TRANSCRIPT

Event

“The U.S. Arms Control Agenda: A Discussion with NSC Senior Director Pranay Vaddi”

DATE
Thursday, January 18, 2024 at 10:00 a.m. ET

FEATURING

Pranay Vaddi
Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation, National Security Council

CSIS EXPERTS

Heather Williams
Director, Project on Nuclear Issues and Senior Fellow, International Security Program, CSIS

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com
Hi, everybody. Thank you so much for joining us. I’m Heather Williams. I’m the director of the Project on Nuclear Issues here at CSIS. Really pleased for you all to join us today in person and also to everyone online, as this is being livestreamed. We are also really grateful to have Pranay Vaddi from the National Security Council joining us for a discussion about kind of the state of play of arms control, the administration’s arms control priorities.

Before we begin, I do have to go over just some security precautions for those of you in the room – safety precautions, I should say. Overall, we do feel secure in this building, but as a convener we do want to just prepare for every eventuality. If there is any sort of an incident, I’ll be your security officer. Please just follow my instructions. And please just see where your nearest exits are. There and there. But, yeah, we aren’t anticipating any issues at all. So with that, let’s get started.

I am very pleased to introduce Pranay Vaddi. Pranay is the special assistant to the president and senior director for arms control disarmament and nonproliferation at the National Security Council. Prior to his current role, he served as a senior advisor in the Bureau on Arms Control, Verification and Compliance at the State Department, where he was the department coordinator for the administration’s Nuclear Posture Review. And he was also a fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment, focused on developing a future U.S. nuclear posture and arms control proposals. I think a lot of you are also familiar with Pranay and his work. And he’s always, I think, really forthcoming and really supportive of engagement with civil society. So, Pranay, thank you so much for doing this and for being here.

Pranay is going to discuss the administration’s arms control agenda, including some updates on U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China engagement. And before I kind of start the conversation, just a couple of reminders for everybody. So Pranay and I will kind of have a bit of a discussion for about 30 minutes. And then we will open it up for audience Q&A. You should have a QR code. If you’re in the room, it’s on your seats. And so if you scan that there’s a form, input your form on that, and then I’ll be going through the questions. And also as a reminder, this discussion, it is on the record. And so that’s also a reminder for folks online.

So with that, Pranay, let’s dive in. This is a difficult time for arms control. Not going to beat – no one’s going to beat around the bush on that one. So in this current environment, can you just say a bit about how this administration is approaching arms control and what are some of its priorities?

Pranay Vaddi: So, one, it is a difficult time for arms control, but I thank you for having the discussion. It’s important for us to – as an administration – to communicate our policies to the international community, to the
Washington, D.C. NGO community and civil society here, as well as other stakeholders. And I hope that over the course of this discussion we’ll be able to dive into all aspects of how we’re approaching arms control and nonproliferation topics in a pretty challenging security environment. I’ve never had a security briefing at the front end of an NGO event before, so I hope that’s not personal and reserved just for me and as part of how CSIS just handles these events, but –

Dr. Williams: We do it to everybody. It’s not just you. (Laughter.)

Mr. Vaddi: OK. Good. I hope I wasn’t being singled out. So I think, you know, for starters, it’s worth thinking about what the president himself has said about these issues. And he’s had a number of opportunities to comment on arms control policy, primarily through speeches before the U.N. General Assembly. And he said, essentially, three essential principles that form the backbone of our policy. One, that there are these global security challenges. We don’t need to agree on everything to keep moving forward on issues like arms control. Two, that arms control is and continues to be a cornerstone of international security, from a U.S. perspective. And, three, we are going to be undeterred in pursuing good-faith efforts to address weapons of mass destruction risks, no matter what else is happening in the world.

The national security adviser had an opportunity to expand on these ideas in a speech before the Arms Control Association in June. I think one of the key things we wanted to communicate in those remarks is that we are at an inflection point in the global security environment. There’s an absence of the type of post-Cold War cooperation that we’ve enjoyed with China and Russia, as they’re prioritizing other issues. We see China and Russia not taking real steps to address the emergent WMD challenges we’re seeing coming from North Korea and Iran. And, of course, we’re dealing with a Russia that is shedding arms control frameworks left and right.

So we have to take these realities into account, these substantial and deep cracks in the post-Cold War nuclear foundation, as we consider what to do in deterrence and arms control policy. You know, I’ll use Russia as an example, given that there’s more news today in Russian state media. You know, after the national security advisor’s remarks in June, we followed up with Russia with a formal proposal to have a nuclear arms control dialogue, with a key focus on discussing what we should do bilaterally to address New START compliance issues – as Russia has suspended that treaty – and also think about a post-New START framework. And more broadly, talk about managing nuclear risks at a time in which we’re dealing with a crisis in Europe where Russia has brandished using nuclear weapons on more than one occasion.

In our approach towards Russia, we are trying to hold Russia to it to account where, obviously, we’ve taken legal countermeasures as it relates to
suspension of New START. We are trying to inform the international community as to what Russia is actually doing in the context of these agreements. And, of course, we led a group of NATO allies who are also states parties to the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty to suspend that treaty after Russia announced its withdrawal. We’re also trying to respond to the new security status quo that’s been created by Russia’s actions and their aggression. We have to demonstrate our ability to engage in longer-term political and military competition with Russia, press our advantages in key areas, and incentivize a return to discussions on Strategic Arms Control primarily.

And then, third, we’ve left an open door to arms control engagement. We continue to offer bilateral engagement on nuclear arms control and managing strategic risks. The meat of the proposal we sent to Russia in September was designed to reinitiate that conversation. What we’ve seen today, and in their formal response a few weeks ago, is that Russia is unwilling to engage. After months of a lot of public statements about why they did not want to engage the United States bilaterally in arms control, they’ve formally responded along the same vein. I think this demonstrates Russia’s willingness to set aside arms control policy and their own arms control priorities and the cooperation that could benefit their security. And that includes longstanding positions that they’ve continuously raised in arms control venues with the United States. But they’re willing to set all of that aside in furtherance of their goal of remaking the European geography, of preventing a further expansion of NATO, these other political priorities that they have placed out there.

I think we have to take Russia at its word, as far as its current position on arms control dialogue. They’re refusing to engage bilaterally on these issues. It casts some doubt on Russia’s willingness to entertain a conversation about a New START follow on, or returning to New START compliance. And that has to be baked into our thinking as we look at our own nuclear modernization, our own deterrence measures that we may want to take, and what the security environment could look like after 2026. That all being said, there are other avenues for engagement with Russia in multilateral venues. We’re going to show up to those venues. We will continue to press our priorities in furtherance of our own national interests. And we hope that Russia is willing to engage there.

Dr. Williams: Can you say a little bit more about what led up to the Russian announcement, decision today and their formal response? Do you – from your perspective, is it just the security environment? That’s the reason that you think Russia might not be willing? Or were there specific aspects of the proposal that you think are – have been – are proven problematic, and potentially are things that could be reworked and, you know, try again?
Mr. Vaddi: Mmm hmm. So, look, we didn’t get any sort of substantive feedback on the things we wanted to talk about. So the things that I mentioned, such as returning to New START compliance, a post-New START framework, or managing nuclear risks – three relatively specific ideas, I think, that we put out there to talk about – Russia is not responding in detail to any of those three things. I think, as a general matter, they see the idea of engaging with the United States on Strategic Arms Control, which they view as being on U.S. terms, as not in their interest if that conversation cannot include some of their other priorities as it relates to the map of Europe, Ukraine itself, and our policy towards Russia outside of arms control.

So I think that they’ve set – they’ve set a pretty high bar. They’ve linked kind of other politics to arms control in a way that has not been done in the post-Cold War era. And, as a result, we don’t have a conversation to be had, at least in a bilateral format. And, of course, that’s on top of not engaging under the normal, you know, New START dialogues, and the BCC, and things like that. So whether it’s technical or political level consultation about strategic arms control, it’s sort of not on the menu.

Dr. Williams: That’s depressing. Shifting from bilateral to multilateral, as you did mention that as a potential way forward, do you – are you at all more optimistic about venues like the P-5 process? And, you know, that is tied to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, that is more of a disarmament initiative. It’s also not historically a venue for arms control negotiations or anything like that. But are you seeing any more positive signs of Russian engagement and potential for dialogue within the P-5, especially as Russia currently has the P-5 presidency?

Mr. Vaddi: I don’t know if optimism is the right word. I think under Russia’s chairmanship this year I would suspect that the Russian Federation will make an effort to show that they’re good stewards of the P-5, that they can set an agenda, that they can have – they can host conversations that I wouldn’t call necessarily substantive, but are focused on at least meeting some low bar so the rest of the Non-Proliferation Treaty community can look to Russia and say, OK, it looks like you guys are still trying, even in a difficult environment.

I think it should be made absolutely clear that, you know, Russia lives under the same Article 6 obligations that the rest of us do. The fact that they’re willing to host a meeting on the P-5 does not mean that they’re going to be undertaking any effective measures towards a world without nuclear weapons. And based on their reaction to our proposal for a bilateral dialogue – and it’s worth noting that I think most of the community out there that is focused on nuclear disarmament, the non-nuclear weapon states, really want to see progress made by the United States and Russia bilaterally, because of
the size of our arsenals. We have the furthest to go to get to a world without nuclear weapons.

And so Russia’s refusal to engage with us bilaterally has to be looked at in the context of their NPT obligations. And they have to think that simply hosting meetings related to the P-5, where it’s unlikely that they would be making any sort of practical progress or responding to the more substantive initiative that the United States and the P-3 may be proposing, is not going to pass muster when it comes to the NPT PrepCom, later this year.

Dr. Williams: Mmm hmm. Shifting a bit from Russia to China, there have been some – I’m not going to say optimism, cause for optimism. But there has been some progress in terms of there have been dialogues with China now about arms control, which is absolutely progress from kind of previous years and previous administrations. There was the State Department dialogue in November, I believe, and then the Xi-Biden meeting. And then we also know there was the Department of Defense Dialogue with the with their Chinese counterparts last week. So can you kind of just say a little bit about the state of play of those conversations with China? To the extent you can share, you know, what was the substance of the conversation? And what will be the next steps?

Mr. Vaddi: Sure. So I think it’s important to characterize the number of bilateral engagements we had the right – in the right context. And so there was a number of bilateral engagements leading up to the Biden-Xi meeting that covered the entire gamut of the relationship. And then most recently, we had the resumption, per the agreement by the heads of state, for more mil-to-mil communication. And that includes, most recently, the DPCT that you mentioned.

I think it’s our job at the National Security Council to try to see some consistency across these channels because, obviously, an arms control/nonproliferation discussion can touch on some of the same topics that a defense policy discussion can. And we want membership in both of those discussions to include key decision makers or influencers within the Chinese system, as it relates to their nuclear posture. So making sure we have a consistent message, and that’s getting into their system through all appropriate channels, is one of our important priorities at the NSC. And I think we’ve done a good job in the U.S. government of trying to make sure that we have a coordinated message to the Chinese as it relates to our concerns regarding their nuclear buildup.

So having these initial consultations was a really important positive step, particularly after where we were for the two years preceding. I think it’s really good, obviously, to see the mil-to-mil communications resume as well, because our emphasis for so long has been really on strategic risk reduction.
We know that we’re not going to leap into a formal arms control negotiation anytime soon. We know that China’s arsenal is still being built up. But the fact that our militaries operate in close proximity, that there are tensions over the Taiwan Strait, it’s important to have those military-to-military communications to deconflict at the local theater and strategic levels, where we can.

You know, on the arms control front, we really want to see China respond to some of our more substantive ideas on risk reduction. And we’re still waiting to see if they will. In terms of what the future holds, I think we’re, of course, open to continuing these consultations. But for us, we want these consultations to be results oriented. We do want to maintain open lines of communication to avoid some of the risks that I’ve mentioned. But as it relates to arms control, we want to see some practical measures start to get discussed in these venues. Because for us, we think that there are solutions to some of the specific security challenges that both countries have identified. And whether we can pursue those together in bilateral consultations or maybe discuss them more fulsomely in the P-5, we’re kind of open to those venues for making progress.

Dr. Williams: But in neither circumstance, whether it be the P-5 or the bilat, I’m hearing you say: We are not interested in dialogue for the sake of dialogue. That these are not just meant to be somewhat – these are not meant to be performative activities. That you do think that there are prospects for something concrete coming out of both forums.

Mr. Vaddi: Yeah. I think we have to hold ourselves to some standards here about – in terms of our expectations. I do think there was certainly value on both sides in having a consultation take place in the lead up to the head of state level meeting at the end of last year. But for us, we want to be able to actually make progress on these issues. It’s not really in our interest to just have meetings. We have plenty of venues in which we are able to meet and have diplomatic exchanges, including bilateral exchanges. On the margins of other multilateral arms control venues, for example. But for us to have an actual channel devoted to these issues, we want to use these channels for specific purposes. And that’s to solve some of these problems that we’ve identified.

Dr. Williams: Shifting gears slightly, I’d like to talk a bit about concerns about arms racing and arms build-up among U.S., Russia, China. And I’d be really, really curious to hear your reflections on the Strategic Posture Commission Report that came out, I believe, October of last year. And for a lot of folks in civil society, they read that report and said: The U.S. is getting ready for an arms build-up. That we are prompting or engaging in an arms race. The language of the report, I believe, says that the arsenal needs to be either larger or different. And so it clearly is saying that something has to change in the U.S. force posture. The commission report, though, also does make reference to arms
control and opportunities for risk reduction. So how did you read the report? And how would you respond to those concerns that the U.S. is going to be engaging in this arms race and be abandoning arms control?

Mr. Vaddi: So, one, I think it’s worth noting it was a bipartisan commission. They released consensus findings and recommendations. And it’s important to respect the fact that this group of professionals, many of whom were former government, were able to come together—with all their diverse viewpoints—and come together with a consensus report. And so it’s of interest just that they are able to do that. Two, it is, you know, a congressional blue ribbon commission. It is not a deputies committee meeting. We have established our own views on the issues. (Laughs.) We are studying our nuclear posture, our sort of future arms control policy, as part of an interagency process. And having these recommendations out there, of course, is important data for us to take into account.

Look, I think that the commission’s reports findings communicate a sense of urgency that we share. We’re entering a two-peer environment. It’s never been dealt with before as it relates to nuclear-armed adversaries. And the modernization program, our arms control policies, our nonproliferation policy spanning decades, was designed for, or at least looking at, a world that seems to be not the world that we’re entering or not the era that we’re entering. So I think it’s important to note that we share the urgency of the Commission. We’re going to look at the findings and recommendations alongside our own analysis and decide what, if any, of the recommendations make sense for us moving forward, what, if any, of the measures are practical moving forward. And, of course, we will continue to calibrate what we can do in the deterrence space with our own arms control policy.

I think that the conversation on the outside, as suspected, has been very lively. There is—there are a lot of reactions to the report findings in the international community. I think in my own meetings with close allies and partners, they’ve asked for how we’re taking into account the commission report. A lot of this is procedural. What does the commission actually do? What does—do the report findings and recommendations matter to the executive branch, or to Congress, or not? I think it’s worth noting that this provides a baseline of information for posture hearing season. So we will see a lot of members and senators asking questions based on these report’s findings to administration witnesses in the coming months. And so I think you’ll continue to see this conversation at a relatively high tempo. And we in the administration are looking to find ways to obviously integrate some of these ideas and thinking into our own analysis and then come out with our own recommendations, changes if necessary, as we think about posture and arms control this year.
Dr. Williams: Was there anything in the commission report that you strongly disagreed with?

Mr. Vaddi: Strongly disagree with? Look, I think that, from our perspective, I don’t think we’re ready to sort of, right, count out or count in any specific types of arms control. I think the commission report leaned more heavily in the direction of risk reduction and informal measures. While I think that that is certainly a reasonable assumption to make, given the environment we’re in both from a domestic political perspective and then taking into account international politics, our relationship with Russia, et cetera, I don’t think that we can count out the fact that there could be a formal negotiation in a year or two, there could be a treaty-based arms control approach in the future. The fact of the matter is, we’re in a really dynamic global security environment. Everything is changing all the time. Whether that’s nuclear modernization with other countries, their willingness to participate in arms control, ongoing conflicts and crises – these things change every day.

And I think we have to be adaptable and flexible on how we think about how we want to control what’s happening in the world, whether it’s through formal arms control measures, a combination of deterrence and informal risk reduction measures, or what have you. And I think that’s really hard for a U.S. government arms control workforce that has been traditionally focused on doing arms control in certain ways. That evolution is occurring inside the U.S. government as new people come in and people go out. But we’re kind of at the cusp of this sort of dynamic environment. And it’s really hard to write off any past policy approaches at this point, because we don’t know when the environment may shift again.

Dr. Williams: I’m going to ask you a question about emerging technologies. I did just want to remind everybody, if you have questions, please use the QR code. There’s already quite a few coming in. You’re going to get a lot of questions about Russia, just letting you know. But, please, do keep the questions coming in.

So question about emerging technologies. The commission report also highlighted it’s not just the worsening security environment, the changing geopolitical landscape, it is also technological development. And so I’m curious about what is the administration’s approach to arms control for emerging technologies? We saw a few years ago the ban on direct ascent ASATs. The U.K. has also led some initiatives on responsible behaviors in space. Are there any other ideas or what you might see as opportunities for some sort of risk reduction measures, and/or arms control, towards some of those emerging technologies?

Mr. Vaddi: Yeah. So I think you mentioned two. I think two broad areas where emerging tech and arms control are intersecting right now, from a policy perspective. come to mind. One is obviously the new capabilities. So new capabilities and
domains where AI, space cyber, these sorts of areas where the international treaty has been grappling over the last decade. Like, you know, how do we apply traditional arms control tools to these three domains? How do we even talk about these issues as an arms control community, because a lot of this is coming through, you know, commercial technology and venues that don’t include the traditional kind of arms control diplomacy.

A second area is in monitoring and verification. Between the really active OSINT community on Twitter, or X, the availability of commercial imagery, there’s been this sort of democratization of monitoring and verification as it relates to ongoing crises and conflicts. Maybe not in the formal arms control treaty sense, but in terms of identifying military maneuvers and actions that countries are taking at any place, anytime, anywhere in the world. There’s a lot more sort of public discourse on that, and exposure, and, frankly, media coverage of what all countries are up to at all times.

And so, you know, we may see, as we’ve discussed, less of an emphasis on formal arms control verification measures, like on-site inspections, in a future agreement, you know, with name-a-country. It might be more challenging politically to do it if the trust deficit is sort of very low. And so it’s important for us to think about how to utilize emerging technology and this sort of newfound interest in tracking and tracing what all countries or militaries are up to, in a way that’s widely acceptable and could actually help with monitoring within an agreement. You may also see smaller items of inspection or invisible items of inspection. You know UAS systems, which are being featured very strongly on a daily basis in the Ukraine conflict. Thinking about smaller warheads. Thinking about cyber or space capabilities.

So advancing monitoring and verification technology in the commercial sector is going to be really important, because here in the U.S. government, while we’re thinking about these things, we also have to manage kind of our traditional approaches to arms control and outside inspections. I think you mentioned that as it relates to new capabilities, the United States, the U.K., other countries have been looking to see where can we develop more of a normative approach, some sort of normative fabric globally, as it relates to these emerging technologies that can be integrated into military capabilities but not all countries know exactly how. So there’s not, like, a great baseline of information to go out there and propose formal arms control agreements.

The direct ascent ASAT moratorium is one measure. The AI political declaration that the State Department has been advocating internationally for the past year is another good example. Both of these initiatives have received broad support. Both are evidence of being able to sort of step forward in arms control proposals in a multilateral sense in an area that is not necessarily well understood, but countries basically agree with certain
rules of the road as it relates to developing their own capabilities in these emerging technology domains.

And I think that it’s important to note that this is not – these aren’t initiatives that just countries that have these capabilities are interested in. It’s actually countries that do not have these capabilities who really want to see these rules of the road established, because they want to be able to have some influence and impact on more capable countries that may develop these military technologies over time. And then, of course, maybe down the road, these discussions can evolve into more formal dialogue and negotiations as these technologies are integrated into militaries across the world.

Dr. Williams: So we need to be thinking about new applications of these technologies, potentially different verification regimes, potentially more flexible and informal agreements. But we also need to keep doing the more traditional arms control and keep that verification skill set. So really, we need to just be broadening how we are even thinking about practicing arms control. Am I getting it right?

Mr. Vaddi: So we commonly at the NSC are accused of asking everyone to do too much.

Dr. Williams: Yeah.

Mr. Vaddi: While also prioritizing. And, yes, that’s the answer you’re getting from me. I think, and it’s not because, you know, a lack of prioritization on our part. It’s just, like, we can’t walk away from the fact that we need to engage Russia and China on their nuclear arsenals bilaterally and multilaterally. While, at the same time, we can’t ignore the fact that emerging technology is appearing on the scene. It’s affecting potentially nuclear decision making. It affecting how militaries are using UAS and other systems. And this is a military capability that’s arriving that people who in the arms control community have to think about how to address in some way. But that doesn’t mean that we give up on dealing with WMD at the same time.

Dr. Williams: OK. I am going to turn to the audience Q&A now. And you can keep the questions coming in. For the folks who are online, the QR code, you can find it in the description box on the YouTube page, if you haven’t already. And so feel free to keep the questions coming in. So, as I said, there’s a lot of questions here about Russia and kind of asking you to expand on what you said about the Russian response.

So I’ll first take this question that’s from Emily Dunn in A10: As we approach the sunset and the end of New START, do you think that Russia might come back to the table at the last minute, given their policy of using their nuclear arsenal to offset U.S. conventional advantages, and as their conventional forces are being depleted in the war in Ukraine? So basically, as we approach
2026 and the end of New START, do you think the Russian position might change?

Mr. Vaddi: I do. I don’t know that it’s for all the same reasons. For example, you know, yes, Russia is fighting a war in Ukraine. It’s severely degrading its own conventional capabilities. But I also think Russia will look to reconstitute their conventional capabilities because they can’t just rely on nuclear weapons. And they know that’s not a credible way to sort of deter. It’s not a credible way to advance their foreign policy objectives. I mean, many of which we disagree with. So I think there is potential for Russia to want to come to the table in the close to 2026 timeframe.

I think, frankly, we don’t like to think about this, those of us who are, you know, technical people who work on arms control, but elections do matter. There is an election in Russia this year. There’s an election in the United States this year. Those elections bring a sense of direction as to how much time do I have to work on the next thing and who am I going to work on it with. And so, in all likelihood, maybe we’ll see a change in position that could be tied to these major elections that are taking place. I think, obviously, the Russians have highlighted the Ukraine conflict as one of the key impediments, from their perspective, on engaging us bilaterally. And so how the Ukraine conflict plays out over the next year or two will also have an impact.

But I do – I firmly believe that Russia, based on the fact that they extended the New START treaty at the very beginning of the Biden administration, sees – and continue to adhere to the central limits – sees some interest in limiting us, at least at the central strategic level, as we do in limiting them. And so because of that basic fact, I think that they will want to come back to the table at some point, and ideally before expiration. But Russia could also be unpredictable. And maybe they – and, as they’ve demonstrated – they’ve been willing to accept risk as it relates to their behavior in Europe. So I don’t think that we can make any guarantees. And I’m certainly not making any predictions today. But the fact that February 5th, 2026 is coming is – it’s an important deadline in the Russian system. And it may mean that they’ll want to come back to the table a reasonable amount of time before them so they can try to strike some new accord.

Dr. Williams: Do you have a sense of allies’ views of the U.S. engaging Russia in arms control, as long as there are Russian troops on the ground in Ukraine?

Mr. Vaddi: Yeah. I mean, well, so not every ally is the same. And that’s important to note. I think, at least in my conversations – and I think this would be true for my colleagues in the interagency – allies have viewed our engagement with Russia, specifically on nuclear arms control, in a supportive way. I think they acknowledge that between the unpredictability of Russia’s foreign policy, the
actions they’ve taken in Ukraine, the nuclear saber rattling that’s accompanied their invasion of Ukraine, that having the United States and Russia engage each other on nuclear risk and nuclear arms control is valuable.

I think there are, of course, allies who have some concern with diplomatic engagement with Russia as a general matter. But the fact of the matter is, we haven’t negotiated anything with the Russians. We’re not agreeing to anything with the Russians. And the Russians are telling us that they don’t actually want to talk to us about these issues. And so for allies who may be concerned that the United States is going to negotiate things away, that’s a hypothetical scenario that doesn’t exist today.

Dr. Williams: Relatedly, next question comes from Daryl Kimball at Arms Control Association: Would you agree that the failure by Russia to engage on the U.S. offer for discussions on a New START follow-on framework without a counteroffer – is it or is it not consistent with NPT Article 6 obligations to engage in negotiations to halt the arms race?

Mr. Vaddi: So in avoiding making an arms control compliance determination on stage, here’s what I’ll say. Russia has the same obligations under Article 6 that we do. As does the rest of the P-5. As I mentioned before, I think the 99 percent of the community of countries that pays close attention to the NPT and has expectations for progress by the P-5 in meeting their Article 6 commitments are looking at the United States and Russia to continue the START process or, at a minimum, engage in conversations that will limit any sort of further growth in their nuclear arsenals.

We have that in our hearts as we look to engage the Russians bilaterally. We know that we need to be making progress with Russia in the eyes of many of the NPT community, many of whom are our friends who we share the same goals. And the fact that Russia has come back, and now done so very publicly today, to say that they refuse to engage us, should be – it’s an example of how they’re minimizing their obligations under the NPT and minimizing their nuclear arms control policy in the face of their other goals, their other priorities, as it relates to Ukraine and Europe.

Now, I think we’ll – assuming we will get similar questions like this from Daryl – we’ll have a more educated answer as time goes on. But fact of the matter is, we should all look at this as what it is. I mean, Russia is not looking to limit their arsenal beyond 2026 based on their current reaction. As we said to the previous question, maybe that’ll change over time. But I think it’s important for the international community to realize, as Russia will look over the next six months to message how they’re a constructive actor in the NPT, how they’ve hosted P-5 meetings, how they’ve had a really important
agenda, that the reality is they’re not actually looking to make any tangible progress as it relates to Article 6.

Dr. Williams: OK, shifting gears slightly to North Korea. Getting lots of questions about North Korea. One of them is coming from Simon Lee at Radio Free Asia: As North Korea is continuing to develop its nuclear and missile program, so can you say a bit about current U.S. policy towards addressing that? But also, what steps is the administration thinking of in terms of extending deterrence, specifically with regards to North Korea’s threats?

Mr. Vaddi: So we’ve spent a lot of time focused on North Korea, North Korea’s advancing capabilities, and an irresponsible shift as it relates to their policy and doctrine. Over the past year, we’ve been working closely with South Korean allies on enhancing extended deterrence, primarily the sort of software of extended deterrence, the dialogue mechanisms, the information sharing, our ability to consult in very senior levels as it relates to nuclear scenarios on the peninsula. A lot of this was codified in a presidential-level document, The Washington Declaration, on the eve of President Yoon’s visit to Washington last year. That work is ongoing.

We’re working really hard to implement the – what was announced in that agreement. I think it’s important to note that that agreement maintains our commitment to the NPT, our nonproliferation – our shared nonproliferation goals, as well as our goal for a nuclear free Korean Peninsula. So we’re not changing our policy towards denuclearization. We do know that, particularly with the irresponsible actions North Korea has taken most recently as it relates to Comprehensive Military Agreement and the risk reduction measures contained therein, that we need to work assiduously to try to ensure there is a modicum of risk reduction measures that are still in place to prevent any sort of crisis or political disagreement from escalating into a conflict. Because we know that the potential for that to go – escalate quickly into high-end conventional conflict and even WMD-based conflict that is very high.

So, for right now, we are very focused on seeing what we can do to cool temperatures on the Korean Peninsula as it relates to the CMA termination by North Korea. And then over the longer term, I mean, look, we will continue to try to communicate messages and show that our interest here is in resolving all of this diplomatically. But in the meantime, we’re going to continue to work with South Korea on how we can make our combined extended deterrence posture as credible as possible in the face of an evolving threat from North Korea.

I think the last thing I’ll say on this, what we’re seeing between Russia and North Korea is an unprecedented level of cooperation in the military sphere. And I say unprecedented very deliberately. We have never seen this before. I
think the nature of North Korea as a threat in the region could drastically change over the coming decade as a result of this cooperation. And that’s something that we have to pay attention to, because even in the past year of conversations we’ve had with our close friends and allies in South Korea related to extended deterrence, we weren’t basing that on this type of cooperation taking place. We were basing that on North Korea’s own advances.

And so we have to pay close attention to not just what we’re seeing North Korea provide to Russia to assist in its war in Ukraine, primarily in the form of missile systems used to attack Ukrainian civilians. It’s what could be going in the other direction as well, and how could that improve North Korea’s capabilities? And what does that mean for our own extended deterrence posture in the region, with both Korea and Japan?

Dr. Williams: I want to pull the thread on extended deterrence a little bit. As I’ve certainly heard allies, I’m sure you have as well – (laughs) – and they’ve been public about some questions and concerns about U.S. credibility as an ally, in light of withdrawal from Afghanistan, some statements by U.S. politicians, domestic debates, and in the past those raised concerns about proliferation in some allies. So could – I’m sure you’re tracking this, obviously. How worried should we be about allies pursuing independent nuclear capabilities?

Mr. Vaddi: So, look, generally speaking, these sort of trends on ally proliferation over history have tracked well with trends in terms of the general view of the security environment, right? So I think when the world is a tougher place, more countries are looking to how can they improve their own defense capabilities? And so I guess that’s the first point I’d make.

Secondly, I think, you know, we’ve responded very quickly and forcefully to any concerns allies have expressed regarding the security environment. And, like, look, we try to be at the forefront of it. We try to preempt those conversations. We want to be at the forefront of enhancing extended deterrence, as a U.S. initiative. We don’t want to be in a position where we’re forced into a bargaining scheme, where we’re dragged to the table to have these discussions as an unwilling ally. And this president has prioritized rebuilding alliances. And extended deterrence is at the core of that commitment. Because it’s not just that our allies are concerned with the security environment. It’s that the security environment has become more nuclear for many of those allies. Their concerns have trended more towards concerns over WMD in adversary possession.

And so I will say that our extended deterrence conversations as a general matter have taken on heightened importance. We are, of course, concerned – there has always been this historical connection between extended
deterrence and proliferation, and our nonproliferation policy. And we are taking that into account as we look to enhance extended deterrence relationships, because we want to make sure that the U.S. nuclear umbrella system, as it has existed, remains sufficient for deterring threats, including emerging threats that are emanating in Europe and Asia.

I guess the last thing I would say is we also tried to be very transparent about what we’re doing and why. Not just to our close allies and partners, but to our potential adversaries and the rest of the world. So for example, with the Washington Declaration, we made very clear to Chinese interlocutors, before the declaration was released, before we had any sort of public discussion of this, why we were doing this with South Korea. That it was focused on North Korea. That we view North Korea as a shared challenge between the United States and China. And we need to make progress together on trying to resolve it. Otherwise, the extended deterrence infrastructure is just going to increase in the region. And I think China does not want to see that, for obvious reasons.

And so I think it has a habit – it has a way of sort of highlighting some of these shared challenges. And we want to make sure that we’re transparent about why we’re doing what we’re doing in these extended deterrence relationships, because there are plenty of other countries around the world who will be suspicious that we’re just trying to advance the ball as it relates to, you know, U.S. military infrastructure worldwide, or things like that. That’s not really what we’re trying to do here.

Dr. Williams: Also I have a question about Iran. What is currently kind of being done to monitor Iran’s nuclear development? Should we be at all optimistic about Iran somehow returning to some sort of arms control framework or dialogue?

Mr. Vaddi: So I think, you know, in the current context of the Gaza crisis, obviously, it’s very challenging for us to just focus on Iran’s activity as it relates to its nuclear program. That being said, we are ultra focused on supporting the IAEA. The IAEA has obviously been assiduously pursuing resolving challenges that exist in the IAEA-Iran relationship. Director General Grossi went to Iran early last year, culminating in a series of commitments that Iran made in March of last year. Iran has not followed through on those commitments. At the end of last year, they de-designated a series of IAEA inspectors, who are no longer permitted to conduct inspection activities in Iran.

We’ve been pushing to make sure that Iran follows through on some of the commitments they’ve already made to the IAEA. We have ways in which we can kind of pass messages or concerns on our own as well. That being said, I think it’s a very challenging time for us to engage in sort of the level of
diplomacy you saw early in the administration as it related to the JCPOA. And our hope is that, you know, as the crisis is wrapped up in the coming months or years, that we’re able to engage in a conversation that’s more fruitful and fulsome as it relates to Iran’s nuclear program. At a minimum right now, we’re very focused on sort of keeping a lid on any further provocations as it relates to the nuclear program. And U.S. policy on ensuring that Iran never has a nuclear weapon has been very clear and is stated frequently by U.S. officials.

Dr. Williams: The audience is not going to let us move on from Russia. (Laughter.) More Russia questions coming in. So I’ve got a couple of these.

First one I’ll give you is from Reja Younis, who is here at PONI and also at Johns Hopkins SAIS: And Reja’s question is about how are you and how is the administration thinking about qualitative differences in U.S. arms control on, for example, with non-strategic nuclear weapons? Could potential approaches include treaty limits that focus on delivery systems, bans on certain types of weapons? So really, is there creative thinking going on about different kind of mixing and matching within some sort of an agreement? Or do you think it would be – it would look like New START 2.0, the New New START?

Mr. Vaddi: Yeah, should do a poll for what the right name would be, because I don’t know if knew New START is the one that I would support. (Laughter.) But, yeah, I think there is all the creative thinking happening. We have apparently nothing if not time, at this point, to do a lot of this thinking. I think we’ve communicated publicly over the course of the early years of this administration our interest in a follow-on arrangement that could cover the capabilities that are covered by New START, additional long-range delivery systems, particularly some of the weapons systems that Russia has developed that we would call novel, as well as all warheads. And so it – that that is a sort of version of an expanded New START, if you will, that really just formed the basis of a conversation to take place.

Now, I think we have heard in the past concerns expressed by Russia on conventional capabilities, on dual capable long-range strike, things like that. In other venues, they’ve expressed concerns with space capabilities, missile defense, you name it. None of these have come back to us in the terms of a formal proposal. We’ve heard kind of the complaining to microphones and to journalists. We have not gotten formal proposals from Russia to engage on any topics. And, of course, as we’ve discussed today, we’ve gotten a formal response that is a refusal to engage.

And so the shape of a future arrangement or set of arrangements is to be determined. I think Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov at some point over the course of last year, in an interview, mentioned there might be informal
measures that are worth considering, if it’s too difficult to pursue a more formal negotiation. I don’t know what more there is to that statement beyond what he said. But we, of course, would entertain any proposals to have a discussion. And it could be in the form of limits that are more qualitatively, you know, comparing the overall military strength of the two countries. Or, it could be, you know, what we have done and what we know how to do well, which is something that looks akin to START or New START.

Dr. Williams: I want to be really clear on something. Russia has not offered any concrete proposals?

Mr. Vaddi: Beyond the draft treaties that they offered in January before the invasion, and then put on their MFA website, there have been no specific proposals as it relates to the topics we’ve discussed today. Including sort of a post-New START framework or, you know, managing nuclear risks, which is what we proposed talking about.

Dr. Williams: Are those drafts – are they expecting – are those drafts still in play, from their perspective, that they put up in January before the invasion? Or are those kind of OBE?

Mr. Vaddi: It’s unclear. I mean, you have to think about them in the context in which they were offered. They were offered in advance and very publicly as part of the Strategic Stability Dialogue. The Strategic Stability Dialogue within which they swore up and down that they were not going to invade Ukraine, and everyone was crazy for thinking so. And then one month later, they did invade Ukraine. And so how seriously we’re supposed to continue to take those proposals – and there were two treaties. One was focused on kind of the geography of Europe and NATO, and the other was focused more on U.S.-Russia. There are a few sort of evergreen arms control priorities in these documents, such as on INF systems, reiterating their offer for moratorium, that sort of thing. But it’s hard to view a proposal like that very seriously. It was not that detailed. It didn’t come as a result of negotiations, or sort of a framework process to develop a more specific proposal.

And the way in which they’re offering a moratorium, for example, is on the heels of having already deployed an INF-violating system, having terminated the INF Treaty. You know, something like this was attempt in the 1980s, with the SS-20. And the Russians – or, the Soviets – had deployed several hundred of them at the time, and then proposed a moratorium that would only unilaterally limit the United States and NATO after the dual track decision was taken. And United States and NATO decided to start deploying our own capabilities. And so if it were a serious proposal there was certainly an opportunity for Russia to reiterate that with us as part of our attempts to engage in a formal dialogue most recently. They chose not to do that. They sent a refusal to engage instead. So we have to take them at their word.
Dr. Williams: Right. So take them at their word. No formal proposals. But the onus is expected to be on the United States to come up –

Mr. Vaddi: Always.

Dr. Williams: OK, come up with some sort of proposal. Interesting.

Mr. Vaddi: VADDI: That’s our read of things. And, of course, if we hear anything new, and their mind changes, our door remains open.

Dr. Williams: Door remains open. OK.

Unfortunately, nuclear weapons have been part of the story of the war in Ukraine since the very beginning. Actually, at CSIS and PONI, we just finished a study that had captured kind of all Russian nuclear statements about nuclear weapons since the invasion began. There were a lot. Some of them very direct threats. Some of them more indirect. But one of our questions – one of the questions here is if a low-yield nuclear weapon were ever used on the battlefield during a conflict, how do you think that would impact any arms control discussions or any prospects for arms control going forward?

Mr. Vaddi: So it would create severe political challenges domestically and with allies, obviously, to maintaining our current posture as it relates to arms control engagement. That being said, I think it could also create broad support internationally for more rapid and forceful engagement on nuclear disarmament. And so maybe that ends up being a wash over time. Maybe that ends up, you know, forcing what will be an extremely heightened risks and the heightened tension to quickly de-escalate. It’s hard to predict, right? I mean, we’re talking about an event that hasn’t happened in a very long time, and the context in which it happened previously is very different than the one we live in now, with multiple nuclear-armed countries.

And so, needless to say, all of our efforts are in preventing that scenario from ever unfolding. I think none of us want to live in a world where the norm against nuclear use has been broached and has to be rebuilt over time. And the combination of deterrence and arms control measures that we’re looking to take in this administration, in the context of an ongoing conflict in Europe that involves a nuclear-armed country, are designed to get at that.

Dr. Williams: Do you think that because of the heightened nuclear rhetoric since the war began, are you feeling increased international pressure for some sort of progress on arms control? Like, has this just kind of really brought nuclear weapons to the forefront for a whole lot of countries and for a wider public?
Mr. Vaddi: I think so. You know, I think it’s worth tracking international bodies and the statements they make. So the G-20, for example, is a good example, where they’ve communicated, I think, following the P-5 Prevention of Nuclear War Statement, kind of a similar idea that, nuclear weapons should never be used. So I think that there is energy there. I think that there’s strong pushback on the notion that any country could use a nuclear weapon and get away with it. I think that’s something that has been made very clear to Moscow, and hopefully has helped temper any sort of actual consideration of nuclear use as it relates to this conflict.

That being said, the – as you know, the details really matter as it relates to arms control engagement. And ultimately, both parties have to be interested in doing it. And so Russia right now is not feeling enough pressure to change its current approach to arms control engagement with us. And, again, I don’t think that there’s a substitute for bilateral arms control engagement of the kind that would satisfy the rest of the world, because it would actually result in limits on nuclear weapons. Now, will the international community choose to prioritize this in venues like the NPT PrepCom or other multilateral venues? I don’t know. I think Russia seems very comfortable not making progress in this area right now. And I don’t know that there’s any amount of international pressure or shame that will change their mind.

Dr. Williams: I have a question you from Stephen Young at the Union of Concerned Scientists that’s about the role of China in potentially pressuring DPRK: I want to expand on that, and also get your sense on China’s role in potentially influencing Russia. So kind of, you know, we know that after some concerns about Russian military discussions of potential nuclear use, that The New York Times reported on in November of 2022, but then at some point Xi Jinping made some comments urging Russia not to – you know, not to increase nuclear risks. Indian leader Modi made similar comments. So do you think that China could be playing some constraining role against Russia, but also against DPRK?

Mr. Vaddi: So it’s hard to say how direct that role is. I think, just taking the statements made by Chinese officials on their face, China has demonstrated a continued interest in nuclear restraint on the parts of other countries. Now, when push comes to shove, if the DPRK looks to set up a nuclear test, I think China would play a key role in stopping that from happening, if they could. And our hope is that that influence remains there. One of the concerning elements of Russia-DPRK cooperation over time, of course, is how much does that change China’s ability to influence North Korea, you know, in a 10-year timeframe? Because I think, to a point now, while China has not perhaps played a productive enough role of pushing North Korea back to the table to try to think about what diplomacy looks like as it relates to resolving their nuclear program and moving towards denuclearization, China can play a constructive role at least in sort of reducing the risk of really provocative
actions at this point. But, you know, at some point, maybe that calibration is going to be difficult if their influence wanes with Pyongyang.

**Dr. Williams:** Last audience question I’m going to take is from Bob Vince, and it’s about transparency and the importance of transparency in arms control historically. But I’m going to frame this, I think, in the context of China. China notoriously is not transparent about their nuclear arsenal, or about their intentions. And so what do you think are the prospects of going forward with arms control if there is not increased transparency with China? But, I mean, also with Russia. This is really across the board. Like, could we have arms control, as we know it – whether that be treaty based or not – without some sort of transparency and trust building mechanism?

**Mr. Vaddi:** So I guess I’ll answer it in two ways. One, it’s hard to think of arms control as we know it without – to borrow from you – without transparency baked into it. Whether that's in the form of, you know, verification and monitoring, or data declarations, data exchanges, that sort of thing. Because arms control, as we know it, in part has been something that we’ve relied upon to help shape our own nuclear posture, decisions we make as it relates to our own nuclear arsenal, and we’ve used to shape the nuclear postures and arsenals of other countries as well. And I’m thinking primarily of Russia here, of course, and the Soviet Union before it. I think transparency is thus inherently tied to the type of sort of strategic arms control, or hard arms control, formal arms control that we’ve pursued in the past.

That being said, as I mentioned, it’s a dynamic security environment and arms control approaches are changing along with the environment, or at least need to change. You know, to paraphrase, I think, what some Chinese colleagues have said, and people in the Chinese expert community, there is a genuine interest in the PRC on policy transparency. So they emphasize the need to understand policies, doctrine, et cetera, in other countries, and emphasize that that is an important step for them. And maybe that can lead to transparency of the kind that we’re used to, which is transparency of military capabilities, transparency of military planning, and long-term development. We, of course, don’t think policy transparency is more important than the piece of paper it’s written on, because countries can say – particularly autocratic countries – can say one thing and do something else. Whereas we’re very transparent with our policies all the time, so we don’t look at that as something that’s kind of in the trade basket for arms control.

That being said, there continues to be value in just communicating what our policies are, in walking through our thinking as it relates to a nuclear scenario, or what have you – things that we do, things that happen in the think tank community, things that we do with allies and partners. That’s certainly something that we’ll entertain. But it’s hard for that to be a substitute for the military capability, transparency that is inherently at the
core of strategic arms control, and allows us to make decisions as it relates to our own military capabilities.

Dr. Williams: So last question is going to be from me. It's actually not about arms control. I'm going to ask you to put your lawyer hat on. As a former lawyer, once a lawyer, always a lawyer, I'm going to say. So, a lot of folks know, there's this raging debate in D.C. at the moment about counterforce and nuclear targeting. And we're actually going to be hosting a PONI debate here on Thursday next week between Frank Miller and James Acton about what should U.S. targeting policy be? Should it be counterforce? Should it be counter-city, counter-population, counter-value? There's a lot of different definitions going on. But a lot of it does have to do with international law. And so I'm just wondering if you've been tracking that, and if you have any thoughts on this counterforce debate that's going on, and what questions you would ask James and Frank.

Mr. Vaddi: So I, unfortunately, won't be there. But I'm excited to hear how it goes. You know, I think several administrations have communicated that the United States follows the Law of Armed Conflict as it relates to our own nuclear policy planning, et cetera. And so that's point one.

Secondly, I think it's important for people analyzing this space to understand that this has been a debate that's raged since the splitting of the atom. There's a lot of interesting history on this. And when I was at Carnegie, I dug into this a little bit and thought about it in the context of the Law of Armed Conflict as well. And it's certainly valuable to have a really healthy debate taking place.

As it relates to the discussion that Frank and James may have next week, I think it's really important to think about deterrence, about what other countries think is important, how that relates to a hypothetical nuclear conflict and the decisions that would be made as it relates to nuclear employment here and in another country. This is - there is science, there is math, but there's also subjectivity to all of this as well. And I'm sure that those two participants will travel all of that ground together in a really interesting discussion. But other than that, I'm not going to get into trouble today, so.

Dr. Williams: Yeah. I don't envy the chair of that debate. So I think that brings our conversation to an end. Thank you all so much for joining in-person and also to thank you, all of you, online. But just to finally wrap up, please everyone join me in thanking Pranay for a very forthcoming and, I think, really valuable and helpful conversation about the administration's thinking on arms control, and a bit about what we can expect going forward. So thank you Pranay. (Applause.)
Mr. Vaddi: Thank you.

(END.)