The International Context for US Security
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There are many complexities ahead of us on both sides of the Atlantic with respect to the area of national security. Of course, no-one has ever lived in a golden age; it was always a previous period. But when one thinks back to the 1940s and 1950s and maybe through the middle of the 1960s, I am struck by the fact that there was a substantial consensus about the general direction in which we were supposed to go. Moreover, there was some mutual reinforcement between groups like the IISS and those in governments, not in the sense that the intellectual community always agreed with what people in the government did – in fact they very frequently disagreed – but it was within a matrix of assumptions which permitted a dialogue that in the long run could only be helpful. I have the impression that in almost every country represented at this IISS Conference and in the national security community in general, these shared assumptions have substantially broken down. Thus, while it is perfectly possible to have debates about individual policies, what seems to be lacking is criteria for what we are trying to do and what reasonable goals might be.

The Structure of Politics
Let me therefore address some of the issues as they now seem to me to be emerging. I think the most fundamental one in all our countries, and the one that is least susceptible to intellectual analysis, is the fact that the structure of politics is in a process of change. The relationship of men to events is being substantially transformed in almost all democracies. The effort of getting elected is so irrelevant to the process of government, it takes so much of the energies of potential candidates, it tends to select from candidates those with qualifications that are not necessarily related to what has to be done when they are in office, that this in itself is an obstacle to conceptual thinking. Candidates must devote years of their lives focusing on how to get on the evening news, not on what they will do when they get into office. I suspect that there is not a difference in kind, only a difference in degree, with other societies. So the intellectual backdrop becomes more important than ever, or else the problems of statesmanship become harder and harder to solve.

And the most difficult problem of all is to take a society from where it is, from what it is familiar with, to a future in which it has never been. How to bridge the gap between the familiar, which in a revolutionary period can be highly misleading, and that which is only conjectural, is perhaps more anguish than ever in our time. It is complicated by the fact that the machinery of all of our governments – and certainly the machinery of American government – has become so complex that servicing it turns into an objective of its own. It grows increasingly difficult to disentangle departmental or agency self-will from the national interest. Or, what is more realistic, they tend to be identified. If one traces the evolution of debates on weapons decisions in the United States – and I suspect this must happen in other countries as well – it would be interesting to determine at what point bureaucratic calculation and at what point strategic calculation were dominant and to what extent they merged. I can think of any number of improvements of weapons systems during my period of office that were rejected because the services wanted to keep open the option of something entirely new and were afraid of excluding themselves from the entirely new by agreeing to improvements of what existed. The amusing thing is that the end result of the process was usually that they got neither the improvement of what existed, nor the entirely new.

What is even more significant is that, in these discussions, there was no sense of a strategy that would give one criteria on which to act. This resulted from many factors, of which Vietnam, compounded by Watergate, was the
most important. There has been a collapse or, at the least, weakening of the kind of intellectual consensus, of the type of dialogue from which outside groups could act as a reservoir of reflection and as the supplier of some criteria.

And so we find ourselves in a position in the United States – and in this respect, I repeat, I think this is a problem of the modern democratic state – that almost any new Administration acts as if the fundamental American objectives were never permanently settled, as if one could start over and over and over again. I am not saying this is a criticism of the current Administration, for I substantially agree with the direction it is taking, but as a description of the contemporary scene.

Essentially I agree with the strengthening of American defence and I agree with the general attitude that it reflects. But if asked to what strategy that increased defence expenditure is allied, what it is we should be aiming for in a specific way, I have to tell you honestly that I have difficulty in finding an answer. And if I have difficulty, as somebody who more or less has studied the problem for a long time, what will the general informed opinion be? I suspect many of us at this Conference are in substantially the same dilemma.

The Strategic Environment
We have been talking for over twenty years about the change in the strategic environment. When I first started talking about change, as Albert Wohlstetter and others pointed out, I was premature – or, as others have put it less kindly, I did not know what I was talking about. But whether there was strategic parity in the 1950s, or 1960s, or 1970s – and no matter how you measure strategic power or what the significance of strategic superiority is – the fact is that we have all known for twenty-five years that the growth of strategic nuclear stockpiles on both sides was bound to create a fundamentally new strategic, political, psychological and moral situation. Whether a leader will ever feel confident enough with esoteric weapons that have never been tested in combat conditions to launch a first strike, and whether the significance of the vulnerability of one facet of our strategic forces achieves a decisive advantage or not, are subjects of endless controversy. But everybody who has thought about the problem has substantially agreed upon one fundamental fact: once the United States lost its strategic superiority, the overall relationships in the world would inevitably change. Whether we are inferior, whether we are now liable to be subjected to a first strike, belongs to another debate. But the mere fact that a plausible first-strike counterforce capability has been lost, or is being lost, has created new conditions. How then will the defence of other areas be conducted?

One of the weird aspects of the current debate about theatre nuclear forces (TNF) is that Europe insists that she cannot submit herself to the devastation of nuclear war on her territory, and that therefore the pristine, true strategic doctrine is one that exposes the United States to the devastation of her own territory for people who will not run that risk in the defence of themselves. When I say that it is not possible for the indefinite future to rely on strategic nuclear weapons for the defence of NATO, I am accused of undermining American credibility, or of confirming only what has been going on for twenty years anyway. Yet every European familiar with the debate in his own country must know that the same inhibitions that he is facing cannot fail to exist in the United States. While of course we can get away with avoiding the issue for ten years or twenty years, the growth of pacifism, which I think is a better description of what is happening than the growth of neutralism, is a reflection of a sense of impotence, a sense that there are no reasonable alternatives.

All of this is familiar. We have been debating, talking about it for twenty years so it is not even worth spending too much time on the subject except to say that we have known strategic parity was approaching and we have not done anything significant about it. We are increasing defence budgets by some agreed percentage at regular intervals, which rarely has the quality of translating itself into forces and never into a qualitative change in the military dispositions or into a change in the strategic concept.

The Weakness of Analysis
So we are left with the problems of no longer being able to implement the strategy of the 1950s, of having a mish-mash of forces in