Closing Remarks

Steven E. Miller | April 28, 2015

Well we've had a rich and interesting day. I can't possibly do it justice. But I have been asked to make a few minutes of final remarks. I assure you this was not my idea. And by my clock, I have minus eight minutes. So I’ll try to be very quick. But my assignment as I understood is it to try and extract from today’s presentations and discussions and the posters some discernable themes in the way of future research in the nuclear arena. So what I’m going to do is make five quick points and a conclusion.

So point number one, it's quite notable in my eye how many of you are doing work that's historical, and historical in a deep way. And I would say, especially having listened to today's presentations, that we're basically in the early stages of rewriting the nuclear history of the NPT era. The early part of the nuclear age, I think, we've got it written up pretty well. But the more recent period, the post-1970s period, the documents are just coming into view, the archives are just opening, and you people are at the frontiers of mining this new material and writing up what I would call the deep history of the NPT era. And so we may have as a result of the work that you and others are doing, a much better and much more accurate understanding of why things came out the way we did.

And I think this is profoundly important because we draw conclusions, we learn lessons, we make recommendations and prescriptions, while the soundness, the accuracy, the utility depend enormously on getting the history right. And if you draw conclusions and make prescriptions on the basis of unsound history, you can be right only by accident. So about this strand of work I say full speed ahead. And I think there's a huge opportunity for the young people coming into this business to play a really formative role in establishing the kind of historical baseline that has not existed heretofore because it could not exist.

Secondly, it's very striking to me the internationalization of this field. And I mean this in two ways. First, who's doing this work? When I was a young guy at your stage, the overwhelming majority of my peers were young Americans. By my quick count, we have 18 nationalities represented among the 31 people who did a presentation or a poster at this gathering. Yes there were some Americans, yes there were some Brits, yes there were even some Dutch. But we had an Iranian, we had an Egyptian, for god's sake.

And this I think is very enriching and particularly because it's very easy for us, those of us who are cloistered in our own national settings, to forget that others don't always share our premises and our perceptions. And to have this field aerated by the internationalization of the people that populate it I think is a tremendously enriching development for the field, and is a striking development from what I experienced as a young guy.

But there's a second dimension, which is the kind of work that's being done. That too has been internationalized. When I was a young guy, with my young American peers, we were working on ICBM basing modes and NATO theatre nuclear modernization and ballistic missile defense and we were worried about ICMB throw weights and strategic arms control counting rules. Bill was always an exception to much of this stuff because he was Mr. Non-proliferation. But most of us were caught up in a web that was much more narrowly focused, and that took very little count of the nuclear realm outside of the Soviet-American strategic arms control context.
What have we seen today? The origins and nature of Abak, the African nuclear-weapon-free zone, a poster about Brazil, another about Iran, work on the perceptions of the global south, Wilfred working on criteria employed by nuclear newcomers. So we’ve opened up the portfolio in this field in a way that I think is healthy, desirable, and corrective. And I think this is a terrific outcome and was very vividly illustrated by the presentations today.

Point number three – I think some of the work that you folks are doing, I would categorize as an effort to reframe issues. And by reframe, I mean provide another lens through which to view a familiar issue. And I give you two examples here: Jenny Nielsen, who introduced the humanitarian element in thinking about the nuclear threat that we’ve all been contending with for so long – this is another lens through which to view the nuclear challenge that that we’re all facing - or Behnam Taebi’s effort to introduce ethical considerations even when considering nuclear policy choices in the realm of civil nuclear policy. And not simply an ethical choice, but several ethical choices. Well this is an interesting new way to think about a problem. And I think there’s promising realms of work that were on display during the course of the day.

Fourth, a lot of you are doing what I would describe as analytical assessments of instruments and approaches employed to promote non-proliferation. What worked? What didn’t work? Why? What might work better? What are shortcomings in the regime and how might they be remedied? It’s a whole family of crucial questions there that are all about how can we more effectively promote this objective that we all share, of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons.

So we heard about the sources and uses of trust, we heard of the enhancement of verification capabilities, we heard about regional institutions like disaster management organizations as possible models for regional nuclear cooperation, we heard about coercion as a possible non-proliferation instrument, we heard about the status and role of nuclear-weapon-free zones, we heard about technological opportunities for enhancing verification, we heard about the origins, the role, the character, of export controls. All of this has to do with, what instruments are we working with? When, how, under what circumstances do they work? What impediments do these instruments face? And how can they be packaged together in a way that makes them work more effectively?

Fifth, cutting across several of these categories, many of you are looking in important ways at what I would call the politics of non-proliferation. Whether we’re talking about Isabelle’s comments about the political character of export controls, or Gene Gerzhoy’s work on the alliance implications of trying to restrain your friends from getting nuclear weapons, or Tytti’s discussion of the politics of the Middle East resolution or even Alexandre Debs – if you looked at his poster – it was looking at the political effects of nuclear proliferation. This is all an effort to try and illuminate, what are the political constraints and consequences associated with the non-proliferation enterprise? And I think that theme cuts across several of these categories.

I’ve truncated my remarks a little bit for the sake of brevity, those are my five points, and my conclusion is simply to say that at the Belfer Center, we are somewhat obsessed with what we call, the “So what?” question. The purpose of doing our work is to make the world a better place, it’s not to publish something and send a copy to your mother. So I encourage all of you young scholars to keep in mind the “So what?” question, and that really means, “What do I learn from the work that I’ve done, that applies to some current policy or problem, that will improve our ability to make the world a better place, and of course in the context of our shared interest, that improves our ability restrain the spread of nuclear weapons?” So the “So what?” question is really I think the fundamental underlayment of everything that we do in this business.

It remains for me only to offer some thanks. It’s always wonderful for us to collaborate with Bill Potter and the Center for Non-proliferation Studies, but we owe particular thanks to the Dutch government, whose initiative this was, and who made it all possible. For me, it has been tremendously heartening to see so many talented young people do so much interesting and important work, and to have the opportunity to gather you all together and to learn from you has been a real privilege and we owe all that to our Dutch hosts.