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Why Arms Control Must Fail

David J. Trachtenberg

David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy. Previously, he served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

Introduction

Americans typically believe that fundamental disagreements can be overcome through the patient application of logic, reasoning, and common sense. In international relations, creative diplomacy is often seen as the key to solving intractable problems. This applies to negotiations with adversaries; it is often assumed that international tensions and the risk of war, especially nuclear war, can be alleviated through arms control agreements. Though a noble sentiment, this view is naïve, unsupported by history, ignores contemporary realities, and is unlikely to produce the desired positive results.

This stark conclusion runs counter to the American cultural belief that disagreements among opponents can always be overcome with good faith dialogue and discussion. Such a belief is premised on the notion that all sides share a common desire to bridge their differences in ways that lead to mutually beneficial outcomes.

This is a culturally egotistical view that assumes opponents share the same goals and objectives as the United States and that, with due diligence, the United States can succeed in concluding agreements that not only enhance U.S. security but provide outcomes that make the overall strategic environment more stable and secure.

The central problem with this belief is that there is a growing body of evidence supporting the proposition that U.S. adversaries do not share such goals and objectives. In simple terms, both China and Russia—which pose the greatest threat to U.S. security—are not interested in



“stability” as the United States defines it. Rather, their goal is to work against a stability that preserves the status quo. These opposing objectives are what make meaningful arms control impossible.

Different Worldviews, Irreconcilable Differences

The United States is a status quo power. The focus of U.S. foreign policy is on maintaining or restoring stability in the international environment. Why? Because global instability heightens the risk of upheaval and conflict, which can have catastrophic results with decidedly negative consequences for U.S. global interests. The view that arms control is the best way to ensure stability among rival powers has been reflected over the years in numerous policy and strategy documents. Most recently, for example, as the Biden Administration’s 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) stated, “The United States will pursue a comprehensive and balanced approach that places a renewed *emphasis on arms control*, non-proliferation, and risk reduction *to strengthen stability...*”¹ Indeed, arms control is described as a way to “enhance strategic stability with the PRC [People’s Republic of China] and Russia...” and as offering “the most effective, durable, and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and to prevent their use.”² Yet the 2022 NPR also acknowledged that U.S. and Russian “priorities are not identical, underscoring the importance of dialogue, when conditions permit, to address each side’s differing goals and perceptions of military systems that affect strategic stability.”³ Indeed, the stability that the United States seeks to “strengthen” and “enhance” is one that works to resolve conflicts via international law and institutions vice the use of military force – characteristics of a world order created and nurtured by the United States after World War II. This is clearly not the kind of stability America’s adversaries have in mind or wish to cement in practice.

Indeed, America’s primary rivals, China and Russia, believe the time has come to change the existing world order in a way that displaces the United States as the predominant global power – militarily, economically, and politically. They seek a world order more accommodating to their authoritarian worldviews and interests. And their expanding military cooperation reflects a belief that they will more likely succeed by working together rather than separately. In the contemporary political environment, the phrase, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts,” often attributed to Aristotle,⁴ can be interpreted as meaning that Beijing and Moscow can accomplish more in support of their common purpose through collaborative and coordinated actions than by acting separately.

The United States now must confront not one, but two, major nuclear powers. This is an unprecedented development that greatly complicates deterrence, as what may deter one party may be insufficient to deter the other, and the risks of opportunistic aggression may grow.⁵ In addition, U.S. allies may feel less secure as the United States tries to balance the demands of deterring both powers simultaneously while assuring allies of the U.S. commitment to their own security.



The Dangers of Wishful Thinking

Unfortunately, the United States has yet to come to grips with how best to address deterrence in a world of two nuclear peers. This has led to calls by some to advance arms control efforts as if limitations on armaments will help solve the deterrence problem by codifying a situation of strategic stability. For example, the chief American negotiator for the New START Treaty has argued that the United States should conduct “two parallel negotiations” with Russia and China and “exercise mutual restraint in order to avoid a nuclear arms race—in other words, arms control.”⁶ Another former arms control negotiator opined, “Looking to the expiration of New START, the United States could pursue an interim regime of mutual restraint with Russia.... Decades of nuclear arms control have improved strategic stability and reduced the risk of nuclear conflict. Continued mutual restraint might help sustain these gains if risks can be managed.”⁷

Others contend that resuming arms control negotiations with Russia is imperative, noting that divisive issues like Ukraine “should not delay prompt attention by the United States and Russia to a restart of the dialogue on a post-New START agreement.... Ending or pausing their arms control dialogue will contribute to unnecessary force building and more uncertainty about the qualities of their weapons inventories.”⁸

The Arms Control Association has argued, “Today, nuclear arms control and disarmament are more important than ever. Now is the time to call on your Representative and Senators to show there is bipartisan support for strong U.S. leadership for nuclear arms control.”⁹ Last year, a resolution introduced in the House of Representatives called on the Biden Administration “to pursue nuclear arms control and risk reduction dialogue with the Russian Federation to maintain strategic stability.”¹⁰ An identical resolution was introduced in the Senate several days later.¹¹ However, the notion that the path to stability lies through arms control is illusory, as the parties differ in what they seek to accomplish and how they see arms control as a tool to accomplish it.

This advocacy wrongly assumes a commonality of interests and objectives among Washington, Moscow and Beijing. For example, suggesting that arms control now will reverse China’s nuclear ambitions ignores the reality that Beijing’s nuclear buildup underpins its desire to expand its power and influence at America’s expense—a goal that China is unlikely to abandon by agreeing to negotiate arms limitations in the interest of “stability.” Similarly, decades of Soviet/Russian arms control cheating, coupled with the massive buildup of Russian nuclear forces and the plethora of nuclear threats expressed by Russian officials, show that Moscow has no interest in “mutual restraint.”

There is no reason to believe China or Moscow have any interest in arms control to facilitate the U.S. definition of “stability.” Rather, they seek to upset the existing world order with assertive behavior and extensive military and nuclear capabilities—the antithesis of stability. Wishful thinking that they share U.S. goals is more likely to encourage further delays in the necessary and long-overdue U.S. strategic modernization program, further undermining the efficacy and credibility of the U.S. nuclear deterrent, including the U.S. extended nuclear



deterrent. At a time when nuclear deterrence is under significant stress, this would be dangerous folly.

The Trilateral Challenge

In support of its national objectives, China has become increasingly aggressive in its posturing and its military activities, creating military bases in the South China Sea, challenging the territorial sovereignty of its neighbors, rejecting international arbitration of territorial disputes, threatening the autonomy of Taiwan, improving its military forces, and dramatically expanding its nuclear capabilities. China seeks to overturn American dominance and to take what Beijing envisions as its rightful place of prominence on the world stage. Indeed, as one former Chinese military official has declared, China's rise is "unstoppable," noting, "Even if the US wants to contain China, it can't. The United States is tired of policing the world."¹² As the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command recently testified, "Beijing's aggressive maneuvers around Taiwan are not just exercises – they are dress rehearsals for forced unification."¹³ Moreover, the Chinese leadership appears to have abandoned its self-proclaimed policy of minimal nuclear deterrence in favor of an aggressive buildup of its nuclear forces, which the former commander of U.S. Strategic Command has referred to as "breathhtaking" and a "strategic breakout."¹⁴

Russia likewise has decided to work against U.S. interests virtually across the board as it, too, seeks to upend the existing world order. Indeed, Russia considers NATO, and particularly the United States, its "main enemy."¹⁵ Vladimir Putin has stated that "We are witnessing the formation of a completely new world order, nothing like we had in the past.... The former world arrangement is irreversibly passing away, actually it has already passed away, and a serious, irreconcilable struggle is unfolding for the development of a new world order." Calling for "the development of a new international system that aligns with the interests of the global majority," he noted Moscow's desire to work with those who share Russia's objectives – notably China – stating that "the level of trust between Russia and China is at its highest point in recent history.... China is our ally...."¹⁶ Russia's military and nuclear buildup over the past several decades has been astounding. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated, "We're self-sufficient. We have everything. We know how to ensure our defense capability. If they [the United States] feel that their nuclear arsenals are very outdated and continue to become obsolete against the backdrop of our upgraded weapons, then they should be probably interested in somehow correcting this discrepancy."¹⁷

Moscow and Beijing appear committed to an "irreconcilable struggle" to create a new world order. Such fundamental objectives cannot be papered over by arms control agreements. In this environment, arms control based on wishful thinking is a palliative that seeks to address the symptoms rather than the cause of the different political goals that drive Russian and Chinese armaments. Arms control advocates often confuse cause with effect. As Ronald Reagan used to say, "We don't mistrust each other because we're armed; we're armed because we mistrust each other."¹⁸



A Dangerous Entente

In isolation, considering China's and Russia's increasingly aggressive behavior and their respective military buildups that underpin their more arrogant posture is worrisome enough. What U.S. policy makers must confront today is the reality of greater cooperation and collaboration between these two nuclear armed powers and the implications of this confederation for deterrence, extended deterrence, and Western security.¹⁹

Russia's growing entente with China appears to be more than just a marriage of convenience. The breadth and scope of Moscow's cooperation and collaboration with Beijing is unprecedented. Numerous joint military exercises, including air and naval operations, have been conducted, with both countries' strategic bombers landing in the other's territory for the first time ever a few years ago. Sino-Russian cooperation extends to virtually all areas of the military sphere—from the joint development of novel offensive weapons systems and space technology to cooperation on defensive capabilities such as early warning and integrated air and missile defense systems.²⁰ China is assisting Russia in its brutal war against Ukraine and, as the commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command has stated, is helping Moscow "rebuild its war machine" in exchange for Russian military assistance in other areas.²¹

Discussions, *Da*; Negotiations, *Nyet*

Although arms control is unlikely to produce any meaningful results, this is not to argue against discussions or the desirability of engaging in open and regular communications. As Winston Churchill said in 1954, "Meeting jaw to jaw is better than war."²² Yet, while supporters of increased dialogue tend to believe that this will lead to greater understanding among the parties²³ and, hence, expose areas of common agreement that may have been elusive, it is also possible, and likely probable, that greater dialogue, rather than narrow the areas of disagreement, may actually expose more of them and highlight the "irreconcilable" nature of the parties' goals and objectives.

Indeed, it strains credulity to believe that open lines of communication will reduce tensions and improve the overall strategic environment when the parties' goals and objectives are diametrically opposed. Similarly, it is unlikely that greater "transparency" in armaments will lead Moscow or Beijing to accommodate the U.S. desire to preserve the existing world order, which they both believe is decidedly unfavorable to them. Tellingly, leading Russian spokespersons have declared Russia to be already at war with the United States. For example, as the director of the Center for Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies in Moscow stated, "The United States is the enemy. It is our enemy. It is a hostile state that aims to destroy our country... We are at war!"²⁴ Such views, increasingly spread by Russian propagandists, reflect the worldview of a Russian leadership that believes, as Putin has stated, that Moscow is in an "irreconcilable struggle" with the United States and the West over the nature of the world order. In this struggle, Western notions of arms control as a mutually beneficial endeavor and



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a stabilizing factor in international relations do not align with Russia's strategic objectives and, therefore, cannot succeed.

The United States has historically deluded itself into believing that U.S. strategic restraint would be reciprocated by adversaries; that American accommodation and good will would prompt China and Russia to become partners with the West rather than adversaries; that neither side benefits from escalating tensions or instability; and that arms control agreements would serve as a catalyst for improved political relations. Each of these expectations, and similar optimistic hopes, have been dashed by reality. As one trenchant analysis concluded, the U.S. government's "systemic delay" in calling out Russia's repeated arms control violations, the "enduring lack of government openness regarding the immense Chinese nuclear build-up," and the long-delayed U.S. nuclear modernization program have not produced the kind of reciprocal restraint or improved political relationships that U.S. decision makers expected. Indeed, U.S. arms control policy has been driven by self-deception.²⁵ And in today's environment, there is little reason to believe the results will be different. As the statement, often attributed (or misattributed) to Albert Einstein, goes, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."²⁶

There are existing channels for communication that could be resuscitated in an effort to seek greater insight into Russian posture and programs. For example, although the Congress severely restricted U.S.-Russian military-to-military interactions after Russia's illegal invasion of Crimea in 2014, the legislation did not prevent military-to-military communication.²⁷ But even military-to-military discussions are liable to prove disappointingly inadequate as long as Russian strategic objectives remain contrary to U.S. national security interests. Above all, the United States should refrain from turning dialogue into a negotiation with the expectation that concrete results can be achieved to the benefit of all parties as though this is a zero-sum game. It is not. The United States must be prepared to acknowledge and accept that certain disputes are unbridgeable, no matter how creative U.S. diplomacy is and how determined American diplomats are in seeking common ground. Even Russian officials have acknowledged that political realities make meaningful arms control negotiations with the United States unlikely. As Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov recently stated, "At the moment, it is very difficult to imagine the beginning of such negotiations."²⁸

The Lessons of History

The eminent strategist Colin Gray often said that arms control works best when needed least.²⁹ In other words, arms control agreements are easier to reach among countries who share the same worldview, political goals, and objectives. But these are precisely the countries for which arms control agreements are unnecessary. The United States neither wants nor needs arms control agreements with Britain or France. Where arms control is seen as necessary, however, is with adversaries. Yet, the differing goals and objectives of U.S. adversaries make such agreements either impossible to conclude or unlikely to benefit U.S. national security interests.



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This basic principle was either forgotten or ignored during the Cold War, when it was thought the Soviet Union's agreement to arms control treaties reflected a common belief and a shared commitment to stability. In fact, the Soviet approach was to seek unilateral advantage and to stem American technological progress in areas where the Soviets were lacking. The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was the poster child for this approach. U.S. officials believed the treaty reflected a common belief in the principle of Mutual Assured Destruction and that banning nationwide strategic defenses and leaving the American population deliberately vulnerable to Soviet nuclear attack would dissuade the Soviets from building large offensive nuclear forces. In reality, the opposite was the case as the greatest buildup of large Soviet counterforce capabilities occurred after the ABM Treaty was signed.³⁰ In general, the results of arms control have often been the opposite of what U.S. officials hoped for and expected.³¹ Importantly, as a recent analysis concluded, "Russia's and China's actions are governed by their own perceptions of national security requirements and their own foreign policy goals and objectives; they are not simply mechanistically fashioned to be in line with U.S. requirements and goals—however self-evidently reasonable Washington believes its own policies and goals to be."³²

Repeated instances of Soviet cheating on arms control agreements also demonstrated that Soviet goals did not align with those of the United States, as the Soviets sought to exploit the American penchant to comply with its arms control obligations while cheating to achieve unilateral advantage. In fact, the record of Soviet arms control violations is a sobering one, and the Russian Federation's record is hardly any better. Lest one forget, it was Moscow's violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty that led President Trump in his first term to withdraw the United States from those agreements.

Conclusion

As long as Russia and China continue to view the United States as the main impediment to their drive for global supremacy, arms control is destined to fail. It is simply unrealistic to assume that Moscow or Beijing will agree to any meaningful limitations on their respective military buildups, as those buildups underpin their drive for global dominance.

Both Russia and China recognize that the United States is reluctant to escalate a crisis and that instead Washington seeks de-escalation "off ramps" that will not upset the status quo. Yet, both Moscow and Beijing are willing to pursue escalation when they believe it will work to their relative advantage.³³ The American concept of "stability" does not align with theirs. The Western desire to maintain the status quo, grounded in norms and rules of behavior intended to preserve the sanctity of national borders, runs counter to their desire to change the status quo and establish a new world order in their favor. Under these conditions, meaningful arms control that advances American security and national interests is a chimera.

This reality, disappointing though it may be, must be recognized and acknowledged lest the United States repeat past follies and suffer the disillusionment of policy failures yet again. In the current international environment, such failures can have catastrophic consequences.



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³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

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