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At George Mason University's Antonin Scalia Law School



THE RETURN OF NUCLEAR: Are We Ready to Compete?

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On the heels of President Trump's announcement that he would meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, the National Security Institute hosted two panels bringing together experts from the federal government, private sector, think tanks, and academia to explore the internal and external forces impacting U.S. nuclear policy today.

Panel 1 – Prepared or Posturing: Does the Recent Nuclear Posture Review Effectively Address Today's Threat?

The Nuclear Posture Review, a congressionally-mandated report released by the U.S. Department of Defense in February 2018, provides a roadmap for the next decade of the nation's nuclear strategy. Significantly, as Mr. Ford noted, this is the first such review conducted "in an environment of worsening trends." Mr. Ford opined that the United States can no longer assume that the country operates in an "enduringly benign environment," a reality reflected in other recently-released strategy documents as well, such as the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy.

Ms. Rusten weighed in on more specific provisions of the Nuclear Posture Review. While she was heartened to see its discussion of cybersecurity, she was also disappointed that the review did not directly address the prevention of human error.

After moderator Mr. Jaffer introduced the topic of U.S.-Russia relations, Dr. Harvey described Vladimir Putin as motivated by the decline of Russia after the end of the Cold War—viewing Russia's nuclear program as a means to increase the country's stature in the international community. Mr. Ford commented that although the past approach to Russia may have been too

PANEL 1

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Moderator:
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gentle, the Nuclear Posture Review represents an assertive step in the right direction. Mr. Ford emphasized, however, the need to “preserve a future for engagement.”

Mr. Jaffer then turned the conversation towards North Korea and what recent diplomatic overtures mean for the future. Mr. Ford expressed qualified optimism, noting that although the United States still faces challenges on the diplomatic front, “we’re delighted to have the opportunity to see where this goes.” Dr. Harvey, meanwhile, was generally pessimistic. “I’ve seen ‘Lucy and the football’ too many times,” he quipped. Ms. Rusten, closing the discussion, emphasized that this is just the beginning of a long diplomatic process and that if a first meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong Un ends poorly, the United States should not declare the end of diplomacy.

Panel 2 – Nuclear Storms Back: How are Rogue Powers and Potential Competitors Impacting U.S. Strategy?

Dr. Montgomery began the second panel by observing that after years of deprioritizing nuclear weaponry, we seem to be entering a “second nuclear age.” Mr. Collina shared his concern that the Nuclear Posture Review is a radical departure from past policy. In his opinion, its favorable attitude towards first use only increases the likelihood of a full-on nuclear war. Dr. Mount joined in, cautioning that we have forgotten the Cold War’s lesson regarding the value of conventional deterrence.

Shifting the discussion away from the Nuclear Posture Review itself, moderator Dr. Limbago focused the conversation on the nuclear activities of both U.S. enemies and allies. Dr. Montgomery emphasized the importance of regional stability, expressing concern about nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Dr. Mount downplayed the danger posed by new nuclear aspirants, but noted that rolling back existing nuclear programs will continue to pose a challenge. Meanwhile, Dr. Reiss explained how U.S. treaty agreements are key to regional stability. Honoring our treaty obligations, she posited, will maintain our “nuclear umbrella” and discourage our allies from developing their own nuclear programs.

Lastly, Dr. Limbago asked the panelists how major technological advancements might impact U.S. nuclear strategy. Dr. Mount discussed the need to modernize our nuclear arsenal in the short term. In the long term, Dr. Montgomery focused on artificial intelligence, exploring how it could be used to take human beings out of the “delivery process.” Both Dr. Reiss and Mr. Collina voiced the need for a more sophisticated missile defense system.

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