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TRANSCRIPT
Online Event

The Nuclear Policy Trilemma

"Keynote Address by Senator Angus King"

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FEATURING
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Chair, Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces

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Rebecca Hersman

But before we do anything else, I now would like to turn to welcoming Senator Angus King – a fellow Mainer, I might add – to offer our keynote discussion. Senator Angus King was sworn in as Maine's first independent United States senator in 2013. I would say actually a longstanding tradition of independence in Maine politics. Senator King is a member of the Armed Services Committee, the Select Committee on Intelligence, Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, and the Committee on Rules and Administration. In his time in the Senate, Senator King has worked to strengthen America's national security, conducted critical oversight of the nation's intelligence community, and has supported commonsense budget priorities.

He's a leading voice on the importance of improving the United States' cybersecurity. And Senator King was selected by the congressional leadership to cochair the Cyberspace Solarium Commission, a bipartisan effort established by Congress to review the threats facing America in cyberspace and to develop a forward-leaning plan on how to defend ourselves against cyber threats. Prior to taking office, Senator King served two terms as the 72nd governor of Maine from 1995 to 2003. Sir, we're thrilled to have you with us here today and to hear some of your thoughts on these topics. And so with that, I would like to turn the floor, virtual as it is, over to you.

Senator Angus King (I-ME)

Well, thanks very much. I didn't know about the Maine connection, Rebecca. That's a – that's an added bonus. No wonder I signed up to do this. I'm delighted to be with you this morning.

I'm the chair of two subcommittees in the Senate, and I think it takes the record for the diversity of subject matter. One is Strategic Forces on Armed Services, which is, as you know, a euphemism for nuclear weapon. And the other is National Parks, on Energy and Natural Resources Committee. So, I think national parks and nuclear weapons is a pretty broad spectrum of responsibilities.

I wrote my college senior thesis in 1966 on the theory of deterrence the Cold War. Admiral Richards, the head of STRATCOM, when he heard that, has set naval intelligence on trying to find that document. So far he hasn't been able to, but I remember thinking – and this was, you know, early on in the thinking about deterrence and mutually assured destruction and the whole idea of the sort of standoff that was the basis of the Cold War that, you know, went from the '50s to the '90s.

However, that was the last time I really had to think about these issues in a hard way. And as you mentioned, I've been governor of Maine, which doesn't really involve much in the way of foreign policy – although we can see Canada from Maine, so there is that. But I came to the Senate and was assigned to Armed Services and Intelligence, which means that a good 60-70 percent of my time is spent on foreign policy. And then when I was appointed this winter to be chair of Strategic Forces, that caused me to really dig into a lot of these issues.

So I come at this in some ways with fresh eyes. It's not something that I've been working on my whole life. And I haven't been engaged in this issue. So I've tried to really think about some of the issues involved that we'll talk about today, and to come at them without terrible – you know, without a lot of preconceptions. I talked to Bill Perry, read his book, "The Button." Talked to people about the modernization. We had a series of very substantive hearings at the subcommittee this winter on the various issues. And I insisted that we invite people from varying points of view. They were some pretty contentious hearings, but they were illuminating and, I think, important.

So let me talk about where we are. We are in a fundamentally different place right now than for the past 40 or 50 years. The Cold War was characterized as a – as a bipolar world. We had the Soviet Union and the United States, and that was it. And that was the – that was the relationship. That was the structure of deterrence, the structure of the nuclear arrangements between the two countries, leading ultimately to various treaties, as you know.

Now China is very much in the mix. It's now a tripolar world and it's – and China is deeply engaged in a nuclear buildup. Admiral Richards characterized it as breathtaking what they're doing in terms of the – of the building of not only nuclear weapons, but the deployment of nuclear weapons – submarines, land-based missiles, bombers. They're rapidly expanding their nuclear capability, which complicates the whole calculus. It's much simpler when you're – when you're dealing with two countries. Now you're dealing with three, and they're different countries. They have different histories, different cultures, and so the rules of the game that were played with regard to the Soviet Union and then Russia don't really necessarily apply to China.

And I will – I'll digress just a moment to recommend to everyone in the – in the virtual room today the book "Destined for War" by Graham Allison. If you haven't read it, I think it should be required reading for anyone interested in foreign policy in 2021. It's the best analysis I've seen not only of history, which of course Graham is a master of, but also the culture and history of China, Xi Jinping – what kind of person he is, where he came from, what his background is.

And I'm firmly of the belief that one of the problems with American foreign policy historically has been a lack of understanding and appreciation of others' culture and history. We think everybody thinks like us. And we've learned, to our regret in a number of different situations, that that just isn't the case. And understanding what China wants – that's my most common question in hearings, what does China want – I think is critical to dealing with this new world of nuclear competition.

Deterrence is still our basic strategy. We build destroyers at Bath Iron Works in Maine, and I speak pretty much at every christening of a new ship. And I always say some variation of the same thing, which is we're building this ship

so that it will never be used. The whole idea of deterrence is to have the capability to respond to any kind of attack or aggression against this country in order to deter that aggression. The best attack is the one that doesn't happen. And so deterrence has always been the mainstay, the fundamental mainstay of America's strategy, and particularly nuclear deterrence. That was the – that was the heart of the strategy during the Cold War.

And that brings us to modernization. Deterrence really, if you think about it, rests upon two basic principles. One is capability and the other is will. Capability is: Do you have the ability to inflict damage, to impose costs on your adversary? Will is what it sounds like: Do you have the will to use that capability should it be necessary?

The problem that we have right now – and by the way, the whole – deterrence is a – is a study in psychology. Its whole intent is to affect the mental processes of your adversary, to affect their calculus in terms of whether or not to initiate some kind of aggression against this country. So the question is, if the capability deteriorates – and in this world everybody knows the – pretty much the parameters of the capability of each other – if the capability deteriorates, that means deterrence deteriorates. That means deterrence is no longer as powerful a shield and buckler, and you end up with a dangerous – a more dangerous situation that could lead to an adversary miscalculating – or, frankly, calculating and saying they can strike us the way they could and therefore there is some advantage to be gained.

And that, as I said, brings us to modernization. The problem we have financially or fiscally in this country is that all three legs of the nuclear triad have aged similarly, and the modernization bill is coming due for all three at the same time – a new B-21 bomber, Columbia-class nuclear submarines, and a new ground-based strategic deterrent – a missile – new missiles. All because the existing fleet of deterrent vehicles are aging out. The current group of nuclear submarines, of SSBNs are now reaching – or, will be, within the next 10 years, reaching the end of their lives. The bomber fleet is aging. And the missiles are clearly – the Minuteman III are clearly reaching a point of diminished capacity.

With regard to the bombers and the missile fleet, I went out – we went and looked – brought a group from the Strategic Forces Subcommittee to Minot, North Dakota earlier this year where we could look at two legs of the triad at once. There are bombers there, but there's also a large Minuteman installation scattered across the plains of North Dakota. By the way, North Dakota is the flattest place I've ever been. Being from Maine, I'm not used to the geography where if you're six feet tall and you walk out on the street, you're the highest thing within miles. They say the good thing out there – the good news is if your dog runs away, you can still see him for three days. (Laughs.) And I believe that.

But we visited the Minuteman field. We climbed down in a silo and saw how difficult it is to maintain these missiles. And there's just – to me, that was one of the things that convinced me that they needed modernization. And of course, the lead time on some of these things, like a new missile or a new submarine, is substantial. So if you wait until it's a drastic need then it's too late, almost by definition, and you have a capability gap that, again, undermines the whole concept of deterrence.

So the other – the other piece that convinced me – and this was one of the issues that I really hadn't decided when I began my work on this subcommittee – was do we really need the ground-based missiles? And there's a lot of discussion about that, as you know. And I'm sure there are people in this audience that believe that that can be dispensed with. What convinced me – and I'm just being totally honest with you all – what convinced me that that was a flawed strategy is that it really depends upon the theory of invulnerability of our submarines. The argument goes, well, we've got the bomber fleet and we have these silent invulnerable SSBNs that can patrol the world. They're a sufficient deterrent. We don't need the missiles and we can rely on those submarines.

The nagging fear that I have, and had, is: Yes, the submarines are essentially undetectable now. But I don't know how any of us can have confidence that that will continue to be the case five, 10, 15 years from now. We don't know what's going to be developed in terms of technology. From space perhaps someone will develop a technology that can detect disturbances in the undersea water column that would indicate the presence of a submarine. I can assure you that everyone in the world is working on submarine detection technology. So the idea that we could dispense with the missile capability while we rely upon the invulnerability o the submarines, to me, was a dangerous bet. And it strikes me that the – that the restoration or the renovation of the ground-based deterrent, the strategic deterrent makes sense.

Now, let's talk about a cost. The problem is, as I mentioned, we're doing all three at once. And it's very expensive. I characterized it the other day as you put these three programs together, it's the pig in the python of the defense budget. It's a big bulge that's in the defense budget starting a year or two or ago, or three or four years ago, actually, and moving through the next decade.

It is a major expenditure. There's no doubt about it. On the other hand, it still is in – I didn't check the figures this morning, but as I recall, it's in – it still means that the nuclear enterprise is in the single digits in terms of the percentage of the overall defense budget. So it's expensive, but I think it was Jim Mattis that said we can afford to be safe. And I think this is such an important area, particularly with the Chinese buildup, that we can't afford not to do these projects. I just – I think that's a – it's just essential. And as I said, the problem with something like the ground-based deterrent is, replacing

those missiles is going to be a five- to 10-year proposition. And so, as I say, if you wait till it's really too late, then you've missed – you've lost a lot of time.

The other problem with the financial aspect of this is, and this sort of surprises me as a private sector, former businessman: The United States government has no capital budget. The budget is all expenses. In other words, a park ranger's salary is the same as the cost of a 40-year nuclear submarine. And so you get a – you get this sort of skewed view of the budget where capital items count the same as regular, ongoing expenses, and I think that is a – I think it's a mistake generally of how we budget. I think we'd have a much clearer picture of how we're budgeting if we separated capital from operating. But for some reason I'm not in charge of how the budget is run around here. So it is what is, but in reality, most of these systems – all of these systems are capital. They're going to be there for dozens of years, 40, 50, 60, 70 years, and I think they should be looked at as such in terms of their long-term cost.

I think what I want to talk about for a minute is arms control and really conclude on that. We developed a relationship with the Russians over the years, over the later stages of the Cold War, that involved some perception of the mutual interests that we both had in arms control, and particularly in nuclear arms control. The Chinese seem uninterested in this process. My understanding is that they didn't even want to sit in on the recent discussions with the Russians on the renewal of the New START Treaty. They're very reluctant to engage in a hotline. They're very reluctant to engage in any talks. And I don't really know why, except perhaps they feel that they're – they would be disadvantaged until they reach a point of some parity with Russia and the United States on these matters, and therefore they're just not going to engage at that – until that time comes. That makes a dangerous situation. Obviously, I think the world is a safer place if we have agreements on nuclear weapons, if we have limitations, but right now, China is just – as I say, seems totally uninterested in that proposition. So, we've got to continue to discuss with the Russians and hopefully eventually engage with the Chinese on those issues, but now that doesn't seem to be the case.

The final issue that keeps me up at night is proliferation. And as you all know, there are seven or eight or nine nuclear countries and have been for some time, but the danger – to me the gravest danger is nuclear technology falling into the hands of a group of terrorists. And given the number of countries that have this technology, some of which are more responsible than others – that's a polite way of saying some of which are not as responsible as others – to me is the gravest danger facing humanity. The terrorists on September 11th killed 3,000 people. If they had the capability, they would have killed 3 million. They wouldn't distinguish. And the only thing that kept them from that capability is the lack of access to nuclear technology.

So, my nightmare – and by the way, going back to the beginning and deterrence, if you think about it, deterrence doesn't work with a terrorist organization. The whole theory of deterrence is you bomb us and we'll bomb

you, and your country will be destroyed and you'll be out of power and, you know, it's going to be a catastrophe on both sides. A terrorist organization is made up of many people who don't care about being killed, who don't have a government, who don't have cities. They have very little at risk. And so we really haven't figured out how to apply the theory of deterrence or some new theory to defend ourselves against nuclear terrorism.

And I hate to be pessimistic but given some of the countries that have this technology and given the intent of some of these terrorist organizations to do us harm, I don't think it's farfetched to think of a tramp steamer heading into Miami harbor with a thermonuclear device in the hold. The only thing I can think of as the best defense against that is intelligence. We have to know what's happening around the world and keep track of the plotting that's going on among these groups. But that is a – I think a grave concern not necessarily on the front burner today, but I think we have – all of us who are engaged in these kinds of strategic thoughts have to be thinking about that aspect of this – of this issue.

So those are some of the thoughts that I have. I think we'll certainly continue to work on the issue. I look forward to working with many of those in the audience. And I will say that in my experience here in Congress, ideas are the most valuable commodity. And as we do – I don't think we've ever had a more important Nuclear Posture Review. And as we go through the upcoming Nuclear Posture Review, it's going to be unlike any that went before it because we're in the – in the world of both China and the Soviet – sorry, and Russia, but also because we're in a world of potential proliferation that is profoundly dangerous.

So I'll stop there. And, Rebecca, I think we have some questions. I'm delighted to have a chance to chat with you.

Ms. Hersman Well, thank you so much, Senator King. You've put a lot on the table.

To the audience, I'm going to take the opportunity to ask a couple of follow-up questions and give you a few minutes to post some questions in the Q&A function, so please be sure to use that. And submit them there and I'll turn to those in just a couple of minutes.

Let me maybe pick up first with where you left off, the Nuclear Posture Review. I'm wondering – this is sort of an opportunity – you know, are there certain things you really want to make sure get addressed or that you have any sort of concerns in the way the posture review will be set up? There will be – you know, we expect a review that is more embedded into the National Defense Strategy. I think there's still a bit of sorting out in terms of both the process and the timing and details, but there's a lot of issues on their plate, whether it's from declaratory policy to some of the additional capabilities – nuclear capabilities that were put forward during the Trump administration and a variety of other issues. So if you had sort of a top three, you know, list

for the NPR of, you know, I'm really hoping, you know, that you're working on these, what would you do with that? What would – what would be your message there?

Sen. King

Well, I think number one is what do we do with China. I mean, that's got to be – I think that's the highest priority in terms of the review. We need a very clear-eyed picture of what China's doing, and I think we have that to some extent, but that's going to depend on intelligence. But I – but I think number one is China.

Number two, it strikes me, is what is the potential for some kind of alliance between China and Russia. There are cases around the world where they are – they are appearing to find some common cause, and to what extent is that a – going to be an issue. And ironically – (laughs) – it almost goes back to my college thesis. China and Russia – or, China and the Soviet Union were viewed as the communist bloc for the early part of the Cold War. And I remember the term the Sino-Soviet split. And they sort of went their separate ways. And the question is whether they will return to some kind of alliance against the West. And I don't know the answer to that, but I think that has to be examined.

And then finally I hope some attention is paid to the question of proliferation, and particularly terrorist groups, and the fact that conventional deterrent policy doesn't apply. So what does? Deterrence has defended us – has successfully prevented nuclear war for 80 years. Let's see – 60 – yeah, 80 years. And yet, we're dealing with an entirely different situation, where the theory of deterrence doesn't work. So I would like to see somebody working on, you know, what's deterrence 2.0 look like with regard to nonstate actors. So those are the three things I hope will be touched upon in the review.

Ms. Hersman

Thank you. Yeah, I think it's interesting because we do seem to swing a bit. You know, back in 2009-2010 I think proliferation and concern about nuclear terrorism was pretty high on the agenda and addressed in the Obama Nuclear Posture Review. And then we've kind of moved back to a more kind of great-power challenge in China. I guess we have to really figure out how to do both at the same time, rather than seeming to choose between one or the other. I guess the question is, do you think we can do that? Or do you think that there is sort of a tension between these two nuclear priorities? Or is there a way to kind of bring them together in a more holistic approach?

Sen. King

Well, you said do I think we can do it? I think we have to do it. I mean, I don't think there's a choice. I mean, China is arming to the teeth and drastically expanding their submarine fleet, deploying missiles, deploying mobile missiles, which are an additional strategic challenge. So I think, you know, there's got to be – in terms of China, there's got to be some very good analysis, and there have been – we have a lot of it, about exactly what it is that they're doing.

Oh, and by the way, one thing I didn't mention. When we talk about the triad, when we talk about modernizing the triad, I really think we ought to use the term "the quad" because I think nuclear command and control is as important as any leg of the triad. We can have the best weapons in the world, but if the president can't launch them, or if we – if there isn't communication between the Defense Department and the president and the – and the pieces of the triad, then it doesn't work. If they can compromise – if an adversary can compromise our command and control, they've essentially cancelled our nuclear deterrent.

So modernizing NC3, and particularly cyber protection, is absolutely, to me, a critical part of the modernization. Any conflict that is coming our way will start with a major cyberattack, the purpose of which will be to blind us and cut off our communications. And so, I can't emphasize enough that command and control has got to be an essential part of the modernization process. And I think it is. When we went out to Minot we then went down to Omaha, to STRATCOM, and spent a morning with Admiral Richard and his folks. And they're very focused on the issue of command and control. But I just – I think it should – we got to keep hammering on that because it's not as sexy as new missiles or new bombers.

Ms. Hersman Right. Well, and I was very taken with your, you know, description of visiting at Minot and going down into one of the capsules. I led a PONI group pre-COVID and we did the same thing. And it was a sobering experience to actually be down there and see the maintenance challenges. I know it affected my thinking at the time, and I think most of the people who went with us. And maybe that is playing out a bit in the NDAA, because you laid out the budget challenge very well. But, on the other hand, the bills look like support is pretty strong for modernization. Are there any big areas of discrepancy? Are there any big concerns? What do you see as sort of under debate in the NDAA process on these issues?

Sen. King Well, we haven't – we haven't come to the floor yet with the bill and there's still – there's still some work to be done to finalize the bill as it comes to the floor, but by and large there was not a lot of debate on this subject, and I expected there to be. But most people, as they gain a better understanding of the – of the situation, like me – I mean, I started out pretty much agnostic on this last December and really got to the place where I think the modernization of the – of the missile system is necessary for reasons that I articulated. There may be differences. There will be some differences with the House. I think the House was a little more reluctant, talked about getting reports and things like that. Those will be resolved in conference. But there doesn't seem to be a strong, full-throated debate about what we need to do.

Ms. Hersman Right. Right. Interesting.

Well, you know, I'm going to take a quick break to let people know I'm going to turn to you after just one more question. There is a number of interesting

comments and things that I was hoping people would raise coming up in the – in the chat and Q&A function, so I'll turn that.

I just have one final question for you, sir. You know, you'd mentioned the importance of arms control and the challenges in bringing China to the table, which are indeed, you know, kind of big obstacles in the way forward. But we have some pretty big domestic obstacles when it comes to arms control as well, especially in terms of securing the advice and consent of the Senate if we go down a treaty road in the future. Do you have any thoughts on that? Do you think there is a process in the same way that kind of people have come along in terms of on the Hill at looking at modernization they might similarly do so on arms control, or perhaps being able to support formal agreements? Or is it not possible?

Sen. King

That's a really good question. We seem to have in the Senate what I call the anti-treaty caucus, which people – people who just won't support any kind of treaty, which somehow this has become a politically popular position of, you know, I'm not supporting any treaties, they abrogate U.S. sovereignty. I mean, the classic example is the Law of the Sea. Talk about shooting yourselves in the foot. I mean, we're standing on the sidelines where major disputes around the world are being resolved through the UNCLOS and we're not in the game, and it's costing us, and it's hurting us. And yet, you know, every expert, every military person, every thoughtful, you know, public policy/international relations person I've asked – I've asked that question probably 25 times in the last nine years; every single time the answer is, yes, of course we should ratify Law of the Sea. We can't do it.

There's this wrongheaded view that any compromise of sovereignty can't – we can't do that. We can't – we can't do treaties. But that's – it's ridiculous. We all compromise our sovereignty every day in order to make us safer. We drive on the right. That compromises your sovereignty to drive on the left or your sovereign right to drive through an intersection without stopping at a red light. Why do you do it? Because it makes you safer and it makes you less likely to be killed and less likely to kill other people. So we – by agreeing to these conventions, whether it's in nuclear arms control or Law of the Sea or whatever it is, we increase our international safety and national security.

But I can tell you, I mean, there are people here who just are never going to vote for a treaty. And whether we can get 67 votes for any treaty, no matter how strong it is, I question. I think this is a – I haven't been here – I've been here almost nine years, but I think there's been a sea change in the – in the attitude around here. I don't know if we could get START through again if we were – had to do it today. So I hope we can get through to some of these folks that they are really compromising national security by being unwilling to even consider a treaty with sufficient safeguards that doesn't compromise national sovereignty, but indeed enhances national security.

I didn't mean to make a – give you a lecture on that, but it's something that really bothers me. The Law of the Sea just – I just – like I say, that's a self-inflicted wound.

Ms. Hersman Yes, absolutely. Well, appreciate your comments on that, actually.

Let me turn now to some of the questions that are coming in from the audience. We've got a number of good ones. I'm going to start with one from Elaine Bunn because she really brings up one of the other topics of the conference in the panel that will follow you: What do you see as priorities in this area for working with allies, especially regarding extended nuclear deterrence? Do you see any, you know, kind of tensions? Do you have any concerns there? And how strongly do you think we should continue to emphasize extended deterrence as well as the central deterrence?

Sen. King I think it's really important because the alternative to extended deterrence is proliferation. If the Japanese decide that we're not going to provide our nuclear umbrella, they're going to develop a capacity, or the South Koreans or other countries around the world. I think extended deterrence is a very important concept. It's difficult. It's a difficult intellectual one because you're putting at risk your country on behalf of another country, but the alternative, to me, is a more dangerous international scene. So I believe that the idea of the American nuclear umbrella is very important to both international stability, in terms of some limitation on regional conflict, but also in terms of proliferation.

Ms. Hersman Thank you.

You know, you emphasized in your remarks the importance of kind of addressing the concerns from China. There's at least two questions here regarding the recent agreement announced on AUUKUS, the Australia-U.K.-U.S. nuclear naval propulsion proposal that has kind of caught the foreign policy world by storm over the last week. So Dan Leone has asked for your view on that partnership in the naval propulsion piece. A couple of others have asked as well, relatedly, about, do you think this type of approach, this type of alliance effort, is the right way to go about kind of countering or checking some of China's ambitions?

So two questions but in a very similar topic area, if you don't mind.

Sen. King Well, before I answer that, let me mention something about China and the Pacific that I think is important. We're talking mostly here this morning about nuclear weapons. To me, one of the most serious strategic gaps, if you will, for the U.S. is our questionable ability to counter hypersonic weapons. Our principal strategy in the Pacific is one of force projection, based largely upon carriers. And if a carrier can be taken out by a hypersonic missile from China that's right now largely undefendable, that renders our strategy very vulnerable, and that worries me. If there is a strategic problem that the U.S. faces, I believe it's both in the offensive but particularly in the defensive area

of dealing with hypersonic weapons. If we can't defend against them, then we have to develop them themselves so that we can develop a deterrence on the use of hypersonic weapons. But I wanted to mention that before we get too much further into the discussion.

I don't know much more about what's gone on with France, Australia, and the U.S., other than what's been on the press. On the way in this morning, I listened to the French ambassador very unhappy about what went on. You know, I don't know what should have been done in that situation. It seems to me that the Australians, who were the ones that were going to breach this agreement, should have been the ones to tell France, look, you should know we're in discussions with the Americans because we think we need a nuclear capability and what we originally proposed for you to build for us just isn't going to serve our needs. They didn't do that. Of course, we had meetings with French counterparts that didn't mention it either. So clearly there's some fence-mending to be done. I don't suspect it will be a long-term breach in the relationship between the U.S. and France or the U.S. and the EU. But clearly it was – it probably could have been handled better in terms of communication, although whenever the French were told, they would have been mad as hell when it – you know, if it would have been two months ago or a year ago or last week. That's – but I don't know the details of why the Australians made this decision, but I suspect they're going to have to pay some penalties to France, but they obviously made a decision that this was in their national security interests.

Ms. Hersman Let's see, I have Soyoung Kim from Radio Free Asia who would like to ask you about North Korea. She says: North Korea continues to develop its nuclear and missile programs while the U.S.-DPRK diplomatic engagement seems to be pretty low key. This sort of fits also in your discussion about where the various threats lie. What is your comment on this? Do you have any thoughts on how North Korea fits into this picture of deterrence, arms control, proliferation?

Sen. King Well, North Korea is obviously in the category of semi-rogue nations, where so far there hasn't been any really productive discussions. There were the meetings between their leader and President Trump, but it didn't really go anywhere. Again, I think the beginning of successful negotiations is putting yourself in the other person's shoes. What is it North Korea wants? My guess is what they want more than anything else is regime stability and some assurance that regime change is not on our agenda or South Korea's agenda. But whether assurances can be provided that would be sufficient to allow them to diminish their nuclear program, which they view as a kind of insurance policy, I don't know.

You know, I don't – I wish – I've been to South Korea. I've actually been to North Korea, into two or three feet across the demilitarized zone – (laughs) – up at the DMZ. But I don't – I don't have a clear answer to that, except that pressure has to continue to be applied. And to me, the best route is via direct

talks between South Korea and North Korea. And if they can come to some reasonable uneasy status quo that will reassure the North Korean regime, then perhaps that would lead to the possibility of some level of denuclearization. But it's a – it's a very tough problem. And of course, we haven't talked about Iran yet. That's another dilemma.

Ms. Hersman There's plenty to work on.

Let me – you know, there's an interesting question here that brings together, I think, two areas of interest. You raised part of this in terms of nuclear command and control. And the question has to do with, you know, how prominently does your expertise in cyber and focus you've given that in part kind of undergird the focus that you put on NC3? Do you see it principally as a cyber threat to NC3? Do you see those issues as closely connected or intertwined? And how might you think about cyberattacks that could implicate somehow our NC3 systems in terms of what they would represent in terms of the type of attack they would be?

Sen. King I think they're very closely intertwined. Our commission, which was a very interesting one. It was appointed – it was created in the National Defense Act of 2019. And it has a really interesting structure – four members of Congress, four members from the executive, and six private sector individuals. And we just – we had our 47th meeting last night, as a matter of fact. This has been a very hands-on commission, really thoughtfully trying to approach this problem.

The short answer to your question is cyber is absolutely the – to me – the most serious risk in terms of command and control. And the problem with cyber is it's never done. You can never say: OK, we're – we've done that and it's all – we're safe, it's all secure. Because the adversaries are working all the time to try to undermine it. And the other problem with cyber is that it's cheap. I once did a calculation that Putin can hire 8,000 hackers for the price of one jet fighter. And so it's a low-cost strategy. And it also can be enormously debilitating.

And so, you know, we can – we can talk about focusing on command and control and the security of that system. But what if – you know, what if the whole grid goes down? What if there's no power to the White House? (Laughs.) I mean, I assume there are generators and those kinds of things. But the opportunities for cyber mischief are only limited by our imagination. And so that's why I think it's so critical to have redundancy on top of redundancy because, again, if the adversary believes that they could cripple our command and control, then the deterrent capability evaporates. All those submarines are out there and they have all those missiles on them, but they aren't going to do anything because nobody's going to be able to tell them what to do.

And so that's why – that's why I say this ought to be – we ought to talk about the Quad instead of the triad because I think that's so important. There's no

question in my mind that the adversaries right at this moment as we are speaking are thinking about and working on how to compromise the cyber – the security of our communications system.

Ms. Hersman That is a daunting problem.

Well, again, sort of looking about the intersection of these various threats and challenges, Brian Rozinski asks a question. He says: The Biden administration has argued that we can no longer look at nuclear weapons in a vacuum, that China and Russia see nuclear weapons as part of an integrated toolkit. The administration's response to this includes an effort to better integrate the NPR and Missile Defense Reviews with the National Defense Strategy process. How well equipped do you think Congress is to take a similarly integrated approach to deterrence, both in terms of thinking about adversaries and challenges in this way but also in terms of managing and supporting the investments that need to be made in an integrated strategy? How would that affect –

Sen. King Well, I think the premise of the question is absolutely correct that you can't – we can't think about nuclear policy over here and everything else – hypersonics, cyber – over here. That's not the way our adversaries think of it. They're thinking of – the People's Liberation Army is thinking about – newly, I should say. They are – they are – they're sort of – or they're discovering Goldwater-Nichols. I mean, they're – they are thinking about how to reorganize to be in a more strategically coherent position.

So can the Congress adapt? Yes, I think so. I certainly hope so. We've got some very good people engaged on this issue in both houses. My colleague Deb Fischer, who is my – I call her my vice chair; she's the ranking member of the Strategic Forces Subcommittee. You know, she and I have worked together very closely. I don't think there are any – there are – there are some sort of partisan differences on these issues, but not to any great extent, not as much as on the – (laughs) – on the debt ceiling or on, you know, the reconciliation bill. But I think – I think Congress is prepared to look at this on a more holistic basis, and I think that's important.

I agree with the question and I agree with the approach of the administration. As I say, we can – we can have nuclear deterrence and it can hold, but if they can disable our entire carrier fleet in a matter of an hour in the Western Pacific, that's – that changes the strategic calculus dramatically.

Ms. Hersman Thank you. Yeah. All right. Great question and thanks for that thoughtful answer.

I'm checking here to see, you know, whether we kind of captured most of the questions. We've gotten a lot of them. They are moving between two systems and challenging my technical capacity. (Laughter.)

Sen. King You're doing fine.

Ms. Hersman Let's see. Well, I guess, you know, there's a couple – there's two remaining questions and I'll kind of let you consider how to think about those.

One has to do with declaratory policy and consideration of – it's probably one of the big issues to be considered as part of Nuclear Posture Review and Integrated Strategy Review, and it is related to how do we think about these integrated capabilities and when it is appropriate in any way to threaten nuclear use. So the question has to do with whether or not you support any changes to declaratory policy, particularly in the form of no first use or sole purpose. And that is – kind of how do you feel about that? Do you have any expectations or opinions on that topic?

Sen. King Well, I've thought about no first use, and it's tempting to articulate that as a policy. But again, I was – I was thinking about this as we were preparing for this discussion. Part of deterrence is making your adversary nervous. You want your adversary to be a little unsure of what the policy is going to be and therefore err on the side of caution. And you know, I certainly hope that we would never use nuclear weapons first. I don't think that should be our policy. I don't think that is our policy. But ruling it out just slightly changes the adversary's calculus. And, again, if you think about the whole idea of deterrence is to undermine the confidence of the adversary that they can be successful in any conflict, that's, to me, persuasive that making that kind of statement is – would not be in the national interest.

Let me mention, by the way, while we've talked so much about deterrence, one of the – one of the principal recommendations of our Cyber Solarium Commission was to develop a clear declaratory policy on deterrence in cyber, because the problem in cyber has been over the past 15-20 years we've been a cheap date. We've been – there have been no real consequences for significant cyberattacks against this country, and therefore they keep coming. As I said, it's cheap. And if they're not going to be struck back in some way, why not? And the striking back, by the way, doesn't have to be cyber for cyber. But there has to be – we want someone sitting in the politburo to say: Boss, if we do this, they're going to whack us in some way. And we better think twice about it.

Right now, that calculus isn't being made. And so deterrence is not only applicable in the nuclear field – and it's not a one-to-one comparison. I don't mean to imply that it is. It's not that simple. But it is an important concept in cyber as well. And so far, I think it's been the major strategic gap in our cyber response in this country. So I had to get that in. If you're going to talk about deterrence – if you're going to – if you're going to say deterrence to me, you're going to get a cyber-related answer. (Laughs.)

Ms. Hersman Absolutely. I understand. It makes perfect sense.

Well, Senator, you have been incredibly generous with your time. I want to make sure we let you get onto the business of your day on schedule. But I have

to say, really kind of made it for the hometown girl here. And so it's really fun to be able to talk about the thing I spend all day at work doing with kind of a hero of the home state. So this has really been a fun morning for me. And thank you so much for your time and thoughtfulness, and the great sort of intellect and balance you bring to these issues. It's really a refreshing thing.

Sen. King — Thank you so much, Rebecca. And it's been – it's been fun for me. And, as I said, if members of the audience have ideas or thoughts that they want to share, please reach out to my office. My foreign policy staff is really top-notch. Jeff Bennett leads that. And be in touch with us. I'm always interested in ideas and, of course, always can use a little more education. So, thanks again for the opportunity and look forward to being with you again.

Ms. Hersman — Well, thank you so much, sir. And thank you to the audience. You put some great questions in there and it's really been a terrific discussion. So thank you. And really thrilled to have you here.

(END)