where they could be located, I think we should be able to agree on the importance of not transferring this technology to other countries. I think, you know, it's a little tricky for Russia because of their collaboration with India on the BrahMos missile. It's a shorter-range system, but there is a hypersonic variant that they've been discussing to develop, so we may have to grandfather that, but beyond that, I don't see any need for other countries to have them. And it is a destabilizing system, so we do have an incentive to limit proliferation through cooperation.

Tong Zhao: (19:50)
In the area of nuclear non-proliferation, a lot of things are happening with regard to North Korea. So far, people's attention has been on U.S., the two Koreas, China, etc. We haven't discussed the role of Russia very extensively. But very recently, the South Korean President Moon Jae-in said that Kim is likely to meet with the Russian President very soon. So maybe the Russian role will become more visible in the near-term future. What do you think Russia wants to achieve in this process of negotiation about North Korea's nuclear program? How high a priority do you think Russia attaches to a quick disarmament of North Korea?

Richard Weitz: (20:39)
Right. Russian President Putin has always been interested in the North Korean issue. I mean, one of the first things he did after becoming president was to go to Pyongyang and offer the North Koreans access to the Russian civilian space program. At the time, the North Koreans were insisting on the right to test this, what they called, space vehicles. But, you know, it's hard to differentiate between a space system and an offensive missile capacity, so that didn't work. But he's since been politically interested in working on the issue in the last few years. Russia's lead role in trying to deal with Kim Jong-un has been somewhat displaced. I mean, we've now seen both the U.S. president and the Chinese leader meet with Supreme Leader Kim. I think that meeting will occur, I think that we will now have a meeting between President Putin and Chairman Kim at some point, not clear when and not clear where. But moving to the next phase is, when we move from these bilateral meetings to the multilateral level, well, it would be best to have Russia involved in some way. It's not as critical as China and the U.S. and the two Koreas. The farther out we look, the better opportunities are for having a positive Russian contribution. So, if we can solve, quote, unquote, "The North Korean Crisis," in terms of integrating North Korea into East Asia better and binding it through international constraints. Russia has had the most devout plans for using North Korean participation as a means to enhance their own integration into East Asia through pipelines or roads that would traverse the peninsula. According to U.S. diplomats, Russia and U.S. cooperation on North Korea continues. It's one of the areas where the interests are strongest, despite short-term differences over sanctions, over pacing: how quickly
North Korea has to denuclearize, how quickly we should remove the sanctions. I think those differences are manageable, so I think that this is a fruitful area for Russia-U.S.-Chinese cooperation going forward, as long as we can shield it from some of the other tensions which are affecting other issues.

Tong Zhao: (23:42)
But one difference between Russian and American perceptions about the North Korean threat is: When North Korea conducted ICBM tests, intercontinental ballistic missile tests, everyone said it was an ICBM test, but Russia insisted it was a much shorter-range missile, probably an intermediate-range ballistic missile. Do you think Russia held a genuinely different view on North Korean capability? If so, is it useful to apply the same experience of the Russian-U.S. joint threat assessment on Iranian threat, missile threat, to the North Korean case to help bridge their gap?

Richard Weitz: (24:42)
Right. I know that after the first North Korean ICBM test, as you said, the Russians differed from most assessment, saying it really wasn't an ICBM. But I didn't see that after the subsequent tests. I think that the Russian view has moved closer to that of Chinese and U.S. experts. In general, Russia has downplayed the North Korean threat. There's always been a lower threat assessment from the Russian side, other than North Korea's technology is not as advanced as feared, or its pace of development is slower, trying to dampen the incentives for preemptive confrontation with the U.S. and weaken the legitimacy of sanctions and so on. So that's been a lagging problem, and for that reason, the Iran-U.S. and other joint threat assessments conducted through NATO and any with Russia, they didn't really help resolve the differences. They just made them clear. So, you gave them an opportunity to understand their differences better, but it didn't narrow them. I think we can best circumvent this problem rather than try and solve it by focusing on something that is easy to measure, which is "North Korea is not testing missiles even approaching this range, not testing nuclear weapons," and then we don't have to fight over on "Is this an ICBM? Is this not an ICBM? Is this a hydrogen bomb? Or is it just an enhanced atomic bomb, tritium enhanced?" If we just don't test at all, then this problem doesn't arise. And so that's what I would focus on. In general, yeah, the Russian concerns about North Korea are not that North Korea will attack Russia. It's more that North Korea is testing systems that are driving U.S. missile defenses, which in turn then are a challenge for Russia, or a risk of an escalation of war in Russia's backyard, in the neighborhood and so on. But all these can be circumvented just by getting as quickly as possible to a non-nuclear North Korea, but at least in the interim, not having further tests.

Tong Zhao: (27:24)
Let me follow up with a more big-picture question. Today many people are worried that U.S.-China relationship might escalate into something like a nuclear war. So, it seems to me that a big problem today is that the two countries, U.S. and China, are incapable of reaching a basic agreement on what happened as facts. One example in the area of weapons of mass destruction is the reported use of chemical weapons in Syria. The vast majority of Chinese experts. I'm talking
about not just the general public, but highly educated, very experienced experts in this area. They firmly believe that it was not the Syrian government that used chemical weapons, but it was a campaign of demonization by the West, led by the United States to counter Russia. So, if we cannot even agree on the basic facts, how can we talk about cooperation? The two sides cannot even talk meaningfully with each other on these basic issues, so that deeply concerns me. Given that you have been studying the U.S.-Russia, U.S.-Soviet relationships for a long time, the U.S. and Soviet Union were there, but now the U.S. and China face a threat of launching a new Cold War. Any lessons that you can draw from the U.S.-Soviet experience to help the U.S. and China from further escalating their tensions and their rivalry?

Richard Weitz: (29:41)
Right. I actually reject the idea that China and the U.S. are in the same situation or are on the path towards a new Cold War, like we saw between the Soviet Union and the United States. I mean, I'm a child of the Cold War, I grew up in the Cold War. That's why I got interested in this issue and tried to learn Russian, if I was younger now maybe I'd do Chinese instead, but anyway. It was because there were genuinely days where I thought the end of the world would soon be upon us. I don't see that now. There are some fundamental differences between what we saw then, with the Soviet bloc versus the Western bloc, to what we have now. For example, China and the U.S. are not in a bloc-to-bloc situation. So, I mean, China, you can argue about where Russia is in this, but it's not. And the U.S. has good ties with South Korea and Japan, but there's just a lot of countries in between there that buffer some of the tensions. I mean, the ASEAN countries are all working to avoid a major conflict. Also, the China-U.S. confrontation has not been in the military plane. We haven't seen the kind of confrontation we had between the Soviet Union and the United States in lining our forces right along Europe, along Berlin, expecting a possible military clash day to day. We haven't seen a Cuban Missile-type crisis with China, moving a lot of its assets right up to the U.S. border to present a problem with the U.S. China in general doesn't emphasize its military power, the way the Soviets or, arguably, the Russians do today. I mean, China has a rich set of tools of influence, ranging from economics in particular, to good diplomacy, to soft power, to the attractiveness of Chinese culture and so on. So, it hasn't really been a militarily-led confrontation, the way the Soviet Union, which really didn't have anything else other than its weapons, had to rely on that. So, I do not see any near-term risk of a China-U.S. military clash. I do worry about an escalatory path from some kind of conflicts over Taiwan or the South China Sea or so on. But it's really hard to see how that leads to war. So, it's a lot less probable in my view than what we had with the Soviet Union and the United States. And I think that some good confidence building measures, some restraint as we 'manage' China's rise. So, I mean, clearly China has been a more influential player, it's getting more weapons, and its forces and U.S. forces are going to operate in more proximity now and in the future. But I just think that the conflicts and tensions are more economic, more how to restructure the influence of both countries in a way that meets both their changing needs, but I don't really see China following in the path of other rising powers and trying to carve out some, you know, colonies or use its military force to displace the U.S. I still think that's very remote.
Tong Zhao: (33:57)
One of the specific accusations from the American side against China is that China has been illegally acquiring American military technologies. I know in the Russia-China experience for a time, Russia had a lot of headache because, reportedly, China reverse-engineered some Russian military equipment and used that to develop its own indigenous capability, and therefore became less dependent on Russian technology exports. Some foreign experts even argue that the Chinese J-11 fighter jet, for example, was based on the Russian Su-27 fighter jet. So how did Russia and China resolve that problem? Maybe that can help us think more about how the U.S. and China can better address their problems, some similar problems here.

Richard Weitz: (35:02)
Right. The Russian perception. I mean, what happened, just as we remember that the U.S. stopped selling weapons to China at the end of the Cold War, at the same time the Soviet Union fell apart, so Russia had all these weapons it didn't need, and so it just became a natural decision that the Russians had to sell all the Soviet platforms to China. And so, we had one billion, two billion dollars a year for a while, of Soviet-era weapons reaching China. And, as you said, some foreign experts, including some Russians think that, with several of these systems, China just took some of this technology and replicated it. And that led to, among for several other reasons, a fall-off of the sales about seven, eight years ago. There was another, even more serious challenge that China, partly through this reverse engineering but also through its own efforts, doesn't really need to buy Soviet air technology when it makes its own. But that situation has ended in a sense, and now Russia is again selling major weapons platforms to China, particularly the Su-35, probably one of the best fighter planes in the world, and the S-400, certainly one of the most advanced air defense systems. And there are several reasons for this, but they probably wouldn't apply in the case of China and the U.S. So, one reason was that the Russians made the strategic calculation that it was useful to help China continue to develop its military power as a way to keep, you know, the Pentagon preoccupied or at least divided from focusing entirely on Russia. The Russians say they are confident that they are still a generation ahead. They don't believe the Chinese claims that they have a fifth-generation fighter. You talk to the Russians, they say that it's the Russia still as a generation ahead of China in terms of these really super advanced technologies, particularly air systems, strictly missile defense systems, so they still feel comfortable selling China the systems because Russia has more advanced ones. They also say these systems are harder to copy, than the Soviet air systems. Particularly China has had a challenge making it a really high-performance fighter engine, and they supposedly took steps to make sure that these couldn't be copied. They did sign an advanced intellectual property agreement. You know, I don't know to what extent the Russians really believe that's effective. And then there's a final reason that, but it wouldn't also apply in the U.S. case, the Russians say, they think the Chinese would be able to acquire the technology for the Su-35 anyway, so we might as well sell them to China now to get some mone rather than wait a few years in which China gets it anyhow. So, none of those factors would really apply in the current case. And you know, it's a little risk on the part of the Russians in my view, but
they deny this. Saying that China has this technology. I mean, I don't think China would use it against Russia directly, but it could undercut Russia's arms sales to third parties. I mean, the Chinese arms sales are increasing, the defense sectors are becoming more skilled. And those sales won't conflict with the U.S., but it could conflict with the Russians because of the same potential buyers, those that can't afford or don't have access to Western, European, U.S. defense technology. They're buying it from Russia for the most part, but now we'll have China as an option. So, I keep on telling the Russians, you know, "Be careful, or you may be shooting yourself in the foot or undermining your own advantage." And they keep on, either they say, "It's none of your business, I don't want to talk to you about China. It's our sensitive issue." Or they just say, "No, we're comfortable. We have our systems stay ahead." So, it's an interesting issue. It just doesn't really apply in the China-U.S. case.

**Tong Zhao: (39:54)**
Well, great. Thank you, Richard, for sharing your thoughts. Apparently nuclear is the foundation of the strategic relationship among the three big powers, but it's also the hardest to resolve their disagreements over this issue, their distrust towards each other. But I'm glad that you can come here today to help us develop a more nuanced understanding, which I think in the long run can help us start building confidence and trust step by step.

**Richard Weitz: (40:26)**
Yeah, thank you very much for the opportunity. I think the Carnegie-Tsinghua provides a great service to help and allow us to continue this dialogue on such an important bilateral relationship.

**Tong Zhao: (40:39)**
Thank you. I look forward to inviting you back sometime in the near-term future.