Nuclear Cooperation with Strategic Competitors

Rapporteur: John Milton

On March 21, 2023, CNA’s National Security Seminar (NSS) series hosted a virtual panel discussion (see recording here) on Dr. Timothy McDonnell’s recent publication Working with the Adversary: Great Power Cooperation and Nuclear Risk Management. In addition to McDonnell, the event featured Rose Gottemoeller, former deputy secretary general of NATO and chief US negotiator of the 2010 New START Treaty, and was moderated by Mary Chesnut, a research analyst and nuclear weapons policy expert at CNA.

McDonnell began the discussion by providing a synopsis of his publication. Using lessons from three early Cold War cases in which the US and the Soviet Union attempted to cooperatively manage nuclear risks—sometimes unsuccessfully—McDonnell provided recommendations for contemporary US policymakers seeking to use cooperative strategies to reduce nuclear risks and advance US interests. Gottemoeller, recently published on the subject in the Texas National Security Review, said she considered McDonnell’s findings "a very valuable contribution" to nuclear policymaking. She reinforced several of McDonnell’s key takeaways that aligned with her experiences as a senior arms control negotiator.

The panel discussion and Q&A covered a range of topics, including the consequences of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and the growth and modernization of China’s nuclear arsenal. Gottemoeller drew in part on her experience negotiating the New START Treaty to discuss current US-Russia nuclear relations. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has constrained diplomatic communication between Washington and Moscow, she noted, but the New START Treaty required notifications on both sides’ nuclear postures, provided predictability, and “helped bolster our understanding that they were not raising the strategic nuclear forces to a higher level of operational readiness” during the conflict’s first year. Therefore, Russia’s recent decision to suspend its participation in New START and halt those notifications, Gottemoeller said, “is not bringing the nuclear temperature down. It’s raising the nuclear temperature in my view.”

McDonnell and Gottemoeller both concluded with cautious optimism. Despite headwinds, over the medium to long-term arms control—broadly understood—will remain an important and valuable tool that the US can use to advance its national interests.

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