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Transcript Q&A

Are Nuclear Weapons Still Fit for Purpose?

Carrington Series Discussion

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Question 1:

I agree about the relative irrelevance of August 1945: a punch-drunk military clique trying to understand a new weapon in circumstances where millions have died and all the Japanese cities have been devastated. I disagree with Ward about Cuba, partly because I've reviewed the book by Stern this year which goes through the ExComm transcripts and shows quite precisely that Kennedy was very, very scared of nuclear escalation, which is why he didn't go for the aggressive options that his chiefs of staff recommended. 1973, you could say that was nuclear deterrence in a way because the Arabs thought Israel might be scared of what Russia could do, and there's an interesting background about whether Israeli nukes were targeting southern Russia to prevent that. Kazakhstan: realism doesn't only mean one set of reactions.

But more generally, if we're taking economic arguments, you seem to be saying that nobody should believe in folding money because it might go all wrong and it's magic thinking to believe that it would always work. Of course currencies get devalued in some circumstances but if the majority of people, the nuclear decision-makers in the world, do believe that nuclear weapons impact on their security, would strengthen and embolden those who might be enemies unless counteracted by national nuclear deterrence – that's a kind of anthropological fact. You like facts – that can be fairly easily established by the doctrine taught in various military training establishments and the discourse of nuclear possession in every country. That's a huge self-perpetuating system of belief. I don't know what the experiment is that you could now propose which would dis-confirm that, and it certainly isn't going to be that limited data set resting on Hiroshima.

Ward Wilson:

When Paul and I argue about this, I always think of Patroclus. Patroclus, I'm sure you all remember, is Achilles' best friend. In case you don't recall, Achilles – they steal his girl and it makes him mad and he goes to his tent to pout, and as a result the Trojans win forward and the Achaeans take losses, and it's bad. People come to Achilles' tent and they say: come, fight, come on. He says: I won't fight, I won't fight, they stole my girl. Finally his friend Patroclus goes to him and says: look, Achilles, dude – or whatever the Greek equivalent of dude is – if you won't fight, at least give me your armour and I'll go out on the battlefield. And Achilles says, all right, and he straps on the breastplate and takes up the famous shield and puts on the helmet and he goes out, and for a while the reputation of Achilles carries the day. The Trojans fall back and the Achaeans re-win their lost ground. But Hector

eventually decides, Achilles or no Achilles, I have to go out and face him. He does and he goes out and they fight, and Apollo – always the gods are interfering – sneaks up behind Patroclus and knocks him down. He doesn't hurt him but he knocks his helmet off. The Trojans see that it is not the great Achilles but some other man, and they run him through with spears.

It seems to me that the problem with relying on reputation for defence is that you're relying on a hollow soldier. You're relying on the suit of armour rather than the real warrior. For me, for my country, I want the real Achilles. I want weapons that work. I don't want weapons that have a really great reputation because there's always some Hector out there somewhere who's foolhardy enough or courageous enough to challenge the existing belief and say, Achilles or no, I'm going to fight him.

So my response is that it is absolutely true that right now there is a reputation that nuclear weapons are amazing and marvellous weapons, but the problem with reputations is that they don't always last forever.

Question 2:

Thanks for a very interesting panel. Two quick questions. The first one is: can the panel – I'm going to be very practical – comment on what the effect was of the B-bombers flown across the North Korean/South Korean border, which suddenly was followed by almost total silence from the North Korean leader. We haven't heard a return to the ranting threats of April and May since that time. It sounds like an almost classic case of a deterrent working.

Second, bigger question: Michael Quinlan always argued that a deterrent depended not just on the power of the weapon but on the transparency and the knowledge about its possibly being used. We haven't so far talked at all about the associated communications and transparency associated or not associated with deterrence. Given that the great powers, the old great powers as they called it, have indeed got fairly sophisticated methods of communication and of early warning, and the new powers have none at all, one of the things that really scared me about Mumbai was the lack of any proper communication between the governments of India and Pakistan at that time. Can our panel comment on the crucial association of transparency and warning with the use of a deterrent?

Lawrence Freedman:

Very good question. On the North Korean side − I don't think the North Koreans are crazy, it's just they're working within a framework that I don't understand, and that's different. I really don't understand it a lot of the time but I think it's something to do with the fact that nuclear weapons are the only thing they've got going for them. The real problem for the North Koreans is – it's actually going back to the currency point. After a while it's devalued because you've either got to cash it in at some point, for economic goodies to keep the regime afloat, but if you're too scared to get rid of them because in the end it's the only thing you've got, then what's the point of negotiating with them?

I think the nuclear scare that took place when the 'dear young leader', or whatever he's called, tried to show his strength was – here you are, you're issuing the most bloodcurdling threats. I was in the Far East at the time. You listen to these things with some Japanese and South Koreans and they sort of shrug their shoulders because it had no effect. Everybody thought this was really a bit comical actually, rather than being scared, which if you took this literally we should have been very scared. I think that actually was probably as important as any demonstrations of – the Americans showed we're not scared by this and there's only so far you can take it, so we'll just leave a real problem with North Korea. The difficulties come if at some point they just can't hold that country together. At the moment they can, but that's what I'd be worried about.

On the second point about these things working, when I was here many years ago and used to worry about these things, I wanted to write a paper saying: who knows what would happen if there was a nuclear war? Because there used to be stuff about the magnetic effects of the North Pole on trajectories and so on, so you have this idea, would these things go afoot? Everybody's bracing themselves and it would be like one of those pistols with a little flag saying 'Bang!' We don't know, we genuinely don't know.

But we know by and large that when tested they can cause enormous damage. We don't know quite the mechanics and how it would work in practice. I think Shirley is quite right to point out that a lot of the stuff that could make a difference is not the warheads but the infrastructure surrounding them. You mentioned Michael Quinlan, of course, who during the later years of his life would go out to India and Pakistan and try to explain: if you are going to have these things, there's a degree of responsibility that comes with it. Your failsafe mechanisms and communications are actually a really important part of that. Again, it brings back some of the dangers that

you think about, and not the sort of classic scenarios of major war and how do you deter, but of societies breaking up and struggling for control of an important asset, and how do you guard against that sort of thing. Lots to worry about.

It raises, finally, an important dilemma with proliferation. When a country has proliferated, do you say, 'You're beyond the pale and we just can't talk to you about this stuff and you've got to put the genie back into the bottle', whatever it is, or do you try to engage with them and say, 'If you're going to be a nuclear power, you've got to be a responsible one'? I don't think there are easy answers to these sorts of questions but clearly the view that has been taken about India and Pakistan, particularly Pakistan, is that it is actually quite important to make sure they do understand that with which they are dealing.

Ward Wilson:

Let me just say that on North Korea, it could very well be that they were scared about the B-2 bombers that flew over, but the question is not whether nuclear deterrence works – the question is whether it works all the time, which has to be what it is. Because any failure of nuclear deterrence could lead to a catastrophic nuclear war − for nuclear deterrence you could say that failure is not an option.

This reminds me of the Gulf War. Some people have written that no one believed that the nuclear threat in the Gulf War was real. But in fact Kevin Chilton, who was commander of all US nuclear forces in the United States at one time, wrote an article in *Strategic [Studies] Quarterly* that said that the Gulf War proved that nuclear deterrence works, because James Baker delivered this letter to the Iraqis that said 'don't use chemical or biological weapons' and then they didn't. So that proves that nuclear deterrence works. But if you read the letter closely, there were actually three red lines in the sand: don't use chemical or biological weapons, don't light the oil wells on fire, and don't make terrorist attacks against our friends and allies − obviously, Israel. The Iraqis crossed two of those red lines. So does that mean that nuclear deterrence works a third of the time?

Lawrence Freedman:

That wasn't the threat that Baker was posing. He wasn't posing a nuclear threat; he was saying 'if you cross these lines, we'll topple the regime'. They never invoked a nuclear threat.

Ward Wilson:

They used one of those phrases, 'consequences of great force and violence' or something. Kevin Chilton believed that they were –

Lawrence Freedman:

Well maybe, but Baker and Aziz had a conversation − the transcript is available. It's clear that the threat was to topple the regime. Which they did.

Ward Wilson:

Which is perfect evidence of how our belief in nuclear deterrence gets formed. Here's a threat that obviously wasn't a nuclear threat, and the head of the US nuclear forces is now arguing that that incident proves that nuclear deterrence works. If all of our belief in nuclear deterrence is based on that kind of evidence, then I think that's cause for concern.

Question 3:

I was really struck in listening, particularly, to Sir Lawrence Freedman. In the early 1980s I worked on the NATO side of the Foreign Office, and learned from you at that point. At that point the debate was very much framed in the terms of, on the one hand, deterrence, on the other hand, disarmament and non-proliferation. We seem to have moved to a situation where it's deterrence that is the only subject that matters, yet the disarmament and the non-proliferation processes have actually been very successful. The US recently of course launched a new initiative on disarmament. I'm particularly keen to know your view on how important that is, because there is a debate going on – or there is a process going on in at least one of the five permanent member states about the future of nuclear weapons. How important should we be treating disarmament at the same time as recognizing the importance of deterrence in a world which is very different than it was at that time?

Lawrence Freedman:

The debate used to be that – if you look at the origins of the distinction between disarmament and arms control, which developed in the 1950s, is disarmament was the idealistic type left over from the League of Nations days, and we all know how successful disarmament was with the League of Nations, and they didn't understand the sophisticated logic of deterrence, in

which numbers were irrelevant. The key thing was whether or not you had a first-strike or a second-strike capability. If it was second-strike capability on both sides, then you had mutual deterrence. It was much more complex than that but basically that was the argument. So arms control was much more political in the sense that it was designed to ensure that even in situations with large nuclear arsenals, measures were taken – going back to some of the points Shirley was raising – the hotlines were one product of all this; the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty was another. There were measures you could take that would keep politics in command in a crisis at all times. You wouldn't be driven by pre-emptive thoughts, that if you don't act quickly you'll be got. That's basically the origins of ideas of nuclear stability.

You can accept a lot of that argument; I think particularly that you need to take measures to make sure that politicians are not rushed into nuclear decisions. But it was a bit much to say therefore that numbers were irrelevant, because it seems to me the risks of proliferating numbers – what used to be called vertical proliferation – must be there. The more that's around − there must be some degree of additional problem. Given also in this period in the 1950s, people were talking about arsenals that still seem pretty small compared to what exists even now – you could go down a long way before actually making a difference to any of these calculations.

So I have no problem with a disarmament agenda that cuts down the numbers. I'm more interested in an arms control agenda. My only problem with the disarmament agenda is if you simply think that fewer weapons mean more peace. Not necessarily so. It just means that there are fewer things that could possibly go wrong. And also I just generally believe in marginalizing these weapons. The only note of caution is that there's a history of disarmament negotiations which by increasing the salience of these weapons makes people worry about them and how they might be used even more. So the classic in the 1960s with the Seabed Treaty. Nobody had thought – well, what a stupid place to put nuclear weapons, on the seabed, but as soon as a seabed treaty was proposed, people started to have ideas about why at one point it might be essential to put weapons on the seabed. Ditto the outer space treaty. Why would you want to put nuclear weapons on the moon, to bring them back again? What's the high ground of classical military theory? It was a stupid idea, but as soon as you start to talk about the outer space treaty, people wanted to put the things in outer space.

So you've got to be a little careful about the way that bureaucracies and institutions work with this. But in general we can cope with disarmament. There are just limits to what it will solve.

Question 4:

Can I pick up on the alliances point that Sir Lawrence Freedman made? We isolate countries – generally it causes them to go off and do something rather silly, they invade another country or get nuclear weapons or something along those lines. Rather than asking if nuclear weapons are fit for purpose − is diplomacy fit for purpose, if we're going to stop, as you put it, the second group getting them? That's first.

And secondly, Chris Coker of LSE talks about modern-day war and future warfare, losing the blood element to it and therefore the humane objectivity going to war, the risk of 'they're going to kill our soldiers' and therefore we're going to stop doing it. By having nuclear weapons and in the future we're going to put nuclear weapons on drones or whatever, are we losing the humane aspects of international relations and war itself?

Ward Wilson:

The thing about nuclear weapons is that what they do really well – their ideal purpose – is to kill civilians in large numbers. That's their best use. The problem with this is that killing civilians by and large doesn't win wars. If you go back through history, it's very difficult to find a war in which a leader says: now we have to surrender because too many civilians are dying. You look at the war between Genghis Khan and the Khwarezmians, he destroys city after city and the Khwarezmians keep fighting back. The war doesn't end until the army of the shah is finally defeated on the banks of the Indus in 1221.

So it seems to me that one of the confusions about nuclear weapons is that we think a lot about their amazing destructive capability – and they are the most destructive weapons ever invented by human beings. But destruction and killing civilians doesn't win wars. Think about the French war with the Russians in 1812, where most of the damage and destruction was done in Russia – the Russians emerged as the winner, no damage in France. So it's possible to do great destruction and still lose. Doesn't mean that destruction never helps, doesn't mean that killing civilians can't increase your chances of winning the war. The point is that nuclear weapons do this thing that is really not the central point of war. The central point of war is to beat the other guy, to kill the other guy's military, to beat his military, not to kill his civilians. So I think we get absorbed by questions about destruction and is it humane or not and so on, and we lose track of the fact that they're not very effective weapons.

Lawrence Freedman:

That's a very classical view of warfare, from the Napoleonic – it all depends on the decisive battle. Part of the point of Borodino in 1812, which after all ended because the Russians evacuated their capital city – not everybody died but they evacuated their capital city and put it on fire and the French found themselves a little stuck – Napoleon realized the decisive battle could only take you so far. The point is not that killing civilians as opposed to killing armies is an alternative way to win war, but unless you've cowed a civilian population you may not have won a war, which is what the great proponent of decisive battle, von Moltke, found in 1817 when he defeated the French and suddenly found the French weren't actually giving up, and they cowed the population. Or the Germans found in 1940, when they occupied a lot of Europe but they didn't quite sufficiently cow the population.

These are important issues because they provide alternative reasons to nuclear weapons as to why great-power war has gone out of fashion, which is that it's actually very difficult to win a war simply by defeating another army, especially when there are reserves that can come in. Or as we saw in the wars of the last decade, you can occupy a country but it doesn't mean to say that you've got tranquillity thereafter. We need different mindsets now to think about war. I think we've got to be very careful about extrapolating from Western thinking about war of the last few decades and how other countries think about war. I think they like to think about it differently.

The point was made about diplomacy – is that fit for purpose? Probably the answer is no. Diplomacy is a much undervalued art. We've just come out of a long period when it was thought improper to talk to people with whom you disagree because that would show yourself to be conferring on them a sort of legitimacy, that a conversation was dangerous in itself. There are all sorts of reasons why diplomacy has got much more difficult. The old days of secret diplomacy between consenting governments is much harder now because the news gets out, and 'why are you doing this?', 'why are you doing that?' It's very hard to do some of the things that diplomats used to do and do quite well. Sometimes they did it terribly, as we'll be commemorating next year.

So I think diplomacy is very important, because these in the end are political problems. All that we're talking about – we're talking about the interaction of nuclear weapons with domestic and international politics. That's what you need to address. If you just say, war won't happen because in the end nuclear weapons will deter, you're in for trouble. If you just rely on that you're going to be in for trouble. You need active diplomacy all the time if we're going to manage this very complex and dangerous world of ours.

Ward Wilson:

This thing about 'war has changed', it's widely talked about and people often agree with it. I have to admit that I am a war pessimist. If you look across the sweep of history, war has been a stubbornly persistent accompaniment to human civilization. Those who have predicted that savage war will come again have not yet been let down. War was savage in the 1600s during the Thirty Years War and much more benign and careful about civilians in the 1700s and then savage again in the 1800s. So I'm reminded continually, as I read the papers today, about many of the things that were written in the 1890s and just after the turn of the century, when people said confidently that Europe was now different. Too civilized, too well educated for there to be savage war in Europe again. There might be war in the colonies with primitive peoples but here in Europe we would never again – there's an article in the 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica that talks about how peace is now a permanent part of civilization. It will go forward uninterrupted for time immemorial. People talk about how nuclear war could never happen because it's too horrible, and I think that underestimating human folly is not a winning proposition.

Question 5:

I wanted to ask about the theory of nuclear weapons being weapons of last resort, and maybe having some relevance to Syria. The kind of thing where you start throwing apples at each other and then you use the NSA and Stuxnet and then you have a proxy war and so on. With the idea that maybe even such a theory may imply that nuclear weapons encourage war because countries say: look, we can go to war here and there but we don't have to worry because if the homeland is threatened we can always use nuclear weapons.

Lawrence Freedman:

The Second World War started with probably both the Germans and the British thinking that there might be ways of avoiding mass air raids, or that they could respect rules on merchant shipping or whatever. It didn't last very long because these rules broke down. The only bit that mutual deterrence worked – this is an example where mutual deterrence did work – was chemical weapons. That's partly because the Germans exaggerated the capacity of the British, because they were far ahead actually in the technology, but also because it wasn't clear militarily what you would do with

this stuff. There were always doubts about how you would use it. The point about chemical weapons – the reason why it was such a horror after the First World War is people recovered, they came back and they spoke about gas warfare. The real damage was still done by the old-fashioned munitions.

Last resort therefore is an interesting concept, because it suggests sort of a moderated step-by-step process of escalation. Things don't happen like that in warfare. Again, nothing to do with nuclear weapons, but the worst act of the Falklands War, in terms of loss of life, came quite early on in the fighting, which was the *Belgrano*. It was presented at the time as a terrible escalation and people were quite shocked here as well as in Buenos Aires. So I think these sorts of models of control – it goes back to Schelling and Kahn. There's a passionate and uncontrollable element of war that comes into play, part of Clausewitz's trinity that is still very relevant.

The reason I think it's worth thinking about this is an issue we haven't talked about which often comes up, which is the no-first-use question, which I've always thought was a bad idea. Not because you should prepare to use nuclear weapons first, it's just that you can't promise not to. If you're imagining a great crisis building up – 'it's all right, we've both issued pledges not to use nuclear weapons first' – I don't think many people would be convinced, because they would know that there would be a sense of drama and emotion and passion that could overwhelm one of these decisions.

I'm not disagreeing that there's levels of violence and conflict that are very hard to eradicate. They are always going to be there and therefore you do have to think all the time, as I said, about the interaction between these weapons − and other weapons − and the practices of domestic and international politics. A degree of realism – not in the realist sort of theory, but just realism about the nature of conflict and what it can do – is pretty important in all of that.

Ward Wilson:

I agree.

Lawrence Freedman:

Consensus breaks out.

Bridget Kendall:

I was just thinking about the use of chemical weapons in Syria. With chemical weapons you can be just a little bit pregnant, can't you – you can use them a little bit. With nuclear weapons it's quite hard to see that. Either you use them and it's devastating or you don't use them.

Lawrence Freedman:

If you go back to Ward's point, which is interesting, about what would be the consequences of the next nuclear use – it's quite possible that nuclear weapons will be used. It seems more likely that they will be used than they will be totally eliminated. But what will be the consequences of this? Mark [Fitzpatrick] wrote quite an interesting paper on this for IFRI. There's no obvious reaction. It may be: good god, how did we ever let this sort of thing happen? The international community must come together to make sure this never happens again. Or: gosh, that did the trick for them, didn't it? Until it happens we don't know, because then we'll have another data point.

If you believe that it's more likely to happen with one of the smaller nuclear powers than one of the big ones, then it may well be a contained event. Horrific, but just think of some of the horrific things that we've seen. Natural disasters maybe but the tsunami in Japan, the Boxing Day tsunami and so on. If you're a long way away from these things, you may sort of take a more analytical approach than if you're in the middle of them. So we don't know. It will be another interesting data point.

But with chemical weapons – why the phrase 'weapons of mass destruction' is so misleading is that chemical weapons are just of a different order to nuclear weapons. They raise different sorts of issues but they tend to get lumped together.

Question 6:

I had a specific question but can I make two historical points first? Two historical points I'd like to make if I can. During the Cuban missile crisis, I believe in the order of battle on a Soviet submarine, you have to vote with the mates, and there was a vote taken in a submarine that was out of radio contact, with an American frigate or whatever in its sights, and by virtue of one mate voting against we avoided a nuclear exchange. So the level of risk is much higher than the one you're talking about.

Also, if you're talking about whether nuclear weapons – I mean, reactors are weapons. Chernobyl and Fukushima are reactors. Nobody inside the trade, given the IAEA convention's problems of breeders and all of this, excludes contamination questions. We talk of terrorist contamination weaponry – nuclear reactors are contamination weapons potentially. There are many cases – I think there are 886 mistakes and accidents that have taken place, registered at the IAEA, but because of the conventions they couldn't even speak about them. So you factor in risk, those two comments.

Also with the Japanese, I think it was a dispute between the army and the navy. The Japanese certainly are capable of suicide so when you're talking about the codes, the procedures of battle and all this, the level of risk is much higher, I think. So I would say not rethinking but reimagining, and I actually think the discussion here seems to be a very noble one.

But I'd like to ask you, Professor Freedman, one specific question. You spoke about whether weapons work here in terms of deterrence, in terms of large speaking to small. If you've got nuclear weapons and you're dealing with terrorism, you obviously can't fight terrorists with nuclear weapons. Smaller countries, we have huge weaponry capable of creating a simulacrum in conventional weaponry of the strategic balances. So we don't need actually nuclear weapons even if we want to take on Pakistan, which has quite a large arsenal, we can do it with conventional weapons. There is another aspect of whether weaponry works and that is the political aspect. Large countries are exemplary countries – what is the right example? Is the right example, as with Israel, to have nuclear weapons so that everybody else in the region wants to have nuclear weapons? Or is the right example actually to make a large concordat without giving exclusivity to the large nuclear powers, so they have no political advantage? And then discussing with everybody at once, let's get rid of the thing completely. As an example.

Lawrence Freedman:

A lot of questions. On Cuba, my point was that one of the things that reinforced 'caution', rather than the word 'deterrence', is exactly this sort of thing, whether or not it happened in that way. There was a famous quote by Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis when some U2 got moved into Soviet airspace: 'There's always one son of a bitch that doesn't get the message.' That's why, going back to the previous question, the idea that you can always control war is a dangerous idea. Some things happen that you don't anticipate because there's lots of moving parts, and with nuclear

weapons people have control. It's an important issue with nuclear – again, issues that are now forgotten, but one of the issues always with putting so much of nuclear capabilities at sea is you created issues of command and control that are not going to be there if stuff is on land.

One of the things this changes, but this is again very much from the Western point of view and was one of the reasons why there was no need for the Americans to invoke nuclear deterrence in 1991 – or Britain actually in the Falklands – is because most of the things you want to do, you've got conventional capabilities that can do it. If they'd used chemical weapons, there were things that you could do by way of response. You didn't have to go to nuclear in order to respond. There's sort of a lingering part of NATO which sort of says, 'This may be one of the cases in which nuclear use would be considered', but I personally think it would be pretty unlikely.

So we do have opportunities now to do things with conventional weapons that once upon time people thought could only be done with nuclear weapons, possibly to the good. But it's further explanation of why the role of nuclear weapons is in decline in the security policies of Western countries. It's not necessarily the case for countries who don't think that they've got other options – that they don't have these other options.

The Israeli case is quite interesting because the Israelis have never, ever formally said that they have nuclear weapons. The line is, 'We will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East', followed by 'We won't be the second either'. Everybody assumes that Israel has got a viable nuclear capability and it's worked incredibly well for them, because it does have effect – it clearly has had an effect on Arab political calculations – but it doesn't suit them to go on about it either, because it indicates limitations on their freedom of manoeuvre too. How long this can go on for, I don't know. But you're then talking – the so-called Masada complex or whatever – of what would happen with a country that really was facing complete destruction. And could it all of a sudden – there was some question that they thought about it in 1973 – invoke a nuclear deterrent that they hadn't talked about much in open before.

Ward Wilson:

It's an interesting question we've been talking about, the relationship between conventional and nuclear weapons and how they interact and what the differences are, and how you cross the threshold. The thing that strikes me about weaponry is that the whole trend in warfare, it seems to me, is away from large weapons. The whole trend is toward precise, intelligent, smaller

weapons. Just look over the last 50 years, smart bombs and drones and so on have been used more and more and more. These big blundering weapons just stay in the closet.

Lawrence Freedman:

I wouldn't tell that to the people in Syria. Blundering weapons have been used in Syria because they don't have the small, precise stuff so they use the blundering stuff and kill large numbers of people in the process. We don't, but others do.

Bridget Kendall:

Well, except for 500 pound bombs in Afghanistan.

Ward Wilson:

I'm talking about the trend. I'm just saying that over time it looks as if – if I were investing in military hardware, I would invest in smart hardware, not big hardware. At least based on what I see.

Question 7:

I have two related questions, if I may. The first question is on Libya. Many people have argued, not least in countries such as Iran and North Korea and other countries which may be considering getting nuclear weapons, that our countries would not have sought to intervene in Libya – and indeed to eventually help overthrow Gaddafi – if Gaddafi had had a nuclear arsenal, which he had previously been planning to get. So I'd be interested in your view as to whether that's a reasonable argument. It's clearly not provable either way but is it a reasonable argument to make?

A related question I suppose is – for me that is a reasonable argument to make, that it might well have deterred countries which in any case were on the cusp of whether it was sensible to intervene or not. It was a discretionary war, not a war of necessity. But if that's the case, why don't more countries accept that argument? Why don't more countries get nuclear forces? For me, I think I'm unconvinced that it's mainly about the NPT. In the Middle East it's partly about Israeli compellence of course – whenever people try to get them, they get hit.

But more generally, perhaps it's because there are lots of other reasons that have contributed to this long period of major power peace since 1945, which doesn't feel as if it's about to come to an end. In all the major powers we have more rational, if you like, certainly more cautious leaders than Hitler, Stalin and Mao in that period in the middle of the 20th century. Steven Pinker and Bruno Tertrais, lots of people have argued that this trend towards civilizing is not complete, it's partial – parts of the world are very serious trouble spots but increasingly, for reasons that may have not very much to do with nuclear weapons, war is becoming less plausible. It really relates to Ward's description of himself as a war pessimist. I'm very struck by that, because if you're a war pessimist, then how do you explain the fact that war since 1945 has been less frequent than it was before? How do you explain the fact that not a single member of the United Nations, I can think of at least, has been eliminated by force? This is a remarkable period in terms of the incidence of war compared to the centuries that went before. So maybe nuclear weapons haven't got anything to do with it but something explains that.

Ward Wilson:

Well, I take the long view. Assume civilization is about 6,000 years old. The last 60 years therefore makes one per cent of the evidence. If you look, there are obvious periods of peace and war throughout history. There have been peaceful periods in Europe − from 1815 to 1848 was very peaceful. That didn't mean that war could never come again. The ancient Egyptians had a period of 200 years of peace. They must have felt quite confident that that meant they were not warlike and so on. So I see the evidence and I note it, and it is serious. But from a historian's perspective, it's not that serious yet. There's a not very sound theory that major wars come every 100 years. It's not particularly supported by the evidence but it is difficult not to notice that there's the Thirty Years War and then you have maybe a skip in the 1700s and then you have the Napoleonic wars and then you have World War II and World War I. So I don't know.

On the cusp, I don't want to argue that nuclear weapons have no impact, that deterrence never works. I'm perfectly willing to believe that at the cusp they could have an impact. But just let me remind you of a cautionary tale from 1939. In 1939 there were a sizable number of people in the UK who believed that the first thing that a Hitler regime would do would be to attack British cities with chemical weapons, either from the air or using long-range ships, large guns on ships. It was so serious that everyone in the country – I'm sure you all know, everyone in the country was issued a gasmask. Yet the nature

of the Hitler regime made it so obvious that this was not a war of choice, that this was a regime that had to be challenged, that September 1939 came along and the British people said okay, this is a risk, this is a danger, we face the possibility of an attack with weapons of mass destruction – let's go, we're going to war, because it's too important. I think that it's possible to make that calculation if the regime is seriously bad enough and the situation is bad enough. I think there are all kinds of ways to talk yourself into going to war when it's a bad situation.

Lawrence Freedman:

The question is the big question. It's true that in the great sweep of history, the *longue durée*, who knows. All sorts of bad habits may come back again. But I don't see history as being wholly cyclical. There are changes in communications and technologies and political interactions and forms of political life that make a difference. Will there be another major war? We can think of all sorts of good reasons to avoid it very carefully.

I have to say, I only feel that more strongly in this part of the world than if you go to the Far East. I never feel that they've quite got it out of their system over there. You can see, well, it actually comes back to the alliance point, and the fragility of alliances, the number of major powers who really don't quite like each other in complex interactions. So I just think these are things you worry about all the time. I think that's our job. You come into this sort of business – Chatham House was founded for this reason – to worry about these things. Hopefully most people can get on with their lives without worrying about it; some of us should worry about it, because you can't take these things for granted.

But by and large, for all sorts of reasons – because there are multiple factors at work – the major powers think wars between each other are a bad idea and they don't see them as a natural response to most of the disputes they face. But when you see these arguments over Japanese islands or Chinese islands – how actually are you going to sort that one out? You can see how trouble could brew, even if people thought it was being nothing here. Like the Falklands was like two bald men arguing over a comb. Somehow, some wars don't quite seem worth it but nonetheless they happen.

You raise also a really interesting point about Libya. I think most proliferators are doing it in part because they've got a neighbour in mind, and in part because they want to persuade another power to stay out, to keep clear. It's a perfectly rational set of reasons to acquire a nuclear capability, which they

then have to set against the difficulty of doing it, the risks in the process – the Israelis or somebody will pre-empt, or as the Soviet Union threatened against China in the late 1960s, or indeed the United States thought about China in the early 1960s.

And, the fact that it's a rather negative way of approaching the world and there may be positive things you want out of the world as well. Libya, as we know, gave up its nuclear option partly because it had been a bit found out with AQ Khan and all of that, and it wasn't going to be that easy to become a nuclear power, but it wanted other things. It wanted to rehabilitate itself. So you could argue – another conclusion you might draw from Gaddafi is when the West says 'give up nuclear weapons and we'll rehabilitate you', take that with a pinch of salt, especially if your population don't like you either. I'm sure there's all sorts of lessons people may be drawing from that, and indeed lessons that we should still be drawing from Libya.

But there's a tension. All I want to show is, again, these are political decisions and judgments that all leaders, from pariah states to great powers, end up having to make about their choices and where their balance of interests lie. They're not easy choices and sometimes they get them spectacularly wrong.

Ward Wilson:

Can I say one quick thing about alliances? I want to support you on the notion that alliances are important. I think one of the things that happens is that small nations seem to believe that nuclear weapons are some sort of magic. If you possess nuclear weapons then you are safe forever. You may be small, you may have no resources, you may have to import 60 per cent of your energy from your neighbour, but if you have nuclear weapons then you are safe. I think this is a very important question, because if nuclear weapons are magic, then disarmament is impossible and proliferation is inevitable. Because who would give up magic? Who would be foolish enough to not want to get magic?

But it seems to me that this is the wrong attitude for small states to take. In a world free of nuclear weapons, small nations will be safe in the same way – they will keep themselves safe in the same way that they kept themselves before nuclear weapons, which is they'll make good alliances and they'll try not to piss off their neighbours. So I think that we imagine the world has changed because of nuclear weapons much more than in fact it has. Old-fashioned things like alliances are as important as they ever were.

I think the key change that will lead to people banning nuclear weapons is that people will cease to see them as magic, cease to see them as the essential weapon, the ultimate weapon, and begin to see them as blundering and clumsy, bull in a china shop and ham-fisted. They'll start to think to themselves – their weapons designers will lie in bed at night and instead of thinking, 'I wish we could build nuclear weapons', they'll say, 'I wish we could build one of those tiny little things that fly in through the window'. So I think alliances are important and will continue to be important.

Question 8:

Lawrie, you spoke earlier about the stigmatizing effect of the NPT particularly influencing some of the choices and decisions of some of the states, particularly during the Cold War. I would agree with you that it played a very useful role, especially in the Cold War, but I think we'd have to all accept that that role has been declining for all kinds of reasons, which we don't have time to go into.

Something I've been very interested in, watching the NPT closely, is the way in which the use of nuclear weapons – I don't mean the no-first-use, I agree with you on that – but the use of nuclear weapons, the consequences, the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons has started to come into the NPT agenda. First in the 2010 Review Conference, in the text, then when 16 countries did a joint statement at the first PrepCom in Vienna. Then after the Oslo conference, where 128 countries participated in a conference hosted by the foreign ministry of Norway, looking at the humanitarian impacts. Eighty NPT states joined a joint statement at the last PrepCom in Geneva. Nobody is being very explicit about where that's going except that the freedom of information unveiling of the – I think they were emails between Geneva and the Foreign Office – suggests that the UK government and some of the other P5 states are incredibly anxious that what is going on is going to be a multilateral approach to get a universal treaty that will ban the use, the deployment, the transit, the production, etc., of nuclear weapons. Things that the NPT didn't deal with because of its Cold War role.

My question to both of you is: what effect do you think that such a treaty process would have on stigmatizing weapons, particularly for the nine nuclear-armed countries and for future proliferators? Do you think it will have an effect on the UK debate?

Question 9:

Given the huge scale of the US nuclear arsenal and our alliance with them, what conceivable purpose is it that the British nuclear weapons are fit for?

Bridget Kendall:

Okay, so we did come back to British nuclear deterrence in the end.

Ward Wilson:

I think about Ptolemy. One of the things about the cosmic debate is that for 1,500 years people believed that the Earth was at the centre of the universe and everything else revolved around it. What's striking about that is how quickly, when Copernicus published his theory that the sun was at the centre and that we had a solar system, how quickly ideas changed. It seems to me that the notion of paradigm shift is overdrawn for most scientific debates where lots of facts are available, but in a debate in which there are very few facts you can have sudden revolutions in the way people see things.

It seems to me that the humanitarian discussions that are going on now and that seem to be gaining speed outside of the P5 could well be the indication that people are beginning to rethink nuclear weapons in a radical new way. It is important for those countries that have nuclear weapons to stay in touch with that process, because those ideas could change very rapidly. We don't know what the result of that would be, what the new view of nuclear weapons could potentially be. So I think the stigmatizing effect of humanitarian discussions around the world could have a very profound effect.

In terms of the British arsenal, I don't really know very much about the discussion here. But I constantly wonder why the UK is insistent on having nuclear weapons so perhaps you can explain that.

Lawrence Freedman:

How long do we have?

I think the humanitarian issue – I'm sceptical about what difference a multilateral treaty will have in itself, but it goes back to a point I was making earlier. In 1945 nuclear weapons were seen as a continuation of what had become a habitual way of warfare. I think in the West, accepting Bridget's reminders of the nasty things we still occasionally do to people, by and large our concepts, our strategies, our doctrines try to be more humanitarian. There

are limits to how humanitarian war can be but people try, and if there's going to carry on being violence then people will look for ways to contain it. So nuclear weapons appear in our way of thinking far more outliers than they did in the past. That's important. It could have implications.

Again, I remain unsure that that is how it is viewed in all other places. Also, we can see, and Syria is an example, the speed with which societies can be brutalized. The speed with which the things people thought were unthinkable suddenly become thinkable – as happened in the Second World War, happened in the First World War. That could happen again.

So it's not something on which you can rely but it would be foolish to dismiss it. It's a forum where these issues can be talked about. Also it's just astonishing the extent to which people can get themselves worked up about civil nuclear systems, which are designed by and large not to explode, and not think at all about systems which are designed to explode. So we need to keep on having these debates. I think the revival of interest in these issues is important because otherwise people will get complacent and forget that they exist.

On the British nuclear deterrent, the interesting thing is that it's so hard to have a decent debate on the British nuclear deterrent. People try ever so hard but it lasts about a day. I think one reason for that is we insist on talking about it as a public expenditure issue: what's the cheapest way in which you can keep weapons of mass slaughter? Rather than address the strategic and the ethical issues that they raise. So where we could have been having a serious debate about Trident, we've been floundering around trying to see if there's a cheaper way. Britain's already got a minimum deterrent in the sense that if you want – whether it's a deterrent or not, who knows, but minimum if you want to stay in the business. We've been searching for ways to keep the numbers down while still claiming to have a viable nuclear capability.

Do we need it? The arguments on both sides are entirely speculative. That's one reason why I think people find it so hard to debate. There could come a moment, for reasons that may be hard to discern now, when we would be incredibly grateful for Europe, not just the UK, that we've stayed in the business. Or at some moment the fact that we've kept these things may seem ridiculously provocative. But because we really don't have the points, it's hard to know.

The reason why Britain has got a nuclear arsenal goes back to 70 years ago. It goes back to the fact that we invented them, we thought being a great power meant having nuclear weapons – which is a thing it would be quite

good to break in the future – and finally, because we wanted to keep an influence over the Americans. And as with so much else in British military capability, the basic issue is: what do you need to do to be able to carry on talking to the Americans and be taken seriously by them? We can talk about the value of that and what happens if the Americans are no longer that interested, which produces a different sort of case for being a nuclear power. I think there's a marginal argument but it's worth talking about. But instead we talk about it as whether you can save a billion here or a billion there.

Bridget Kendall:

Thank you very much; it's been a fascinating two hours. It's quite a gloomy subject, I'm not sure we made it less gloomy. I must say I'm left with an even gloomier thought, which relates a little bit back to the question about, is diplomacy fit for purpose. We've established any use is likely to be catastrophic and you only need a tiny percentage chance for it to happen, if it does happen, for that to be the case. We haven't even talked about the possibility of a dirty bomb as well as a Hiroshima-style catastrophe. We talked about how little data there is on past use or even understanding intentions of political leaders, in order to try and understand what this might mean.

But what I find myself worrying about, listening to the discussion, is we talk about great powers and small powers, we talk about the role of stigmatization, the importance of communication, but what about all those outside these parameters? In a world where borders matter less and less, where we see nation-states and governments finding themselves held hostage from below, what are the diplomatic tools that can deal with this? It's hard to analyse rationally because we're talking about non-rational, elusive actors. You can't negotiate with them; you can't even threaten them with retaliation. So what on earth do you do about that? So let's hope that that's not the future.

Thank you all very much for coming. Thank you for your questions. My apologies if someone put up their hand and I didn't see you, but I hope you'll join me in thanking our speakers for a great discussion.