PROCEEDINGS

CHALLENGING THE ARMS CONTROL MYTHOLOGY: A CENTURY OF EXPERIENCE

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on "Challenging the Arms Control Mythology: A Century of Experience" hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on September 23, 2025. The symposium highlighted a forthcoming National Institute study led by Michaela Dodge on the long-standing and persistent arms control myths that defy practical experience of the past century, what lessons can be drawn from them, and what U.S. policy makers should emphasize going forward.

David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)
David J. Trachtenberg is Senior Scholar with the National Institute for Public Policy and previously served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

Arms control, as practiced by the United States, has, to put it generously, a checkered history. Despite American expectations for arms control typically outpacing results, there remains a belief in some quarters that arms control is necessary: to improve the political climate among adversaries; to avoid a spiraling, costly, and dangerous arms race; to provide predictability regarding strategic programs; to ensure stability in international affairs; to lower the costs of national defense; to sustain support for necessary defense and nuclear modernization programs; and to lock in a host of other positive results that presumably benefit U.S. national security.

Moreover, there has been a pervasive belief that the United States is the primary driver of adversary arms developments, and that if the United States exercises strategic restraint, including through arms control, others will follow suit. This is just one of the numerous myths that have endured over the past century, despite empirical evidence of their fallacy.

In particular, the notion that arms control is essential to prevent an arms race is a frequently heard refrain from those in the arms control community who seek to stymie long-overdue U.S. nuclear modernization programs. For example, as one recent commentary concluded, "as the expiration of New START in 2026 approaches, the choices before both capitals remain stark: either allow the collapse of the last pillar of bilateral arms control and eventually risk a renewed arms race or take bold steps toward a more comprehensive and future-oriented arms control framework….if both Cold War rivals can seize this moment, they may still avert a dangerous and uncontrolled arms race."[1]

The desire for arms control solutions that alleviate U.S. strategic problems reminds me of Alexander Pope's comment that, "Hope springs eternal." Nowhere may this phrase be better applied than when it comes to arms control, which may also be described, as Samuel Johnson once described second marriages, as the "triumph of hope over experience."

[1] Fakhar Alam, "What could be the Future Scenario of US-Russia Arms Control?," *Modern Diplomacy*, September 11, 2025, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/09/11/what-could-be-the-future-scenario-of-us-russia-arms-control/.

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Despite a burgeoning inventory of examples demonstrating the fallacy of relying on arms control to solve America's strategic problems, the myths surrounding arms control continue to live on—like zombies that refuse to die.

Why these arms control myths live on may be a reflection of the West's optimistic belief in the nature and goodness of man; an example of the triumph of idealism over realism in U.S. foreign policy; the belief that all parties share common goals and a common desire to avoid conflict; and that in matters of war and peace, leaders will allow their better angels to triumph. Of course, the arms control lobby is a large, vocal, and well-funded enterprise, so admitting arms control shortcomings and failures is hardly good for business.

Today, perhaps more than ever, with the goals and objectives of the United States and its potential arms control partners at such cross purposes, the odds of achieving any arms control agreement that serves U.S. national security interests are slim to nonexistent. After all, the United States seeks to preserve the strategic stability created by American power while both Russia and China seek to overturn it through the expansion of their massive military and nuclear programs. These fundamentally incompatible goals and objectives essentially guarantee that meaningful arms control is an exercise in wishful thinking and ultimate futility.

But whatever the reasons for the pervasiveness of these arms control myths, an objective assessment of the empirical data over the past century should help set the record straight. And that is precisely the rationale for the study we are discussing today.

Let me close with this thought: A friend and colleague often references Marie Kondo, a Japanese TV personality who has become popular among households, and who developed a method of sorting through accumulated clutter. I don't know how many of you are familiar with her, but she even has a series on Netflix explaining how to tidy up. Her approach is, "That which does not bring you joy, thank it for its service and send it on its way."[2] I would suggest this commonsense approach has applicability to arms control agreements, which we should acknowledge have not given us the joys of stability and predictability we expected, and we should thank them for their service and send them on their way.

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Michaela Dodge

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For worse rather than better, arms control has traditionally played an important role in U.S. national security. The 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) called it "the most effective, durable and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and prevent their use."[3] President Trump wants arms control with the Russians and the Chinese.

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[2] Referenced in Tom Karako, "A Marie Kondo Moment for MTCR: Tidying Up the U.S. Approach to Missile Proliferation," *CSIS Briefs*, September 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/marie-kondo-moment-mtcr.

[3] U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, 2022, p. 16, https://dod.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/NPR/.

Yet, historical experience shows that in hostile times, arms control does not matter at best, and is actually damaging to U.S. long-term objectives. Several fallacious concepts are so entrenched in our collective arms control thinking that we often do not pause to examine them. Yet, examining them closely is a goal of this upcoming study and I am so grateful that we have some of the best thinkers on this topic joining us in this endeavor.

One ought not be optimistic about potential national security accomplishments of future arms control treaties. Today's adversaries are unlikely to solve our security problems for us, especially not through arms control. A courtesy of several decades of process that its proponents still call a success, we face worsening geopolitical conditions without credible tactical nuclear weapons, sufficient missile defense, and likely too few strategic nuclear weapons. We also lack infrastructure that could redeem these flaws on a reasonable timeline. Yet, we continue to advocate for more arms control, not fully appreciating the malign role it has played during the Cold War and since the 1990s.

Let me discuss the first fallacy that has persistently captured the arms controllers' imagination. I am grateful to my boss, Keith Payne, for his input in putting the initial list together.[4] The first fallacy is that arms control negotiations and agreements will drive improved political relations. Thus, the value of the process is as important as the substance—or more so. Consequently, the United States should seek agreements for the priority purpose of easing political hostilities rather than the specific limits of the agreement. Specific limits do not matter that much if one ends up in a better spot politically at the end of the process than he would without it.

The focus on the process allows a shift in the discussion, from other states' political goals to the general desirability of peace brought about by states possessing fewer weapons. That is often necessary because political considerations would show the practical impotence of prevailing arms control and disarmament ideas in the context of an adversary's goals and his determination to use weapons to advance them. Colin Gray observed that "Arms control agreements have the effect of focusing attention on the strategically irrelevant question of whether a tolerably even balance of forces has been negotiated. Save with isolated reference to the arms control process, the United States has no interest in achieving a tolerably even balance of forces [with the Soviet Union]."[5] That is because the United States is a status quo power.

Soviet (and now Russia's and China's) goals, have to do with restraining the United States in areas of its advantage (e.g., missile defense) while leaving the space for their own nuclear force expansion as wide open as possible. I would like to mention New START briefly here. Ambassador Steven Pifer argued that "The relationship [between the United States and Russia] has improved substantially since then [when the treaty negotiations started], and

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[4] Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence and Arms Control: Ending the Deceptive 'Holiday from History,'" *Information Series*, No. 616 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 10, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-and-arms-control-ending-the-deceptive-holiday-from-history-no-616-february-10-2025/.

[5] Colin Gray, "The Strategic Implications of the Nuclear Balance and Arms Control," in Staar, eds., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality*, op. cit., p. 24.

New START has been a major driver of that improvement."[6] Even if this statement was true, and one ought not forget that Russia did declare itself openly hostile to U.S. interests in 2007,[7] how worthy was this supposed improvement given Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014? How caught off-guard was the United States because a majority of its foreign policy elite believed the mirage of the Obama Administration's "reset" policy, of which New START was to be a crown jewel? How weak has been our response to years of Russia's New START violations?

Real reconciliation of hostile political relations will lead naturally to reduced military requirements. The swaths of arms control agreements of the 1990s attest to that. The reverse, however, is not true. On the basis of this enduring historical pattern, Gray concluded that this phenomenon is reflected in "virtually all twentieth-century experience with arms control or its absence" and, as a consequence, arms control "is either impossible or unimportant."[8] Understanding this reality is critical because, when the value of arms is subordinated to the pursuit of an illusory political goal, arms control enthusiasms can degrade or eliminate U.S. capabilities that are needed because of political hostilities that are not ameliorated. That is precisely the situation in which we are finding ourselves today.

The second assumption is that the other party will comply with his arms control obligations and that the United States will be able to enforce compliance. Dr. Johnny Foster memorably remarked "I don't understand why we go to the trouble of negotiating with a potential adversary with the understanding that the adversary is going to cheat."[9] Neither do I.

Arms control initiatives often are advanced with the promise (or expectation) that opponents will not risk the potential cost of non-compliance, or that violations can be alleviated or corrected by consultations or via some form of compellence, if necessary. This is a variable of the unsound assumption that weapons are "not tools dearly bought to accomplish ends for the sake of which foreign leaders are willing to kill and die, but rather, that they are expensive burdens that these leaders would prefer to shed."[10] If weapons violating agreements have utility in obtaining leaders' goals, a symbolic punishment or public opinion pressure will not make countries give them up.

The challenge in punishing violations is two-fold. One, a country that seeks to punish violations might have its own difficulties in admitting that violations are happening because its own government might be the one invested in an arms control treaty. Two, a government

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[6] "The New START and Implications for National Security," op. cit.

[7] For the text of the speech, see Vladimir Putin, "Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," *Washington Post*, February 12, 2007, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html; and Daniel Fried and Kurt Volker, "The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was," *Politico*, February 18, 2022, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918.

[8] Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail*, op. cit., pp. *x*, 16-19. (Emphasis added.)

[9] "The New START and Implications for National Security," *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, June 17, July 15, 20, 27, and 29, 2010), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg65071/html/CHRG-111shrg65071.htm.

[10] Malcolm Wallop and Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Arms Control Delusion* (Institute of Contemporary Studies, 1987), p. 42.

may not be willing to use effective pressure points for a fear of undermining whatever is left of the arms control regime. Fred Iklé, who went on to serve as the Reagan Administration's Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, famously articulated more than half a century ago that "detecting violations is not enough. What counts are the political and military consequences of a violation once it has been detected, since these alone will determine whether or not the violator stands to gain in the end."[11]

The U.S. track record in enforcing compliance is abysmal. The enduring expectation that "this time it will be different" meets the definition of insanity attributed to Albert Einstein—doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.[12] With regard to America's enemies, however, the frequent reality is their noncompliance and the absence of effective enforcement tools that Washington is willing to employ.

Our third misguided assumption is that adversaries will moderate their aggressive goals and behaviors given the economic advantages of doing so in a liberal international economic order. A related assumption is that arms control can take advantage of and help expand this cooperative space. This assumption was rather infamously operative prior to World War I in Sir Norman Angell's thesis that war has become too expensive for a rational leader to pursue it.

During the Cold War, much the same argument was applied to the Soviet Union as the rationale for détente agreements. It was later similarly repeated in the expectation that China would rise peacefully and take its place within the civilized "international community." As a related experiment, the United States supposedly could prudently remove regional forces, including nuclear forces, from Asia. That expectation has proven again to be a serious mistake. States' political goals remained at odds, but now China has more resources to pursue them given the economic advantages of global liberalization of trade.

No matter how much one might wish away adversaries, adversaries that do not wish to be wished away have their own way of asserting their presence. As Hedley Bull astutely observed, "history is littered with catastrophe unthinkable and unimaginable to its victims, who placed their trust in a logic of history which deserted them in their hour of need."[13] Ukraine today could be considered one such example, and whether our folly lands the Free World among the victims of Russia and China's cooperative expansionism remains to be seen. It is blatantly obvious that arms control cannot save us from this predicament, but probably can make things worse.

The following two assumptions are very familiar to this audience. We've done quite a bit of work on debunking them over the years at NIPP, so I will keep my reflections short.

For decades, the U.S. government convinced itself that societal vulnerability to adversaries is stabilizing and in our interest. This mistaken conviction led to severe limitations on missile defenses and a commitment to ideology that has far outlived the treaty

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[11] Iklé, "After Detection: What?," op. cit., p. 208.

[12] Christina Sterbenz, "12 Famous Quotes That Always Get Misattributed," *Business Insider*, October 7, 2013, https://www.businessinsider.com/misattributed-quotes-2013-10.

[13] Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race*, op. cit., p. 48.

that originally restricted missile defenses. Almost a quarter century after we finally left the treaty, missile defense capabilities remain inadequate to threats we face.

Another recurring myth is that U.S. actions solely drive adversaries' modernization programs. U.S. restraint, then, will lead them to stop their own modernization program. Some adherents to this dogma even claimed that U.S. actions, effectively unilateral disarmament, would even start a "peace race."

And lastly, we allegedly need arms control because the fewer nuclear weapons, the less of a chance of a nuclear mishap or accident. There is no historical evidence for this proposition, at least as far as we know, although we don't have reliable data for non-U.S. countries.

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Robert G. Joseph

Robert G. Joseph is former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, and Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director of Proliferation Strategy, Counterproliferation and Homeland Defense.

I will also offer a practitioner's perspective on arms control based on three personal experiences.

The first demonstrates how we often misunderstand the adversary, attributing to him the same motives and goals that we have. In 1987, during the final days of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty negotiations, in a meeting between Ambassador Max Kampelman, our chief negotiator and the Soviet negotiator, the latter asked whether the Soviets—instead of destroying their mobile SS-20 Transporter Erector Launchers (TELs)—could simply saw off several inches from the back of the launchers and then use them for agricultural purposes. Kampelman, who often talked about arms control contributing to the welfare of his grandchildren, immediately agreed to the request noting that the United States was a rich nation and that we would destroy our TELs in accordance with the treaty text. At some later point the Soviets transferred their TELs to a nuclear-armed ally—and not for agricultural purposes. We may like to think that our adversaries care about making the world better for their grandchildren as we do, but that is not their purpose in negotiating arms control agreements. They seek through negotiations to achieve unilateral advantages in nuclear forces through their deployments and by constraining our capabilities.

The second occurred in December 1987. I took part in the Washington Summit between President Ronald Reagan and Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Arms control was at center stage of the summit. Ambassador Kampelman and Gorbachev's chief military advisor, Field Marshall Sergey Akhromeyev, held an arms control session during the summit. In that meeting, Ambassador Kampelman made an opening offer showing how far the United States had come toward the Soviet positions. General Akhromeyev summarily closed his folder and said that the U.S. offer was not enough, to which Ambassador Kampelman responded that he will see if there are further concessions the United States can make to achieve an agreement.

This was the Reagan administration and Max was a great American and regarded as a tough negotiator.

Years later I "borrowed" the Field Marshal's technique when I negotiated with the Libyans and they sought to include relief from sanctions in our talk. I closed my folder and explained that we came to discuss the elimination of their nuclear program. The British host called for a break. The negotiations reconvened without any more mention of sanctions.

The third experience demonstrates our reluctance or inability to use our leverage effectively. As I stated in my testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during its hearings concerning the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the outcome made clear that, if you want an agreement really badly, you will get a really bad agreement. Our negotiations with Iran were characterized by concession after concession to the point of appeasement. Instead of using our economic and other points of leverage, our negotiators conceded almost every point objected to by Iran. The result was a one-sided agreement that did not restrict Iran's missile programs, its support to terrorist proxies, its regional destabilization activities, or its acts of state terrorism. Even on the nuclear side, by allowing Iran to enrich uranium, it provided the pathway for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.

In conclusion, arms control often masquerades as a solution, but it can definitely be a problem.

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Susan Koch

Susan Koch is former Senior Advisor to the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control on the NSC Staff.

My remarks today will be based on a 2018 National Institute study of four arms control noncompliance cases: German violation of the Versailles Treaty disarmament provisions; Soviet construction of the Krasnoyarsk radar in violation of the ABM Treaty; Iraqi violation of the UN disarmament requirements after the First Gulf War; and North Korean violation of all of its nuclear arms control agreements and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions between 1992 and 2009.

Of those four cases, only one ended well. After years of denial, the Soviet Union admitted that the Krasnoyarsk radar violated the ABM Treaty, and dismantled enough of it that it could not again function as a radar.

The German and Iraqi violations were resolved only by devastating wars. The North Korean violations continue unabated to this day. That history is not encouraging. Each case study addressed in the study was unique, but together demonstrated patterns of noncompliance and response which remain relevant now.

First, authoritarian regimes are more prone to noncompliance than democracies. They have little if any respect for the rule of law, are secretive, and accountable only to themselves. Unfortunately, the United States is now interested in arms control only with authoritarians. Next, asymmetries in stakes and resolve among the parties may be the most critical

determinants of noncompliance. In three of the four cases, the violator's stake in noncompliance generally was far greater than the enforcer's stake in compliance.

Germany in the 1920s wanted to restore national greatness and provide the basis for a future strong military. In the 1930s, Hitler did not just violate Versailles, he shredded it. Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong-Il believed their regimes were at stake, and sought (temporary) compromise only when they were threatened militarily. On the other side, Britain and France grew tired of Versailles compliance enforcement by the late 1920s, and then turned to appeasement. Several UNSC members wanted after a few years to return to normal (and economically beneficial) relations with Iraq, and the United States moved from military threats to political and economic inducements after the 1994 signature of the Agreed Framework with North Korea.

In the Krasnoyarsk case, the dynamics were quite different. The Reagan and George H.W. Bush Administrations' stake in ending the Krasnoyarsk violation and the Soviet Union's stake in retaining it were for years equally strong. Ultimately, U.S. resolve proved longer-lasting—although the Soviet Union might have remained more resistant if it were not for the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev. General Secretary Gorbachev may not have valued treaty compliance, but he placed a high priority on good relations with the United States and on demonstrating dominance over the Soviet military establishment.

Three of the four cases demonstrated that, where compliance is elusive, the most effective inducement may be the threat of military action, whether occupation or attack. In the early 1920s, French occupation of the Ruhr, and threats of a repeat, convinced Germany to end some violations, if only temporarily. In the 1990s, U.S. threats of military action led North Korea to sign the Agreed Framework, although not to honor it. Only in the Iraqi case did two of the main parties, the United States and United Kingdom, follow through with actual invasion. While that certainly resolved the compliance issues, the price was enormous.

It may be stating the obvious, but compliance is generally easier to enforce for bilateral than multilateral agreements. The only successful case studied in this report was also the only purely bilateral one. If U.S. Allies had been parties to the ABM Treaty, it is doubtful that they would have demanded—without wavering for over six years—that the radar be dismantled.

While the Versailles Treaty had many parties, the United States was not among them, leaving only the United Kingdom and France as central enforcers of the disarmament provisions. In the 1920s, they disagreed more often than not on compliance issues—differences that the Weimar Government was able to exploit. During the next decade, they tended finally to be in agreement, but in favor of inaction and appeasement.

The UNSC Resolutions on Iraq involved many states. Of the permanent UNSC members, only the United States and United Kingdom remained firm in demanding complete Iraqi compliance.

North Korea's nuclear obligations were a hybrid, but primarily multilateral. The NPT, IAEA Safeguards Agreement and UNSC Resolutions involved most states in the world. The

Agreed Framework was bilateral, but South Korea and Japan were critical to its implementation.

The Six-Party Talks were obviously multilateral, but the United States led in both demands and concessions. The North Korean case fully demonstrates that a bilateral, or clearly U.S.-led, agreement by no means guarantees either compliance or a firm response to noncompliance.

Finally, violations of arms control agreements are at best difficult to deter. One might argue that the case studies were a skewed sample in this regard, because they all involved noncompliance. However, arms control agreements over the past 100-plus years that were never violated are rare indeed. The demilitarization of Germany and Japan were exceptions, but in both cases, the leadership and the population embraced that outcome only after the catastrophe of the Second World War.

Fear of detection and response had some deterrent effect in the Weimar and Iraqi cases, but that was by no means complete. When discovered, the violators sought to appease the enforcers through partial compliance. The same was true of North Korea, although its compliance concessions were even more limited than those of Iraq or Weimar Germany. Finally, expectation of detection did not deter the Soviets from building the Krasnoyarsk radar; they simply assumed that the United States would not demand compliance. Which shows how worried they were that we might be strict arms control enforcers. In this case, at least, they were wrong.

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Christopher A. Ford

Christopher A. Ford is former Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, Special Assistant to the President and NSC Senior Director for WMD and Counterproliferation, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Verification and Compliance.

Thank you for having me on this program.

It's hard to follow such a terrific roster of speakers who have flagged such important issues, but—and with apologies for any lapses of coherence due to jet lag, since I'm joining you guys from Singapore right now and it's just past two in the morning here—let me at least add a little of my own gloss on these issues. These will just be my own personal opinions, of course, and they won't necessarily correspond to those of anyone else, but I think they'll dovetail well with what the others have said.

Let me note at the outset, however, that I don't consider myself a die-hard arms control skeptic. When it's done right, arms control can, I think, play a valuable role in helping us meet security threats and preserve strategic stability. The problem, however, is that it's far more difficult, and rather less common, for arms control to be "done right" than we in the West like to think it is.

The Greek philosopher and historian Plutarch once wrote to one of his patrons about how to tell a friend from a flatterer.[14] He called, in effect, for *true* friends to show each other the kind of tough love that does not evade or sugar-coat what the other really needs to hear. The flatterer, wrote Plutarch,

> always takes a position over against the maxim 'Know thyself,' by creating in every man deception towards himself and ignorance both of himself and of the good and evil that concerns himself; the good he renders defective and incomplete, and the evil impossible to amend.

By contrast, the true friend is both able and willing to offer "admonishment and frankness of speech." Precisely because he is truly a friend, in other words the true friend "blames … when he must."

So, bearing that in mind, let me try to offer a little such "blame," puncturing some of the *flattery* of arms control that I sometimes see in the policy community. I want instead to be a true friend to arms control by flagging some of its potential pitfalls and seductions.

To put it simply, we sometimes *want* arms control so much that we get in our own way. To illustrate this, let me describe a few types of characteristic challenge that can be created by the *mindset* we bring to dealing with issues of arms control. These are, in a sense, *political* or perhaps *cultural* problems—challenges related to how morally and intellectually *serious* we really are about arms control, if you will—and there are at least four of them. These four relate to:

- whether and when to enter into arms control in the first place;
- whether and when to *withdraw* from an arms control agreement;
- challenges of compliance assessment; and
- challenges of compliance enforcement.

Problems of Entering

My good friend the late Jeff Eberhardt was fond of reminding State Department negotiators that "if you want it bad, you get it bad." That is, if you're *too* eager for a deal, you give the other guy a powerful tool with which to take advantage of you. *Less* eagerness to get a deal can thus sometimes produce better results.

Malevolent actors like the Iranians and Russians often excel at arms control gamesmanship. We've taught them over the years that the mere *prospect* of talks is often enough to get the United States to back off from doing things that might annoy or disadvantage them. And they frequently try to take advantage of this, in effect *weaponizing* our earnest desire for diplomatic solutions against us.

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[14] Plutarch, *Moralia. How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/plutarch-moralia_how_tell_flatterer_friend/1927/pb_LCL197.265.xml.

The Soviets were particularly eager practitioners of such gamesmanship. (I discussed this in more detail in a paper published by NIPP earlier this year.[15]) After they had deployed a new generation of strategic delivery systems as well as their intermediate-range SS- 20 missiles in the late 1970s, they began offering "nuclear freeze" resolutions at the United Nations, hoping to lock in place an advantageous balance before Washington could respond with countervailing deployments.

When their forces outnumbered us in central Europe, Moscow promoted a "no-first use" treaty that would have taken off the table our nuclear deterrence against those forces. When President Reagan began pursuing potentially space-based missile defenses and was building up U.S. conventional might, the Kremlin duly offered a plan to ban weapons in space and proposed "Talks on the Non-Increase and Reduction of Military Expenditures."

One might wonder, in fact, whether that tradition continues today. I saw recently, for instance, that Vladimir Putin—the man who has been violating the New START agreement[16] and who announced Russia's "suspension" of that treaty in 2023[17]—is now suggesting to President Trump that we extend observance of the central limits on strategic systems in New START.[18] One wonders whether Putin's newfound liking for New START has anything to do with the fact that the U.S. national security strategic policy community has recently coalesced on a bipartisan basis,[19] perhaps for the first time in my lifetime, around the idea that we need to have *new* nuclear delivery systems and *more* nuclear weapons than before in response to the new challenge of deterring *two* nuclear peers at the same time.

If indeed deterrence requires that we now deploy more weapons—and I agree that it does—it's obviously a terrible idea to agree to extend limits that would preclude us doing so. So *of course* Putin now wants to lock us in at present force levels! His game (and its dangers) should be obvious to anyone paying attention, but arms control can be seductive, and we've been fooled before.

Anyway, arms control negotiating is clearly not a business for the incautious or naïve. Sometimes "nyet" is exactly the right answer to an arms control proposal. Ronald Reagan knew that, but the prospect of reaching a "deal"—any deal!—is apparently eternally tempting, and not everybody has the Gipper's moral courage, as his wife Nancy put it in a different context, to "just say no."

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[15] Christopher A. Ford, *Struggling with The Bomb: Competing Discourses in the Nuclear Disarmament Movement, Occasional Paper,* Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, February 2025), https://irp.cdn-website.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/Ford_NIPP_disarmament_paper_Vol._5_No._2.pdf.

[16] Edward Wong, "U.S. Says Russia Fails to Comply With Nuclear Arms Control Treaty," *The New York Times*, January 31, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/31/us/politics/us-russia-nuclear-treat.html.

[17] "Putin: Russia suspends participation in last remaining nuclear treaty with U.S.," *Reuters*, February 21, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-russia-suspends-participation-last-remaining-nuclear-treaty-with-us-2023-02-21/.

[18] "Russia signals readiness to extend New START treaty for one year," *NHK World*, September 22, 2025, https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20250923_03/.

[19] Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx.

Problems of Remaining

A second set of political problem with arms control revolves around how long to *stay* in an agreement when circumstances are changing.

The most obvious way that relevant facts can change, of course, is that the other side may cheat. This was, for instance, the reason for the United States' withdrawal in 2019 from the INF Treaty: Russia was flagrantly cheating, and it had been doing so for years.

It's also possible for withdrawal to become appropriate even when the other side is complying, if *other* facts change in ways that make it disadvantageous to remain. This was the case for us with the ABM Treaty, from which we withdrew after the growth of *third-party* missile threats from North Korea and Iran.

But here's the rub. Historically, we have struggled *politically* with withdrawal even when it's needed. Our earnest *desire* for arms control has sometimes made it difficult for us to gather the courage to *get out of it* when circumstances demand.

Russia, for example, began testing a new cruise missile in violation of the terms of the INF treaty in 2008. The United States knew about this not long afterward, but it actually took the Obama Administration until 2014 to be willing actually to publicly declare Russia a violator, and even then Washington did essentially nothing except simply *talk* about the problem until Obama left office. By the time we in the First Trump Administration arrived on the scene in early 2017,[20] Russia had begun actually *deploying* its new missile against us and our allies in Europe.

The United States did finally react concretely under the First Trump Administration, authorizing the Defense Department to start R&D on *American* INF-class systems. And when Russia didn't change course, we announced in 2019 that we were pulling out.[21] By then, however, it was already *more than ten years* after the first flight-tests of the illegal missile had occurred. That is disgracefully long.

Problems of Compliance Assessment

My third category of political problem is the challenge of honestly assessing *compliance* with arms control agreements. Admitting that problems exist can have major consequences, and that can sometimes make leaders reluctant to be honest in compliance assessment.

With INF, it proved extraordinarily hard for us to get even our friends in Britain, France, and Germany to admit that there was a Russian INF violation at all. They did eventually relent, but they prevaricated for a painfully long time, clearly fearing that their concurrence with U.S. assessments of a Russian violation would mean the end of the treaty. Especially for France and Germany—for, in fairness, the Brits came around sooner—it seemed better to *ignore* the Russian violation than to see a treaty officially collapse.

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[20] Daryl G. Kimball, "The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance," *Fact Sheets & Briefs*, Arms Control Association, August 2019, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty-glance.

[21] Michael R. Pompeo, "U.S. Withdrawal from the INF Treaty on August 2, 2019," U.S. Department of State, *Press Statement*, August 2, 2019, https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-withdrawal-from-the-inf-treaty-on-august-2-2019/.

And it's not just them. We ourselves have a mixed track record of being willing to admit the existence of problems where such honesty would suggest a need to *do something* in response to them. It was not until more than a *decade* after the U.S. Government first assessed Iran was in the early stages of a nuclear weapons development program, for example, that we were finally willing officially to state what obviously followed from that—namely, that Iran was in violation of its obligations under Article II of the NPT.

Problems of Enforcement

Turning to my fourth and final category of problem, there can also be huge political challenges associated with compliance *enforcement*. This is the old challenge Fred Iklé captured in the title of his 1961 Foreign Affairs article "After Detection—What?"[22] If you find a violation, *what are you willing to do about it?*

As it turns out, leaders sometimes find it hard to take resolute and effective action to try to *restore* compliance even once a violation becomes undeniable.

The Obama Administration's approach to INF is a good example, but we should also remember that after Iran's nuclear program first came publicly to light, it took the international community a long time to do anything in response. By the time the first U.N. sanctions were imposed, for instance, the centrifuge plant at Natanz had gone from being merely a provocative hole in the ground to actually *producing* enriched uranium. Once again, shame on us.

Conclusion

So, if there's a myth to dispel here, it is the false idea that asking tough questions about arms control and approaching arms control proposals with some realistic skepticism is necessarily to be *hostile* to it. Pursuing good arms control requires a kind of "tough love" that our policy community has sometimes found difficult to apply.

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J.D. Crouch

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During the following few minutes. I am planning on offering a practitioner's perspective on arms control negotiations. They stem from my experience with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Space Talks with Russia, the Moscow Treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense Treaty withdrawal discussions, and from my time on the Hill being involved

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[22] Fred Charles Iklé, "After Detection--What?," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1961, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1961-01-01/after-detection-what.

with arms control. I have much more experience negotiating with the Russians than with the Chinese, but some of these lessons are applicable just as well.

Historically, the United States approached negotiations very academically, which was different from how negotiations were approached in the period between the two world wars. After the invention and spread of nuclear weapons, we focused on reducing costs of armaments and maintaining so-called strategic stability. Negotiations with the Soviet Union were not about improving relations per se but there was hope among some that this might be a by-product of negotiations.

We approached the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks as a seminar. We would educate the Soviets, and they will see things the way we do. Then we would come to a mutually beneficial agreement. Meanwhile, negotiations were about power politics for the Soviets, which meant we did not share assumptions on a fundamental level. We approached negotiation as a win-win proposition, they as a zero-sum one. This asymmetry is also reflected in who is in charge of negotiations. Diplomats are in charge of the negotiations process in the United States, members of the military and the security services dominate Russian negotiations.

While the Russians maximize demands going into negotiations, the Americans offer packages that are pre-negotiated during the inter-agency process. We implicitly take Russia's interest into account during the process of devising U.S. proposals, then negotiate down from even those balanced inter-agency agreements.

Any international negotiations are a two-step process for the Americans. First, we negotiate among ourselves. Second, we negotiate with our international counterparts. The Russians state maximalist demands, they often ask for further concessions, and then pocket them when we offer them. The Russians would often not give us anything in return, move on, and ask for more concessions.

While U.S. negotiating teams are real players in the process, the Russians send their diplomats equipped with the government's positions and very little authority to change them. The last significant difference is in implementation of international agreements. While the United States takes into account the "spirit" of the treaty and strives to not come even close to violating it, the Russians take a legalistic approach with the intent of exploiting potential loopholes and taking advantage of opportunities created by the U.S. strict adherence to arms control agreements. In short, the Russians care less about agreements than we do, as they are for them fundamentally political, not technical, documents which are both a reflection of the correlation of forces and something to be disregarded as Russian interests change or opportunities for advantage present themselves.