

International Affairs Forum Interview

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By Jason Miks

IA-Forum discusses security issues with Richard Weitz, Senior Fellow and Director of Program Management at the Hudson Institute, and author of 'Revitalising US-Russian Security Cooperation: Practical Measures'. His current areas of research include defense reform, counterterrorism, homeland security, and U.S. policies towards Europe, the former Soviet Union, Asia, and the Middle East, in addition to which he coordinates Hudson events and the Institute's intern program.



International Affairs Forum: How troubled are you by China's military build-up?

Richard Weitz: I think it is disturbing. Not because China has any intention of attacking the United States, but because the conflict between China and Taiwan has not been resolved. The build-up might lead the Chinese to think they have a military option against Taiwan, and that is problematic for the United States because America would under some circumstances consider intervening on behalf of Taiwan.

IA- Forum: Do you see Taiwan becoming a flashpoint between the U.S. and China?

Richard Weitz: I consider it unlikely, but possible.

IA- Forum: Do you think the United States would intervene to protect Taiwan?

Richard Weitz: I think that under some circumstances the United States would consider intervening. In the nuclear age, there's always the question about whether we would sacrifice New York and Washington for other countries. For the most part, it seems unlikely that people will want to do that. But some may be willing to take the risk, and that will depend on who is in power at the time.

IA- Forum: Japan is considering revising Article 9 of its so-called peace constitution to allow it to play a more active military role in terms of peacekeeping and self defense. There has even been talk of debating whether it should consider possessing nuclear arms. How likely do you think this is?

Richard Weitz: As long as America's pledge to defend the Japanese appears credible, then they are not likely to develop nuclear weapons.

IA- Forum: One ongoing concern in East Asia is North Korea's nuclear program. Is there a military option for dealing with it?

Richard Weitz: Not now. That horse is out of the barn and I don't see that kind of option there.

IA- Forum: What is the best way of containing the problem?

Richard Weitz: Well that's the word - containment. We're stuck with the same situation as we were with the Soviets. We have to believe that at some point the regime will collapse and be replaced by another one.

IA- Forum: Is there anything the US can, or should, do to precipitate such a change?

Richard Weitz: Americans have been active in terms of confronting North Korea on human rights issues and putting economic pressure on the government to make its position more difficult. But it would be difficult to promote regime change without having the situation blow up - literally.

IA- Forum: Many have voiced concerns in recent months over some of the domestic and foreign policy moves in Russia under Vladimir Putin, including crackdowns on human rights groups and disputes over energy. Can the U.S. and Russia be genuine partners?

Richard Weitz: In some areas there is very good cooperation. In other respects, the U.S.-Russian relationship is more troubled. We have seen some of these disagreements in the last year. You've mentioned the problems in terms of domestic policy. There are also a lot of disagreements, for example, regarding the former Soviet states and who should have the greater influence in those countries. There's the debate about the importance of democratization vs. authority, as well

as disagreements over the proper role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

But the situation certainly remains a lot better than it was during the Cold War - it's inconceivable that you would see a war between the two countries.

IA- Forum: You published a book for The International Institute for Strategic Studies called 'Revitalising US-Russian Security Cooperation: Practical Measures.' What kind of measures do you have in mind?

Richard Weitz: I thought that some of the proposals being discussed, like more formal agreements to reduce nuclear arms, just wouldn't gain support in Washington at the time. So I was thinking about other options, such as increased cooperation on energy and non-proliferation issues. There seems to be progress in that direction with the U.S. global nuclear energy partnership, and with the equivalent program that the Russians are using to try to take back spent plutonium from Iran after they supply fuel for its nuclear reactor. So you see cooperation in some new areas. I think that's the direction in which things seem to be moving.

IA- Forum: How serious a challenge do you think nuclear proliferation is to America's security?

Richard Weitz: I think it is the greatest security threat we all face today. Proliferation might allow these materials and weapons to fall into the hands of troublesome actors, especially terrorist groups.

IA- Forum: What can the U.S. do?

Richard Weitz: Strengthen the International Atomic Energy Agency, work through the Proliferation Security Initiative, and convince Russia and China to take a stronger stand on non-proliferation issues. These are all moving in the right direction, but you could push them along further.

IA- Forum: You've been involved in 'scenario-based planning.' What has this involved?

Richard Weitz: It tries to get people to think outside their in-box. It was developed most prominently by Shell Oil Company in the 1970s. At the time, while a lot of companies assumed the low price of oil would continue indefinitely, and planned accordingly, analysts at

Shell asked 'what if the price goes up? How can we position ourselves to deal with that?' Shortly afterwards the OPEC oil crisis took place, and the company did very well.

We try to organize workshops for clients for them to consider possible developments and their potential responses. As an example, we might discuss how they would respond if Turkey decided to join the SCO. Another scenario might be what if there was some sort of problem with nuclear energy and we had to rely more on different energy sources. We try to bounce around questions and force people to think beyond their regular assumptions.

IA- Forum: How successful do you think the U.S. has been in securing the homeland against another terrorist attack? Is the lack of another attack a sign that things are going as planned?

Richard Weitz: Well that's the key point that you have just mentioned. There has not been an attack. We had the same problem analyzing deterrence during the Cold War. When the Soviets never attacked the West, the question then became whether they ever wanted to do so. Likewise, we don't currently know whether Al Qaeda has planned to launch a mass attack. There is evidence that they have, such as the London airport plot last summer. But in America we've been safe thus far. Each year, we are getting stronger. On the other hand, we have a dynamic situation in which the adversary is also adjusting kits tactics, strategy, and capabilities even as we are beefing up our own capabilities.

IA- Forum: What would you like to see the Bush administration focus on in its last 2 years in office?

Richard Weitz: You've mentioned some of the issues I'd like to see addressed. I'd like to see less of a preoccupation with Iraq and more of a focus on Asia, as well as more concern with Russia. Iraq is important, but it has to be kept in perspective. We have been so fixated on Iraq that China has gained a lot of influence in East Asia without much attention among Americans.

IA- Forum: Some argue that there has not been enough of a focus on Afghanistan.

Richard Weitz: I agree very much with that.

IA- Forum: Was the U.S. nuclear deal with India a good idea?

Like many people, I think that strengthening relations with India will

be good for everyone. Maybe not for China, but for everybody else. But I'm concerned about the effect that the deal might have on nuclear non-proliferation efforts.

IA- Forum: Thank you, Mr. Weitz.

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