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Nina Tannenwald is a faculty fellow at Brown University's Watson Institute and director of its International Relations program. She recently spoke on the Watson Institute's podcast, *Trending Globally*, on the topic of nuclear war and North Korea. Read the full transcript from her interview below.

### **Is the nuclear taboo under threat?**

The nuclear taboo is a widespread inhibition on using nuclear weapons first. It's associated with a sense of moral opprobrium about using such destructive weapons and killing so many people. This has developed over the course of the post [World] War [II] Period and most people now think that nuclear weapons really aren't to be used. Since the 1950s, most American presidents have shared this view and despite all the talk from Trump and Kim Jung Un, the North Korean leader, it's still in effect. But it's under pressure today from a number of areas.

One is all this loose talk about using nuclear weapons which helps to erode or undermine the taboo.

Second is the nuclear doctrines of the nuclear armed states are expanding or increasing the roles that nuclear weapons have in security policy and this is a reverse of trends since the end of the Cold War.

Other things that are putting pressure on the taboo— so, nuclear doctrines, modernization plans.

So almost all the nuclear armed states are in the process of modernizing their nuclear arsenals, the United States for example is seeking to develop new small nuclear warheads, tactical nuclear weapons in part because they're more usable. But of course, a weapon that is more useable also puts pressure on this nuclear taboo, this dividing line between conventional and nuclear weapons. Former Secretary of State George Shultz just testified before Congress. The one thing he said was there is no use for a new small tactical weapon. We shouldn't go down that road. Once you use one nuclear weapon, you use more nuclear weapons and then you're in nuclear war. This kind of technology puts pressure on the taboo. So we now have this 72 year tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons and the nuclear taboo helps to reinforce that tradition and maintain it.

### **And you said that other states have modernization plans as well?**

All the nuclear armed states have modernization plans. They're all going in the wrong direction

### **Are the claims that Kim Jung Un makes about his Country's Nuclear capability credible?**

Yes. I think they're quite credible. Kim Jung Un has been quite exemplary in announcing in advance what North Korea's intentions are: to build and nuclear arsenal then testing the weapons for all to see and also announcing they would build ballistic missiles and then regularly testing those missiles for all to see. Now there's some fudging. So the giant nuclear test that took place in September 2017, he claimed was a hydrogen bomb, that's a thermonuclear weapon, that's a very sophisticated capability, probably it was a boosted fission weapon, but actually it doesn't really matter.

That weapon had ten times the explosive power of any weapon that he had tested earlier. People estimate a small nuclear arsenal with perhaps the capability to add three weapons a year. He has intercontinental ballistic missile capability to strike the United States. And so, I think that no one should be in doubt that the capabilities are there.

### **Do you think President Trump would put Seattle at risk to protect or defend Seoul?**

If North Korea attacked Seoul, we have an alliance agreement with South Korea, and so the most likely way we would respond is with conventional weapons. The problem then is that North Korea would respond with a nuclear weapon because it would be overwhelmed by U.S. conventional force. Would Trump do that? That's highly risky and I think there would be a lot of hesitation before doing that, but it is possible.

### **How do you see that unfolding?**

I actually think that the most likely way we would get into nuclear with North Korea is through miscalculation or accident. I think there's a lot incentive for both countries to be very cautious about intentionally launching a war that could escalate to a nuclear exchange. North Korea could be wiped out and the United States would have catastrophic damage.

But suppose that North Korea had gotten word of that message, they could have interpreted it as the United States preparing or launch. Or suppose at the time that false message had been sent out [in Hawaii] a U.S. bomber was on a training run around South Korea North Korea mistook that bomber as a plane launching a nuclear attack. Right?

And then North Korea because it has a very small arsenal has a very strong incentive to launch first. This is what is called first strike instability in the jargon of the Nuclear weaponeers. When you have a very small arsenal and you sit there and wait, the United States could potentially knock out all of, let's say they have 12 missile sites or something like that. So, North Korea has an incentive to launch first and they have a very strong incentive to launch first. And once they launched we would likely retaliate.

### **So Nina if you were in charge, what would you try to do, how would you go about trying to deescalate the risk of Nuclear war between the United states and North Korea?**

The main thing we have to do is talk to North Korea and I think we have to drop the precondition that North Korea has to come to the table already committing to denuclearize.

**You don't think they'll do that.**

I think there is zero chance at this point that North Korea is going to get rid of its nuclear weapons. When North Korean leaders saw what the United States did in Iraq in 2003, engaging in regime change and overthrowing Saddam Hussein and then again in Libya in 2011 and overthrowing Qaddafi the lesson that North Korean leaders learned was that you better have nuclear weapons to prevent the U.S. from coming in and engaging in regime change. So that's why they want them. That's the main reason. They may also want them for offensive reasons which is to try to divide South Korea from the US if they can threaten SK and then raise doubts whether the U.S. would actually respond to defend SK, that would create a divide between South Korea and the United States.

The quicker we move on from the fiction that we are ever going to get them to get rid of their nukes, the more likely we are to deescalate this crisis. We are going to have to make some kind of commitment that we're not going to engage in regime change.

North Korea has long wanted a non-aggression pact with the United States, and so something along those lines. Those are starting places for a policy that deescalates this military crisis, but those policy positions are also a very long way from where the current administration is.

**But do you think that another administration could get there? I mean if it's not Rex Tillerson and not Donald Trump?**

Yes absolutely. I think there are many people in Washington advocating, talking with North Korea and arguing that we're in a world of deterrence now we're not really in a world of non-proliferation anymore.

**And you think that the interlocutors on the North Korea side will listen to that kind of discourse that sort of reasonable that sort of shared ethics c'mon guys we don't do this anymore**

I think from the North Korean perspective, it's not really about ethics. It's about the survival of the Kim John Un regime. And so, if there were an agreement that the United would not engage in regime change in exchange for significant constraints on the arsenal and the missiles then I think there would be some room for agreement there.

**Is it worth looking at the Iran Nuclear Deal and comparing it with what's going on in Korea? At least President Trump's attitude towards the Iran deal**

I think it's very relevant for two reasons. One, The Iran agreement is an example of a very successful arms control agreement that involved compromise on both sides so it shows that such an agreement is possible and this was a six-party agreement. If we abandon the Iran Agreement then that sends a signal to North Korea that if the United States does not stick to its promises with Iran, why should North Korea bother to engage in any agreement with the United States. There are many reasons for the US not to walk away from the Iran Agreement but sticking to it does help reinforce that these kinds of agreements are possible. They do increase the security of everybody.

**Well, the doomsday clock has been set at two minutes to midnight, where would you set the clock?**

Well, that's a good question. Two minutes to midnight is the same as it was in 1953 at the height of the cold war. So, one question this raises is whether the nuclear threat the danger of nuclear war was the same as it was in 1953.

**And that's when the U.S and the Soviet Union were testing thermonuclear weapons?**

Yes, there was a real risk of a nuclear war that would lead to global annihilation. So, is the current situation like that we could ask? I think my answer would be no and yes. So, if the question is whether a nuclear exchange now would lead to global nuclear annihilation I think probably not—that you could have a use of nuclear weapons today that would not wipe out the whole world. On the other hand, if you view this clock as signaling the possibility of major catastrophe then yes. We could have a major catastrophe now through the use of nuclear weapons, a small use could escalate to a large use. So, for example in the 1961 Berlin Crisis and the 1963 Cuban Missile Crisis the clock was set at 7 minutes to midnight. In my view the Cuban missile crisis is the closest we ever came to nuclear war, which is incredibly dangerous

So, the metrics for setting the clock have shifted. Today the staff of the bulletin also includes the consequences of climate change and that does have global effects. So, what's going into the clock now is a little bit different than the old days. I would set it very close. I think the risk of nuclear exchange now is higher than it's been in my professional lifetime. I have never been so worried about the possibility that we could actually get into a nuclear war. Mainly through miscalculation.