



Joseph Cirincione Interviewed by Jeffrey McCausland

Joseph Cirincione , Jeffrey D. McCausland

December 5, 2006



[Joseph Cirincione](#)

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: We're joined today by Joe Cirincione, who is Senior Vice President for National Security Affairs at the Center for American Progress, a distinguished expert on nonproliferation.

Joe, it's a real pleasure to have you here at the Carnegie Council.

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: Thank you. My pleasure.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: I think where I'd like to begin, Joe, is let's talk a little bit about the state of nonproliferation globally. You could say the [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) [NPT] is one of the more successful arms control ventures. There are 180-plus countries who are now signatories.

How would you describe the global state of nonproliferation and the question of instability surrounding nuclear weapons?

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: Well, the global state is precarious. This is an often-overused phrase, but we really are at a nuclear tipping point. The decisions we make in the next three-to-five years will determine whether we continue some of the progress we've made over the last fifteen years or whether we launch a new wave of proliferation.

Here's what I mean. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons [NPT], as you say, is considered the most successful security pact in history. Every nation of the world is a member of this Treaty, except for India, Pakistan, Israel, and now North Korea, who has left. A hundred and eighty-three of those countries, by far the majority of nations in the world, have joined the Treaty and pledged never to have nuclear weapons. The other five states that have nuclear weapons and are members of the Treaty have pledged to reduce their arsenals gradually over time.]

This Treaty has worked much better than anyone anticipated, although not perfectly. Obviously, we've added states since the original five joined the Treaty, but most of the countries have not acquired nuclear weapons. The dam that was built in the late 1960s has largely held.

The question is: Can we keep holding that dam or is it going to break—are we going to see a flood of ten, twenty new nuclear nations?

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: Let's move on, then, to some particular questions.

In the news today, of course, is the discussion of Iran. Will Iran become a nuclear power? Will that pose a great threat in the Middle East or even more broadly? And even today, [President Ahmadinejad](#) of Iran stated that were the United States and its European partners to be successful in imposing sanctions on Iran through the United Nations, that he would consider that an act of hostility.

How do you describe the situation, this crisis if you will, that seems to be rolling out slowly with Iran? Do you really think it's as big a threat as described? And can we keep, if you will, some degree of unity with our European partners if we do in fact have to impose sanctions?

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: Thanks for asking me the toughest question first. Iran is by far the most difficult proliferation crisis we face. Even though North Korea actually has nuclear weapons now, Iran, because of their location and their impact on the region, is a far more difficult case to solve.

Here's the situation. No one objects to Iran developing nuclear power. The problem isn't the nuclear reactor. It's what goes into the reactor and what comes out of the reactor.

Iran, in addition to the power reactors, says it wants to build factories to make the fuel for those reactors and then reprocessing facilities to reprocess the fuel once it comes out. The problem is that the very same factories that could enrich uranium to low levels for fuel can enrich it to high levels for bombs. The very same factories that can reprocess the fuel rods for disposal can reprocess them to extract the plutonium which can also be used for bombs.

So we are trying to stop Iran from building those facilities. They have a legal right to do so. The problem is we don't believe that they're just for peaceful purposes.

So how do we stop them from doing it? To do so we're going to have to have a united front of the United States, the Europeans, the Russians, and the Chinese, and the regional neighbors involved, and convince Iran that they have a brighter future without this nuclear weapons capability than they do by pursuing it.

So far those efforts have failed. So far I think we're headed for a nuclear showdown with Iran in 2007. We're playing a game of nuclear chicken. They're not stopping, they're going full speed ahead, and the United States and its allies are insisting that they stop, and we're not pulling off the road. We don't know which one is going to blink.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: Is there any possibility at all of some common ground? I was thinking as you were speaking there that, even today, [Mr. Gates](#) has his confirmation hearings to become Secretary of Defense, and he said categorically that in terms of what the Iranians were doing, they were lying about the fact that they were not enriching material for nuclear weapons.

At the same time, we see here that very soon [the Iraq Study Group](#) has a report coming out in which we may actually seek Iranian assistance to deal with our problems in Iraq. Is there any possibility, you think, of a common ground that we might find to get the Iranians to back down?

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: There is a possibility, but it is going to require all the skill diplomatically that we can possibly muster and the wisdom to use military force as a lever, but not be tempted to think that that's a solution to the crisis.

Here's what I mean. A lot of people—and you will hear this talk ratchet up again in 2007—believe that we should just take out the facilities: "Let's just bomb them; let's just stop them."

The problem with that is what happens next. Iran has a dozen asymmetrical responses that could cause havoc throughout the region—threatening our troops in Iraq; threatening our ally Israel; shutting down oil traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, which would send oil spiking to over \$200 a barrel, and probably throw the Western economies into recession. And that's just the beginning. Another attack on a Muslim country would almost certainly inflame Muslim anger throughout the world, putting at jeopardy U.S. and Western business interests and citizens. That is not a box you want to open.

And, by the way, the worst of this is that the military strikes wouldn't actually stop the program. It would probably accelerate it. They would speed up their efforts to get a weapon as quickly as possible,

convinced that only that could stop the United States from attacking.

So the key is to have military force in the background, as an ultimate last resort, but to be pushing ahead with both sanctions that could really restrict and slow down their program.

And here's the good news: It's very difficult for a country to do what Iran is trying to do. They need external help. If we can cut off that external help, we could at least stretch out how long their effort will take before they get capability. Right now it's estimated that it will take them ten years to get nuclear weapons capability. I agree with that estimate.

And then, you have to have a package of carrots that are attractive enough for Iran to realize they can get economic benefits and security benefits by turning away from this path. That's where we come in. The Europeans are offering the economic carrots. Only the United States can offer the security guarantees in the same way we offered it to Libya: "You stop your program; we will stop our efforts to overthrow your regime. You verifiably give up these efforts and we will open up a new era with you, a new era of diplomatic recognition and mutual security assurances." That's the kind of deal that's out there. The question is whether our diplomats are skillful enough to go get it.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: Let's then turn to the next big question in the area of non-proliferation, at the moment at least, and that is North Korea. As a military friend of mine once described, the Korean Peninsula is "the land of bad choices."

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: Yes.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: But now in North Korea, of course, the situation has changed significantly. The six-power talks ostensibly are supposed to recommence there soon. But, of course, the North Koreans have detonated a device or a weapon. There's a little bit of uncertainty about all that. In many ways, it would seem to me this is no longer non-proliferation, the prevention of the acquiring of a weapon; this is counter-proliferation and getting them to turn something back, not unlike the South Africans, or perhaps the Libyans.

How would you describe that problem and perhaps how we might deal with the North Koreans in these upcoming discussions?

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: Right. You're trying to convince a country that if you give up a weapons capability that it has or may have—their test on October 9, 2006 was inconclusive. It was what we call a fizzle. It was designed to go off at a certain yield. The North Koreans themselves said it was going to be 4 kilotons. It exploded at something like half-a-kiloton. That indicates there's a problem with the design, maybe with the plutonium they were using for the core. So they have problems. That's good for us, bad for them.

But they had something there. If they continue testing, everyone expects that they could perfect a weapon. So you've got to roll this capability back.

Going in our favor is that North Korea is a poor, isolated country, with really no real allies in the region. At best, they have China, who is a friend, but China doesn't want to see them have a nuclear capability either. So you can use this to both contain the program, slow it down; and, again, try to make a deal.

What are they willing to trade for? I believe that that deal is there. In fact, we concluded an agreement with them back in September of 2005, where for the first time they agreed in writing to completely give up their program in exchange for security assurances and economic incentives.

The basic problem as I see it is not so much in North Korea, which is tough enough, but here in the United States, where our own administration has been divided. We haven't been able to clarify or decide whether we're interested in changing the regime's behavior or changing the regime. It's this conflict

between pragmatists (for example, [Condoleezza Rice](#), the Secretary of State) and hard-liners (like the Vice President, [Dick Cheney](#)) that has paralyzed U.S. policy.

Every time we make a diplomatic advance, the hard-liners don't want to see that negotiation and they actually make efforts, like financial sanctions, to pull that back, because the hard-liners believe that no deal is possible with these kinds of dictators, only regime change will work. The pragmatists say regime change is far too costly, militarily and in funds, and that only a deal is possible. That conflict has to be resolved inside the United States before we can hope to get the deal with North Korea.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: As we deal with these countries, of course, one thing we have to consider is what their motivation is—I mean what role does nuclear weapons play in their strategy? When you think about Iran and North Korea for a moment, how would you describe what they are trying to accomplish? Is it similar; is it qualitatively different—and, therefore, our approach has got to be adjusted accordingly?

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: Here we can learn from history. We have enough experience, after sixty years, to understand why countries want nuclear weapons. It's basically the same set of reasons.

- Number one is security or power. They want to protect themselves. They want to use the weapon to exert power in their region, even globally.
- The second is prestige. They think this is a shortcut to great-power status. India is the classic example of this.
- And the third reason is often overlooked. It's domestic politics. It's factional struggles within the government, where one side believes they can gain a domestic political advantage by pushing a program.

What you have to do is understand those drivers and then develop counters to them. For Iran and North Korea, I believe the security and the prestige factors are the ones driving the program. And in Iran you can also see the domestic politics playing there. President Ahmadinejad has seized on this issue to bolster an otherwise-unpopular regime. The theocracy in Iran is not popular with the people, but this issue is. By framing it the way he has—that this is a question of Iran's national rights to the energy supply of the future, nuclear energy—he has been able to rally support for his otherwise-unpopular regime that has been unable to deliver on either the economic or anti-corruption pledges that elected him in the first place.

You have to understand those issues, develop counters to them, as a way to thwart a country's or a political faction's ambitions.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: I want to press you on this notion that you talked about, of hard-liners versus pragmatists, for a second. Are you at all concerned—if we try to sort out some kind of an agreement in either place, Iran or North Korea, it seems to me always the big problem is verification of the agreement. I always recall, of course, the great line by [Ronald Reagan](#), "trust but verify."

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: Absolutely.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: It has often struck me in my time working in arms control, that becomes the ultimate problem: that you may get an agreement, but then the hard-line folks in perhaps the United States will insist on a verification regime that becomes almost too difficult, particularly when you are talking about a couple of states, like Iran and North Korea, which are fairly closed societies, North Korea perhaps being the most closed society there is on the globe.

Do you think there is still a possibility of that happening, despite that real desire to verify any agreement were we to get one?

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: We'd be foolish to trust either country. You have to have a verification regime. No verification regime is perfect, but you can get a fairly high level of confidence. And you can then have backup plans to prepare for what happens if you've missed something, what happens if there is a breakout.

We always do that. We did it with the Soviets during all these years. We did it with Libya when we made the deal with them. We did it with Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, when they gave up thousands of their nuclear weapons after 1991. We made sure we got every single one of those.

The same is true for North Korea. Fortunately, they have a very limited capability at this point. They have one reactor that is making the plutonium. You could shut that down and be pretty confident that you've closed it off.

In Iran, it is more complicated. They have diversified their facilities. So any deal would have to have a very intrusive verification regime. And the Iranians are going to want some sort of quid pro quo for that. They are going to want some compensation for that. Maybe it's not monetary; it's more political, recognizing their role in the region, for example.

History tells us that if the two sides are willing to strike a deal, you can probably find it. It's a question of whether we're willing to pay the price.

With Iran, I think we could have gotten a deal several years ago. They were coming to us, offering to negotiate it. We weren't interested then. This is what I mean by the hard-liners. Back in 2003, they thought there was no need to negotiate with Iran—we were going to roll right over from our success in Iraq to overthrow the regimes in Damascus and in Tehran, so why negotiate? That proved to be a fantasy. Now the price of any deal has gone up, and the risk that we can't get a deal at all has also increased.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: Let's talk a moment then about the United States. Under the NPT, the nuclear weapons states at the time also had a commitment to do away with their stockpiles. You could argue that over time the United States and the Russian Federation, the two largest possessors of nuclear weapons, have reduced their stockpiles significantly, but they still maintain 90-plus percent perhaps of all the weapons on the planet.

We in the United States, of course, have an ongoing evolution of our own nuclear forces. We are going to go to fewer weapons; we're going to go to smaller warheads. There are questions about do we maintain subs and land bases and airborne systems.

What effect do you see these evolutions in U.S. weaponry and U.S. nuclear strategy having on this whole global question of nonproliferation?

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: It has a huge effect. Very often people deny it, but back at the beginning of the nuclear age, when we did the very first national intelligence estimate (NIE) on proliferation under [President Eisenhower](#), the linkage was clear: There were states we were worried about who wanted to acquire nuclear weapons—and these weren't rogue states; these are our allies or neutral parties, like Sweden or Australia, West Germany, Japan; they were considering getting weapons in the 1950s and 1960s—and the assessment was that they could get them and that they would drive to get them unless there was progress made on global disarmament, that the United States and then the Soviet Union agreed to a test ban and reductions in their nuclear warheads.

These two were clearly seen as linked, and the reason is obvious: If countries think that nuclear weapons are in fact the currency of great power, that these have great military and political utility, and that countries are acquiring more of them, they are going to want to join that race. You see this impact in countries like India or Pakistan.

This is the great danger really from North Korea and from Iran. It's not that if those countries acquire nuclear weapons they are going to attack us. It's what happens in the region. North Korea and Iran would know that if they ever used a weapon, there would be a devastating and immediate response. It would be the end of their regimes, the end of their livelihood.

The issue is: What happens to their rivals in the region? What does Saudi Arabia do, Iran's rival? I think it is going to try and match that nuclear capability. Egypt and Turkey used to have nuclear programs in the 1960s; they would rev them up. You would have this chain reaction that would spread out from the region and around the world. That's the linkage. That's the danger you have.

And it applies to us too. Now, you're right, we used to have many more nuclear weapons. Our stockpile has been cut in half in the last fifteen years. In fact, globally there are only 27,000 nuclear weapons in the world. There used to be over 60,000, just fifteen years ago. We have about 10,000 of our own. Russia has about 16,000. And we are drawing our stockpile down. We are going to end up around 6,000 or so by the end of this decade. To us that looks like a great reduction.

The problem is it's 6,000 nuclear weapons, and to a country that has none, that's a lot of weapons. So they want much more progress from us. If they think that the most powerful country in the world still says it needs nuclear weapons, insists that these are essential to their security, then why aren't they essential to their security as well?

You've got to make progress on both fronts. You can't stop the other guy from getting those weapons if you keep clinging to them yourself.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: Let's look into the future then, Joe. In your current position you're Senior Vice President of National Security Affairs at the [Center for American Progress](#) in Washington. We've just completed a midterm election. We know already candidates are lining up for 2008. What strategy would you recommend to a future candidate for the presidency, as he or she looks to 2008, to deal with this growing problem of non-proliferation?

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: This is going to be a very exciting couple of years for anyone interested in this field. For students it's perfect. Study this. Watch this development.

What you're going to have is the Bush policy that they brought into place six years ago crumbling before our eyes. They had a whole new approach to proliferation, one that relied on military force and direct military action—to eliminate regimes, not eliminate weapons. That policy has failed. Proliferation problems have grown worse across the board in the last six years.

Now you're going to see both political leaders in Congress and presidential contenders of both parties struggling to put in place an alternative policy.

I think what you're going to see is a merger of the best of the traditional Treaty-based regime, based around the NPT and things like the [Comprehensive Test Ban](#), and some of the new policies that the Bush people brought in that actually worked, like the [Proliferation Security Initiative](#), to interdict illegal transfers of supplies and some of the other elements. A combination of reasonable missile defense, but not going whole-hard all the way.

You already see this in some of the discussions going on inside Congress, where members are pushing for direct negotiations with North Korea, direct negotiations with Iran. They are getting more skeptical about the Administration's plans for a new generation of warheads.

You are going to start seeing debates about how much to spend on refurbishing our existing weapons. Do we build a whole new generation of subs and bombers and missiles? What kind of message does that send to the world? All of this is up for grabs.

I honestly believe that a candidate who is running for office and emphasizes reducing the global nuclear threat is going to get a wide audience: both the threat from new countries and, really the number one security threat we face, nuclear terrorism, the possibility that al-Qaeda or some other group could get a nuclear weapon from one of the existing arsenals and actually use it.

A set of policies that aims to reduce and secure the arsenals, convince other countries not to acquire these weapons, and reduce our own reliance on nuclear weapons—that trinity of policy efforts can make a big difference both in getting someone elected and actually doing something about the threat.

JEFFREY McCAUSLAND: Joe, it has been a great pleasure talking to you. I want to thank you very much on behalf of the Carnegie Council for spending time with us here today.

JOSEPH CIRINCIONE: My pleasure. Thank you very much for having me.

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