Address to the NNSA-NDU Integrated Deterrence Roundtable

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I began my recent article in the Texas National Security Review ¹ with the famous quote from John F. Kennedy: “We should never negotiate from fear, but we should never fear to negotiate.” I love this quote, because it backs up my conviction that diplomacy is a vital aspect of our national security strategy.

It is how we are able to change the status quo without resort to the use of force. At the same time, it bolsters our deterrence posture, enabling us to convey tough deterrence messages when necessary and hold out the olive branch when possible. In other words, diplomacy is the ying and yang of deterrence—the stick and the carrot in one single tool. To me, it is a core aspect of integrated deterrence.

The tool has several moving parts, first and foremost communications. They can be conducted in many ways. The most effective are back-channel communications, which can drive messages home privately, away from the glare of public opinion. If conducted at a high level, they bring top decision makers quickly to the table and may spark quick action. If conducted at an expert level, they allow the sides to work through delicate issues and prepare the ground for high-level action later. Person to person is best, but telephone calls and video chats can also work, especially if the two principals know each other and have worked together over time.

Routine messaging, for example through the National Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers between Washington and Moscow, are also important. They can keep communications flowing and should be used to the full extent possible. They can play an important role in crises—after years of passing routine notifications, the U.S. NRRC played a vital role on 9/11, getting a message to the Russians quickly that our heightened military readiness was a counterterror action and not directed at them.

Although we should avoid playing megaphone diplomacy, talking to our counterparts via the press, sometimes it is unavoidable when the other side isn’t picking up the phone. In that case, broadcast, print and now social media can play an important role. Although Twitter isn’t the most popular social medium, it still seems to be the favorite one of diplomats and politicians around the world. I haven’t yet seen diplomatic dances on TikTok channels, and I suppose we can thank our lucky stars for that.

I think that the Biden Administration’s recent approaches to the Chinese have been practically a textbook case of good diplomatic practice. First, communications at a high level and in person:

from NSA Jake Sullivan to his counterpart, top Chinese foreign policy advisor Wang Yi—over 10 hours in Vienna last month; and from CIA Director Bill Burns in Beijing to a number of top Chinese officials, also in May. News of these meetings only emerged after the fact, and the results of the meetings have stayed confidential.

Second, when the Chinese will not communicate—refusing a meeting of SecDef Austin with the Chinese Defense Minister at the Shangri-La Conference, the Biden Administration has taken to the airwaves, talking forcefully about the value of mil-mil communications in avoiding unintended escalation. Of course, the Chinese are taking to the airwaves themselves, protesting the freedom of navigation passages that the United States and Canada undertook over the same weekend—but it is incumbent on us to keep up the messages that convey our intent and indeed our strong desire to put a floor under the relationship.

The other aspect of the diplomacy tool that I like to emphasize is process. Sergio Jaramillo, the former high commissioner for peace in Colombia, has argued convincingly that if you cannot trust your interlocutors, then make sure that you can trust the process. His standard for producing that trust is simple: If the process is generating good results, then you can trust it.

Until recently, we had an excellent example of a process that could be trusted even in the midst of this terrible war in Ukraine: the Black Sea grain deal involving Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the United Nations. With Russians and Ukrainians working together to inspect the cargoes, a more difficult inspection regime is difficult to imagine. Despite profound animosity between Russia and Ukraine, over 20 million tons of food left Ukrainian Black Sea ports from the July 2022 start of the initiative through February 2023.

Since that time, the Russians have tried to stymy the deal because they say their own foodstuffs and fertilizer are not getting out to markets as they’d been promised. I am glad the players have been able to extend it for two months into mid-summer and I hope that a fix for the Russian products can be found in that time. My initial point remains, however: here is a case where the process was producing results, even though the participants did not trust each other one bit.

I’ll say one last thing about diplomacy as an aspect of deterrence: it is important to avoid monochrome behavior. An example of this is the storied stubbornness of the Soviet-era Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev famously declared that he could ask Gromyko to “sit on a block of ice” until the other side capitulated in the negotiations. This tradition has come down through the years in the practice of Russian negotiators who can sit through the night to insist on their point while everyone else is longing to sleep.

To be effective, a diplomat has to be able to skillfully call on many moods. One of the goals is to keep one’s counterparts slightly off balance, so they do not relax into thinking that their negotiating goals will be easy to accomplish—or alternatively, impossible to accomplish. If the latter happens, then they will simply walk away.

The main point is that “monochrome diplomacy” is not the best way to succeed in a negotiation. Sometimes, a tough message delivered with a calm demeanor and a vision for exiting the crisis is more effective. This is the ideal of how effective diplomacy integrates with deterrence.
Now I would like to turn to the second part of my remarks, how I am thinking about the future of arms control. From the current behavior of Russia and China, it is going to have an uncooperative aspect to it that is unlike the 60-year period we have just been through. The trauma of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 shaped international negotiations to control nuclear weapons and also chemical and biological weapons—the other weapons of mass destruction—and their delivery vehicles. The trauma formed the basis for a consensus that we had to negotiate, hard and in good faith, to keep such weapon systems under control.

Russia and China were never perfectly aligned with that consensus— their behavior always suspect—but at least they were willing to negotiate to produce results and join with the regimes. We could trust the process. Now I am not sure, but let’s stick with John Kennedy’s advice: we should never negotiate from fear, but we should never fear to negotiate.

If we can accomplish something at the negotiating table, that is the best option: indeed, Dmitri Peskov gave the Kremlin’s response on June 5 to Jake Sullivan’s speech at the Arms Control Association on Friday, June 2, and it was fairly positive: He said that the US government’s readiness to engage with Russia on nuclear arms control without preconditions is an “important and positive” statement, and added that Moscow “awaits concrete proposals from Washington” through diplomatic channels. That’s a positive message.

However, if we cannot negotiate with either Russia or China, what are our options for controlling weapons of mass destruction in an uncooperative environment? Here are six ideas that I’ve been thinking about, and I will appreciate your reactions.

First, we should up our game on National Technical Means, ensuring that we make use of all the sensors and data that we can, including the large constellations of commercial satellites now going into LEO. A thermal constellation by SatelliteVub will soon be going into orbit. This more ubiquitous sensing will help us to understand what is going on in the nuclear forces of Russia and China even if we don’t have our inspectors on the ground in their facilities.

Second, we should lead by example, taking the initiative on tough problems and putting our ideas out there: The State Department’s recent Political Declaration on Responsible Military Use of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomy is a good example. So is the Vice President’s proposal to ban destructive ASAT testing.

Third, we should build global consensus around good ideas for future negotiations, creating an agenda for the non-participants to chew on even if they aren’t joining in. For example, Russia’s and China’s leaders have said they are willing to consider moratoria on INF-range systems in Europe and Asia. We should put our own proposal on the table, to ban nuclear INF-range deployments in Europe and Asia. That is a proposal that other countries, including our allies, should be able to get behind, and that Russia and China might find attractive once they’ve thought about it.

Fourth, we should continue to cooperate intensively and actively at an international level to prevent proliferation. The Proliferation Security Initiative is an excellent example of a program that has developed as an international tool; I was impressed with the wide-ranging exercise that
PSI sponsored in the Indo-Pacific last summer. Perhaps we need to look again, as the United States of America, at reviving the nuclear security summit concept that President Obama pioneered. I know it required a lot of heavy lifting, but it got leaders around the world focused on proliferation problems.

Fifth, where we can, we must continue to look for ways to cooperate with Russia and China. Perhaps nuclear counterterrorism is one such area; perhaps nuclear energy safety is another. Ways that we talk to them, the P 5 process in particular, are good mechanisms and we should continue to build on them. However, I think we need a big project with each of them, to work nuclear problems and keep muscle memory alive—or in some cases build muscle memory—for future broader cooperation.

Finally, we need to fireproof ourselves and our allies from nuclear harm, and that means continuing to carry out our planned and budgeted nuclear modernization, to ensure that our nuclear deterrent, including its extended aspect in Europe and in Asia, remains credible.

There you have it, the six ideas that I have been considering for a less cooperative period of nuclear arms control. I will appreciate our comments. You can tell I am no partisan of the notion, now fashionable, that nuclear arms control is dead. It is our responsibility, under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and before humanity, to ensure that it remains alive. What is more, we must strive to return to the negotiating table as soon as we have willing partners. I thought that the Kremlin’s statement about NSA Sullivan’s speech was a good sign. Let us hope it bears fruit.