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FOCAL POINTS IN ARMS CONTROL

In the contemporary world of growing complexity where major social, political, and economic shifts are determined by unexpected, cascade, and even catastrophic developments, facilitation of coordination among actors become vital. When decisions on cooperation or conflict de-escalation have to be taken under severe time pressure, the importance of conspicuous solutions is difficult to overestimate. Such solutions are often called “focal points” and include numbers, objects, and phenomena the value of which as bases for coordination is expected to be evident to all parties involved. This essay looks at the role of focal points in facilitating arms control negotiations – a key activity shaping contemporary international security.

The intuitive point of departure for the analysis presented in this essay is that symbolism plays a crucial role in enabling compromise in arms control negotiation – an area prone to zero-sum thinking and excessive concerns about falling victim to artful exploitation by the opponent.

Thomas Schelling and his followers suggested two strategies of identifying potential focal points during negotiations or other types of interactions among humans. First, a focal point may be found in a certain conspicuous material phenomenon. For example, the main clock at a city’s central railway station is usually identified as the default meeting place. In arms control, the range that separates strategic and other classes of missiles is agreed to be 5,500 km – roughly the distance a missile launched in Eurasia has to travel to reach North America, and vice versa. The “focal allure” of these points, usually called “salient,” results from the fact that they are expected to be evident even to individuals who seek coordination but are unable to communicate. Absent a widely-recognized natural phenomenon or a landmark underpinning a focal point, participants in a negotiation without communication cannot resolve coordination problems. Some observers have noted, however, that the effectiveness of “non-communicable” focal points was debatable because it was not guaranteed that the parties “would attach the same salience to the same point.”

Second, a round number that does not correspond to any widely known phenomenon can serve as a focal point in a negotiation where parties are able to communicate freely. Round numbers can be found in almost any area under negotiation, including arms control. A round numerical solution need not be so unique as to be identifiable without communication.

between the parties. Schelling, who was mostly looking at cases of rapid crisis escalation in which adversaries did not have enough time to communicate, was not interested in this second source of focal points.\(^3\)

Both types of focal points have gained traction in arms control. On one hand, arms control is a less rapidly unfolding process than a real-time international crisis or war, so focal points in arms control are mostly numerical and situational, that is, they are picked in the vicinity of negotiators’ initial positions. On the other hand, conspicuous, or salient solutions are also used – for example, when negotiators need to delineate geographic boundaries of areas to fall under a negotiated arms control regime.

**CLASSIFYING ARMS CONTROL SOLUTIONS**

From the focal point perspective, one can identify three types of solutions embodied in arms control agreements.

1) *Non-focal point.* Most of negotiated arms control solutions come in such form. These solutions are reached without reliance on any symmetry or beauty of the number. In many cases, numbers in arms control negotiations are picked in a consensual manner without the need to attract negotiating parties to a position that they would otherwise not consider optimal based on their interests. In such situations, the beauty of the number may be present, but is not necessary to override anyone’s initial negotiating position. Only a small share of numbers in arms control agreements conform to the definition of a focal point.

For example, the round numbers used extensively in the New START (2010) and Conventional Forces in Europe (1990) treaties were not needed as tools of drawing the positions of the sides closer to one another; agreement on these numbers was quite easy for the negotiating parties to reach before they had to address more controversial issues. According to senior negotiators involved in the most recent round of strategic arms control talks between the United States and Russia, the ceilings for deployed nuclear warheads to be enjoined in the New START Treaty of 2010 were in fact not difficult to agree upon. Neither side considered it a major concession to commit to observing the maximum of 1,550 deployed warheads and 800 of deployed and non-deployed carriers.\(^4\)

In a similar vein, the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty signed in 1990 and the preceding negotiations on “mutual and balanced force reductions” in Europe involved dozens of numbers most of which were, according to the existing accounts of CFE negotiations, in no way focal.

Overall, in arms control negotiations, numbers often generate less contention than, for example, the terms on which the sides would be monitoring and verifying implementation of the negotiated agreement. In these and many other cases, the round numbers “focal promise,” which can be defined as the power of attraction, was either unnecessary or weak.

2) *Non-equilibrium focal point.* This is a focal point in the vicinity of which there is another focal point, so that a shift from one to the other can occur relatively easily and oftentimes unexpectedly. One example of nonequilibrium focal points is provided by counter-value and counter-force targeting principles in nuclear strategy. Each principle is based on an underlying coherent logic that can be adopted by the mutually deterring sides. Counter-value targeting is premised on the belief that even a minimal risk of a major city being hit by a nuclear-tipped missile is sufficient to prevent one’s adversary from all-out aggression. In its turn, counter-force targeting is based on the assumption that a nuclear war can be fought and won by a sudden disarming strike that would eliminate all (or almost all) of adversary’s retaliatory capability. While it would be most economically and politically sensible for a dyad of potential nuclear-armed adversaries to converge around the counter-value principle, certain trends in the evolution of their mutual political attitudes and force structures can result in a quantum shift to counter-force targeting – a much more costly and risky posture. In broad terms, the choice of posture depends on the dominant worldviews among decision makers, namely, whether they believe in deterrence in general and whether they believe that the side which has a bigger arsenal stands real chances of prevailing in a crisis.

It can be argued that the two principles under discussion during the CFE talks also constituted non-equilibrium focal points. The Soviet Union started off by demanding mutual force reductions in equal proportion to the initial numbers (in which Moscow had an advantage). In its turn, the United States and its European allies insisted that the USSR should introduce greater cuts that would eliminate the disparity between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Eventually, the reform-minded Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev agreed in 1988 to the principle of parity because he considered the numbers of Soviet troops deployed in Eastern Europe excessive and unaffordable. This change of preferred focal point


\(^4\) See, for example: Lewis, Jeffrey, Bar Nunn, Foreign Policy Blog, October 17, 2012, http://www.foreign-policy.com/articles/2012/10/17/bar_nunn
allowed to promptly conclude the negotiations and sign the CFE Treaty in November 1990.

A similar focal-point debate unfolded during U.S.-Soviet negotiations on intermediate-range missiles. Under the leadership of Gorbachev, the Soviet Union eventually agreed to the complete elimination of this whole class of missiles which implied bigger reductions in absolute numbers for the Soviet Union than for the United States. An alternative solution would have been to cut similar numbers of missiles or to compensate Moscow in a certain way for scrapping a greater number of weapons.

The Global Zero principle — total elimination of nuclear weapons — is another example of a non-equilibrium focal point. As an end-state, the Global Zero is morally attractive; however, it does not represent a Nash equilibrium given the difficulties of compliance verification and everyone’s temptation to obtain a decisive edge by quickly (and covertly) deploying just a few nuclear weapons.

3) Equilibrium focal points. These are focal negotiation outcomes in the vicinity of which there are no evident focal alternatives based on different concepts of justice, such as “equal cuts” vs “total elimination.” Numerous examples of equilibrium focal points are provided below.

Both equilibrium and non-equilibrium focal points in arms control usually come in one of the following forms:

• numbers: round or otherwise “magical,” that is, sticking out because of certain special characteristics;
• symmetries: points at the same distance from the preferred position of each negotiating side;
• natural or other physical phenomena or objects, such as borders drawn along rivers or mountain ridges or physical principles underlying weapon technologies.

Several trends in the use of focal points in arms control deserve closer attention.

THE PROMISE OF NUMBERS

Round numbers began playing a visible role in arms control negotiations with the emergence of mass-produced standardized weapons. As the number of weapons at the disposal of each negotiating party was rising to overkill levels, these numbers became very large and abstract. A recent think tank report on the U.S. nuclear weapons capability suggested that “deep uncertainty [persists] in estimating the adequacy of nuclear forces: how will they work in the environment they might create? Lacking data, planners sought assurance in larger inventories, while analysts usually had recourse to modeling gains and losses under simplistic scenarios contrived to show the numerical consequences of various constraints—what Aron derided as ‘strategic fiction.’”

With abstract models and simplistic scenarios ruling the day, solutions based on numerical focal points became easier for negotiators. This concerned, first and foremost, nuclear explosive devices and the means of their delivery. Over the 1960s, consensus emerged between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as on a broader multilateral scale, that the accelerating expansion of the deadly arsenals had to be contained. First results were achieved by the early 1970s in the form of “ceilings” imposed on further growth of Soviet and American nuclear stockpiles. At approximately the same time, negotiations opened between NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization on limiting the massive conventional weapons arsenals that the two blocs had accumulated in Europe. CFE talks also had the potential to become rich in focal point outcomes.

However, the power of focal points in arms control failed to fully materialize. Numbers are usually dictated by the sides’ strategies and postures, that is, by their determination of the most likely adversaries and conflict scenarios. Arms control negotiations usually focus on the possibility of an agreed change in postures that would, in turn, lead to a review of the optimal numbers of weapons necessary to maintain the new posture. Once postures are defined, agreeing on numbers becomes relatively easy. At the same time, round or otherwise “magic” numbers can serve as reference points that attract attention of negotiators and prompt them to consider changes in posture that would correspond to those “magic” numbers.

For the United States and the Soviet Union (Russia) rising numbers became both the cause and result of the choice in favor of counter-force targeting. Large nuclear stockpiles only make sense if nuclear weapons are regarded as a war-fighting capability and as usable and allowing to prevail in a conflict. Mutually deterring sides stay at low numbers if they only see nuclear weapons as a guarantee against ultimate defeat in a conventional conflict and do not consider surprise disarming strike scenarios as realistic. The decision by the two nuclear superpowers to proceed with building massive overkill arsenals signified a choice in favor of the counter-
force targeting focal point. Once the U.S. and Soviet postures were adjusted and sides moved by the 1980s towards discussing disarmament options (as opposed to just agreeing to cap the arsenals’ growth), the exact number of retained warheads and/or missiles became – within certain limits determined by the postures – less a matter of principle than of a technical decision.

At the same time, the three other NPT-compliant nuclear-armed states, including China, have remained content with their limited arsenals, unwilling or unable to plan for responses to a potential first disarming strike by an adversary. Their nuclear postures remain centered on the focal point of counter-value targeting. In the recent years, according to some analysts, India and Pakistan reached counter-force numbers and are therefore likely to be planning for retaliation against massive surprise nuclear attacks by the other side.6

Once the United States and the Soviet Union securely locked themselves in an overkill situation, win-sets in arms control negotiations between them or their blocs began to be based on raw estimates of “sufficient” numbers rather than on exact calculations or plans of using the weapons, especially nuclear. For example, it became popular to claim, in Moscow or Washington, that a nuclear superpower “cannot afford” to reduce its nuclear arsenal below the sum of warheads deployed by second-tier nuclear-weapon states. Alternatively, it was maintained, a nuclear superpower needs to aim for an order-of-magnitude edge in numbers of a nuclear superpower over any second-tier nuclear-weapon state. Both assumptions converged on 1,000 as the minimum acceptable number of deployed warheads to be retained by a nuclear superpower.

Apparently leveraging 1,000 warheads as a focal point, U.S. President Barack Obama asserted in his June 19, 2013 speech in Berlin that the United States “can ensure the security of America and our allies, and maintain a strong and credible strategic deterrent, while reducing our deployed strategic nuclear weapons by up to one-third.”7 The number of deployed U.S. warheads at the time of this speech was capped by the New START Treaty at 1,550. The Russian side, subject to the same limit, did not explicitly endorse the 1,000 warheads goal citing concerns with U.S. plans to deploy potentially robust missile defenses. However, the number 1,000 previously featured in public statements by Russian officials who suggested that 1,000 would be the absolute minimum Moscow could possibly consider if “smaller” nuclear-armed states continue to refrain from multilateral limitations talks with the United States and Russia.

The “arbitrary focal numbers” phenomenon also transpired in the debates on “unacceptable damage” from a nuclear attack. At the height of the cold-war era arms race, policymakers in the U.S. and the USSR had to make bold assumptions about the scale of the destruction that the adversary would prefer not to risk. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara defined the situation of mutually assured destruction (neither side is tempted to undertake a surprise disarming nuclear strike against the adversary) as one in which the attacker would be sure to lose at least 25 percent of its the population and 50 percent of its industrial capacity.

As the prominent military strategy expert Lawrence Freedman noted, these numbers were not just beauti-

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ful, but arbitrary: “These levels […] reflected less a judgment about the tolerances of modern societies and more the point at which extra explosions would result in diminishing marginal returns measured by new damage and casualties, the point at which – to use Winston Churchill’s vivid phrase – ‘all you are going to do is make rubble bounce’.”

Despite the arbitrariness of large numbers, some focal points in arms control crystallized as a result of difficult negotiations and the focal points’ significant power of attraction.

**SALIENT POINTS**

“The number that matters most in norm-setting is zero,” noted one prominent arms control analyst. He continued: “This number is the clearest and most meaningful way to set norms and customary practices among responsible states. The number zero is embedded in the CTBT, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Biological Weapons Convention. States that do not honor the number zero become, _ipso facto_, outliers.”

Zero is indeed one of the most powerful focal points in arms control and far beyond this area. On the bilateral level, the US-Soviet Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty of 1987 falls under the same zero category. This treaty completely eliminated two classes of ground-launched missiles covering the ranges between 500 and 5,500 km.

Yet however attractive zero may be as a beautiful number supposedly signifying absolute security for everyone, in many contexts it has the clear trappings of a non-equilibrium focal point. Many opponents of zero argue that it would be very hard to detect and timely punish any breaches of a zero-based norm. Analyst Michael Krepon argues that “[b]ecause numbers of chemical and biological weapons that are greater than zero can be hidden, suspicions can only be conclusively affirmed by use, if they cannot be revealed by national technical means or intrusive treaty-monitoring regimes.” Another critic points out that Global Zero will be achieved by default as soon as nuclear arms become redundant and/or outmoded. This may happen if a more powerful weapon of deterrence is invented or if the risk of conflict involving major global or regional players is reduced to unimportant levels.

Focal point in arms control can also take the form of a calendar date. January 1, 1967 was chosen by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) negotiators as the cutoff date pivotal for the treaty. By setting the criterion of a nuclear test conducted before this date, this point helped to resolve the non-trivial problem of who should be allowed to keep nuclear weapons under NPT.

Time focal points sometimes crystallize when negotiators face the need to reach a new agreement not just before the existing one has expired, but to commemorate a certain anniversary of another treaty. For example, the United States and Russia sought to sign a new START treaty before the May 2010 date of opening of the NPT Review Conference. In that way, Washington and Moscow wanted to present non-nuclear weapon states with a major accomplishment on the way towards nuclear disarmament – an NPT commitment of nuclear-armed nations. The treaty was indeed signed in Prague on April 10, 2010 – three weeks before the NPT Review Conference kicked off in New York.

NPT itself contained a provision mandating discussion about the extension of the treaty at a certain focal date in the future. The treaty entered into force in 1970 for the term of 25 years thus making 1995 an important focal point when the future of NPT had to be determined.

Verification regimes in arms control provide some valuable examples of focal points. “Everything is accessible to everyone” principle is enshrined in the Antarctic Treaty of 1959. Twelve signatory states have the right to send representatives to inspect any area in the Antarctic, including any signatory’s scientific bases, arriving sea vessels and their cargo. In a similar vein, the Seabed Treaty of 1971 allows all parties to fully monitor one another’s seabed activity beyond the 12-mile territorial waters zone.

A competing focal point in the sphere of verification would imply a maximum number of permitted inspections. For example, the US-Russian New START treaty of 2010 envisages 18 annual short-notice on-site inspections (in addition to inspections carried out by national technical means) in order to verify observance of the treaty limits and conversion or elimination of delivery systems. This includes 10 on-site inspections of deployed warheads and deployed and non-deployed delivery systems at ICBM bases, submarine bases, and air bases (Type One inspections) and 8 on-site inspections at facilities that may hold only non-deployed delivery systems (Type Two inspections). The Open Skies Treaty of 1992 provides for an equal number of “passive” and “active” inspections for groups of participating countries. Each signatory – alone or together

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10 Ibid.
with another participant – is assigned a number of overflight inspections by other signatory nations and is entitled to the same annual number of flights over other signatories’ territory. In its turn, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty requires a qualified majority of signatory nations (30 out of 51) to launch an on-site inspection of a suspected nuclear test. The exact figure of 30 votes in favor of an inspection was agreed upon as a result of a midway compromise between the focal figure of 50 percent (25 votes) and some nation’s insistence on the two-thirds majority (34 votes). This very mode of reaching the consensus to be enshrined in the treaty also exemplified a focal point solution.

In bilateral US-Soviet and Russian arms control negotiations, any numerical solutions reached (concerning permitted numbers of missiles or warheads, details of inspections regimes etc.) reflected, apart from the sides’ postures, compromises between their espoused notions of justice. The United States has regarded as fair its preponderance over any potential rival – possibly, out of belief that even in an overkill situation, advantage in numbers still matters. Russia centered its negotiating position on parity with United States for parity’s own sake, refusing inter alia to consider the option of minimal counter-value deterrence that could be based, for example, on the submarine-launched component of the nuclear triad.

While questioning the need for parity, the U.S. side equally rejected minimal deterrence. In the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) report, the Obama administration argued that “the need for strict numerical parity between the two countries is no longer as compelling as it was during the Cold War.” However, it also warned against “large disparities in nuclear capabilities” that “could raise concerns on both sides and among U.S. allies and partners, and may not be conducive to maintaining a stable, long-term strategic relationship.”

Finally, a clash of non-equilibrium focal principles has occurred in the debate on the definition of outer space. Russia prefers the borderline interpretation of the atmosphere / outer space which begins at the altitude of 100 km above the sea level. The alternative approach championed by the United States is based on the distinction between two physical forces allowing an object to lift off the ground: aerodynamic or gravitational. According to this principle, airplanes flying thanks to the lifting power of their wings in the air would be considered travelling in the atmosphere while a missile orbiting the Earth thanks to gravitation would be regarded as an outer space object.

These principles are mutually exclusive, and each of them has clear practical implications desirable for the respective party. Deployment of weapons of mass destruction in outer space is prohibited by the Outer Space Treaty of 1967. If the U.S. interpretation is accepted, the United States will be deprived of the opportunity to deploy high-altitude weapon systems that Washington believes it is capable of developing in the long run.

CONCLUSION

Focal points have so far played a visible yet limited role in arms control. For the most part, arms control is negotiation about principles – broad concepts of threat, deterrence, force structure and posture etc. – rather than numbers. Once principles are defined, agreement on exact numbers of weapons can be reached relatively easily. Principles usually imply alternative focal points with arms control talks being essentially centered on making a choice among these points. Negotiating sides seek to substantiate the rightfulness of their respective versions of a focal point on the grounds of fairness or effectiveness. The competing focal points can be defined as “non-equilibrium,” that is, allowing a shift from one to another without losing the basic characteristics of a focal point understood as a solution grounded in a certain interpretation of justice or the “beauty” of the number. This does not mean, however, that, once reached, a non-equilibrium focal point is doomed to be dropped soon in favor of a competing focal point. In fact, solutions such as the zero principle applied to intermediate ballistic missiles are resilient enough to remain in place for decades. However, the probability of them being challenged at a later time through invocation of a competing focal point is higher than the same probability for equilibrium focal points. The lack of stability of non-equilibrium focal outcomes in arms control can be explained by the equal standing enjoyed by alternative conceptions of justice.

16 A scientific version of this argument was developed most recently in: Kroenig, Matthew, Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes, International Organization, vol. 67 iss. 1, January 2013, pp. 141-171.