How to Overcome the Impasse on Nuclear Disarmament: An Interview with Thomas Countryman

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ABSTRACT
Thomas Countryman was a member of the US Foreign Service for 35 years, retiring in January 2017. He took office as assistant secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation in September 2011 and held that position until January 2017. From October 2016, he simultaneously served as acting undersecretary of state. He was one of the key figures in formulating the Obama administration’s policies relating to nuclear nonproliferation. Since October 2017, he has served as chair of the Arms Control Association board of directors. In this interview, he shares his critical views on the nuclear policies of the Trump administration and elaborates alternatives. For instance, in response to the end of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, he suggests that both NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and non-NATO members in Europe should explore new policy initiatives to “reduce the risk of a sharp escalation in missile deployment,” as they will be potential targets of any new Russian intermediate-range missiles. The interview took place in two parts. Part 1 was conducted on 1 August 2018 and Part 2 on 29 August 2019. The interview was edited and footnoted for the Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament (J-PAND).

Interview PART 1 (1 August 2018)

About Hiroshima and Nagasaki

J-PAND: Recently, you have visited Nagasaki.

Thomas Countryman (TC): After visiting Hiroshima two years ago, I found myself just as moved emotionally when I stood at ground zero, at the hypocenter in Nagasaki. The scale of death and suffering that can be caused by nuclear weapons is very hard for any ordinary person to understand. To get this education as I did in Nagasaki and before in Hiroshima, it makes me feel that I want every American citizen to be able to feel it the way I felt it with real visual evidence, with the testimony of the hibakusha. I want every world leader to see that the use of atomic weapons is not just statistics; it’s real human lives, real human suffering.
J-PAND: So did you see any differences from Hiroshima in terms of the damage from nuclear weapons?

TC: Well, there were different weapons and different physical effects, but I think the extent of suffering was very much the same. In both cases, I like the way that the citizens of the city are determined to keep alive this memory in a very educational, nonconfrontational way.

J-PAND: There was a G7 Hiroshima foreign ministers’ meeting in April 2016. And they issued the Hiroshima Declaration on Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation. In this declaration, they said, “Political leaders like us and other visitors have come to Hiroshima and Nagasaki and been deeply moved. We hope others follow that path. We share the deep desire of the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that nuclear weapons never be used again.” What do you think of this statement?

TC: Well, I helped to write that statement. We had a meeting of the G7 nonproliferation directors in Hiroshima the month before the foreign ministers met, and we drafted this statement along with 50 other paragraphs about nuclear weapons and nonproliferation.

I think it is a straightforward statement, a powerful statement. I think my Japanese colleague wanted it to be a little stronger, and it was a little bit difficult for some of the other members of the G7 to make it stronger than it was. But I think it does reflect what the G7 strongly agree on.

J-PAND: What is your position now on the issue?

TC: In the future, I would like to see the G7 be able to make a statement like this a little bit stronger. Not just that they share the deep desire never to use nuclear weapons again. But if you look at the rest of the document, it includes some commitments by the G7, both the nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states, what they’ll do to further reduce the risk. I think there are still stronger steps that the US, Britain, France, certainly Russia, China, and others can do. And I hope in the future there’s a stronger and stronger consensus on that point.

J-PAND: What was the point that those weapon states most resisted?

TC: I don’t wish to say which states, and I wouldn’t say it was resistance. But I think our Japanese colleagues, if I am remembering correctly, suggested that there be a stronger reference to say we are committed to reducing and ultimately eliminating nuclear weapons. But, you need to get a consensus. That is the nature of all G7 statements. There’s not perfect agreement, but there’s consensus on a statement that is in the middle among the seven. Of course, this helped lead to the visit of President Obama to Hiroshima a few months later.

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1G7 Foreign Ministers’ Hiroshima Declaration on Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation in Hiroshima, Japan, 11 April 2016 https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000147442.pdf.
Turning Point on Nuclear Doctrines

J-PAND: In your speech in Nagasaki, you said the two major nuclear powers, the United States and Russia, have passed a turning point in nuclear doctrines, in nuclear arsenals. Could you elaborate on that?

TC: For the last 40 years, the United States and the Soviet Union or Russia have gradually reduced their arsenals so that both countries today have only about 15 percent of the number of weapons that they possessed in the 1970s. That’s a very positive thing. Both states have defined their doctrines in ways that restrict the conditions under which they might think about using nuclear weapons. And so this has been a steady downward trend for the last 40 years. And that’s very positive.

In both the United States’ nuclear posture review (NPR) (US Department of Defense 2018) and in the public statements of Mr. Putin, you cannot see this downward trend continuing. It has flattened out. They are not talking about further reductions. They are not talking about a narrower role for nuclear weapons, and both, but especially Russia, are hinting about increasing the types of weapons, the number of weapons. So that’s why I say this was a turning point. I hope it’s not permanent. I think we can get back to a point where we are again restricting the conditions of use and reducing the number of weapons.

J-PAND: Which country triggered this turning point?

TC: That’s a very good question. I think there are a number of answers there. From the Russian side, they’d blame the United States for withdrawing from the ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Treaty in 2002. The United States in relying upon ballistic missile defense to protect itself against a potential threat from North Korea or Iran has taken a step that Moscow sees as threatening to the Russian strategic deterrent. I don’t agree. I think the Russians are exaggerating the capabilities of US ballistic missile defense and almost looking at it as if the US has magic powers to shoot down ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles), which it will never have.

The Russian viewpoint on this is almost – well, I have called it paranoia. And that has caused Mr. Putin to talk about nuclear weapons, new types of nuclear weapons, and then for his domestic audience to talk about nuclear weapons as what makes Russia great. This rhetoric I think is extremely unhelpful. It’s something North Korea or maybe Pakistan would say, but for so many years, Soviet and Russian leaders had not said we’re great because we have nuclear weapons, and now Mr. Putin is saying it again. Unfortunately, Mr. Trump who knows much less about nuclear weapons than Mr. Putin does, likes some of the same kind of rhetoric, and so unfortunately, he has embraced some of the same language.

I think the other factor of course that strengthens this negative trend is Russian aggression against its neighbors and against democracies. This is both physical aggression in occupying parts of Georgia and Ukraine and its cyber aggression against not only the United States, but many different countries in Western Europe. And if this Russian aggression and attack on democratic systems continues, it certainly escalates tensions and

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2Pathways to a Nuclear Weapon Free World" by Thomas Countryman on July 28 in 2018 at International Peace Symposium 2018 in Nagasaki.
makes it harder for the United States to talk about reducing its nuclear capabilities. So, I think those are the factors on each side.

**J-PAND:** Please give us your analysis of the factors that have been strengthening this negative trend.

**TC:** I think I just answered part of that. The other part is the general decline in the international atmosphere. An increase in tensions between Moscow and Washington for many reasons.

**J-PAND:** How about the Congress in the United States? Many members of the Congress do not seem to care about nuclear arms reduction.

**TC:** I think that’s part of it. Certainly, the election of Mr. Trump brought back into the government a number of people who admire nuclear weapons. And there are certainly in the United States Congress a number of members of the majority party who think nuclear weapons and ballistic missile defense are great and want to spend – they want to borrow more money from China so they can build more nuclear weapons. I think it’s a strange approach to national security, but it is a popular approach right now in the Congress.

**J-PAND:** Please clarify that point. Why does the United States need to borrow more money from China to build more nuclear weapons?

**TC:** Well, it’s what I would call Harry Potter economics. The United States could afford to build ballistic missile defense. It could afford to modernize the nuclear delivery systems, the submarines, the bombers, the missiles, and it has a plan to spend $1.7 trillion in the next 30 years on modernization. The United States economy could afford to do that. But the US Congress chooses not to afford it. They choose to cut taxes for the richest people in America to create the biggest deficit in the US budget we have ever seen, to borrow the money from overseas, which means very much from Chinese banks.

**J-PAND:** The government borrows money.

**TC:** Yes, the US government must borrow from other countries by issuing Treasury bills. And they will hand the bill to our children and our grandchildren. It is banana republic economics. It’s very simple to say we can afford to buy all the best weapons in the world and let our grandchildren pay for it. I think this is damaging to US national security, but politically it’s painless for the majority in Congress to finance things this way.

When you borrow money from another country or from a big bank to finance the deficit, you don’t say, “I’m borrowing money from you in order to build nuclear weapons.” You don’t say, “I’m borrowing money from you in order to build a new railroad.” It’s all part of the general deficit. But there is no sense of either reality or irony on the part of the members of Congress who want to have the biggest deficits in the world. I think it’s very poor national security policy. But it is very popular in Washington to spend someone else’s money.

**J-PAND:** How do the US and Russia consider legally binding obligation under Article VI of the NPT (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons)?

**TC:** The first answer is the real legal answer. Both Moscow and Washington have a legal obligation to reduce and ultimately eliminate their nuclear weapons. They have had this
obligation for almost 50 years, since 1970, and they have made a lot of progress. They
should be proud of the progress they’ve made, but they should also recognize that the rest
of the world sees the need for additional steps to move faster towards zero. A few years ago,
both Washington and Moscow were able to say yes, we know we have that obligation, we
are working on it. Today, it’s a little bit different. The Russian Federation says yes, nuclear
disarmament, but in the context of general disarmament. In other words, the Russians want
to talk about getting rid of all nuclear weapons at the same time as conventional weapons.

The United States doesn’t take such an extreme position, but one of the things that
bothered me most about the NPR in the United States was that it did not repeat this very
simple, true legal statement that the United States has a legal obligation to reduce and
eliminate nuclear weapons. I have asked many US officials since then why they won’t say
it. Some of them at a lower level are ready to say it. But at the policy level, you cannot find
that any political official of the Trump administration is willing to make this very simple
statement. I think it’s because they lack courage. And they fear that it doesn’t sound very
masculine to say we have to give up these weapons. They might say that to emphasize this
point would undermine the US nuclear deterrence. I don’t agree. I think that’s a very poor
argument.

So, it is very difficult when the two superpowers are not prepared to act like super-
powers and recognize their own obligations.

We are in a negative position at the moment. I don’t think it has to last.

**J-PAND:** Then what will happen at NPT review conference in 2020?

**TC:** Certainly if Moscow and Washington made some progress on arms control in the
next two years, that would help the atmosphere at the NPT review conference. Unfortunately, this is not an important goal for the leadership in the two countries. The people who are at the level I was at in the US government and the Russian government, I think they would like to see a successful review conference with a high
degree of consensus. But in order to get that, a number of things should happen. First and
most basic is the US and Russian Federation should be more clear about their Article VI
obligation. But beyond that, the two of them should show some serious progress on the
next stage in arms control.

I don’t know if that will happen. There are many reasons to be negative about the
outcome of the 2020 review conference. I think there is still time to work towards a more
positive outcome for the conference.

**J-PAND:** Then what are your recommendations for the next NPT review conference?

**TC:** Well as I said, the US and Russia have to work on their bilateral issue. Other
countries should focus on holding the weapon states to a high standard but should
make every effort to focus as well on the nonproliferation issues that we face today,
especially with regard to North Korea. The other thing that I hope that the Non-Aligned
Movement does is to not allow Egypt to be the only member of the Non-Aligned
Movement who can decide whether there is a consensus document. This happened in
2015 when I was personally involved. Most of the countries in the Non-Aligned
Movement were happy with the compromise document, but they had delegated to
Egypt the power to preserve or kill the entire document based upon Egypt’s decision
on the compromise on the Middle East language.
If the Non-Aligned Movement again gives all of its negotiating authority only to Egypt, then even if everything else goes well in 2020, you’ll have the same problem as in 2015.

J-PAND: The Trump administration’s policies on Israel must be quite disappointing for Egypt.

TC: Yes.

J-PAND: In a very different context from nuclear disarmament, Egypt and the Arab states may express some political frustration in the NPT review conference.

TC: Of course, they will. They will make very loud complaints. If the Arab diplomats spent five percent as much time talking to the Israelis as they spend complaining about the Israelis, we could make some progress on the Middle East, but that’s not how diplomacy works in the Middle East.

J-PAND: Negotiations at NPT review conference in 2020 would be tougher than in 2015?

TC: I don’t think it’s tougher than five years ago. It’s the same. It’s the same.

**The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons**

J-PAND: Let me ask you about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. What do you think about this treaty?

TC: Well, it’s a very positive statement. It is a moral statement, an ethical statement. It expresses the hope of many countries in the world. It is not yet a practical document that provides a pathway to eliminating nuclear weapons. It also has some weaknesses that were caused by political compromises in the drafting. That’s true of every treaty ever negotiated. You make compromises. But some of the compromises made in this case, for example, not setting the Additional Protocol as the standard for compliance, I think, undermine its moral value. I hope that the treaty will cause both nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states to have a more serious dialogue about how security in the world would be possible without nuclear weapons.

J-PAND: Why do you see the treaty as not practical?

TC: Because it gives no reason for the nuclear-weapon states to join the treaty at this point. That’s the essential reason. It does not lay out a pathway for negotiation between first Moscow and Washington, and then the other nuclear-weapon states. It will increase the moral pressure on all of the nuclear-weapon states, but is that enough to get us somewhere? I’m not so sure.

J-PAND: Japan also doesn’t participate in this treaty. Do you think that if Japan joined this treaty, the United States would be offended by Japan’s action?

TC: I don’t know if the United States would be offended. I think some people in the US government would view it negatively. This is not an easy decision for Japan. I understand why Japan – why so many good citizens of Japan, like those I met in Nagasaki this week – would like Japan to join in this moral statement. The bigger question for Japan should be
“If we in Japan sign and ratify this treaty, does that get us closer to the United States and Russia working hard on disarmament?” And the answer is not obvious. As you say, an action like that by Tokyo might weaken the relationship with Washington at a time when Tokyo, Seoul, and Washington are working together to denuclearize North Korea.

And Japanese ratification of the treaty could cause the United States to change some of its security commitment to Tokyo in a way that would not help the cause of nuclear disarmament. So it is not an easy question for Tokyo, but I think the correct question is not “What do we feel in Tokyo?” but “What will have the correct effect in advancing arms control negotiations?”.

J-PAND: Suppose, someday, we have denuclearized North Korea. In that situation, will there be more of a chance for this treaty to become more universal?

TC: Well, I think every time there is a step to reduce the nuclear threat, then the chances for this treaty become better. If there were more limitations on the US and Russia, the chances become better. If North Korea truly has no nuclear weapons, then the chances become better. But all of that right now is hypothetical.

Alliances and Nuclear Deterrence

J-PAND: Perception of Japan about extended deterrence seems to overemphasize the effect of the so-called nuclear umbrella.

TC: People think about the US-Japan alliance as being primarily a nuclear alliance. I don’t look at it that way. It is a security alliance in which the two countries cooperate. Japan provides for its own defense, but it knows it also has support in the political and military backing of the United States. Even if we have a conflict in East Asia that affects Japan, the United States does not immediately go to the use of nuclear weapons. The primary deterrent against North Korea and against China is conventional, not nuclear. So, there is nothing automatic about the US Japan nuclear security guarantee.

J-PAND: The Japan-US Security Treaty includes the prior consultation clause. In case the United States tried to use nuclear weapons, vis-à-vis North Korea or possibly China, the United States will request prior consultation with Japan?

TC: I’m not certain of the details of the treaty. But it is ultimately a United States decision whether or not to use nuclear weapons. I think the important part is that conventional deterrence is more important than nuclear deterrence, and this is true in Europe as well as in Asia.

J-PAND: Now, in the international community, we are seriously divided in our estimate of nuclear deterrence. How do you analyze this situation and what is your suggestion to go beyond this division?

TC: The question is correct. We are seriously divided. Countries that have not known war for many years and that do not have any enemies today are among the leaders in advocating for the ban treaty. Countries that have recent historical memory of being attacked – and those are countries, to speak frankly, that border the Russian Federation –
have a more immediate concern. And some of those countries are being attacked today – not just Russian occupation of their territory, but Russian cyberattacks on members of NATO. Those countries believe very strongly in deterrence, and the more threatened they are, the more they feel that nuclear deterrence has to be a part of that package. That’s a hard concept for somebody in New Zealand or South Africa or Colombia to understand.

But I think there is ground for a real dialogue between states about the meaning of deterrence, the extent that you can rely on conventional deterrence, what happens if one side renounces nuclear deterrence before the other side does. These are not simple questions. It is too simplistic for some of the ban advocates to just say deterrence is a myth. I don’t agree. Deterrence has real meaning. If you can achieve strong deterrence without nuclear weapons, that’s the question that has to be discussed today. In other words, the question we must discuss today is if you can accomplish genuine security, genuine deterrence against attack, without relying on nuclear weapons for deterrence.

J-PAND: Speaking in Nagasaki, you suggested a “joint enterprise.” Your suggestion is “now is the time to convene a high-level summit approach to help overcome the impasse on nuclear disarmament.”

TC: The discussion about deterrence is something that needs to include nuclear-weapon states, and then states such as Japan and NATO members that are part of an alliance that includes nuclear deterrence, and it should include some of those states who are opposed to all nuclear weapons and who believe there is no such thing as deterrence. That’s one conversation, and it’s a very difficult one to have. It has to include military experts as well as civil society, and that’s not easy. The joint enterprise of course refers to the ideas of Sam Nunn, Bill Perry, Henry Kissinger and George Shultz that a group of leaders of key countries could have a summit – perhaps a limited number of countries just as President Obama did with the nuclear security summits – where they could say the goal is elimination of nuclear weapons, and here are a few things that we agree to work on, which is to move towards no first use, to negotiate lower numbers, and to reduce the alert status of nuclear weapons. They laid out very specific ideas that don’t add up to a treaty, but the fact that you could get 10 or 20 or 30 presidents and prime ministers to agree that these are the steps towards a world without nuclear weapons, that would be a major change in emphasis. They proposed this idea 10 years ago. It hasn’t happened yet. I do not believe that either Mr. Putin or Mr. Trump is capable of leading such an effort. But I do think that other democracies – Japan, Canada, Germany, many others – could lead such an effort, and that it would mean something. So that’s a different concept than a discussion of deterrence, which would still be a valuable conversation.

J-PAND: It is very difficult to judge whether or not nuclear deterrence really works. Do you think the nuclear deterrence provided by the US really works now under circumstances like the threats from North Korea or China?

TC: Well, the first element of deterrence for any country should be its own capability to resist and to fight back, and that’s why it’s important that Japan have a strong national defense and a strong capability to respond to any aggression against it. That’s the first element for any country. The second element is alliances. To the extent that Japan and the
United States cooperate in having a strong conventional response, then the nuclear
deterrent becomes the lesser part of the equation.

In order to move towards that goal of less and less reliance on nuclear deterrence, it’s
important that Japan spend money on defense. It’s important that Japan cooperate
closely with the United States, and it’s very important that Japan and the South Korea
build a better bilateral cooperation on military issues. This is often prevented by political
obstacles. But it’s extremely important in my view that the South Korea and Japan show
that they cannot be divided either by China or by North Korea.

J-PAND: Does it mean that we should not be divided politically or militarily?

TC: Both China and North Korea would like to divide the alliance among the United
States and Japan and South Korea, and to divide it both politically and militarily. It is
extremely important even as we work towards a new relationship with North Korea, even
as we work towards a more solid relationship with China, that it be very clear that the
alliance of these three cannot be broken.

J-PAND: Do you think China or North Korea is trying to divide the relations of those
three allied countries?

TC: Yes, constantly, every day. It’s a major foreign policy goal of both China and North
Korea.

Iran and North Korea

J-PAND: I want to ask you about nuclear nonproliferation. What are the major break-
throughs in the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action)?

TC: Well, the most important breakthrough was Iran agreed permanently, eternally, not to produce nuclear weapons, to adhere to the NPT, to adhere to an
additional protocol of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), and to
have an eternal presence of IAEA inspectors. That made it the most thorough verification measures of any nonproliferation agreement ever concluded. That was
a huge breakthrough.

J-PAND: You must be very disappointed from the decision by President Trump to
withdraw from the JCPOA.

TC: First, I would say that the US did not withdraw. The US violated the JCPOA.
The JCPOA does not have a clause that says you can withdraw if you change your
mind. You can either respect the agreement or you can violate it, and the United
States was the first of seven countries to say, “We want to violate it.” In doing so,

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3 The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is a detailed, 159-page agreement with five annexes reached by Iran
and the P5 + 1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) on 14 July 2015. The
nuclear deal was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231, adopted on 20 July 2015. Iran’s compliance with the
nuclear-related provisions of the JCPOA will be verified by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) according to
certain requirements set forth in the agreement. On 8 May 2018, President Trump announced that the United States
would withdraw from the JCPOA and reinstate US nuclear sanctions on the Iranian regime (Arms Control Association
2018a).
the United States is also violating the UN Security Council resolution, 2231,\textsuperscript{4} that made the JCPOA binding upon all countries. And so the United States is doing exactly what it accuses Iran and North Korea of doing, which is ignoring the UN Security Council. Beyond that, it is a mistake because first, it eliminates the strongest nonproliferation agreement ever written. It will not be replaced by something stronger, no matter what Mr. Trump says. It will not happen.

It increases the risk of conflict in the Middle East, which I think is the goal of at least some of the people in the Trump administration and the goal of some of the foreign countries that oppose Iran. It creates a very serious and unnecessary conflict between the United States and its most important allies, first in Europe but also Japan and others. It is a declaration by the United States that until Iran becomes a completely different country, we can never have a normal negotiated relationship with it. It is very different from the US approach to other autocratic regimes.

Yes, the Iranian government is corrupt. It is autocratic. It is plutocratic. It is stealing from the people. But this is also true with Russia. And yet, Mr. Trump admires the Russian government.

\textbf{J-PAND:} One more thing is a basic attitude of “Anything But Obama.”

\textbf{TC:} This is an important point I’ve made before in other statements, that the main reason for Mr. Trump’s hostility is that the JCPOA was an agreement made by President Obama. He is obsessed with Mr. Obama’s achievements and determined to erase those achievements no matter what, without having an alternative plan in place.

\textbf{J-PAND:} Are there many mistakes in his foreign policy?

\textbf{TC:} Well, there’s no foreign policy coherence at all to the difference in his approach to Iran and North Korea. It is number one, about his very fragile ego and number two, about his political base.

\textbf{J-PAND:} What do you mean by saying his political base?

\textbf{TC:} He promised his voters that he would tear up the JCPOA, and he finally did it, and he thinks he’s keeping a promise. Now it’s interesting to note that when he made that promise in 2015, the majority of Americans thought the JCPOA was not a good agreement. When he actually followed through on the promise in 2018, the majority of Americans said the United States should keep the agreement. It doesn’t matter. He made a promise. It was a promise that he could keep without worrying about the consequences, so he did it.

\textbf{J-PAND:} I can imagine you made a tremendous effort to conclude this JCPOA. What the Trump administration did must be so disappointing for you.

\textbf{TC:} Well, this is a broader issue, and one of the most negative effects is that it is not clear to me, after this withdrawal, why any country would sign any agreement with the United States. And especially with this president. He has a record in business of breaking agreements and contracts, and now he has a record in government of doing the same.

\textsuperscript{4}Adopted by the Security Council on 20 July 2015. For full text, see; \url{http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol = S/RES/2231(2015)}.
thing. So even the next US president, if he is psychologically more stable than Mr. Trump, is going to have a hard time signing agreements with any country. I don’t know why Kim Jong Un wants to sign an agreement. It is perhaps because Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim have a similar level of honesty in the execution of agreements. Maybe they are made for each other.

J-PAND: Now, let us talk about North Korea. What do you think of the Panmunjom Declaration and the joint statement of President Trump and Chairman Kim?

TC: Well, the declaration between South Korea and North Korea was a positive thing. It had a good degree of specific detail, and if both sides work on it sincerely, I think it can lower tension on the peninsula and lower the risk of war.

But the Singapore joint statement is different. It has very little detail. In fact, some of the agreements that the US made with North Korea 10 and 20 years ago had more detail than the Singapore joint statement. And it is clear that Mr. Trump did very little study of that history before he agreed to this statement. Still, I welcome the fact that he has reached out, that he has made this effort to build a relationship that can result in lower tension between the US and North Korea. It will be a very hard process. It will be much more difficult than Mr. Trump seems to think it is, but having the process is much better than just sleepwalking into war, which is what the two countries were doing a year ago.

J-PAND: In retrospect, how did you evaluate the “strategic patience” policy of the Obama administration?

TC: It would have been good if United States could have made some kind of agreement with North Korea. It was too difficult. And frankly, in the political environment in Washington, there was no benefit. Because you know that any agreement that Mr. Obama had made with Mr. Kim would be attacked the same way that the JCPOA was attacked. If President Obama had gone to Singapore, met Mr. Kim, and come away with four very vague sentences, all of the Republican Party leaders would have said, “This is terrible; this is weak.” When Mr. Trump does it, they all say, “This is wonderful; this is brilliant.”

They line up so that Fox News says exactly the same things about its beloved leader as North Korean television says about its beloved leader. I think it was unfortunate we couldn’t do more with North Korea, but I think President Obama made the right choice to focus on Iran rather than on North Korea.

J-PAND: Was it intentionally decided by President Obama to put a higher priority on Iranian issues than North Korean issues?

TC: I don’t know how explicit the decision was, but I think it’s pretty clear that’s where we put the effort.

J-PAND: What was the process in the Obama administration for choosing strategic patience as the policy toward North Korea?

TC: Again, I’m not sure. I don’t remember hearing that term ever come from Mr. Obama. Last year (2017), Mr. Trump’s policy was “strategic impatience.” I don’t think either phrase, even if it sounds simple, is very descriptive. When there was an opportunity to do something with North Korea, primarily because of good diplomacy by
South Korea, I’m glad that Mr. Trump responded positively. We didn’t have the same opportunity during the Obama administration.

**Japan’s Stockpiles of Plutonium**

J-PAND: Japan and the US extended a bilateral nuclear agreement that has served as the basis for Tokyo’s push for policies emphasizing the recycling of nuclear fuel. But the US is perceived to be concerned about Japan’s stockpiles of plutonium. So tell us your view on this extension of the bilateral nuclear agreement and concern with Japan’s stockpile of plutonium.

TC: The agreement on civil nuclear cooperation between Japan and the United States in 1988, that includes the 123 agreement, has been extended as it passed its initial 30 years, extended automatically. That’s a very good thing. In the last 30 years, Japan and the United States have been solid economic, and scientific partners, and we should continue to be.

I am concerned about plutonium. It’s very nasty stuff. The fact that Japan’s stockpile keeps growing does not make me concerned about Japan’s intention, but it does make me concerned about nuclear security and about nonproliferation. So, I would hope that Japan would take this moment to do a very careful reexamination of its fuel cycle policy because I think an objective evaluation would lead Japan to make a different choice in the fuel cycle.

J-PAND: Including a choice to stop it?

TC: I don’t believe that reprocessing is a good economic choice for Japan. It was not a good economic choice for the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and Belgium. I don’t think Japan has a magic touch that will make it profitable in Japan when it has been an economic disaster everywhere else. Maybe I’m wrong, but the way to test this is to do a new zero-based economic study of the alternatives.

J-PAND: How hard did the United States try to push Japan to stop the nuclear cycle?

TC: I don’t think that – well, I can talk about what I did in 2015 and 2016, which was I did not push them to stop, did not push Japan to change its policy.

What we discussed is that it would be a much better thing for Japan to reduce its stockpile of plutonium instead of continuing to increase it, and we talked through all the technical issues. I think that the Trump administration has had a similar approach, but I honestly don’t know how hard my successors have pushed on this issue.

Yesterday (31 July 2018), the Japan Atomic Energy Commission has announced a new policy that for the first time says something very important, that Japan will reduce its

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5Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act (AEA) of 1954 establishes the conditions for major nuclear cooperation between the United States and other countries. In order to enter into such an agreement with the United States, a country must commit to a set of nine nonproliferation criteria. One of them is “U.S. prior consent rights to the enrichment or reprocessing of nuclear material obtained or produced as a result of the agreement” (Arms Control Association 2019).

6The Agreement for Cooperation Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of Japan Concerning Civil Uses of Atomic Energy in 1988. [http://fissilematerials.org/library/jp123.pdf](http://fissilematerials.org/library/jp123.pdf).
holdings of plutonium. And that’s good. That’s a good step forward. I think there’s more that should be done, but overall this was a positive statement.

J-PAND: Some anti-reprocessing people in Japan argue that stopping reprocessing in Japan will have positive implications for global nonproliferation. On the other hand, some pro-reprocessing people in Japan say that North Korea will not abandon its nuclear program if Japan abandons its reprocessing option. Could you comment on this kind of argument?

TC: Japan did not start producing plutonium because North Korea was building nuclear weapons, right? If Japan were to stop, it would help a little bit in persuading North Korea to get out of the business. But, it’s not the decisive factor. Japan should make a decision on reprocessing based on what makes economic and safety sense for the people of Japan. It’s not a bargaining chip. It can be a good moral argument if Japan wants to use it. But nobody has said – I’ve never said that Japan needs to stop if we want North Korea to stop.

J-PAND: Some people in South Korea say they want to do the same as Japan does. So once Japan changes its policy on reprocessing, that’s going to have some political influence on South Korea.

TC: Yes, South Korea watches closely what Japan does. So, I think there is a political effect there, yes. I don’t think that reprocessing makes sense for South Korea. Japan has already spent many trillions of yen on reprocessing at Rokkasho. That money is not coming back, I’m very sorry to say. I don’t want to see a good ally like South Korea throw an equal amount of money into a black hole.

J-PAND: And it’s also not good for waste management.

TC: Both Japanese and South Korea scientists have argued it has advantages for waste management. I think the latest scientific studies show that there is no advantage.

The NPT and Nuclear Arms Control Treaties

J-PAND: A half century ago, in 1968, the NPT was signed. The basic framework is a so-called grand bargain, based on nuclear disarmament, nonproliferation, and civilian use of nuclear energy. But the times have changed. Do you think this grand bargain is still the best option today?

TC: Sure. I consider the NPT to be the most successful and important security treaty in history. It has advanced the national security of every country on earth; even the ones that haven’t signed it are better off because of the existence of the NPT. Is it a fair treaty? Well in one sense, of course not. It is unique because, unlike almost every other multilateral treaty, it gives more rights to some countries than to others.

That was the best deal possible in 1968, and it was a good deal to make then. It cannot be improved today, I’m sorry to say. There is no new arrangement that is possible and

7“The Basic Principles on Japan’s Utilization of Plutonium” announced by Japan Atomic Energy Commission on 31 July 2018.
http://www.aec.go.jp/jicst/NC/inkai/teirei/3-3set.pdf.
would be more fair to other countries. If you tried, you would do more damage than benefit. So yes, I feel bad for all the people who say it’s unfair, but it’s the best thing we have, and it has done effective work. For anybody to walk away from the treaty because it’s unfair would be damaging to their own national security.

This was a recognition of the political reality at the time, that there were five nuclear-weapon states. There were 25 more states that could become nuclear-weapon states. Everyone in the world recognized that the world would be very unstable if every technically advanced state built nuclear weapons. The essence of the agreement is getting all those nonweapon states to say we won’t build nuclear weapons, but we expect the weapon states to reduce. That’s the essence of the agreement. I don’t think it’s correct to think of it as a trade, where the weapon states said, “We’re going to let you build nuclear reactors if you let us keep our nuclear weapons.” That’s not an accurate picture of what’s happened.

**J-PAND:** Now, let me turn to the 123 agreement. Recently, the US made some variations on its 123 agreements with some countries. In the case of the UAE (United Arab Emirates), it was very strict on the fuel cycle. And in case of Vietnam, it was a bit more flexible. How do you see the effect of the 123 agreement, and what is a basic strategy behind a 123 agreement?

**TC:** Well, I don’t agree that it was terribly different. I mean there are many categories of agreements. For example, with military allies, we have something called a status of forces agreement that governs the legal rules about American soldiers stationed in Korea, in Japan, in Germany, in Italy. The agreements are not identical because the countries are not identical. The issues are not identical. The legal requirements are not identical. It doesn’t bother me that the 123 agreements we have with Vietnam, with South Korea, with the United Arab Emirates, with Norway – these are different. They’re different countries, we have different levels of cooperation. We have different legal issues. We have different political concerns.

The important part is that in all of them, the United States seeks to ensure that this country participating in nuclear energy will not become a proliferation problem. That’s what they have in common. So I am not bothered by the fact that agreements with countries participating in nuclear energy are different.

**J-PAND:** At the 2020 NPT Review Conference, many non-nuclear-weapon states are expecting some progress in US-Russian nuclear arms control. Please tell me your perspectives on extension of New START and fate of the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) treaty?

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8. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) was signed 8 April 2010 in Prague by Russia and the United States and entered into force on 5 February 2011. New START replaced the 1991 START I treaty, which expired December 2009, and superseded the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), which terminated when New START entered into force. “The treaty’s duration is ten years from entry into force (Feb. 2021) unless it is superseded by a subsequent agreement and can be extended for an additional five years.” Seven years after entry into force (5 February 2018), New START limits went into effect that capped accountable deployed strategic nuclear warheads and bombs at 1,550” (Arms Control Association 2018b).

9. “Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, abbreviation INF Treaty, nuclear arms-control accord reached by the United States and the Soviet Union in 1987 in which those two nations agreed to eliminate their stocks of intermediate-range and shorter-range (or ‘medium-range’) land-based missiles (which could carry nuclear warheads). It was the first arms-control treaty to abolish an entire category of weapons systems. In addition, two protocols to the treaty established unprecedented procedures for observers from both nations to verify firsthand the other nation’s destruction of its missiles”.

[https://www.britannica.com/event/Intermediate-Range-Nuclear-Forces-Treaty](https://www.britannica.com/event/Intermediate-Range-Nuclear-Forces-Treaty)
TC: Well, one is fairly easy; the other is more difficult. The 2010 treaty, the New START treaty, lasts until 2021. This is unusual in a treaty, but it says that the two presidents can extend the treaty for an additional five years, and they can do this without the approval of the US Senate and the Russian Duma.

Now this is the most important and easiest thing that Mr. Trump and Mr. Putin could do to contain a nuclear arms race, to improve the national security of both countries, to increase nuclear stability, to show the rest of the world that we care about containing nuclear weapons, and to open some space for all the other difficult political issues that Russia and United States have. That’s why I would like them to do it tomorrow. There are people in both capitals who are overintelligent, and they start thinking of complicated reasons why it’s not that simple, but in fact it is that simple. New START extension is kind of a minimum. If the US and Russia have not extended New START before May of 2020, that will be a pathetic performance in the view of most countries in the world.

The second part is harder. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty has been violated by Russia. The Russians accuse the United States of other violations.

J-PAND: Could we just specify what they are doing?

TC: They deployed a cruise missile that has a range longer than 500 kilometers. They made a counteraccusation. These are complex, technical issues. Complex, but not impossible to solve. And if the two presidents told their military and diplomatic negotiators “Go and visit each other’s sites and do inspections on the ground,” we could find the solutions. Maybe it’s a compromise; maybe it’s amendment to the treaty; maybe it’s something else. But so far, there is no political desire in Moscow to resolve the question.

J-PAND: What is your interpretation of why Russia does not have the political desire?

TC: There are many in the Russian military who have believed for 30 years that the INF Treaty was a benefit for Western Europe and a loss for the Soviet Union and for Russia because Russia cannot build these intermediate range forces, but China can. Korea can. Pakistan, India, Iran could build such weapons.

J-PAND: And Russia is surrounded.

TC: And Russia is surrounded by a lot of people whom it has made very angry. So, I think that some in the Russian military said, “We don’t care about the treaty. We’re going to force the issue.” And I think that it’s possible that they could provoke the United States into being the first to say, “We give up on this treaty,” and then Russia has a double victory. They have the weapons they want, and they can blame the US for breaking the treaty. And there are geniuses in Washington who are ready to walk right into that Russian trap. Mostly in the Congress, but also in the White House.

Interview PART 2 (29 August 2019)

President Trump and Nuclear Arms Control

J-PAND: This time, let me ask follow-up questions to the interview we had in August 2018. I have basically three questions. One is about aftermath of the end of INF
Treaty. The second one is, more broadly, about the nuclear policies of the Trump administration. Finally, the third one is about Iran, DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) issues, proliferation issues. If you can add anything –

**Tom Countryman (TC):** No, that covers the whole world. (Laughs.)

**J-PAND:** Right. First of all, last time when we talked, the INF Treaty was almost dead, but now it’s gone.

**TC:** Now it is dead.

**J-PAND:** How do you see this current situation?

**TC:** On INF, the treaty is gone. The leaders in Washington and Moscow both seem intent on demonstrating that they are supermasculine and building new missiles to place in NATO countries or in Russia. At this point, there’s no reason to expect that those missiles will be fitted with nuclear warheads. We expect that they will be conventional, but the problem is of course without the INF Treaty, there is no restraint if one side wishes to change a conventional warhead to a nuclear warhead, and there’s no means of verifying what’s on there.

So, the Russian escalation with the deployment of the 9M729 (new Russian ground-based missile) will be met not immediately but in a year or two with a US conventional escalation, and the Russians will do their counterescalation. We will be back to the 1980s and everything that implied about the risk of very short-notice attacks by either side on each other’s capitals.

It’s not utterly hopeless. I think NATO has shown some restraint. I think it will not be easy for the United States to escalate. It will have to not only build new weapons but get the agreement, the consensus of NATO before it can deploy offensive weapons. So, it is going to –

**J-PAND:** The same as in Japan?

**TC:** Yeah, and I think even harder in Japan and South Korea. So I think it’s going to be a slow-moving escalation, at least from the US side. And I still seek to encourage European countries to make their own proposals on how to prevent a new Euromissile race. I would hope that both NATO and non-NATO members in Europe who will be the targets of any new intermediate-range missiles will come up with some ideas that reduce the risk of a sharp escalation in missile deployment.

I’m also encouraged that the United States Congress is not prepared to endorse the Trump policies without asking tough questions. It will be a long fight starting September in the US Congress as to whether there will be funding to support new intermediate-range missiles. So, in all the loss of the INF Treaty is an important loss. It is a dangerous situation but not as immediately dangerous as it is likely to become within the next couple of years.

What concerns me even more is the threat that the Trump administration poses to New START. Without New START, there will be no limits on either side’s arsenal for the first time in 50 years. There will be no verification and notification, no capability for the United States to determine the size of the Russian arsenal, and the same for the Russians about the US arsenal. That will lead, as we have seen before, to planners on both sides
assuming the worst case about the other side’s capability and overcompensating by building still more weapons.

So, there’s a real risk that the deployment of weapons will go above the 1,550 ceiling if New START goes away. However, it is not yet a lost cause. Every agency of the US government – State, Defense, intelligence – supports extension of the New START. John Bolton, the former national security adviser, opposed it, as he had opposed every arms control treaty ever written, and will do his best to kill it. But now he is out of White House.

This strategy to kill New START was to propose that we need a bigger comprehensive treaty that covers the US and Russia and China and every weapon from the invention of the knife up to nuclear weapons. He knows damn well that is not feasible. It’s not a serious offer, and the US has put forward no concrete idea that has a chance of attracting China to such a negotiation. So, it’s what we call a poison pill, an opportunity to kill New START by saying we tried to get more and we failed.

As Mr. Bolton was fired, we may have a better chance to get alternative voices into Mr. Trump’s ear. It is important that leaders from other countries speak up, not just arms control professionals but prime ministers and presidents, when they talk to President Trump, have to deliver the message that New START is important for their security as well. So, we hope that many leaders will step forward to do that.

We also hope that there will be a number of voices from both parties in the United States that will get to the president that will convince him that we have to move forward on this. There are many medium- and long-term effects if we don’t extend New START, and the first of these is the effect on the NPT review conference next year. Failure to extend New START before May of 2020 will be the single most negative factor at the review conference in 2020. So, I think many people but especially presidents and prime ministers who talk to President Trump have to put this high on their agenda.

Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CECD)

**J-PAND**: What do you think of the initiative announced by Mr. Chris Ford (assistant secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation), CEND (Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament)?

**TC**: There are both positive and negative factors about CEND. The US government in its National Defense Strategy and in its Nuclear Posture Review have said the security conditions have changed in the last few years, and there are no conditions necessary for nuclear disarmament. I don’t believe that anybody in the US government has ever explained that statement adequately.

In other words, the US military said eight years ago that we could fulfill all of our nuclear missions with 1,000 warheads instead of 1,500. Nobody in Trump administration has explained why 1,000 warheads are not enough today. What has changed in the

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10(The US is promoting an apparently new initiative: ‘Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament’ (CEND). The initiative is described as the start of a process to identify key questions and challenges that would need to be overcome along the road to eventual nuclear disarmament, and then to explore possible answers to them” (International Institute of Strategic Studies 2019).
security situation? Certainly, there are more tensions. Certainly, there is less trust between the US and Russia. But what physically has changed that makes our current nuclear arsenal inadequate? No one has explained that.

In addition, the initiative of the US to create the environment for nuclear disarmament ignores the history. Yes, it’s true that the most important steps forward in nuclear reductions were taken during the 1980s and ’90s which was the best period of relations between Moscow and Washington in the last century, but there were other times when we had important steps forward on nuclear disarmament despite high tension with the Soviet Union and with Russia.

And the US initiatives on nuclear disarmament were always part of managing and reducing that tension between Washington and Moscow. An important part of creating the environment for nuclear disarmament is to try to achieve nuclear disarmament. I think for some in the administration, I don’t say this about Assistant Secretary Ford, but for some in the administration, talking about creating the environment is the excuse for doing nothing at all.

That’s the negative side. The positive side is that this forum provides something that has been lacking in arms control discussions in the world, and that is a place to speak less formally, more creatively, more confidentially about some of the real conceptual obstacles that we face. For example, the question of deterrence.

Nations in the world that do not face a real military threat think that deterrence is an unnecessary concept, whereas other countries that have a history in the last century of being attacked by their neighbors do believe that deterrence is necessary. I think there’s some room for common ground and for common understanding that would help create better conditions for nuclear disarmament.

So, that’s the positive side. Still, we are going to get to nuclear disarmament not by talking about the environment but by Washington and Moscow talking to each other, and that is too difficult for this administration to do right now.

**J-PAND:** As you said, even in Japan, some experts suspect that the CEND initiative is a sort of excuse for the inaction of the United States in nuclear disarmament. With this kind of skepticism, how can the United States invite many countries and have a serious talk about this?

**TC:** Well, there should be skepticism, but there also should be participation, and there should be people who come to that discussion and say the environment for nuclear disarmament has been ignored by Washington and Moscow, and that’s the main problem at the moment. If either Washington and Moscow were world leaders as they claim to be, they would be taking the initiative rather than discussing the reasons that they can’t take the initiative.

**J-PAND:** The point that you made, possible common ground; could you give me some elaboration on that?

**TC:** Not really. I think that discussing nuclear disarmament or finding consensus at the Nonproliferation Treaty review conference is more difficult if there is simply a rejection of opposing points of view. So, if the United States and Russia and France are intent on saying that the supporters of the prohibition treaty are naïve and unrealistic, this doesn’t help the conversation.
If some of the advocates of the prohibition treaty insist that nuclear deterrence is a terrible idea and that people who feel like they need a deterrent shield are being naïve, that doesn’t help the conversation. If nothing else, to tone down the rhetoric and recognize that there are some common interests in disarmament would be helpful.

**J-PAND**: One big challenge is how we can contextualize ideas of arms control or nuclear disarmament in security policy. Sometimes people tend to think these two are very different from each other or incompatible. But should they go together?

**TC**: They certainly should go together. Your question gets to a concern I have about the way that military and strategic thinkers in both Washington and Moscow approach the issue. President Harry Truman did something very important in August of 1945, which is to say that only the president can authorize the use of nuclear weapons. He made very clear to the US military that these are not just another option that a general can use for a particular combat situation.

These are qualitatively different weapons and they are not to be put under the sole control of one military official. That concept was important in keeping distinct the extreme nature, the extreme effects of nuclear weapons. What concerns me is that distinction is being eroded – not that anybody wants to give control of nuclear weapons below the presidential level, but the concept that nuclear weapons are really extraordinary and must only be used in the most extraordinary circumstances, that concept is being worn away in both Washington and Moscow.

It is irresponsible for the Kremlin to contemplate when it might use a nuclear weapon in a conventional war situation, but they do contemplate it, and the fact that they contemplate it is illustrated by the fact that they have more than 2,000 nonstrategic warheads stored. In the United States, there is the willingness of the Nuclear Posture Review and other documents that have come from the Pentagon to talk about limited nuclear war or managed nuclear war. I think this change in rhetoric reveals a change in thinking, less of an allergy to using nuclear weapons, and all of that to me means that it becomes more likely that a nuclear weapon can be used.

**J-PAND**: What is behind that new thinking by the government? Is that because the United States is becoming weaker?

**TC**: That is a hard one to explain. I think one factor is the fact that nuclear weapons are not in the public consciousness the way they once were. There are very few people alive today who remember directly the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. In the United States, even through the 1960s and ’70s and into the 1980s, there was public debate. There was information in the newspapers about nuclear weapons and the risks of nuclear weapons.

The fact that no nuclear weapon has been used in combat for 74 years means that people have tended to forget about the danger. Of course, military and political leaders would say we haven’t forgotten about the danger, but if there’s less public consciousness and discussion, the fact is the danger is not as real. So, that’s one factor.

The second factor is this strain of authoritarian thinking in both the Kremlin and in the governing party in the United States that relies on nationalistic appeals and projections of strength as part of their political argument. We again have political leaders who
believe that it is possible to gain superiority over the other side or to make the United States invincible to attack. All of that sounds lovely if you’re a nationalist. In fact, both of them are impossible.

The United States cannot be made invulnerable from intercontinental missiles as long as those missiles exist. And there is no circumstance in which the United States could attain the kind of technical or numerical superiority over Russia that would allow the US to dictate to Russia. The Russians think it’s not impossible. That scares them, and it reinforces the Putin policy of national paranoia. We don’t have leaders that are as responsible or as cautious in either Moscow or Washington as we had for the first 60 years after World War II.

**Democratic Presidential Candidates**

**J-PAND:** How do you see the Democratic presidential candidates and their policies on nuclear weapons?

**TC:** I wish they would talk about it more. I think Elizabeth Warren has the right answer, which is that no first use is a sound policy for the United States. I think the reaction to that from the Republicans, from some of the Democrats, from some of the press is absurd. They say why would the United States restrict its options, or, as we say, tie one hand by making such a declaration?

The fact is, we already tie our own hands when it comes to doing highly immoral things. We have renounced biological weapons. We have renounced chemical weapons. We will not use genocide as a military tactic. We have already tied our hands by agreeing to do things that are revolting to the conscience of humanity, and make no mistake, first use of nuclear weapons by the United States would be an abomination to the conscience of humanity. So I hope that they talk about it more, and I hope, when we get a new president, that this will be one of the changes that are made, to declare no first use of nuclear weapons.

**J-PAND:** Not only Senator Elizabeth Warren but also Vice President Joe Biden.

**TC:** Yeah, Joe Biden certainly is and Elizabeth Warren as well, but I wish that all the candidates would speak about it a little more. I would like this to be a topic that is in the consciousness of American voters.

**Nuclear Proliferation Issues: Iran and the DPRK**

**J-PAND:** Let’s move to nuclear proliferation issues. First, Iranian issues. How do you see the current situation?

**TC:** Tense. I see Mr. Bolton attempted to pursue his long-standing goal of having the United States and Israel go to war against Iran, and this is one of the few topics on which I think President Trump has the correct instinct. We don’t really need another war in the Middle East. The Israelis have become more aggressive just in the last few weeks in attacking Iranian targets in Lebanon, in Syria, and even in Iraq, which is somewhat
unprecedented. There is the risk every day that one of these incidents will lead to a broader conflict.

I don’t think there is a way to view the Israeli attacks other than as a provocation where they are hoping that Iran will respond by attacking Israel and that will bring the United States into a war. I think that is Mr. Netanyahu’s strategy, and in this I think he was supported by Mr. Bolton. The good thing is that so far, Mr. Trump does not support such a strategy.

Whether the JCPOA can be salvaged, I just don’t know. The Iranians have observed the most important parts of the agreement, even though the United States has not. They have shown a degree of patience. But both Washington and Tehran have a large number of ayatollahs and revolutionary leaders who would like to have a conflict. That’s what makes the preservation of the JCPOA so uncertain.

**J-PAND:** What could be an exit strategy from this difficult situation?

**TC:** Well, President Trump is not someone who ever thinks about exit strategies or goals or the other side’s perspective before he starts an argument. So I don’t see a good exit strategy for the United States. I think President Macron is trying to work on something, and I hope he succeeds, and if it brings Iran back into full compliance with the JCPOA, it ends the less important violations that Iran has been making, and in return the United States eases some of the unilateral sanctions that are in violation of the JCPOA.

You may end up with a lighter version of JCPOA without Mr. Trump ever acknowledging that he’s respecting the JCPOA. That might just enable us to limp through the next 17 months until there’s a different president and new possibilities, maybe. I don’t see a really good exit strategy for either side right now.

**J-PAND:** Okay. How about the case of the DPRK nuclear issues?

**TC:** I don’t see very much happening. I think that Mr. Kim has the same incentives as the Iranians, which are just to manage the situation, prevent it from getting worse until we see what happens in the US elections. He has found the secret to managing Mr. Trump which is flattery, and it’s working pretty well for him. At the same time, he continues to develop his conventional capabilities to put the ROK (Republic of Korea) and Japan further at risk, and he almost has a blessing from Mr. Trump to do this because the US has avoided making any kind of criticism.

**J-PAND:** It’s a very unique situation.

**TC:** Yeah. So, I still think that President Trump was correct to initiate high-level diplomacy with Mr. Kim Jong-un. I want it to succeed. That depends upon the North Koreans and the Americans being willing to do negotiations below the level of the president. And I can’t tell, I just don’t know whether Mr. Trump has really empowered Mr. Biegun\(^{11}\). The President has always disempowered everyone else by repeatedly saying, “I’m the only guy who matters. I’m the only guy who can make a deal.”

That may have changed when he met Mr. Kim in June at the border, but I don’t know if it’s changed, and if it hasn’t, then it’s very hard to see how we get progress. What also concerns me that is discouraging serious negotiation is the latest political spat or

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\(^{11}\)Stephen E. Biegun, [https://www.state.gov/biographies/stephen-biegun/](https://www.state.gov/biographies/stephen-biegun/).
argument between Japan and the Republic of Korea. It’s totally unnecessary. It weakens the security of both countries. It removes any incentive for North Korea to negotiate seriously, and to be quite honest, it’s poor judgment on the part of both countries and their political leaders.

I know that it responds to popular feeling, but it is the dumbest thing I’ve seen. For the last year and a half, I have been praising the very skillful diplomacy by President Moon and the ROK that created an opening with North Korea, but in escalating this fight between the ROK and Japan, and I’m not going to take sides, but I’m no longer able to offer so much praise for South Korean diplomacy.

**J-PAND:** Now it’s a difficult situation, but one big sticking point in negotiations with the DPRK is a big-deal approach or a step-by-step approach. What do you think?

**TC:** There will be no big deal in the near future. There has to be a step-by-step approach. There’s plenty that both sides can put on the table. The North Koreans can make some concrete steps including Yongbyon (Nuclear Scientific Research Center) inspection and immobilization. The US could put some important things on the table in terms of recognizing the DPRK, declaring an end to the war. There are many different sizes of steps that the two could take, and even if it’s a baby step at first, that would be better than the situation we’re in. But there is no prospect of the comprehensive deal suddenly materializing.

**J-PAND:** This is not the question I should ask you, but why, do you think, is the White House taking that big-deal position? What is your interpretation?

**TC:** Number one, it accords with Donald Trump’s self-image as the world’s greatest dealmaker. He hasn’t made any good deals yet as president, but he still believes himself to be the smartest man in the world and the best dealmaker in the world. The second reason I think has to do with Mr. Bolton and his view of North Korea, which is that every partial deal ever made with North Korea was a failure, and therefore either we get everything, or we go back to hostility and threats of military action. That’s his point of view.

**J-PAND:** As I generally stated and as you said, Japan could be a big target of the DPRK missiles.

**TC:** Sure.

**J-PAND:** This option, a big deal approach may be good for the United States or Mr. Trump, but the people in US allies in Asia are worried about the risks in this position.

**TC:** And they should worry about it. They should worry about the fact that the US has a president who doesn’t really give a damn about allies. That’s a problem. On the other hand, the rest of the US establishment aside from Mr. Trump and Mr. Bolton do agree that it’s important to defend allies.
**No-First-Use Option**

**J-PAND:** Okay. Let me go back to the aftermath of the end of the INF Treaty and the possible disappearance of New START. Do you think traditional arms control approach by mainly the US and Russia is already obsolete, and we should create some new arrangement?

**TC:** We should have the goal of including China in nuclear negotiations. That should be a goal for the future. Right now, the United States and Russia possess 90 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons. No one in this administration has suggested how you draw China into that negotiation. Broadly speaking, there are three possibilities.

You could offer to China to limit itself to 1,550 warheads like the US and Russia do. That’s four times as many warheads as China has today. I think they would accept that offer, but it’s not a smart offer to make. You could offer that the US and Russia will go down to the same level as China. I would love that. The Chinese would love that. It would be good for the world, but neither the Kremlin nor the White House is ready to cut their own weapons.

Or you could say to the Chinese, “You limit yourself to 300 weapons, and we’ll limit ourselves to 1,500 weapons.” Why would the Chinese negotiate on that basis? There is no realistic plan, no realistic possibility to involve China in arms control negotiations until the U.S. and Russia first do more bilaterally.

**J-PAND:** With regard to the declaratory policy of no first use of nuclear weapons, many experts, including ones in Japan and the United States, are saying, “Oh, we cannot believe it” or “We cannot verify it.” So, if we were to be more serious about the option of no first use, what policies could work for a no-first-use option and can be beneficial for China, the US, and its allies?

**TC:** Well, there’s always a question when someone declares no first use. The Soviet Union had a policy of no first use, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, declassified papers in the Warsaw Pact made clear that they had very intensive plans for first use. What’s a little bit different about China is that they have built a nuclear force structure that is consistent with a no-first-use policy. They don’t have thousands of nuclear warheads; they have 300, which is sufficient to retain a credible secure second-strike capability.

You can never be certain of anybody’s promise on no first use. Certainly, you shouldn’t have confidence in any policy annunciated by either President Putin or President Trump because they’ll change it tomorrow if it suits their purpose. But we have to acknowledge the Chinese have greater credibility in a no-first-use declaration because of the way they’ve structured their forces.

**J-PAND:** If the United States declares a no-first-use policy, then the US needs to change its nuclear force structure to make its no-its-first use policy reliable.

**TC:** Well, you can never make it perfectly reliable, and the fact that the United States has elected a man such as Donald Trump as president means you can never be certain it’s reliable. But it would be appropriate for the United States to declare no first use and then to do bilateral negotiations with the Russians that makes that promise more credible on both sides, including by changing the force structure.
**J-PAND:** How about between the US and China?

**TC:** Well, the US-Russian relationship is the most dangerous at the moment, but the US-Chinese relationship is the most important over the next 50 or 100 years, and we do need to work harder on discussing with each other how to manage differences without conflict. We have a history of doing that with Russians for almost 60 years, very little history of doing that with the Chinese, and it won’t be easy to do, but it’s an urgent requirement that we talk with the Chinese not only about nuclear doctrine and capabilities but about the entire range of security issues. As I said, it’s not easy.

**J-PAND:** Sure. One more point is how the US can persuade allies including Japan that no first use is a good option.

**TC:** Yeah. That’s difficult. I think the right way to persuade allies is number one, to talk about allies as if they are allies, which this administration does not do. Number two is to have defensive forces in place that are capable of responding to any attack from China. It is, after all, only China that Japan is worried about when it expresses concerns about a no-first-use policy. I think that the promise of a US security alliance is more credible if it relies only on conventional forces.

**J-PAND:** How you can say that?

**TC:** Because if either Japan or the United States is thinking that we are prepared to use nuclear weapons at the first sign of a Chinese attack, I think that’s a less credible guarantee than saying, “Of course our conventional forces will be there and will defend you.” Any US president will have to think carefully about using nuclear weapons first.

I do not consider it a likely event that the Chinese would one day attack Japan. I do consider that Japan and China are both capable of getting themselves into a senseless conflict over a bunch of uninhabited rocks (Senkaku Islands). But if there is such a war and you don’t have a no-first-use policy, you have created an expectation in Tokyo that in fact nuclear weapons will be the first thing that we use instead of the last, and that makes the risk of escalation much higher. It gives China an incentive to be the first to use nuclear weapons no matter what.

**J-PAND:** Once the escalation starts, it’s very difficult to control or stop.

**TC:** Those rocks will be underwater soon anyway due to climate change.

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**The TPNW and the Nuclear Umbrella**

**J-PAND:** The next question is about TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons) and the US allies. Some legal experts at ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) emphasize that the nuclear-umbrella states such as Japan can join the TPNW while maintaining the alliance with a nuclear-weapon state. If those countries say “We are not under that nuclear umbrella anymore,” legally speaking, it may be legitimate. But politically or militarily speaking, from strategic viewpoint, I cannot see how it can work.

**TC:** Yep.
**J-PAND:** Do you have any thoughts on that?

**TC:** No, I don’t. First, it’s a hypothetical question, and ICAN has its own reasons for encouraging that belief, but whether that belief is legally sound or not, I don’t know. It is a political question; it’s not a legal question.

**J-PAND:** Is it realistically possible to say, for instance, Japan will say that we are out of US nuclear umbrella?

**TC:** Well, I have never believed that the so-called nuclear umbrella is the most important thing about the US-Japan alliance. We are economic partners. We are security partners. The strength of that relationship does not depend upon the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent. It depends upon not insulting each other as is the habit of the current president. It depends upon supporting each other in a number of political and security ways. I understand why the concept of the nuclear umbrella is important to some Japanese leaders, but to focus on that and allow the rest of the alliance to deteriorate concerns me very much.

**J-PAND:** I see. What do you mean in saying “the rest of the alliance”? 

**TC:** If the United States and Japan are having more arguments, if the US president is insulting Japan the way he insults every other ally, then it will be more difficult to sustain the political, economic, and security cooperation that gives meaning to our relationship and that is the true substance of the alliance.

**J-PAND:** I see.

**TC:** That degrades the relationship.

**J-PAND:** I see. So, for the US, Japan is a unique country because the US has been stationing a lot of important military bases there.

**TC:** Yes, the bases are important, both for the defense of Japan and for the global mission of the US military. But extended deterrence by nuclear weapons is only one aspect of the alliance.

**J-PAND:** Well, okay. Thank you so much.

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**Notes on Contributor**

Tomoko Kurokawa works with Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS), one of the major nationwide TV stations in Japan, since 1996. She is an experienced journalist in covering nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and nuclear energy issues. She was a Visiting Scholar at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) from 2012 through 2013. Now she is a non-resident scholar of CEIP.
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