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Transcript

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Guest: **Elbridge Colby**

Episode 40: U.S. Nuclear Doctrine and
Nonproliferation in East Asia

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Zhao: You are listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China's foreign policy, international role, and China's relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy located in Beijing. I am Tong Zhao, an associate in Carnegie's nuclear policy program, based at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy in Beijing. I will be your host today.

I am delighted to be joined by Elbridge Colby. Elbridge Colby is the Robert Gates Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, where he focuses on strategic deterrence, nuclear weapons, conventional force, intelligence, and related issues.

Okay, so, from the American perspective, given the likelihood of greater escalation risks, what's your prescription to U.S. policymakers? So, the Obama administration is making a lot of efforts to try to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in American overall national security strategy. So, do you think, as you argued, to deal with this potential Chinese conventional capability and to deal with the greater risks of escalation, do you think the U.S. should reverse the effort to reduce the role of nuclear weapons, and to raise the role of nuclear weapons?

This will probably occur during Secretary of Defense Carter's tenure or even, you know, beyond? But Carter, as we know, he is an expert on nuclear policy. He has written books on nuclear strategy, on strategic issues, so he's no layman to nuclear weapons. He not only knows the politics around nuclear weapons, he also knows the physical, operational, technical details, about nuclear weapons.

So, I think, the first part of this question is what do you think Secretary Carter will do about nuclear weapons? Is he going to continue Obama's efforts to reduce the role, or is he going to raise the role of nuclear weapons? And, the second part of the question is, what do you think should be the right policy?

Colby: Right. Those are two different questions, as you can imagine.

I don't know Carter particularly well at all, but I do know his work. And Carter, this is my shorthand—the RAND Democrats, which is a species of Democratic national security expert, Ash Carter, Jim Miller, Ted Warner, who are very serious national security thinkers, they're basically realistic and pragmatic and they acknowledge the importance of a strong defense, but they look for ways to minimize risks and to fold in arms control. To some extent that's what everybody does, but this is, I think, an identifiable group anthropologically, if you will. And, I think, my sense of Carter is that he's going to operate with some significant constraints from the White House. This president has committed himself and his administration very much to reducing nuclear weapons and reducing their role, so I think Carter will have to acknowledge that political reality, but at the same time my guess is that—and, I think he's interested in non-proliferation measures and appropriate arms control measure—my guess is that Carter will—his previous record indicates that he supports a strong, enduring U.S. nuclear force, nuclear deterrent—so my guess is that he'll acknowledge the rhetorical interest in arms control and the reduction of the role of nuclear weapons but that in practice, his Pentagon will move forward in, kind of, rebuilding, in modernizing the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the U.S. nuclear deterrent. I mean, the consensus in the United States is that arms control with Russia is basically dead for the foreseeable future, and so, meaningful steps towards a world free of nuclear weapons or disarmament don't seem very plausible in the next two years of the Obama administration. But there are the beginnings of a big recapitalization of the U.S. nuclear force and Carter is pretty much on record as supporting that. So, I would expect him to be on the “the U.S. needs a strong nuclear deterrent” but without

fundamentally changing the policy that the Obama administration has pursued, which is, kind of, a rhetorical focus on disarmament, a desire and aspiration to do arms control and disarmament stuff but at the same time recapitalizing the nuclear force.

My own view is that, that's great, and that makes sense, and that's very good given the constraints that he will have in this administration, that Carter will have in this administration. But over the medium term, my recommendation would be for the United States not to abandon the goal of controlling nuclear risks, not never, that and reducing nuclear danger, that's always good; but to acknowledge that and deal with the reality that nuclear weapons and the U.S. nuclear forces are going to play a central and foundational role in U.S. strategic posture and military posture and defense posture and broader strategy for the foreseeable future, particularly if the United States is going to continue to play this leading role in the world, which I think it will and should. And so, what that says to me is that the U.S. policy, it's a little bit of quibbling words, but I think it's important: the U.S. should seek to minimize the extent to which it relies on nuclear weapons, but that judgment should depend on strategic context.

Zhao: Okay.

Colby: So, Russia has really reintroduced aggression, and the use of force and the threat of escalation into Europe, so the U.S. will need to respond. We would like to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons, but with Russia behaving that way, I think nuclear weapons and military force will become more a part of the European theater because that's a response.

In the Pacific, I think China's very substantial military buildup is going to force the United States to adapt its military posture and its strategic posture in the region. I think, first and foremost, that means that the U.S. is going to try to maintain the conventional advantage, even if it's shrunk—which is what I think the U.S. is trying to do and that's all good—but I also think the U.S. is going to have to think a bit more about its nuclear policy here, which has been, kind of, out of mind for the last generation or so because the scale of China's military buildup and the reality of existing, of enduring tensions, and disagreements means that, unfortunately, conflict is possible, and so, the United States needs to think about that, and so, my view is we should speak more frankly about what it is that we expect nuclear weapons to do and the way that I would talk about that is to say “the U.S. is always interested in ways of reducing nuclear risks and nuclear dangers, but the U.S. also recognizes that nuclear weapons are an enduring part of U.S. strategy and a stable order, and we won't shy away from that, and we'll build the capabilities, and posture our forces in the way necessary to make that posture credible and effective.”

Zhao: So basically the United States needs a more flexible nuclear capability and posture.

Colby: Yeah, I think that's right. A more flexible, a more discriminate, and a more adapted nuclear posture.

Zhao: I think you used the term “tailored” in your writings, which I think captures your thinking very accurately. So, if the United States is going to obtain a more tailored or more flexible nuclear capability and nuclear employment policy, what are the practical implications for the current U.S. nuclear modernization programs? As we know, all three legs of the U.S. nuclear triad need to be modernized in the future and the discussion is ongoing right now on how to modernize them. So, there are already plans to replace the old systems, the strategic bombers, the silo-based ICBMs, the

nuclear submarines with next generation systems. Besides those programs, what additional things need to be done to make U.S. nuclear capability more flexible, more tailored? Does that mean the U.S. needs to resume nuclear testing to deploy more advanced and tailored tactical nuclear weapons? Does it mean the U.S. needs to develop a more particular types of delivery systems? So, what's the implication for the nuclear modernization in the future?

Colby: That's a good question. Well, first off, it shouldn't involve testing—anything that would require us to test should be disfavored—but, I think there are some hardware changes that the U.S. might need, I think the recapitalization, the triad, and a lot of the platforms and systems that are being planned for are the appropriate ones. But, I think a lot of it's also in the software, so to speak, which is to say the plans, the strategies, the doctrines for thinking about employment of nuclear weapons. Also, the command and control capabilities, as well as the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance—basically the ability to use nuclear weapons in a more controlled way. Which is not to say that they would be used as warfighting tools, they would not be treated like other weapons, they would be treated—actually, the Russians are thinking along these lines, basically that you would use nuclear weapons, essentially, as political weapons, but in a tailored way, and the United States needs to be prepared, first and foremost, to that kind of use. We don't want to get caught with our pants down, so to speak, if you'll forgive the crude expression. But, also to be able to deal, in the worst case, with the loss of conventional superiority. So, I think this is actually not going to take a massive change in the kind of program of record as the U.S. calls it, or in its posture, but it is going to take a change in the software of how the U.S. thinks about its nuclear posture and nuclear employment.

Zhao: Okay. So going back to your general argument about conventional gap and more flexible nuclear posture, does the phrase, “Using nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional inferiority,” does that accurately describe your argument, or how is your argument different from that?

Colby: Well, my argument includes the possibility of relying on nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional inferiority. The Americans don't talk about this, but it's still implicit in our policy that the U.S. is prepared to use nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional inferiority. Even the Obama administration did not even reach a sole purpose or a “no first use pledge,” right? So, the countries that were not covered by the no first use pledge are also the countries that could plausibly pose a challenge of being conventionally superior to the United States. So, that's always been part of U.S. doctrine and, I think, if it didn't get removed in 2010, it's never going to get removed, I think, practically speaking.

So, this is what my thinking is about, it is more about adapting the U.S. nuclear policy and posture to the strategic, emerging strategic realities. And, taking something that has a little bit been in amber since the Cold War and making it responsibly adaptable to the current and the emerging environment; not to make nuclear weapons more useable because we want to use nuclear weapons—that's the last thing we want—but to have them continue to be strategically relevant and effective in this new environment.

Zhao: Okay, I think that makes a lot of sense from the American perspective, but I'm also curious about how you think the Chinese and Russians would see this argument? China, we had very weak conventional military capability vis-a-vis the United States for a very long time, and China

refrained from overly depending on nuclear weapons to compensate its conventional inferiority. So, apparently, China does not necessarily subscribe to the idea of using nuclear to compensate for conventional inferiority.

And, how would the Russians see this? The conventional gap between Russia and the United States is becoming greater and greater, as a matter of fact. So, how would your argument be perceived by Russians, because they might argue, "Maybe we Russians should also think more about nuclear weapons, let nuclear weapons playing a bigger role, let it play a more flexible roll?" How do you control the potential consequences for such action-reaction dynamics between the major nuclear powers?

Colby: Excellent question. You're exactly right to ask that question.

Let's talk about Russia first. First of all, Russia is already doing that. So, Russia is already much more reliant on its nuclear weapons and willing to introduce them into international and regional politics than the U.S. and NATO, and I think if you watch Russian nuclear signaling, both rhetorical and also their operations, in the last year in particular, it's very suggestive. So, what I'm talking about in the Russia context would be more a response, it'd be really an adaptation to Russia's behavior, but also its military modernization plan. I'm not sure it's correct to say that the U.S. advantage over Russia is growing. I think the Russians have actually had a pretty formidable military modernization plan over the last 10 years, and certainly in a contest beyond Russia's near-abroad, the Russians would be in a lot of trouble, but Russia has substantial capability in its near-abroad and in the former Soviet area that's pretty significant, and I think they're aware of that. And of course, the NATO military capability, particularly outside the United States has diminished quite a bit. So, that's the real challenge.

So, I think, what I'm talking about in the Russia case is really just dealing with the Russians doing exactly what I'm about. I mean, in some sense I think the Russians have a good nuclear strategy. I worry that they may be too aggressive with it since my argument is that more or less everybody could have my nuclear strategy, but should have it for status quo purposes. The Russians are not a status quo power, so that violates my rule for a stable equilibrium among the great powers. But, that's the Russia context.

Let's talk about China, because I think you bring up an interesting point. I think China has been restrained in its nuclear posture and for a long time its conventional military posture was more restrained. But, I think, there's a reality which is that China has built up its military and continues to be appearing to build up its military in a way that's designed, it seems to me, first to make U.S. access, effective access, to the region, military access to the region very difficult if not impossible depending on the context. And, then more slowly, but looking forward, that China's developing more of a capability for power projection, closer to China initially but who knows in the longer term. The United States has, since the Second World War, has seen itself as this, sort of, leader of this network of like-minded states, many of which are its allies. And, that is good for the United States and those states, but also for countries like China, which has benefited from this broader global trading system and the restraint that this kind of network has exercised on states that China is concerned about. It's worth remembering that most U.S. alliances in Asia were originally instruments partially to restrain those allies.

So, the fundamental aspect that's changing in this arrangement is China's military power, and it's intruding into the post-war space of the United States in maritime Asia. Now, China thinks that's legitimate; China's rising. As Mao said, "China has stood up." I can understand that, I can sympathize with it. If I were Chinese I might think very much the same way, in fact, I probably

would. But, let's think about the reality. If China's growing military power presents this change, it, by necessity, undermines the credibility and the effectiveness of the American military guarantee and American military primacy in this area of maritime Asia, and thus undermines that kind of basic strategy and this basic order.

There's some talk in the United States, but I don't think the United States is going to retreat to fortress America, the United States is going to try to continue to play this role, and certainly U.S. allies and partners and others in the region want the U.S. to play this role; not just Japan but also South Korea, Australia, Philippines, even the fence-sitters Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, etc. So, the U.S. is going to try to maintain its conventional advantage, but it's possible the United States will not be able to sustain this advantage, at least over areas we've traditionally cared about and that are part of this order. Now, this presents a really formidable problem, because if China can attain conventional superiority, then it might seek to use that leverage, either in a political contest, with the implicit threat of force or even, God forbid, in a conflict. Now, in order to prevent this from happening, the United States may seek to rely on nuclear weapons to offset this Chinese convention.

Now, China may respond with its own nuclear buildup and be less restrained in its nuclear force, or be more aggressive in its conventional capabilities, but the problem is, if China does outfox the United States, if it does end up being superior to the United States and puts the United States in a position where its nuclear posture is not credible, not effective, then what's the deduction? Well, if you're Tokyo, or if you're other states in the region, you can either say, "Well the Americans are kind of finished and I'm going to accommodate China," or, there's some middle ground, you can try to split the difference, which maybe is more likely. But, the alternative is that you say, "Well, the Americans can't guarantee me and I'm afraid of being under the Chinese shadow, so I'm going to look at my own, autonomous strategic capabilities—"

Zhao: You mean nuclear weapons.

Colby: —yeah, nuclear weapons—and the Americans may say, "Don't do this," but, we know from the past that U.S. allies and partners have been willing to do this in the past. And, the U.S. stopped them when the U.S. still had strategic superiority, had a dominance over them, over South Korea, over Taiwan several times, over Japan in the 1960s, and also in Europe. But, you look at what's happening in the Middle East right now, and you hear the language from the Saudis and others. If the U.S. does lose that credibility, it may not have sufficient influence. And, it's also possible the United States may say, "Well, you know, we're going to fight it but we're not going to fight it too hard because this military challenge from China is too formidable." And in that case, China runs into a situation where its own strength has brought about a regional situation which is exactly what it doesn't want, which is regional proliferation, less control over some countries that China has traditionally feared or disliked, or had reason to be suspicious of. And, then it's military power will be self-defeating. Just to wax philosophical for a second, I think China's position is not unlike German; there's a lot of parallels to imperial Germany. But, I think, if I were Chinese, and—I'm an American, I'm a patriotic American so I'm biased—I try to put myself in China's shoes, part of the reason I worry about China is because I think, "Well, if I were Chinese, I would behave in this way," and that worries me as an American. It's not because I think the Chinese are doing anything, morally wrong. I sympathize—China's back, it's powerful, it wants to be respected, it deserves that. I completely agree. But, the problem for Germany was that the more powerful it became, the more it frightened its neighbors.

And, it's sort of a function of geography; one of the reasons people trust the United States is because we're far away. And China doesn't have that luxury. So, I think, that if I were China, the policy of Bismarck is the right policy, which is strong, "we demand to be respected," we have, speaking as Chinese, "we have decisive influence in a lot of respects, but we also understand that restraint is crucial to our success." And, I think—discount what I say because I'm an American—but, I also think from China's perspective that's the right strategy. The question will be whether that can be sustained.

Zhao: Okay, since you brought up U.S. alliance in East Asia and the potential for these countries to go nuclear in the future—actually some non-Chinese experts have recently argued that it's in America's interests to actually let these allies go nuclear, to let them develop their independent nuclear weapons capability to counter the perceived growth of Chinese conventional military capacity. So, would you go one step further, go to the extreme by saying it's in American interest to see the allies go nuclear?

Colby: Well, definitely not right now, I think the United States should oppose allied proliferation under current conditions. I think the existing system is the best one, which is that—or, maybe it's not the best but it's good enough—which is, the United States provides this, sort of, oversight or, sort of, supervisory function in security terms and we're the country that has nuclear weapons for our allies like Japan and South Korea; and, I think those countries are better off with the U.S. having them rather than them having independent capabilities. I think China's better off, I think that's the reality. The question is, if things deteriorated, and if China pushed strongly in this direction, what would I say? I think the United States would have to look at it from a strategic point of view, ultimately. The United States would have to say, "We face a new situation. Obviously, proliferation is something that we oppose, and we think is bad, but we also have to acknowledge the tradeoffs." In the past the U.S. has, ultimately, come around to think that some degree of—that it would rather maintain its alliances with certain countries rather than fully oppose their nuclear weapons acquisitions. If Japan or South Korea this year, or in five years, pursued a nuclear weapon, I think the U.S. would say, "This is huge violation. This could be the end." But, if a kind of world emerges where the U.S. can't really credibly provide extended deterrence, I think the answer might well be very different.

Zhao: Okay, well, one last question and the easiest question. Given the current status of U.S.-Russian relations—given all the problems in Crimea, in Ukraine—what are your general thoughts about what will happen to nuclear arms control? I know you served as policy advisor to the Secretary of Defense representative to the new START treaty, and you saw the treaty being drafted and being negotiated and then being ratified. So, you played a role in the new START treaty and nuclear arms control. So, do you have any personal feelings about the current frustration over nuclear arms control, and do you see any specific, potential areas for progress?

Colby: Yeah, I think, in some respect nuclear arms control is now more important than it was. My view is that the whole abolition and disarmament agenda is a red herring; it's not feasible and is probably a bad idea, and new START and that kind of thing never really were practically connected to it but there was all this hubbub about abolition. What nuclear arms control is best for is when you're in situation with a country that you could actually get into a fight with, you want to

try to find ways to mitigate those risks, that could both precipitate conflict or that could generate pressures towards escalation.

So, given that we're actually in a position where we could actually get in a war with Russia—God forbid—now is when we should be going with arms control proposals. Now, what are those arms control proposals about? Those arms control proposals should be about stability. It should not be about reducing numbers. In a sense, right now may not be the best time politically, but my proposals to the Russians would have nothing to do with numbers. They would have to do with understanding, what the U.S. programs are and are not about, and what Russian programs are and are not about, with the idea that we don't want the Russians to misinterpret what we are doing. We want them to understand what we're doing when we're doing it, but, for instance, if we have a missile defense program that's about Iran or North Korea, we don't want the Russians to think it's about them. For instance, if we launch a missile against a North Korean missile, we don't want the Russians to think that that's a prelude to an attack on Russia. We want to be able to use that missile against North Korea, because we want the President to be able to say, "I'm not worried about a Russian response, I'm doing this about North Korea." So that's the kind of thing that we can do with the Russians and it would actually make a difference. But that has nothing to do with getting the world without nuclear weapons.

I honestly think new START, when it expires in 2021, we're going to want to keep a framework with the Russians, and we'll start thinking about that in a couple years more seriously, but I think the same thing applies with China. I did some work for CSIS [Center for Strategic and International Studies] on this a couple years ago with some friends and colleagues; the U.S. and China should be trying to think of constructive ideas where we could reduce risks towards escalation and so forth. Not about convincing the U.S. or China to get rid of nuclear weapons, it's not going to happen, but about avoiding misunderstandings in the midst of—in a sense, some of these CBM kind of things that we're doing with incidents at sea and preventing unnecessary or inadvertent escalation. One, or both, sides may want to escalate deliberately, in which case that's a different story, but you don't want escalation to be a mistake.

Zhao: Well, it's great to hear your very sobering insight. It's always the case that arms control is most needed when it is most difficult to achieve.

Colby: Yeah, exactly.

Zhao: But I'm very glad that, we have people as talented as you are working on these most difficult issues and making a contribution to better communications between the nuclear powers.

Colby: *Xiexie.*

Zhao: So, again, thank you very much, Elbridge, for spending time with me today and that's it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast. If you'd like to read or learn more about the nuclear policy and the U.S.-China relationship, you can find more articles, events, and podcasts on our website at www.carnegietsinghua.org. I encourage you to visit and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.

Colby: Thanks very much.

Zhao: Thank you so much.