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Transcript

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Episode 48: U.S. Nuclear Posture and Regional
Security Challenges

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

I’m very delighted to be joined by Professor Matthew Kroenig, who is an associate professor of government and foreign service and international relations field chair at Georgetown University and a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. Welcome, Professor Kroenig.

Kroenig: Thank you, Tong Zhao. It is a pleasure to be back here at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center.

Zhao: Thank you. Last month, Iran and its P-5 negotiating partners reached a framework agreement to end Iran’s nuclear program. You have emphasized the risks of a nuclear Iran to U.S. and regional security and have been skeptical of the promise of negotiations, even calling for U.S. airstrikes against Iran if negotiations failed to produce a satisfactory comprehensive agreement. How would you evaluate the announced framework agreement and the prospects for final future accord?

Kroenig: I guess I would make a few points. First, you mentioned the military option, and I think in calling for the United States to do what it takes, including use force if necessary, to stop Iran from building nuclear weapons, is not at all unusual. I am, I think, someone who’s made the case more clearly than others but it is a bipartisan policy of the United States to have a policy of prevention, and a bipartisan approach to have a credible military option on the table, and so President Obama himself has said many times that the United States will do what it takes to stop Iran. But turning to diplomacy, my view is that this is not a good deal. The goal of U.S. policy, in this case and in cases historically, has been to stop the spread of sensitive nuclear technologies themselves. As you know, uranium enrichment and plutonium processing can be used to make fuel for weapons or for reactors so once a country has that capability, they’re essentially a latent nuclear power. And U.S. policy has been for a decade calling for Iran to give up its enrichment program. This was the policy under the Bush administration, but also President Obama in 2007 when he was a senator and a candidate for president, said that as president he would ‘stop Iran’s uranium enrichment program,’ and as you know, there are six U.N. Security Council resolutions that called on Iran to suspend its enrichment program. So I think by agreeing to a comprehensive final deal, where we allow Iran to keep two enrichment facilities, 6,000 centrifuges, there’s a big climb down from where we had been previously. I think this is a bad deal. I think we should have pushed for a deal that got Iran to eliminate its enrichment capability. I do think, however, that we are likely to get this deal, in part because I think it is such a good deal for Iran. It allows them to have their cake and eat it too. They get to keep latent nuclear weapons capability and get the sanctions lifted. So I think there is no reason not to take it.

Zhao: In case there is no deal that satisfies not only the White House, but also the Congress, and assuming that the United States is going to conduct a military strike against Iran, actually, if it’s successful in that operation in terms of eliminating Iran’s current nuclear facilities, how would the United States prevent Iran from merely reconstituting its program in secret, particularly given that a military strike would likely preclude any more future IAEA safeguard matters?

Kroenig: So I think I would disagree with some of the premise of the question, because I think non-proliferation policy is all about buying time. It always has been and I think it always will be, and that's the best argument in favor of a deal, that it will buy time. It doesn't guarantee that Iran never builds nuclear weapons either. And so I think a military strike as a last resort also would buy time, if it's clear that everything else has failed and if we do nothing, Iran will build nuclear weapons, then the military option is our only hope for a non-nuclear outcome. So it buys time, keeps the non-nuclear option alive. So many people argue, as your question hinted, that Iran will simply rebuild afterwards, so it would have been counterproductive in the end, but it will have bought time, and so I think that creates space for other things to intervene and also creates space for a full range of policy approaches. If we have more time, we have more time for sanctions, more time for diplomacy, more time for a possible future of military options, I think we would have an entire range of military tools to choose from after a strike. And if you look historically, there have been strikes on nuclear facilities in the past against Syria, against Iraq, against Nazi Germany during World War II, and in none of those cases did the countries redouble their efforts and quickly rebuild nuclear weapons after; rather in all of those cases, the countries stopped their nuclear program for a time and in all of those cases other events intervened that prevented those countries from getting nuclear weapons. So I think that's the most likely outcome of a strike against Iran. It would buy time and make it more likely than not that Iran doesn't build nuclear weapons in the foreseeable future.

Zhao: It's almost certain that even a limited U.S. air strike against Iran would certainly be met with retaliatory actions by Iran. So how would the United States avoid its own military action against Iran expanding to become a much larger conflict either between the United State and Iran or possibly even including other regional actors?

Kroenig: Well, the first thing I would point out is I completely agree [that] there are serious downside risks to a strike, but there are serious downside risks to a nuclear-armed Iran as well, so you have to weigh the question of what is worse. And my judgment, and I think the judgment of American officials who have looked at this carefully, is that the risks of a nuclear-armed Iran are greater than the risks of a military strike. So if it came to that, the United States would have to have a strategy to mitigate against those downside risks. So in terms of retaliation in a wider war, there are things the United States can do to manage it.

But I think the most important thing to understand is, Iran itself doesn't have an incentive to escalate the conflict. So put yourself in Iran's shoes, you're the Supreme Leader, your overarching goal is to protect the regime, protect the military, you wake up one morning and your nuclear facilities have been destroyed. But your regime is intact, your military is intact, so you would have to retaliate, you would want to restore deterrence internationally and save face domestically, but on the other hand, you wouldn't want to pick a full-scale war with the United States, a country that could destroy your military and your regime. So almost every Iranian military analyst I've talked to says it's likely the Supreme Leader would aim for some kind of calibrated response—to strike back but not too hard. And in fact, many of my critics, those who have argued that conflict would spiral out of control, agree with that assessment. Rather they argue it's the United States that wouldn't accept a limited conflict, it's the United States would seek to make it a bigger conflict, that if Iran looked like it might retaliate, that the United States would make it into a bigger war. I guess I have more faith in U.S. foreign policy than that, I don't think

it's in U.S. interests to fight a major war with Iran. It could be in our interests to destroy these nuclear facilities, and I think we could trade the destruction of those facilities for some limited Iranian retaliation, and it's hard for me to see how this turns into a major war in the region, as some have argued.

Zhao: Fair enough. So as we actually pay attention to Iran on the other part of the world, North Korea is busy building its nuclear capabilities and the most recent progress seems to be the reported test of the submarine-launched ballistic missile. Given your argument in the Iran case, how do you see the military option in addressing the DPRK nuclear problem? Realistically speaking, what military measures can the United States and others take against the DPRK?

Kroenig: It's much harder, as you know. It's much harder to destroy the program, in part because we don't know where all the facilities are, in part because we may not be able to destroy them. And also I think because the retaliation would be much more serious. North Korea might already have deliverable nuclear warheads according to some U.S. military assessments, and North Korea has the conventional capabilities on the border that could do a lot of damage to Seoul. So I think both in terms of the benefits and the costs, the equation is very different from [the Iran case]. I think preventive strikes must be [one aspect] of non-proliferation policy if we're serious about stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, but you can never have a one-size-fits-all policy, you always have to tailor the policy to the situation. So I think the military option can be an effective part of the U.S. approach in Iran. In North Korea, it's much harder.

Zhao: So we have discussed two regional examples, but now let's broaden the discussion a little bit and look at U.S. overall nuclear posture in the near future. After the Ukraine crisis, relations between NATO and Russia apparently are at their lowest point since the Cold War ended and many allies are debating how NATO member states might better respond to a potential future military conflict with Russia.

You have advocated that in order to prepare for and deter such an eventuality, the United States and its NATO allies should revise the alliance's nuclear posture, including reinforcing adjustable yield, tactical systems, nuclear-armed sea and air launched cruise missiles, and forward-deploying dual-capable aircraft to new NATO member states, such as Poland. Some other countries have highlighted the challenges posed to such a change by domestic projects within NATO member states as well as the risks of further antagonizing Russia. What do you think would be the likely response from Russia and what steps might the United States take to avoid some of the destabilizing effects of such a policy?

Kroenig: Well, you asked what we could do not to antagonize Russia, but I think the question is rather, what can we do to stop Russia from antagonizing Ukraine and the rest of Europe? Russia was the aggressor here, Russia is redrawing the map of Europe for the first time since World War II at gunpoint. So this is a threatening situation and a destabilizing situation. And so the question is, what can NATO do to deter Russia from doing something similar against a NATO ally, further destabilizing Europe? There needs to be a conventional element of that component, and many people have recognized that, but there's a nuclear element to Russian strategy, and as I talk about in this piece, the Russians think about de-escalatory nuclear strikes, that in the event of a conventional conflict, they could turn to nuclear use early in a conflict in order to force the West to sue for peace on terms favorable to Moscow. In order to deter that, I think the West needs a

more credible nuclear response to this Russian nuclear threat. At present, I don't think we have that. The call for more flexible nuclear options is to make sure that we have a more credible response to a limited Russian nuclear strike in the event of a conventional conflict. So rather than destabilizing or antagonizing Russia, I see such a move as stabilizing. I think it would deter Russia, and then I think Russia's aggression in Ukraine is partly emboldened by the belief that Russia has this nuclear backstop, and so I think if we had a more credible nuclear deterrent, it makes it less likely that Russia engages in this hybrid warfare at lower levels.

Zhao: So what specific measures do you think the United States and NATO allies can take to actually reinforce the credibility of the deterrent?

Kroenig: So the problem I see now is that NATO and the United States have dominant conventional capabilities and strong strategic nuclear capabilities, but there's really a gap at the tactical level. Russia doesn't have that gap. Russia maintained a lot of its tactical systems during the Cold War. And I think that's what makes this de-escalatory nuclear option credible for them, they could use nuclear weapons in a limited way against a NATO airbase, against NATO ships, against NATO forces, and we would have a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, we could try to escalate with strategic nuclear weapons, but then Russia might retaliate with strategic weapons—a dangerous escalation toward nuclear war. We could try to fight through a nuclear attack with conventional force, but it seems silly, frankly, to try to approach it that way. And then we have these dual-capable aircraft in Europe with these B-61 gravity bombs, so we could try to fly those over into a conflict zone in Eastern Europe. But Russia has some of the best air defenses in the world, and so they could shoot those planes down.

If you're doing something as important as launching a nuclear strike, you might want to have some control over whether it arrives at the intended destination or not. So I think there are a range of options that NATO should consider, and this is something that I'm studying now myself to consider the various costs and benefits. But I think some of the things that could fill that gap would be to return to a nuclear-armed sea-launch cruise missile, which the United States used to have and we got rid of. It could mean forward-deploying B-52 bombers armed with air-launched cruise missiles to Europe. It could mean forward-deploying the B-61 gravity bombs further East in Europe. At this point, I don't know which of these various options would be best, or which combination of these options, but I think these are the kinds of options NATO needs to think about to make sure it has a credible response to a limited Russian nuclear strike.

Zhao: Interesting. To build [on] the above question: while such deployments as you just mentioned might be geographically limited to Europe and directed at Russia, it would nonetheless signal a broader change in the U.S. approach to nuclear weapons in its defense planning. What do you think would be the impact of such a change in U.S. nuclear posture on other countries, particularly China, which might view such revisions as potentially threatening to their own security interests?

Kroenig: Well in Asia, I really see only one configuration in the nuclear balance of power that's consistent with strategic stability in the region. And I think that's balance of power where China has a secure second-strike capability, and I think has a reliable nuclear response, but where the United States maintains a clear nuclear advantage. And I think the reason that that's the only stable balance is because if China fears that its second-strike capability is threatened, it will likely

take steps for quantitative and qualitative improvements in its arsenal to make sure it gets there so I think it's difficult for the United States to maintain a first-strike advantage, first of all. And second of all, it would lead to an arms race because China would take steps to prevent that from happening. But, I think the United States needs to maintain a strategic advantage, because if China were to seek parity with the United States, I think that would make America's allies in the region very nervous—maybe Japan, maybe South Korea. They would come to doubt the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella, and they may take steps such as building their own nuclear capabilities that could lead to a regional arms race. So I think the United States needs to maintain regional superiority but not threaten China's secure second-strike capabilities. I think building these more secure, tactical second-strike capabilities that I'm talking about in Europe, even if these capabilities were deployed in Asia, that could be consistent with these broader configuration where the United States has an advantage but China's secure second-strike capability isn't threatened. I think that is an important configuration to maintain.

Zhao: In your writings, you generally have been critical of disarmament, viewing total disarmament as unrealistic, and you argue that nuclear weapons are valuable tools in pursuing and safeguarding a country's national security interests, especially you said that obtaining nuclear superiority brings about tangible national security benefits. But as we are talking right now, the NPT review conference is underway at the UN headquarters in New York, and nuclear weapon states are receiving increasing pressure to reduce or further reduce their nuclear weapons. Where should the United States strike the right balance between maintaining nuclear superiority and fulfilling its commitment to disarmament?

Kroenig: Both of our countries have promised in the NPT in Article 6 to pursue negotiations in good faith toward eventual nuclear disarmament, and I think that's important. I think it's important to the United States to maintain its commitments including to Article 6. I think the question is how best to do that. I think there's a widespread perception in the arms control community that maintaining that Article 6 commitment means continually reducing nuclear forces. But that's not written into the treaty and that's not what I see as commitment to Article 6. There's something of a chicken and egg problem here. Does disarmament lead to peace? Or will peace in the future lead to disarmament? And I think it's more the latter. Former U.S. President Ronald Reagan once said, 'We arm ourselves because we mistrust each other. We don't mistrust each other because we're armed.' I think that's right. I think making progress on Article 6 is much broader. I think it means addressing the underlying conditions of insecurity in international politics, and I think if we can get to a place where those underlying security tensions are eliminated or greatly reduced, then disarmament would flow freely from that. So I think Article 6 is important but the way to get there is through ameliorating security concerns and that's something Washington and Beijing do every day in their own ways. I see that as maintaining our commitment to Article 6.

Zhao: Many people are interested in how the U.S. arms control policy might evolve in the near future. How do you think about the existing Obama administration's arms control policy in general and how the next administration might continue or change some of the existing policies?

Kroenig: I see arms control as a tool. I see it as a means to an end. The end from the U.S. foreign policy point of view is American national security, and so arms control can sometimes be a helpful

tool for achieving that. But I think there are some people who view arms control as an end in and of itself—[they think that] agreements are a good thing, reductions are a good thing, and I disagree with that. I think part of the—one of my criticisms of the Obama administration, is that I think the administration has tended to see arms control as an end in and of itself. I think that's actually undermined American security in a number of places. I think we see that with Russia, with the administration so concerned about arms control, doing things like promising Dmitry Medvedev when he was president over things like the hot-mic episode, with President Obama promising to cave essentially into Russian demands on missile defense in order to try to get arms control agreements. I think the Russians read that as signals of weakness and I think it's less likely that Russia would have invaded Ukraine and had the rest of the behavior it did today if they thought they had a stronger opponent in the White House. But I think they saw this arms control agenda and other things as a sign the administration wasn't necessarily willing to stand up to Russia to protect American interests.

Zhao: Very interesting. Thank you very much, Doctor Kroenig for spending time with me today and for offering very insightful comments.

Kroenig: Thank you very much for having me. Hopefully we can do it again sometime.

Zhao: That's it for this edition of the Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast. If you'd like to read more about nuclear policy and the U.S.-China relationship, you can find more articles, events and podcasts on our website, at <http://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!