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Why US-Russian arms control can succeed even in a climate of confrontation

Mikhail Troitskiy 

ABSTRACT

The onset of a crisis in US-Russian and global arms control has generated manifold proposals on ways to rejuvenate productive negotiations on weapons cuts and confidence building measures. Yet most of these plans are focused on technical details while failing to capture the central role of politics – both domestic and international – in enabling arms control. More important, many observers overlook the fact that, historically, US-Russian arms control negotiations only yielded concrete results when the sides were clear about their mutual intentions. Those intentions did not need to be cooperative; they could well be adversarial (as was the case during much of the Cold War). But for arms control to work, they had to remain at a stable, tested, and predictable level, which was clearly not the case in the late-2010s. To expect US-Russian arms control to regain its lost momentum by itself and salvage the political relationship would be to misunderstand the sources and context of past achievements in bilateral arms control.

KEYWORDS

Arms control; United States; Russia; security; foreign policy; negotiation

At the turn of the decade, a crisis is rapidly unfolding in US-Russian arms control – with potentially dangerous regional and global implications. One key arms control agreement – the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty – has already fallen apart. Others, such as the New START, the Open Skies Treaty, and even the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, may be next in line to unravel. Many observers have been quick to dismiss the prospects for keeping any formal US-Russian arms control agreements in place or even renewing the existing ones, which would mean the total collapse of an arms control architecture that has been built up over decades.

However, the fate of US-Russian arms control is far from sealed. Over the past 50 years, it has developed in fits and starts, and if history is any guide, conflict as such does not always make arms control impossible.

In fact, Washington and Moscow proved capable of making deals even in a climate of confrontation. What really mattered was not whether relations were cooperative or adversarial, but whether both sides had sufficient transparency of the other's intentions. Such transparency allowed each side to calculate the risks of disposing of certain numbers or types of weapons and to proceed with a formal agreement even when antagonism was running high. Conversely, at times when the relationship was generally cooperative, but at least one side sensed or expected an unfavorable turn in the counterpart's intentions, arms control stalled.

At certain junctures, the difficulty of agreeing to limit and reduce the stocks of deadly and destabilizing weapons seemed formidable. And yet, a confluence of events

usually opened up new opportunities within several years of the period of acute despair.

Putting politics first

It is common to argue that arms control overtures can be used to signal readiness to improve political relations. Viewed through such a lens, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev impressed the United States and other NATO members by agreeing to drastically reduce the numbers of Soviet troops deployed in Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s. That initiative likely won Gorbachev trust among the leaders of major Western nations and facilitated the end of the Cold War (Montgomery 2006). Such logic puts arms control ahead of politics and suggests that arms control decisions can be made largely independently from the state of relations between the stakeholders.

Many analysts, however, adhere to a different perspective – they view arms control more as an outcome than a source of cooperation and argue that interstate relations need to be ripe for cuts in the numbers of weapons or military personnel.

They suggest that the prospects for arms control breakthroughs depend on the overall dynamic of relations between the stakeholders (Arbatov 2018). While these prospects may also be affected by the political will and preferences of individual national leaders, historically the outcomes of arms control negotiations have depended on broader political trends in the relationship between negotiating countries.

A 2018 report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace concurred with the “politics first” argument with respect to US-Russian relations. Its author, Eugene Rumer, argued that “the history of US-Russian arms control closely follows the trajectory of the political relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States. Improvements in the political relationship were invariably accompanied by accomplishments in arms control. When the relationship between Moscow and Washington deteriorated, progress in arms control stalled and existing agreements came under increasing pressure from critics” (Rumer 2018).

Discussing that argument, in 2018 *The Economist* asked: “If arms control does indeed follow politics, could better relations between the big nuclear powers, at some later date, re-energize arms control?” The weekly’s answer was negative: “Alas, probably not. The problem is potentially destabilizing technologies, notably those of missile defense and cyberwarfare” (*The Economist* 2018).

Others, meanwhile, have suggested that an improved political relationship may not be necessary. Those scholars point to clear intentions – even in adversarial times – as key enablers of arms control. According to American University’s Keith Darden, “transparency of actions, capabilities, and intentions – perhaps achieved through the type of bilateral and multilateral engagement that is increasingly being curtailed by both sides – could contribute to a lessening of tensions or at least a clarity of interests and ambitions that would make nuclear deterrence less necessary” (Darden 2018). Lawrence Freedman concurred: “A degree of trust is needed” (*The Economist* 2018). While real intentions themselves may be inscrutable (Rosato 2014), right signals can enable arms control and keep it afloat until an adverse change in the signals.

Disarming under confrontation

Relations between the two nuclear superpowers have gone through periods of both stable and changing intentions since the dawn of bilateral agreements on nuclear arms. Arms control proved successful in two types of situations in the US-Russian (Soviet) relationship.

One is under credible commitment to cooperation. At those times, mutually assured destruction lurked in the background, but was not allowed – primarily by the US and Russian leaders – to drive the bilateral relationship. Under such conditions the START II (signed in 1993), the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (2002), and the New START (2010) treaties were signed. These three agreements came into being, respectively, in the early years of three consecutive post-Cold War decades, at times when a push for and expectations of continued cooperation were driving the US-Russian diplomatic and economic agenda –

mainly for the reasons of a shared global mission and a good personal rapport between the leaders of the two countries. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (1987), the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (1990), and START I (1991) were also to an extent made possible by Mikhail Gorbachev’s “new political thinking” and the reciprocally cooperative moods that were taking over the West in the late 1980s.

While getting rid of redundant weapons in a climate of cooperation may be easy and politically rewarding, the real challenge is to find opportunities for arms control in a situation of conflict. A second mode of political relationship enabling US-Russian arms control has traditionally been one of global confrontation, but with clear non-expansionist intentions – that is, without signs of surprise maneuvers being planned by any of the parties in order to change the status quo dramatically in its favor. During the Cold War, such stability of intentions was in large part based on the acceptance by Washington and Moscow of mutual vulnerability in situations of high conflict escalation. Regional rivalry and operations aimed at mutual subversion were unlikely to lead to a major war (Kapur 2005). Under such circumstances, the Soviet Union and the United States negotiated several arms control treaties that became major building blocks of the global arms control regime, including SALT I and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (both signed in 1972) as well as SALT II (1979).

Arms control did not take off in its contemporary form before the Cold War disputes with high escalation potential became reliably manageable. The sides found it difficult to assess mutual intentions and were expecting to be targeted by surprise operations with dramatic consequences for the balance of power between the two blocs, such as the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba, subversion of West Germany’s commitment to NATO, or Western support for an anti-communist uprising in a Warsaw Pact country. Major arms control initiatives of the late 1960s and early 1970s did not come into being until the superpowers learned how to address those and other dangerous controversies through diplomacy.

It is both surprising and promising that arms control negotiations can bring results in a situation of conflict between the parties involved. Arms control enthusiasts are eager to point that out when advocating cuts in weapons arsenals as a feasible reconciliatory measure, even as attempts to resolve the disputes on the ground are stalled. And yet, such proposals often fail to take into account the requirement of stability of perceived intentions – the need to convince one’s opponent that no bolt-out-of-the-blue operations are being contemplated simultaneously with handshakes across the arms control negotiation table.

The stumbling blocks

Indeed, periods of perceived stability of intentions were limited in time. Sooner or later, Washington and Moscow resumed maneuvering to obtain unilateral advantage over the other. Toward the end of the 1970s, signs of expansionist intentions beyond the earlier established limits destroyed opportunities for reaching arms control agreements. No arms control deals were made in the first half of the 1980s, as the sides clashed over deployments of intermediate-range missiles in Europe and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Uncertainty of intentions came to a head by 1983, when Moscow came to believe that NATO was preparing a surprise attack against the Soviet Union. On both sides, voices that advocated de-escalation in the bilateral relationship, including through arms control, were muted until Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to power in 1985.

At the beginning of each of the three subsequent decades, US-Russian arms control negotiations brought tangible results, only to grind to a halt soon thereafter – as a result of renewed rivalry. Signed at the height of the post-Cold War embrace between Washington and Moscow, the START II Treaty never came into force after the US and Russia failed to agree on limits to missile defense. Since the early 1980s, when the Reagan administration announced its Star Wars initiative, discussion of missile defense projects by Washington has been viewed by Moscow as an ominous sign of change in the United States' intentions toward Russia.

Such dynamic played out in the second part of the 1990s when the enlargement of NATO and its operations in Bosnia and Kosovo stirred fears in Moscow of a new Western interventionism for which missile defenses were supposedly designed to serve as a cover. For its own part, Washington began to suspect that, in a departure from the multilateralism of the early post-Cold War years, Russia was turning toward zero-sum interpretations of its national interests.

Productive arms control was not possible in such a climate. A compelling illustration of the mechanism whereby uncertainty of intentions impeded arms control is provided by the Adapted Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. Although by 1999 Russia and NATO had succeeded in modernizing the treaty, the adapted post-Cold War version of the document contained a time bomb: It required that Russia pull out its troops from Georgia and Moldova. Such a requirement, which made implementation of the agreement highly problematic, was not driven by considerations of military strategy or tactics but resulted largely from domestic politics. Influential US Senators began doubting Russia's intentions vis-à-vis smaller post-Soviet republics whose sovereignty Washington was looking to protect, and

they demanded that a linkage be established between a mainly unrelated multilateral arms control agreement and Russia's noninvolvement in ethno-territorial conflicts across post-Soviet Eurasia.¹

Toward the end of the 1990s, it became clear that mutual reassurance by post-Soviet Russia and the United States of their nonhostile intentions since 1991 had failed in significant part. Attempts at such reassurance made by the top leaders – presidents Clinton and Yeltsin – did not trickle down to lower-level politicians, government bureaucrats, and grassroots voters in the United States and Russia who did not share much of the post-Cold War optimism about imminent partnership between the former rival powers (Marten 2017).

However, the sides managed to return to mutual reassurance in the first few years of the new millennium. Russia supported the US-led anti-Taliban campaign in Afghanistan, and US President George W. Bush reached out to Russian President Vladimir Putin to establish a personal bond that survived a few subsequent crises. The almost immediate spinoffs for arms control included the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty and a NATO-Russia declaration on “a new quality” of relations in May 2002 – a major confidence-building move that tempered Moscow's negative reaction to the second round of post-Cold War NATO enlargement. The positive political momentum of 2001–2002 was strong enough for the Kremlin to refrain from overdramatizing the Bush administration's decision to pull out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

The intermission, however, turned out to be brief. Scattered regional rivalries with significant escalation potential resumed between 2004 and 2009 and set in firmly after 2012 on issues as diverse as the international alignments of Ukraine and other post-Soviet nations, civil war in Syria, Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs, and the fate of the political regime in Venezuela. As mutual suspicions of meddling in domestic politics and elections grew, arms control became difficult to advance, given the lack of ability – and often willingness – of the top leadership in both countries to rein in advocates of arms buildup as a source of strength or a means of signaling resolve.

The final turn toward a full-fledged crisis of US-Russia arms control was predictable already in 2012 as the short-lived “reset” in relations between the two sides started to unravel. The rise and fall of arms control during this reset showed that arms control becomes problematic even in a cooperative climate in the US-Russian relationship if the risks of “defection” are perceived as high: at least one side concludes that the other is switching to an adversarial posture. In such situation, fear of being deceived and exploited becomes too strong to resist.

By the end of the 2010s uncertainty about mutual intentions became extreme, scuttling almost all opportunities for arms control. Characteristically, in such an atmosphere, the ghost controversies that seemed to have long been left behind – such as the dispute around NATO nuclear sharing, orbital bombardment systems, or tactical nuclear weapons – came back to haunt the US-Russian arms control agenda. Neither side made a consistent attempt to save the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which the Trump administration formally terminated in 2019. To make matters worse, it is hard to imagine a coalition in the US Senate and the Trump White House that could enable ratification of a new strategic arms control deal to replace the New START, even if it is extended until 2026 by an executive decision. Meanwhile, Moscow refuses to discuss cuts in tactical nuclear weapons without demanding that Washington pull out its tactical nukes from Europe.

Make no mistake: the crisis of arms control did not cause the downturn in the relationship; neither can arms control be used to reverse the political trend. Never in the history of US-Russia relations has the genie of actual or looming arms races been put back into the bottle by miracle. Very rarely, if ever, has arms control been helpful in resolving conflicts between Washington and Moscow and strengthening their economic and diplomatic engagement. On the contrary, political will to reassure each other of mutual intentions has always preceded substantive and fruitful arms control negotiations.

The current predicament

After 30 years of post-Cold War relations between the United States and Russia, US observers are inclined to believe that Russia seeks to undermine the very foundations of American power, including democracy, the global image of the United States as a credible partner, and its alliances (Arquilla et al. 2019; Green 2019). Their Russian counterparts, meanwhile, are convinced that Washington will not rest until political regimes in post-Soviet Eurasia, including Russia, become more pliant and dependent on US support (Sputnik International 2019). In such conditions, good-faith arms control becomes redundant because no one really believes it can help to reduce escalation risks arising primarily from the clashing policy agendas.

Calls for action to save arms control are being made in the United States, Russia, and globally (Countryman 2019; Korb 2019; Arbatov 2019). Unfortunately, most of these proposals tend to overlook the need for political prerequisites to the recommended and largely technical measures. If arms control as a means of reducing the danger of a devastating war is to be rescued, the stakeholders need to address first and foremost the political calculus behind

their foreign policy moves that arouse suspicion of surprise changes of intentions. On one hand, why does Washington believe that it does not need to look for a compromise with Moscow – for example, by agreeing to maintain limits only on strategic weapons while leaving tactical nukes largely out of the equation? Why do some US policymakers assess that the security of the United States can be assured even without any nuclear (and other) arms control treaties? On the other hand, what is the political calculus behind Moscow's purported bid to deploy an intermediate-range missile that was cited by Washington as the reason to pull out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty?

Answers to those questions boil down to the renewed post-Cold War readiness of both sides for brinkmanship – testing each other's resolve in prospective conflict scenarios. Each side has given up on achieving their stability objectives through a negotiated arms control solution in the hopes that brinkmanship will awaken the other side to reality and force it to agree to negotiations on previously unacceptable terms.

However, as history has shown, cases of brinkmanship, such as the early Cold War crises, can only lead to moments of reckoning when the situation is ripe for a compromise. Most often, brinkmanship only leads to more brinkmanship. For example, no reckoning occurred after the first Berlin Crisis: what followed was further escalation punctuated by new acute crises. Only after the Cuban Missile Crisis did the sides fully acknowledge that the stalemate they had achieved was indeed detrimental, and only then did they engage in good-faith negotiations to reduce risks.

Nuclear arms control becomes even more problematic because Moscow and Washington consider nuclear weapons as status-elevating instruments: leveraging ownership of such weapons, they tend to claim expanded freedom of action on the international stage. While many in NATO countries are worried whether Moscow would seriously consider using non-strategic nuclear weapons to “de-escalate” a conventional conflict, the United States is modernizing and expanding its nuclear arsenal while the US president welcomes nuclear arms racing and brags about the size of his “nuclear button.”

In such a difficult setting, US-Russian arms control is unlikely to recover unless the sides choose to engage in the signaling of stable mutual intentions. Indeed, clear signals of non-adversarial postures would be difficult to send at this moment. However, a verbal commitment to moderation as opposed to a commitment to prevail in conflicts – may be enough to breathe life into some of the arms control regimes. While a joint declaration on the inadmissibility of a nuclear war² may be important from the perspective of global security, giving at least partial satisfaction to the nations that seek to ban nuclear weapons, Moscow and Washington would be

better served by providing mutual reassurances of non-escalation in potential conflict scenarios well below the nuclear threshold.

In a similar vein, agreeing on ways to preserve stability, however that is defined, may bring tangible security benefits only after major conflicts on the ground have been resolved. If the order of steps is reversed, the risk of sudden escalation will not be reduced, because maintaining abstract stability comes second to the pursuit of concrete conflicting interests on the ground and the quest for dominance in the likely conflict scenarios. The fate of the treaties on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces – two bedrocks of stability under any definition – provides clear evidence to that effect.

Even more helpful to arms control and nonproliferation could be an unequivocal verbal appreciation by the US and Russian leaders of the peace dividend. While no leader of a great power can afford to refrain from touting national progress in the development of advanced military technology, arms control has always been motivated in substantial part by saving money on military procurement. The right balance between rhetorical commitments to military prowess and the peace dividend, as well as between resolve and compromise, has always been key to successful US-Russian arms control.

Finally, taking the political decision to reduce the dangerous deniability in mutual policies could also go a long way toward restoring US-Russian arms control, as engagement in adversarial deniable action is a sure breaker of perceptions of benign intent.

The history of US-Soviet and US-Russian negotiations shows that successful arms control follows credible assurances of mutual intentions. Generally, arms control works when the room for change in strategic postures on both sides is limited and unnecessary – that is, when the intentions of the sides are expected to remain stable, be they cooperative or adversarial. But when the sides fail to define their intentions, arms control becomes problematic.

The current crisis of arms control in US-Russia relations stems from the optionality that both countries have sought lately to maintain in their mutual postures. Essentially, it is caused by their unwillingness to apply credible self-constraints in a number of areas, such as attempts to convert possession of nuclear arms into status. If both sides still value arms control and believe that in the longer run its demise will be dangerous or costly, they need to start by softening their official rhetoric and agreeing to refrain from behaviors – such as deniable high-impact operations – that have significant potential for quick escalation. To expect US-Russian arms control to regain its lost momentum and salvage the political relationship would be to

misunderstand the sources and context of past achievements in bilateral arms control.

Notes

1. In May 1997, the US Senate passed a resolution conditioning implementation of an essential component of the Adapted Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (that would be signed in November 1999) on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia and Moldova. The Clinton administration effectively upheld that demand and made it the official US position. See Kuehn (2009, 10); Hill (2018).
2. Moscow has been reported to have proposed such declaration, only eliciting a lukewarm reaction from Washington. See *The Moscow Times* (2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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