Challenge and Response: Nonproliferation Policy in the 112th Congress

In assessing nonproliferation policy in the 112th Congress, John Noonan, Policy Advisor with the Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI), opened the panel by laying out President Obama’s justification for his non-proliferation efforts, specifically, that the threat nuclear terrorism poses to the United States and the western powers is reason enough to ratify the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. He explained that the Administration’s strategy – to make both American and Russian nuclear reserves smaller and thus more manageable and secure – was designed to help not only in U.S.-Russian relations, but also inspire other countries to mitigate their nuclear proliferation efforts. He then opened the floor for the three panelists to discuss the veracity of the Obama Administration’s strategic calculus and offer insights into the future trajectory of the new Congress as they are welcomed to their positions with such a complex and heavy issue.

The first speaker was Henry D. Sokolski, Executive Director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center. He opened his remarks with the analogy that nonproliferation is to national security what global warming and biodiversity are to the health of the planet. “It’s one of those things everyone kinda nods and says, ‘Yeah, I guess.’ But they have a hard time closing in on what to do to promote it.” Mr. Sokolski generally framed a key term by acknowledging that the “atom” can be used for peaceful/civilian or military purposes. Yet while one purpose is helpful for boiling water, the other (which uses the same materials and technologies) promotes tension or terrorism. He then brought the issue into a congressional context. He took time to review Congress’s history with nuclear policy, noting the once-every-few-years regularity of interjection. Mr. Sokolski claimed that the time has come yet again for congress to renew its nuclear policies, especially in light of our failures with Iran and North Korea. Mr. Sokolski also stated that in order to get people to pay attention to the arguments, he has always tried to find the partisan angle, as it draws more attention. Nevertheless he projects that both parties on the Hill will come together on this issue of nonproliferation as they face Korean, French, Russian, and Japanese nuclear firms wanting to expand their business in America.

The next speaker was Edward A. Burrier, a Professional Legislative Staffer for Representative Ed Royce, Ranking Member of the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade and also a member of the FPI Future Leaders Program. He began with affirming the need for new ideas to confront the current and future nuclear issues. Mr. Burrier also broached the topic of spreading new enrichment and reprocessing technologies necessary to develop nuclear weapons. He reiterated FPI Executive Director Jamie Fly’s testimony in front of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, “We’re on the precipice of proliferation of nuclear weapons unlike anything we have witnessed since the development of the atomic bomb.” He followed with his fear that the Obama Administration is on the verge of compounding the problem with nuclear cooperation agreements, e.g. Vietnam and Jordan. He argued that the key question is how the enrichment and processing (key bomb making procedures) will be handled. Mr. Burrier then analyzed some strategically sound and then stickier situations the Obama Administration has
encountered with nuclear agreements. For instance, President Obama’s U.S.-UAE nuclear deal can be considered a “gold standard” of agreements. Yet there is still a question on whether or not Congress will be willing to rein back on bomb making capabilities. The Obama Administration, he stated, has been lax on the gross misrepresentations of the rights different countries claim under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. This is concerning, especially with regard to Iran. Mr. Burrier argued that the Obama Administration is putting itself in a box if they allow uranium enrichment on Iranian soil while not allowing countries like Jordan, Vietnam, UAE and others to develop their own enrichment technology.

The final panelist was Joel C. Spangenberg, Deputy Staff Director of the Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Mr. Spangenberg brought to light some of the known and lesser known counter nuclear terrorism initiatives of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). He highlighted the Container Security Initiative, the Megaports Initiative, international bilateral support, and innovative technologies, like the Global Nuclear Detection Architecture, as ways that the DHS is mitigating the threat of nuclear terrorism. Mr. Spangenberg also pointed out that the Governmental Accountability Office (GAO) has been actively screening for nuclear threats in ports-of-entry, international aviation, and small maritime vessels. Countering the threat of nuclear terrorism, he stated, is reliant on the development of nuclear forensics attribution capabilities. He encouraged the next Congress to continue overseeing efforts like the Nuclear Forensics and Attribution Capabilities Act and to foster further international cooperation to thwart nuclear terrorists.