Interview with Keck Center Board of Governors member Richard Johnson

By Pieter Van Wingerden ’24

To begin, I am interested in your time at CMC. Where did you live on campus and what is your favorite CMC memory?

I loved my time at CMC. I spent three years on campus and a year off campus, because I did the CMC Washington Program and studied abroad in Beijing. I spent the second semester of my sophomore year in DC and the first semester of my junior year in China. On campus, I lived in south quad and then mid quad. I lived in Fawcett Hall my freshman year and lived for a semester in Stark Hall, when it was the brand-new dorm. When I came back to campus after going abroad, I lived in Beckett Hall. Beckett's the place I still think of as my dorm. When I come back for reunions, my friends and I wander by Beckett and poke in. We snuck in one year and walked around to find our old rooms. It's a much nicer dorm now than it was back then.

In terms of favorite memories, it's so hard to say. I've made lifelong friends that I still talk to daily or weekly. The cool thing about CMC was that it gave me the opportunity to start and try doing the things I wanted to do with my life. I was interested in government and international relations. Going to DC to work for Joe Biden, my first boss, was amazing. One specific memory relevant to this discussion is that I took a Chinese foreign policy class with Professor C.J. Lee. He co-taught the course with a gentleman, who sadly passed away a few years ago, named Amb. Ji Chaozhu. Ambassador Ji’s last job in his career was as an Undersecretary General for the United Nations. But he's best known as the interpreter for Mao Zedong and Deng Xiao Ping. If you look at the old photos of Nixon in China, or when Deng came to the US and went to the rodeo with Jimmy Carter, Ambassador Ji is sitting right there, interpreting for those seminal leaders in Chinese history. One day, I was sitting alone in Collins Dining Hall, and he recognized me from the class and asked if he could sit and have lunch with me. And so, I had lunch with Mao's interpreter. That's one moment I don't know that would have happened elsewhere. But it happened at CMC, and I'll never forget it. CMC is a unique place where you can have an experience like that. It's just phenomenal.

When and how did you decide that you wanted to pursue a career in national security?

That goes back even earlier, before CMC. My own family very much shaped me. My grandfather got me a subscription to National Geographic, and I remember being obsessed with maps. Every issue came with a free map, and I remember a China map that I got and I was thinking how interesting it was. I was always interested in global affairs. My parents are ham radio operators, so I got my license as a kid. In the days before the internet, getting on the radio and talking to somebody in Russia or Australia was a big deal because, at the time, we only had email. That was very eye-opening for me. I took a world history class in high school during my first year. I had an amazing, dynamic teacher named Karen Berry, and this was right around the time Clinton had gotten into office. We were talking about free trade, NAFTA, globalization, and post-Soviet Russia. This was all happening in real time, and I found being in a new world was interesting. The last thing that pushed me over the edge and took me to know what I wanted to
do, was when Hong Kong reverted to China the year I graduated from high school. I remember thinking and talking about what that meant moving forward and that China would be a crucial player again. I say again because China was very important for centuries.

When I got to CMC, I started as an IR major, but I eventually decided I didn't want to take that much economics. I ultimately became a Government and Asian Studies dual major. One of the first things I decided to do at CMC was to take Chinese; that was the last big step propelling me in that direction. So that's a long answer. But those are the things that got me there.

What advice do you have for students who want to enter public service?

My first piece of advice is that you should do it. There's nothing more rewarding. Of course, you will make less than you would if you worked at a big consulting or accounting firm, as many of our CMC grads do. But your ability to impact what we are doing as a government, as a nation, and, frankly, as a global community, will never be greater than when you're working in government and public service. For some people, that will be diplomacy through a foreign service career. People must remember there are many ways to work in international relations with the government. That extends beyond being a Foreign Service Officer or working at the State Department. I say that with great respect as somebody who worked as a civil servant at the State Department for twelve years and thinks the State Department does essential work.

We have many agencies in the US government, like the Department of Defense, where I work now. There's also the Commerce Department, the Treasury Department, the Energy Department, the Intelligence Community, and the Agriculture Department. There's also Congress, which is an important place with a lot of influence. My number one piece of advice is if you want to do it, don't be afraid. The way to go forth is to get out there and reach out to the CMC alumni network. We have amazing people working across the government. People in DC love mentoring the next generation and hopefully having them do a better job than we did. So, get on LinkedIn, and don't be afraid to reach out. The worst thing that can happen is somebody doesn't respond to you, or they say no. But I bet you nine times out of ten, someone will be willing to speak with you. They can give you lots of advice. But, remember, there are many pathways. And, of course, military service is another great way to serve. We have a lot of amazing military officers here in the Pentagon that work on foreign policy. There are lots of ways to do this work. You have to find the one that works for you.

Russia recently suspended its participation in the New START treaty. Can you explain the treaty's importance in preventing a catastrophic nuclear accident, and the administration's approach vis-a-vis our nuclear policy toward Russia moving forward?

One of the first things that the Biden-Harris administration did, from an international perspective, was to extend the New START treaty. The treaty had a provision that allowed it to be extended for five additional years. So instead of expiring in 2021, there was a mutual agreement between Russia and the United States, to extend the treaty for five years. That's because both governments at the time recognized that it was in their mutual interest to maintain this treaty. This treaty caps the number of deployed nuclear warheads worldwide, at least for the United States and Russia, the two largest holders of nuclear weapons.
in the world. It also provides transparency and regular communication between the United States and Russia on things like missile tests and major military exercises. This helps prevent misunderstandings and accidental actions that could result from miscommunication. We talk a lot about the importance of strategic stability, and we believe that the New START treaty is an important way to maintain and strengthen that stability and reduce nuclear risks.

As you pointed out, Russia claims that it has suspended its participation in the New START Treaty. In the US view, that action is not legally valid under the treaty. We would say that Russia is not in compliance with the treaty at this point. And in fact, we have previously stated that Russia has been not in compliance in a number of areas, including the obligation to have a regular consultative meeting between the two nations and the requirement to have regular on-site inspections, both in the United States and Russia. The treaty allows and requires that each nation goes to the other country to look at their nuclear facilities and confirm that the conditions there are in line with the treaty. Russia has suspended its access for the United States to do those inspections. For those two reasons, Russia is not complying with the treaty. Now the good news, if there is good news, is that Russia has said that it intends to maintain the limits on its overall number of deployed weapons. That quantitative limit should be maintained. But the challenge is that because they need to allow for the inspections and other exchanges of information, it gets harder and harder for us to verify their compliance with the treaty.

We have stated that Russia should uphold its obligations under the treaty and that the suspension is invalid. We've also said that because Russia's steps are not legally valid, we have a lawful right to enact countermeasures. We have decided not to provide a biannual data exchange that we do every six months. We've decided not to give that information because they said that they would not provide the information. If Russia were to come back into compliance, we would return the favor. We believe that implementing the New START treaty is in the interests of both nations and, frankly, for strategic stability globally. We will continue to evaluate as the situation evolves. We will also continue to work in pressing Russia to return to compliance with that treaty. We would like to seek a follow-on treaty because the New START treaty will expire in 2026. And without that treaty, we will have no further arms control treaties that exist between the United States and Russia, which we don't think is a good situation for the United States and for the world.

The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review describes Beijing as embarking on an “ambitious expansion, modernization, and diversification of its nuclear forces.” Can you describe the threat posed by the PLA’s nuclear weapons infrastructure?

A big takeaway from the new Nuclear Posture Review is the dramatic expansion of the PRC’s nuclear program. For four decades, the PRC has said it only maintains nuclear weapons for deterrence. In other words, to maintain the ability to conduct a second strike against any nuclear attack on the PRC. The PRC has also said they couple deterrence with a no-first-use policy. And for many years, the PRC maintained a relatively small nuclear arsenal compared to the US and Russia. The concern now is a dramatic increase in their construction of silos for intercontinental ballistic missiles. We assess those silos would be used to house missiles with nuclear payloads. More broadly, we are concerned with their development of a nascent nuclear triad -- their missiles, the air leg in terms of bombers, and the sea lane through submarines. We've said publicly, we assess China's nuclear arsenal could grow to around 1000 nuclear
warheads by 2030 and potentially up to 1500 by 2035, a significant expansion compared to earlier assessments in the low hundreds.

Such assessments do not match up with their stated nuclear doctrine of minimum deterrence and no first use. Instead, they are trying to do something more coercive in nature that could allow for the first use of nuclear weapons. If so, the United States would be dealing with two major nuclear competitors for the first time in history. We always thought about the US and Russia in the past, but now you have to think about the US, Russia, and the PRC together. What does this mean for US nuclear deterrence, our nuclear forces, and what we need to maintain strategic stability? What does it mean for arms control? Now we have to consider what changes in our US-Russia nuclear weapons policy mean for China. This creates a situation where we have more challenges to achieving strategic stability. Even in the darkest days of the Cold War, for example, we had some levels of arms control and dialogue on strategic nuclear issues. Under previous treaties, there were inspector visits, data sharing, and discussion of our nuclear doctrine. The United States is the most transparent nuclear weapons nation in the world. We have published how many weapons we have in our stockpile, and our budget is very open about how much money we're spending on these programs. Our nuclear doctrine is in our nuclear posture review, which can be found online in an unclassified format. Plus, Russia, to a certain extent, has been clear about its doctrine. And even if you don't always believe what it says, Russia has at least stated publicly their views. The PRC, however, is way less transparent. They've never said how many nuclear weapons they have. And they talk about their policies of no first use and minimum deterrence, but they don't have the history that we have with Russia on arms control.

Our challenge is determining how to put guardrails on the US-China relationship. The President has clarified that we seek competition but not confrontation with the PRC. We recognize that competition can be healthy, as opposed to confrontation. One area where we should have some common understanding is placing these guardrails in the relationship. For example, we have military deconfliction crisis communication channels with Russia under the New START Treaty. For example, we notify each other about major missile launches and military exercises. We don't have that level of transparency and information exchange with the PRC. When we talk about guardrails, this is what we mean. Some think we want to negotiate numeric limits caps on the PRC nuclear arsenal. At some point, we would like to see restraint and limitations. But for now, we must start with the basic building blocks, including risk reduction, crisis communications, deconfliction channels, and hotlines.

A great example is the spy balloon incident, where the secretary of defense sought a phone call with his Chinese counterpart to explain our concerns. His counterpart did not pick up the phone. That is the perfect time you want crisis communications, even if you have different views. Even in competition, we want to prevent unintentional escalation or miscalculation. We want to seek more communication channels, especially in the nuclear realm. In the meantime, we will continue to pursue our nuclear modernization to ensure that our nuclear forces remain safe, secure, and effective, and to make sure that we can uphold our commitments to our allies and partners, including those in the Indo-Pacific, like Japan, South Korea, and Australia.