

Former US State and Defense Department officials discuss prospects for nuclear war

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7 December 2018

On December 3, *Foreign Affairs*, published by the US Council on Foreign Relations, and *Scientific American* hosted a panel discussion entitled “Do Nuclear Weapons Matter?” Gideon Rose, the editor for *Foreign Affairs* and one of the three participating panelists, explained that the panel’s purpose, over two-and-a-half decades since the end of the Cold War, was to discuss the contemporary significance of nuclear weapons.

The three panelists all have deep ties to the US State and Defense Departments. Rose himself was a staff member of the National Security Council under the Clinton administration in the mid-1990s. As the editor of *Foreign Affairs* since 2010, he has overseen and taken a direct part in the debate over US foreign policy under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

The second panelist, Elbridge Colby, served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense from 2017-2018. He is one of the principal architects of the latest US National Defense Strategy, which advocates a shift of US imperialism’s focus away from the “war on terror” and towards “great power competition,” i.e., war with Russia and China.

Colby is the author of an article published recently in *Foreign Affairs* titled “If you want peace, prepare for nuclear war,” a modern adaptation of the Latin phrase, *si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war). In it he argues for the US adopting a strategy to fight a “limited” nuclear war.

The third panelist, Nina Tannenwald, served in the US State Department under the Obama administration.

In introducing the panel discussion, the event’s moderator, Curtis Brainard, Managing Editor of *Scientific American*, stressed that they all could agree that “a lot has changed in the last 10 years, and that the specter of nuclear conflict...has come back to center stage.” He posed the question, “After so many years of détente, what happened?”

A large portion of the forum centered on the rapidly deteriorating relationship between the US and Russia on one hand, and the US and China on the other. Tannenwald argued that one of the principal reasons the world is experiencing a new “qualitative arms race” is Russia’s “bringing us back to the old geopolitics.”

Colby, while agreeing that “Russia is the more pointed reason that nuclear weapons have reemerged in the international

security environment,” argued that China was the cause for “the more fundamental, structural shift” in U.S. foreign and nuclear policy.

Summing up the quarter century of US-led and instigated wars that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, now giving way to “the reemergence of great-power competition,” Colby stated, “I think that the last 25 years was the exceptional period in history, rather than the period that we’re living in now.” Both Tannenwald and Colby agreed that one of the main differentiating elements between the Cold War of yesteryear and the new period of global military confrontation opening up today is an absence of “ideological conflict” in the latter.

Colby stated that “post-WWI to 1991 was a highly ideological period in human history,” and that “the kind of area that we’re likely entering into” is one “where ideology is a component, but not as defining as it often deemed to be during the Cold War.” What is more “defining” in terms of the driving forces behind the present eruption of global militarism and the threat of nuclear war was not explained.

Skepticism was expressed during the discussion in relation to the primacy given to the development, deployment and potential use of nuclear weapons. Colby stated that during the Cold War, the “continual imagination of wars” by the ruling class’s war planners ultimately prevented any exchange of nuclear weapons.

“That’s one of the reasons why I think we need to get back to what I call ‘Cold War thinking’ in the best sense, which is we think about it, and then it’s unlikely to happen, rather than ignoring it, which makes it more likely,” he said.

Rose, who stated during the Q&A that he was more “pro-nuke” than Colby, insisted that, although “the world is going to hell in a hand-basket and nobody knows what’s going on,” nonetheless, “every time you seem to give a couple of these human countries a pair of [nuclear weapons], they stop fighting each other,” hence, “the nuclear issue isn’t the one that keeps me up at night”.

He added, revealingly: “nuclear weapons are good for one thing and one thing only, if you’re a rational person, which is essentially giving you a ‘get out of jail free’ card for your regime from external attack. When you have them, you will not be deposed in a war for regime change; when you don’t have

them, you are open to it. Look at Gaddafi, look at Saddam.” While advancing this cynical, though undeniable, argument, Rose made no mention of the source of these “external attacks” and “regime change” operations.

This conversation between the supposed “smartest people in the room” can only be understood within the context of the increasing military expenditures and growing number of military exercises being conducted by the US and its NATO allies and partners throughout the world, all of which point to a heightening preparation for a major military confrontation. A resurgence of the class struggle internationally and the growth of economic nationalism and global financial instability is leading the capitalist ruling class to turn toward war as a solution to its crisis.

A report published in November by the congressionally-appointed National Defense Strategy Commission reviewing the US National Defense Strategy (NDS) stated that the “security and wellbeing of the United States are at greater risk than at any time in decades,” and that “America’s military superiority,” which provided the “foundation” upon which it was able to assert its global hegemony following World War II, “has eroded to a dangerous degree.” Therefore, the report urges the US to increase its spending on every aspect of the military. “A two-war force sizing construct makes more strategic sense today than at any previous point in the post-Cold War era, yet the NDS adopts what is functionally a one-war sizing construct,” it states.

The major theaters for the two wars American imperialism is driving towards with its incessant provocations against Russia and China constitute the eastern and western entrances of the Eurasian landmass. This week has seen Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issue an ultimatum to Russia giving it 60 days to submit to what Washington defines as “compliance” after which the US will abrogate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, putting the world on a hair trigger for nuclear conflict. NATO has built up its forces on Russia’s doorstep, while Ukraine has sought to provoke a conflict in the Azov and Black Seas, while declaring martial law in preparation for war.

With regards to China, the world’s second largest economy, Washington has recklessly carried out relentless “freedom of navigation” operations, including sending warships through the sensitive Taiwan Strait three times this year.

Against this backdrop of rising tensions between the world’s largest nuclear-armed states, Tannenwald stated that “the issue today” is “the rising chance of a use of nuclear weapons” due to “miscalculation or inadvertent use”. As an example, for what could potentially trigger a nuclear world war, she cited “the Hawaii false alarm in January,” when “people had about 36 minutes to duck and cover until the correction came on the air and that it was just a test—that is how we could get into nuclear war.” She continued: “Imagine that if President Trump tweeted, ‘all Americans should evacuate South Korea,’ and if

it was a particularly tense moment between the US and North Korea, Kim Jong-un could mistakenly take this as a signal that the U.S is about to launch a nuclear war.”

Summarizing the utterly reactionary content of the policies these state-connected figures propose to prevent such a catastrophe, Tannenwald stated that although “the number one goal should be to prevent the use of nuclear weapons...one of the ways to do that is to actually separate your conventional and your nuclear forces very clearly so that the target is not confused about what kind of weapon is coming at them.”

She went on to spell out the scenario of a rapid escalation of a clash between the US and China into a full-scale nuclear war: “When you have a cruise missile that can have a nuclear or a conventional weapon, or like in China where they have their nuclear subs and their conventional subs operating in the same control system, operating near each other ... if the U.S. attacks China intending only a conventional attack, China may lose the ability to control its nuclear submarines, and then ... it provokes China to respond with a nuclear strike. Similarly, if you’re using a cruise missile, and the target can’t tell whether it’s conventionally or nuclear armed ... then potentially the country will respond with a nuclear attack.”

Her answer to this evident threat of a nuclear confrontation? “If we’re going [in] this new arms racing direction, we need to be pursuing talks with both, especially Russian and China, about how these technologies interact, and what constitutes stable deterrence in this new world, and that’s not happening.”

The forum provided only a glimpse into the kind of discussions that are being held with the top echelons of the US military and intelligence apparatus in which “thinking the unthinkable” has clearly returned with a vengeance, resulting in active preparations for total war involving nuclear weapons.

The claims that nuclear war is unlikely because it is irrational, that the only concerns are accidental and inadvertent use of these terrible weapons and that talks will solve the issue are a combination of duplicity and naivety that only serve to cover up the real driving force toward a global conflagration.

The only rational answer to the threats discussed in the forum is the abolition of nuclear weapons. Instead, the US is planning to spend \$1.7 trillion to modernize its nuclear arsenal.

The drive toward war is based not upon rationality, but rather the crisis of a world capitalist system gripped by the insoluble contradiction between the nation-state and the global economy and confronting the growth of class struggle internationally. Only the working class, united on an international basis and mobilized in the struggle to put an end to the capitalist system can stop the threat of a nuclear Third World War.



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