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The Obama Administration's Pending One-Third Cut to the Nuclear Arsenal -- National Security Implications

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DOUG FEITH:

Thank you, Frank. It's always a treat to have a chance to appear with Frank and support the work of the Center for Security Policy which is an important institution in Washington and –

FRANK GAFFNEY:

You were present at the creation.

DOUG FEITH:

Present at the creation –

FRANK GAFFNEY:

Founding chairman of our board.

DOUG FEITH:

Frank mentioned that the Obama administration is, according to recent reports in the New York Times and elsewhere, considering reducing the number of US nuclear weapons from approximately 1550, which was the number in the recent US/Soviet nuclear reductions treaty, new START agreement to around a thousand. And the – I just want to give a few general comments about considerations I think that people should have in mind as they – as they follow this news. The – I don't think that there's necessarily a problem in reducing nuclear force levels. I mean, I think reasonable people can debate what size our arsenal needs to be. And fifteen hundred, you know, is a round number. If somebody wants to make an argument it could be a little bit less than fifteen hundred, I don't immediately react and say that that's – that's the end of Western Civilization. But I'm disturbed when I read some of the – of the commentary about the subject in the public debate. Because there is a common assumption that lower levels of nuclear weapons are inherently a good thing. And I think that people are focused on – they're focused on the wrong idea of success or benefit. The issue of the size of the US arsenal relates to

a number of factors. One of the most important of which, I believe, is the – what in the Bush Administration we referred to as dissuasion.

The – the general view that we had when we were doing the nuclear posture review at the beginning of the Bush Administration, the George W. Bush Administration, was that it was important to set a level for our nuclear forces that would provide reasonable assurance to those countries in the world that are relying on our nuclear capability for their security. The consequence of failing to do that would be to encourage those countries to seek security not under the US nuclear umbrella, but by pursuing their own nuclear weapons programs. And our view was that that's not desirable because if the number of nuclear powers in the world increases enormously, the danger of nuclear war increases enormously. And the risks to the United States increase and the world, I think, is a safer place if the United States has a nuclear umbrella the integrity of which is clear to all of the various countries that have decided to foreswear nuclear weapons for themselves because they were content to rely on our – on our assurances. So that's an assurance point. We also focused in our nuclear posture review on this issue of dissuasion. We want to have a nuclear capability that is formidable enough that nobody thinks that they could easily match it. We want to dissuade people from thinking this is an area where a little bit of effort on their part would put them on par with us. And there's – an element of that is maintaining the triad, the combination of land-based, air-based, and sea-based forces. That has importance for assurance purposes, because the survivability of our nuclear deterrent is crucial to being credible as a nuclear power. And it has importance for dissuasion purposes and ultimately as – I mean, I'm now at the Hudson Institute and the founder of the Hudson Institute, Herman Kahn, basically taught the world that all of this talk of nuclear weapons and deterrence and dissuasion and assurance and anything that you want to – to discuss regarding nuclear weapons ultimately has to be rooted in a realistic view of how nuclear weapons might be used so that everybody can draw the right conclusions and that, you know, talking about nuclear weapons simply from the point of view of deterrence without discussing how they would actually be used, how it would affect war and stability, is a big mistake. So he was an advocate of thinking very realistically about even, as he put it, unthinkable subjects like, you know, the possible use of nuclear weapons in war.

And I think if we take Herman Kahn's advice and think about it in a really hardheaded sensible fashion, we actually have the greatest chance of avoiding nuclear war altogether. I mean, we have this very impressive run since August of 1945 when nobody has used a nuclear weapon in war and one of the greatest challenges we have is how do you keep that going for decades to come. And what we – what we do with our nuclear arsenal and how competent we are in maintaining a credible arsenal that can provide the necessary assurance, the necessary dissuasion, the necessary deterrence, and the ability to defeat an enemy if necessary, all of that is the way to achieve the most human end, which is keeping this run going of the world living without the, you know, the catastrophe of nuclear war. So our goal, in my view, should be maximizing security and stability, not maximizing reductions. And I guess the main point

that I would make is what disturbs me about a lot of the debates about the subject is there is an assumption on the part of a number of people that the way to reduce the danger of nuclear war in the world is to maximize reductions. And in particular, maximizing American reductions. Because that's called leadership by some people. And I think that that's just an irresponsible – an irresponsible position. Now what the Obama administration has explained from the beginning is that underlying its whole approach to the nuclear weapons issue is the president's unprecedented declaration of support for nuclear zero, a world without nuclear weapons. And if one reads the fine print on the administration's views on nuclear zero, there is a recognition that it's at most aspirational. The administration doesn't say that it's a highly realistic goal. It doesn't say that it's anything that can be achieved in the near term. But they say it's important to set out as an aspiration the idea that the world will someday get to the point where there are no nuclear weapons, where all of the powers that have nuclear weapons will agree to destroy them completely and verifiably.

Now I – what I'd like to do since this really is an important element of the administration's thinking is just spend a minute or two on this nuclear zero point. Cause it, too, is often thought about in an incorrect way. And what gave nuclear zero it's – the political potency that it has is that a number of very eminent people from Republican administrations, mainly, signed on to it as an aspiration. The idea, I think, had its origins in the thinking of a very fine man, Max Campbellman, who was a US arms control negotiator during the Reagan Administration. And the idea has been signed onto by George Schultz and Henry Kissinger and that gave the idea, as I said, I think a lot of political potency, credibility with a lot of people. And, you know, when you're dealing with people of that stature, it's important to try to think the issue through from their point of view. And I had long talks with Max Campbellman about this. I think the motivation behind this idea is a desire to sound humane, to present oneself as humane and to provide inspiration for people that we really don't – we don't have nuclear weapons cause we want to use them. We don't have nuclear weapons because we're evil or oblivious to the moral or physical catastrophe that nuclear war would be. And so to a large extent, it's a statement about oneself. I mean, it's one of those things where I think the advocates of nuclear zero are interested in telling the world about themselves more than telling the world about the security problems that the world faces. And, you know, maybe there's some value in that. Maybe there's some value in that to them. Maybe there's some value to that broader than them. But I think that that kind of talk comes at a cost. And I think the lack of realism of the goal is a problem that has costs. For a president of the United States to talk about nuclear zero, even with all the hedging and all of the qualifications and conditions that president Obama has attached to his remark, I mean basically he said, all of the relevant countries would have to agree and it would take a process and there would have to be verification and inspections and it's not going to happen in the near term.

And he, as I said, if you read the fine print, it's highly qualified. Even with all those highly qualified statements, for the president of the United States to say that the goal of our country is a world without nuclear weapons I think strikes any really thoughtful person around the world as being either charitably realistic, uncharitably cynical and dishonest. Because I don't think anybody who has real responsibility for security believes that it is realistic. And then there's the question of why would the president of the United States say something that is patently unrealistic? That – basically, you know, every bad guy in the world is going to sign on and comply in defiance of all of human history with, you know, a complete and verifiable ban on the possession of nuclear weapons. And I think that if the president of the United States looks either unrealistic or dishonest about an issue as important as this, it undermines the assurance point. I mean, people are going to look and they're going to say how reliable is the United States in making nuclear commitments if the president can talk that way? And I think it's a serious – it's a serious question. It could drive others around the world, other countries that currently rely on the United States, to decide that they're nervous. Now, this nervousness gets aggravated when they consider the talk that we're not just talking about this aspiration of a nuclear free world, but also serious reductions that might make it impossible to sustain the triad, which means it affects the survivability of our force. There's also a very important point, which you can – you can derive from the president's own material on the subject. One of the things that president Obama said, his administration said, about nuclear zero is how important until we get it it is to maintain the most talented scientific and engineering support for our nuclear program. In other words, he implicitly acknowledged in his administration's own material that it would be very dangerous if we cannot attract the most talented young engineers and scientists into our nuclear weapons infrastructure. Because our whole deterrence depends on the quality of those people. Well, I think that when the president of the United States declares that our ultimate goal is nuclear zero, and he's talking about cutting money and cutting numbers, one of the things he's doing is discouraging the most talented people from going into this field and that's a serious cost.

There's also, by the way, on undermining assurance, is the attitude of the administration toward the major proliferation problems in the world, Iran and North Korea, also undermines confidence in the United States and makes other countries believe that they're looking into a future that is going to include additional nuclear powers and perhaps it is a time – I think this is a major miscalculation on the part of China, for example, which instead of working with us to do everything reasonable to get the North Koreans to stop their nuclear program, is more interested in putting a thumb in Uncle Sam's eye than in really working against the North Koreans. And one of the consequences is the Chinese may wake up one day with new nuclear weapons in the hands of South Korea, possibly Japan, possibly Taiwan, not to mention other countries in the Asia/Pacific area. And I think, you know, if that kind of proliferation happens it's very bad for us, it's very bad for China, it's very bad for the world, and it will be in part a consequence of the failure to take proper action against North Korea, Iran, and the like. Anyway, to close, what I would say is – the last point I would make is, nuclear zero, some people have said, well,

even if it's not realistic to think that we'll actually get there, the goal is good, isn't it? And I would just like to say I don't believe even the goal is good. And the reason is you cannot do a lobotomy on the collective brain of the world. You can't uninvent nuclear weapons. People know how to make them. So if you could just do a thought experiment that all of the countries of the world that have nuclear weapons actually did agree to destroy them completely and verifiably, and so you actually achieve the end state, you would not be ending war, necessarily. You would not be ending evil in the world. I mean, nobody who says nuclear zero, it depends on the ending of evil or war in the world. So if you had war, and you had a major war, the countries at war whose lives would be hanging in the balance in that war would have an incentive to reinvent nuclear weapons And there would be great pressure for any country that did that to use them. And I think there's a strong argument to be made that the world would actually be less stable from a nuclear point of view under those circumstances than it is currently. And so I think that this – the problem is a classic government problem. It's a problem of achieving the – not simply failing to achieve your goal, but achieving the opposite of your intended goal. And I think that that's a sad story about this nuclear zero initiative and that I think is something that I'd like to see more people appreciate. Especially as they're considering these new reduction proposals from the administration.

FRANK GAFFNEY:

And the appointment of a man who espouses them to be the next Secretary of Defense. Doug, quick – thank you very much – two quick things. One, could you address the question of whether or not, in addition to the points you've made, ridding the world of nuclear weapons being not necessarily a permanent end state, but the whole proposition that what you would actually do at that point is make the world safe for conventional war. And our experience with conventional wars before we had the advent of nuclear deterrence. And secondly, you sort of alluded to it or touched on it at least in connection with your point about discouraging smart young people from getting in to this line of work. I just – I would be very interested in your thoughts on – what I think of as the atrophying of our deterrent. Given that we haven't modernized and tested and so on.

DOUG FEITH:

Well, let me start with your last question first because a very important element of this picture is the nuclear testing question. And when we talk about actions that the Obama administration has taken that might tend to undermine confidence in the American nuclear umbrella, The administration's support for the comprehensive test ban treaty is part of it. The – you have this extraordinary situation where one of the most complex pieces of equipment ever produced, you know, a nuclear weapon – doesn't get tested. And, you know, for political reasons, administrations have not wanted to test and it's, you know, the politics are certainly understandable. And the scientists have done lots of calculations and they've done lots of work and they've said, well, we can do computer modelings that substitutes for testing. And these are, you know, a lot of these people are smart. And what they say, you know, sounds okay. I

mean, it's certainly, they know more about it than I do. But there is a problem of common sense here. And that is, we're dealing with materials that are in some cases inherently volatile. I mean, they change over time. And we don't have thousands of years of experience holding equipment like this on the shelf. And we're now at the point where decades are going by where items that are on the shelf are being certified as being workable, reliable, will have the effects that we intend them to have. Even though they have not been tested. They have not been test driven. I mean, the interesting thing is an automobile is a piece of cake compared to a nuclear weapon. Nobody would dream of buying an automobile without driving it. I mean, there's no question that we know how to make automobiles, but you still wouldn't buy an automobile without driving it. And the idea that you would have a nuclear weapon on the shelf for how many decades and say, you know, it passed its design expiration date and the idea that you would say, well, based on all of our calculations, based on everything we know, it should be okay. You say, well, what about something that maybe nobody anticipated? Would you take the certification of any scientist that – no, no, no, there's nothing that nobody anticipated. I mean, when in history has there ever been anything complex where you could say there's nothing that nobody – I mean, just, as I said, it defies common sense. And the longer we go without any tests, again, it becomes one of a number of factors that other countries will weigh in deciding whether they want to rely on the United States. I hope that countries do continue to rely on the United States. I don't want anything that I'm saying to be taken as encouraging anybody to go. I think the world will be a much worse, much more dangerous place. And I think that the chances of nuclear war go up tremendously if instead of having, whatever it is, eight or so countries with nuclear weapons, we wind up having twenty or thirty countries in the world with nuclear weapons. That's very, very undesirable. And I would want our nuclear weapons policy to be focused on how can we keep the number down, how can we keep the risks of nuclear war to a minimum? And if that can be served by lowering nuclear levels, fine. But if it's served by keeping nuclear arsenals up, then that's what you want to do. And the real test is stability, the real tests is reducing the risks of nuclear war, the real test is not simply minimizing nuclear arsenals and, in particular, America's nuclear arsenal.

FRANK GAFFNEY:

Very well said. Can we take one more? I didn't mean to dominate this. You've answered it volubly, but one more question and then we'll move on to Dan.

MAN:

Yeah. I used to be a submariner. So it pains me to say so, but the other parts of the triad are pretty important. I was, during the state of the union, someone commented on how some conservative tweeted and a liberal tweeted back completely ignorantly about how doing away with the land based portion of our ICBMs would hurt our deterrence. Could you just quickly, for the benefit of everyone, so that they don't assume that they know, how, if we don't have any ICBMs, how much simpler a counter-force strike would be against the United States deterrent? Many people don't seem to understand that the number of targets goes down from hundreds to in the single digits.

DOUG FEITH:

Well, I mean, I think what you just said is a large part of the answer. There is a strong argument for each of the three legs of the triad. Each performs different functions, each can be used in crisis in different ways. Having all three greatly complicates the calculations of enemies. And anybody who makes the argument that we should be kind of simplifying our force to their force, simplify the calculations of our enemies, I think is making a strategic error.

FRANK GAFFNEY:

Amen. Let me just close with one thought. A colleague of ours who used to run one of the major nuclear facilities once told me that, a pro pro your point, Doug, about the certitude that we could have in the computations that cause us to believe that these untested weapons for decades beyond their shelf life and so on are still perfectly usable if need be. He said that this very bright young man, one of those attracted still to this business, came to him at one point and expressed frustration. He said, I hate experimentation. It interferes with my calculations. And indeed it often does. Doug, thank you very much. [APPLAUSE]