

Utility of Nuclear Weapons – Tuesday, November 8, 2005, 9:00 am

The Utility of Nuclear Weapons

Daryl Kimball chaired and opened the session with a question to the panelists: under what circumstances could nuclear weapons be used?

General Eugene Habiger (ret.) spoke first, saying that the key is not to build nuclear weapons that are attractive to use. He also described the requirements process, stressing that this is carried out initially by civilians, not the military. Civilian policy, he said, had been slow to react to the end of the Cold War, and was lagging behind the military. General Habiger concluded by saying that the US should not use nuclear weapons, should not make them attractive to use, but should continue to have them.

Henrik Salander spoke next and began by posing the question: if it is assumed that nuclear weapons have military use, can they be used politically? He observed that the status quo in terms of states possessing nuclear weapons is inherently unstable. In 2050, he predicted, there will be several more states with nuclear weapons than today. However, he commented that, in his opinion, nuclear weapons do not have that much utility. The difficulty is that, in the post-Cold War world, such weapons have a credibility problem. Mr. Salander concluded by observing that the political impossibility of using nuclear weapons is gradually making them devoid of utility.

Frank Miller took a more assertive position. He argued that nuclear weapons underwrite the ability of the UK and the US to deter attacks on their vital interests. Such weapons, he argued, guarantee not only the security of the UK and US but also that of their allies. Conventional capabilities, he said, can not replace that of nuclear weapons. Such weapons were built never to be used. But paradoxically, they are used every day, he argued, because of their deterrence value. Without the US nuclear deterrent, allies would either be subject to nuclear blackmail or would have to develop their own nuclear weapons. Mr. Miller concluded by posing his own question: is there a need for the US to have nuclear weapons? If the answer is yes, then the US will at some point have to build a new generation of weapons to replace the existing ones, which have a limited life.

Ivan Oelrich argued that the US was at the end of a long process of de-nuclearizing its military, a process that been driven by advances in conventional weapons technology. However, there are some missions that by definition require nuclear weapons. These include deterring a Chinese buildup of nuclear weapons, and deterring a nuclear attack.

A vigorous Q&A session ensued. In response to the importance of verification as stocks of nuclear weapons decline, Miller answered that at current levels, verification is not as important as it used to be. However, at lower levels (about 600) verification becomes more important. Solander answered a question on negative security assurances by saying that at present, these did not seem to be in place, at least, not among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Habiger responded to a question on alert rates by saying he did not see a linkage between alert rates and number of weapons. He responded to another question on resource competition by saying it could develop serious scenarios, for example a new Cold War focused on energy supplies. In response to an allegation that US allies are an excuse for the US to retain a nuclear capability, Miller said it was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. Habiger answered the last question by saying we have been dealt

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a hand and we have to play with these cards. Nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented. Kimball closed the session, and thanked the speakers for their participation.

Summary by Drosten Fisher, Georgetown University, MSFS 2005