Congressman Adam Smith on U.S. National Security and Arms Control After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Adam Smith is the U.S. Representative for Washington's 9th Congressional District. He has served as the Chair (2019-2023) and Ranking Member (2023-present) of the House Armed Services Committee. This interview has been edited for clarity.

Jackson School Journal: Thank you so much for joining us. I want to start with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. What does the invasion tell us about our strategic priorities and the emerging era of great power competition?

Smith: It tells us that we are living in a very dangerous world and that we have to be extraordinarily careful about how we proceed, because the costs are high and the risks are real. We have a strong disagreement with a nuclear-armed power. That drives home the importance of international diplomacy and the role the U.S. plays in the world. We have to be incredibly thoughtful about the threat from autocratic governments like Russia and China.

Jackson School Journal: You mention that we are in a diplomatic conflict with a nuclear power. Russia's rhetoric suggesting nuclear escalation is virtually unheard of since the Cold War. Do you think that's a credible risk? Does that advise some change in our own nuclear posture?

Smith: I think it is a credible risk, but I don't think it is that high. I don't think Putin is suicidal and I think he's using the threat as much for intimidation as an actual threat. But it suggests the incredible need to get back to an arms control discussion.

Under Presidents Nixon, Carter, and Reagan, when we were having arms control discussions with the then-Soviet Union, we at least understood the force structures. But right now, there's a lot of new weapons development. There are new missile, nuclear weapons, and missile defense technologies. The risk of misunderstanding–for one side to think that they are threatened and need to respond to the threat, or that they're powerful enough to conceivably win a nuclear war–is going up, and the only way to reduce that threat is transparency and dialogue. With Russia and China, we need to re-enter discussions to better understand the arsenals we face and to get back to a mutually deterrent posture.

Jackson School Journal: How do you view the future of arms control agreements? Do you see the United States pursuing the restoration of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty or an extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) past 2026?

Smith: New START is something that we could conceivably use as a starting point, but I think we're in a whole other realm right now. First, you have three parties, not two, because China is a rising nuclear power. It is not a one-for-one, zero-sum game.

Second, weapons development is going in a whole new direction. If you have a cyberattack capability that can shut down the other side's deterrent, do you think, can I shut them down and attack them? And we are talking about more than just nuclear delivery mechanisms. What type of nuclear weapon? What type of missile defense?

So, it is not enough to restart what we shut down. Whether you are talking about the INF, or New START, or going back to a ballistic missile treaty, you have to understand how warfare has modernized. What is going on with satellites, what is going to happen in space? How can we protect our space assets, and how can all sides involved feel that their space assets are protected? All those things have to be put on the table, and we have to have a transparent discussion because the risk of miscalculation is truly frightening.

Jackson School Journal: Surely these commitments cost money: I understand that the White House has proposed a 4% boost in defense expenditures this coming year. What do you think about the argument that we are better off investing in solving domestic challenges, rather than investing further in defense?

Smith: Well, first of all, negotiating arms control treaties does not cost much money. We could save money if we had them. But we also need an adequate deterrent—we have to be able to do both. I would also say that in terms of domestic expenditures, we just invested $6 trillion over and

above the regular budget, with the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) package, the Recovery Act, and the bipartisan infrastructure deal. We've made significant domestic investments, so I think we can also have an adequate defense.

The last thing is that we have to spend wisely and effectively within the Pentagon. I worry a great deal that a lot of people have a simple approach on defense: that the more we spend, the better. I don't agree with that. I think we have to be a little more cautious about the money we spend.

Jackson School Journal: I want to speak especially to European deterrence, since that is the primary regional implication for Ukraine. In the past few years, many have criticized NATO partners, especially Germany, for underspending on defense and deterrence. As European readiness is tested, do you agree with that assessment?

Smith: This is all part of adapting to the post-"post-Cold War era". As I mentioned in my remarks, after World War II, Europe expected to demilitarize. They had been fighting each other for about a thousand years at that point, in one way or another, and they could now focus on their economies instead. The only reason that worked is because the U.S. military was strong enough to deter the Soviet Union at the time.

We are now entering a different world. Russia is a threat, but it is a different threat than the Soviet Union was. Because the European Union has been around for a while, there is more reason to believe that peace in Europe is resilient. So I think our strategy should shift to Europeans being able to defend themselves–not on their own, but the partnership needs to be more balanced. We are already seeing that happen in Eastern European countries, which are reacting to the Russia threat by growing their militaries. Germany also dramatically boosted their military above the 2% level. I think that is an appropriate part of the strategy.

Jackson School Journal: In relation to Eastern Europe, some academics like John Mearsheimer have argued that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a response to the expansion of NATO after 1992. Do you believe there is merit to that argument?

Smith: I would say there is merit to the argument, but I ultimately don't agree. This conflict ultimately grew out of Russia's inability to emerge from the Soviet Union and build a stable economy and government, which opened the door for Putin to use Russia for his megalomaniacal, authoritarian ambitions. Would that have been different if NATO hadn't expanded? I find that hard to believe.

The other piece of the equation that ultimately brings me to this answer is what Eastern Europe wanted after the Soviet Union fell. They wanted to be integrated into the West and to be protected so they could get out under the thumb of the Soviet Union and grow their economy. Estonia, which I visited in February, is a great example. They were one of the poorest countries in the northern hemisphere under the Soviet Union and are now one of the most prosperous because of economic freedom and integration within the European Union. The defense alliance protected them and gave them the freedom to achieve that. You can't walk through Poland, Romania, Lithuania, or Estonia and not say, [expansion] has given more freedom and opportunity to more people.

Jackson School Journal: On the subject of travel and alliances, I understand that you've recently returned from India and Australia, so I want to turn to the Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Leaders have insisted that the Quad is not a defense pact, but military-to-military collaboration is accelerating. Where do you see that partnership evolving?

Smith: I think the biggest area is supply chain issues. Starting in the mid-1990s, as China decided to pivot to a more capitalist approach to economics (if not in politics), they became a go-to place to do business. The corporate world wanted access to this fast-growing enormous market of 1.4 billion people, and they saw an opportunity in fewer regulations and cheaper labor.

So many aspects of the global economy became concentrated in China, that even if China wasn't as belligerent as it is now, they would have disproportionate power. There would be a need to better distribute that power, and the Quad is about how we build up the capability of countries like India and Australia. In pharmaceuticals, for example, India is second to China and growing. And for manufacturing, we can build broader partnerships to balance against China's growing power. It's not just India and Australia, but Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea certainly are robust powers where we want to expand our options. So, it really is as much about economics as it is about defense and deterrence, if not more so.

Jackson School Journal: The balance of power with respect to the Taiwan Strait has tilted significantly towards China. The War in Ukraine has also carried particular resonance in Taiwan. Do you think there are any steps the United States and Taiwan can take now to improve deterrence against armed conflict?

Smith: Absolutely, I think we learned a lot from Ukraine.

We learned that a smaller force can still have a devastating deterrent impact on a larger force. It comes down to missiles, drones, and information technology. So, we need to get more missiles, more drones, and make sure that their information technology is robust and secure.

We don't have to send Taiwan a bunch of tanks or a bunch of ships: missiles, drones and information technology are the key to presenting an adequate deterrent. I think this was understood before Ukraine, but certainly it has driven the point home.

Jackson School Journal: When it comes to advancing Indian capabilities, one of the implications of the Ukraine conflict is that it has made some differences in the United States and India's worldviews clear, especially with respect to Russia. Is this a roadblock in US-India collaboration toward a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'?

Smith: It's more of a speed bump than a roadblock in US-India relations. Whenever you're dealing with a partner, the key is to not ask them to do something they can't do. It's always a fine line—you want to pursue your interest, but if you're going to have a partnership, you must understand where your partner is coming from. 60% of Indian military equipment comes from Russia. They can't just cut that off: they won't have the spare parts for their military. We want to wean them off that.

And if India can't help us by directly confronting Russia, how can we help each other? That gets back to economics. When I visited Hyderabad, a massive and growing tech center, I was struck by their ability to develop, manufacture, and grow economically. In the defense industry, both Lockheed and Boeing have partnerships in Hyderabad where they make wings for the F-16 and tail sections for the C-130s. I visited a Boeing plant where they're making the fuselage for the F-18.

We can build and grow on these partnerships. But to tell India to break up with Russia entirely is not a reasonable thing to ask. We cannot build the partnership that way going forward.

Jackson School Journal: Some people believe that climate change is an area of collaboration with China. Do you believe that collaborating on addressing climate change is relevant to our military and security policies?

Smith: One hundred percent. China is going to be a major factor in the world, and you can't imagine a world where they're not. So, we have to find areas where we can work together even as we balance against their more aggressive behavior.

Climate change is an enormous opportunity. Protecting the globe is in everybody's best interest, and it is a huge market if we develop technologies on wind, solar, biofuels, hydrogen, perhaps even fusion and nuclear energy. Energy efficiency, transmission, the resiliency of energy grids: it's a massive opportunity to work together.

Jackson School Journal: My last question is personal to us as students: for young people who care about national security, how can we play a part?

Smith: Get involved and get engaged—certainly, the Jackson School is a huge player. As I said at the start of my remarks, the contribution that the Jackson School makes to our community is the knowledge base that they bring with professors, but also the students they educate. I mean, your questions are incredibly informed. There are a number of members of Congress who wouldn't understand half of what you just said. So, to have young people who are informed about the world and engaged in the world builds our future. A career in the diplomatic corps would be a cool way to go as well. So get engaged, get involved, and take advantage of what you've learned!

Jackson School Journal: Thank you so much for your time.

Smith: Thank you, I appreciate it, thanks for your questions.