Summary of key points
workshop on "The Sum of All Fears:" Crossing the Nuclear Threshold in the 21st Century
Held at the US Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, 14-15 August 2005

This workshop focused on deterring/preventing a nuclear detonation on US soil, and addressed four scenarios.

Scenario #1: Near-Peers. This scenario concentrated on China and Taiwan, but also included Russia. A nuclear detonation on US soil was most likely to occur in connection with an escalation of a crisis over Taiwan. China was considered the most likely nuclear adversary of the future. It was noted, however, that nuclear weapons were taking on an increasingly important role in Russia's security strategy and posture, and that Russia should not be dismissed as a future nuclear threat. One participant stated that Russia might assume nuclear superiority over the US in the near future, if the US did nothing to stop the inevitable obsolescence of its own nuclear forces, while Russia continued modernizing, albeit at low levels. Others disputed whether Russia would ever have the resources to do this.

Scenario #2: Rogue States. There was much discussion of Iran and North Korea in this category. The main conclusion of most workshop participants seemed to be that Iran and North Korea would both have too much to lose to ever attack the US with a nuclear weapon, or to be connected with a nuclear detonation on US soil (because the retaliation would be massive).

Scenario #3: Foreign Terrorists. Workshop participants agreed this was the most worrisome scenario. Some noted that it would be extremely difficult to intercept or interdict a terrorist groups' possession of a nuclear weapon once it had acquired one, that prevention was the most important priority. No clear strategy for deterring foreign terrorist's use of a nuclear weapon emerged from the workshop discussion, although some participants proposed putting potential state-sponsors on notice that they would be held responsible for any terrorist nuclear event.

Scenario #4: Domestic Terrorists. Two workshop participants were very well versed in domestic sources of terrorism. They argued that, given the distrust among such groups, and the "lone wolf" character of most home-grown terrorists, it was unlikely that such groups possessed the discipline and coherence necessary to acquire and operationalize a nuclear weapon. They also argued that it would be highly counterproductive for such groups to use nuclear weapons to attack domestic targets. The conclusion was to discount this scenario as a path to nuclear weapons use on US soil.

Key "take-aways:"

(1) Engaging China in a strategic dialogue is critical to an overall deterrence posture toward China.

- ASCO is addressing this through its funding of Track II US-China dialogue.

(2) We need to better understand the strategic culture of rogue states such as Iran and North Korea.

- ASCO is funding a workshop on comparative strategic cultures, with a focus on Iran.

(3) Further analysis of deterring foreign terrorist use of nuclear weapons is a high priority.

- ASCO is developing an approach to this issue.

Drafted by: K. Kartchner/23 August 2005