

Congressional Oversight of Nuclear Weapons

Congresswoman Ellen Tauscher began the panel with a quote from General James E. Cartwright, Commander U.S. Strategic Command, which underscored the need for Congress to undertake a new dialogue on nuclear weapons.

Rep. Tauscher continued by outlining the reasons for the lack of Congressional discussion on nuclear issues. Rep. Tauscher made the following points:

- Congress does not have a defined role in the nuclear debate
- A shortage of experts on nuclear proliferation in Congress
- Changes in leadership on the Armed Services Committee led to the dissolution of the nuclear weapons' panel.

Rep. Tauscher said the lack of attention to nuclear concerns was due in part to the fact that most members of Congress represent districts that are not concerned with nuclear issues. They therefore have less incentive to delve into these nuclear issues.

Rep. Tauscher delineated what Congress needs in relation to the nuclear debate:

- Experts on nuclear weapons
- Candid conversation about non-proliferation issues
- An institutionalized group that researches and understands nonproliferation issues
- Representation by people without an ideological perspective.

In conclusion, Rep. Tauscher stated that with the above, Congress would be able to engage in meaningful, sustained nonproliferation discourse.

Stephen Schwartz began by giving a brief history of the congressional role in the nuclear debate:

- Historically, Congress has shown little interest in issues related to nuclear weapons
- Congress' oversight of nuclear weapons has been marked by long periods of inattention followed by short periods of attention, after a crisis or scandal
- Congress maintains a conviction that more weapons are better, without any discussion of why this is true
- The Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy greatly influenced the growth of the nuclear complex

Next, Mr. Schwartz discussed recent congressional acts on nuclear weapons, which included an investigation into the collapse of the weapons' complex (1988-1992), and a proposal for increased support of the Department of Energy

Mr. Schwartz then explained why Congress is not actively engaged in nonproliferation matters.

- Lack of incentive to get involved
- A need for basic knowledge about nuclear programs and facilities

- Organizational structure of congress: responsibility spread among several committees
- Few experts or leaders on nuclear issues.
- Lack of staff resources
- Lack of time for in-depth examination of the issues
- Issues are viewed as too complex
- No precedent for sustained involvement

Mr. Schwartz offered a number of solutions to remedy the problems, which includes:

- Establishing new House and Senate sub-committees with specific responsibilities for all nuclear programs
- A consolidated nuclear weapons budget
- An annual examination of strategies
- The establishment of a nuclear weapons caucus.

Mr. Schwartz closed with a warning that if Congress continues to do nothing, a new weapons' complex may be created without the knowledge of Congress.

Amy Wolf addressed the current environment on Capitol Hill. She attributes Congress' lack of interest in nuclear weapons to two things: The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Gulf War. She added that most Members were elected post-1991, and are not familiar with the cold war. Today, Congress considers the most serious threats to national security to be biological and chemical weapons. Nonproliferation is not important to their constituents; therefore, the incentive for Congressional activity on nonproliferation is lacking.

Ms. Wolf ended by explaining that there may not be a solution to this lack of oversight, because Members do not view nuclear proliferation as a legitimate concern.

Summary by Lynnea Williams, Georgetown University, MSFS 2005