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A New START?

In the age of Trump, arms control needs a relaunch: it will either be multilateral or it will not be at all

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Before too long, we may well be hearing about the death of nuclear arms control. On 2 August 2019, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) is due to terminate. The INF Treaty is the only major arms control agreement between Washington and Moscow that bans ground-launched medium-range missiles with a range of 500 to 5,500 kilometres. The end of INF would make New START the sole remaining nuclear arms reduction treaty between Russia and the US.

This agreement on the limitation of deployed strategic nuclear weapons expires on 5 February 2021. The parties could agree to an extension for up to five years. But this would be like putting a band-aid on the gaping bullet wound that is rapidly growing nuclear proliferation. To apply a really effective bandage, we would need a completely new concept for nuclear arms control. There are two key reasons as to why this is necessary:

First, nuclear arms control must be multilateral rather than just bilateral in the future. Unlike during the Cold War, Europe no longer plays a central role in today's global conflicts. Asia's importance has increased exponentially. And this also applies to nuclear arms. Although China, India, and Pakistan are still some way behind the US and Russia when it comes to the size of their nuclear arsenal, they are steadily catching up and can therefore no longer be ignored. In this sense, the Trump administration's deliberations about the inclusion of China (at the very least) in future treaties are certainly not misguided. From Washington's perspective, such a step is, in fact, almost mandatory, since Beijing has superseded Moscow as the big challenge of the 21st century.

Second, future arms control will no longer be able to focus solely on nuclear weapons. Other technologies are increasingly influencing strategic stability. These include missile defence; long-range, conventional precision weapons; antisubmarine defence; systems to

detect and track mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles; obviously the whole gamut of cyber-related challenges; and the role of space is also growing in importance.

A new arms control strategy?

For now, however, Washington and Moscow would be well advised to apply that band-aid and extend New START for a few more years. The treaty actually provides the parties, and particularly the US, with a number of important advantages. Russia is currently modernising its strategic nuclear weapons (all Moscow's Soviet legacy delivery systems such as missiles, submarines, and strategic fighter aircraft are to be replaced with new ones) and this elimination programme has been given a completion deadline of 2026. New START also guarantees a certain degree of transparency through the reports and on-site inspections that the treaty foresees.

At the moment, however, the Trump administration does not seem particularly keen on committing to an extension of New START. In 2017, the president himself described New START as a unilateral agreement to Russia's advantage – probably partly because the treaty was negotiated by his predecessor Barack Obama. For many years now, National Security Advisor John Bolton has been known as a fierce opponent of arms control per se. He doesn't want the US to be subject to restrictions, especially since he doesn't believe the other party to the agreements will actually comply with them.

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Unfortunately, Russia's blatant violations of the INF Treaty was grist to Bolton's mill. At least, the American State Department has repeatedly confirmed that Russia has been adhering to the terms of New START. However, the US is also currently conducting a comprehensive modernisation of its nuclear weapons stockpile – a process that was already started under Barack Obama – and in this context, the White House might see New START to be something of an unnecessary limitation.

But Moscow also benefits from the transparency guaranteed by New START as well as the concomitant stability of expectations regarding America's nuclear weapons stockpile. These advantages are not to be underrated considering the often erratic behaviour of the current president. Consequently, during their meeting in Helsinki in July 2018, President Putin made it clear to Trump that he was interested in

extending New START. However, for some time now, Moscow has been pointing out to the reluctant Trump administration that this would necessitate joint discussions lasting significantly longer than just a few hours.

Moreover, there's currently an escalating conflict around the implementation of New START. Russia claims that the US has not implemented the treaty provisions as agreed. The key issues here are the repurposing of strategic B-52 bombers for solely conventional operations and a reduction in the rocket-launching facilities on America's Trident II submarines. Russia claims that it has been unable to establish whether the US has carried out the requisite structural modifications on its aircraft and submarines in compliance with the treaty. According to reports by observers, what was initially merely a technical dispute has now acquired a political dimension. Perhaps Russia wants to ensure that it will be able to pass the buck to Washington in the event that its endeavours to secure an extension of New START fail.

Whatever the outcome of the discussion about extending New START, we certainly need a much more robust arms control strategy. Over the coming years, we will have to learn to live with nuclear weapons. There are no reliable methods of verifying complete and irreversible nuclear disarmament. We therefore need to set more modest goals. The focus must always be on preventing nuclear conflict without simultaneously putting interests at risk. In other words: each country's own nuclear deterrent must be credible; but, this deterrent must not threaten the other party such that arms races and thus crisis instability become likely. The key mechanism to achieve this is arms control. This is not a Cold War instrument but rather a tool for guaranteeing collective survival in the nuclear age. And this scenario is set to continue for the foreseeable future.

European leadership?

The crux of arms control is that the security interests of the opposing party must always be taken into consideration. Responsible conduct in the nuclear age means that all parties must always think and act with common security in mind. However, this basic principle, which was already pertinent during the Cold War, must now be applied in a fundamentally different strategic environment. The arms control of the future will either have to be multilateral or it will be non-existent. Future arms control treaties will not serve the national security interests of either the US or Russia if they remain bilateral and completely exclude China and other nuclear actors.

Initially, the arms control of the future will probably have to focus on information exchange, transparency, and confidence-building before arms limitations can be tackled.

Today, Asia plays a far more important role on the global political stage than it ever did during the Cold War. And this also applies to nuclear arms. At the same time, modern technologies must also be taken into account. Technical innovations are threatening to undermine the nuclear second-strike capability. Politicians could get the idea that nuclear wars are something that can actually be waged and even won. The principal task of future nuclear arms control would be to stop this dangerous development in its tracks.

This means that arms control will be extremely difficult. In the past, arms control was, to a large extent, led by the US. For now, this is something that we can no longer expect. Neither Russia nor, for instance, China are capable of filling the gap left by Washington. All we can hope for is that the tide will soon turn in the US and that Washington will become aware of its important leadership role is when it comes to arms control.

Until that happens, we need to do some conceptual thinking. And this is something Europe can take on. Initially, the arms control of the future will probably have to focus on information exchange, transparency, and confidence-building before arms limitations can be tackled. Perhaps we will have to start with informal talks, also involving non-governmental stakeholders, such as think tanks. Maybe the role of unilateral measures versus negotiations and treaties will be much more important than it was during the Cold War era. One thing is certain though, an arms control 'renaissance' will require we invest a good deal of political energy and most certainly also patience.



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