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# Enduring Arms Control Myths: A Century of Experience

Michaela Dodge

Foreword by  
Keith B. Payne



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

# **Enduring Arms Control Myths: A Century of Experience**

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# Table of Contents

|                                                                                                                                  |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Foreword .....                                                                                                                   | v   |
| Executive Summary .....                                                                                                          | 1   |
| Chapter I. Introduction.....                                                                                                     | 15  |
| Chapter II. The Fallacy That a Liberal Economic<br>Order Will Lead to Peace.....                                                 | 25  |
| Chapter III. The Fallacy That the Arms Control Process<br>Will Independently Improve Political Relations.....                    | 41  |
| Chapter IV. U.S. Armaments Incite Opponents' Arms<br>Buildup; U.S. Inaction Stops It.....                                        | 67  |
| Chapter V. The Mirror-Imaging Fallacy: Assuming<br>That the Adversary Shares U.S. Assumptions .....                              | 85  |
| Chapter VI. The U.S. Assumption That States Will<br>Comply with Arms Control Obligations, or Can<br>Be Persuaded to Comply ..... | 103 |
| Chapter VII. How to Foolproof a U.S. Approach to<br>Arms Control.....                                                            | 125 |
| About the Author.....                                                                                                            | 135 |



## Foreword

Dr. Michaela Dodge has authored an *Occasional Paper*, *Enduring Arms Control Myths: A Century of Experience*, that is as unique as it is important. She examines the arms control process, as practiced by Washington, and finds that it is driven by enduring myths and fantasies. These are the pathologies of U.S. arms control practice that opponents are able to exploit—leading to agreements that are oversold to the public and unwary officials, and are ultimately damaging to U.S. security.

For example, Dr. Dodge examines the enduring, but generally mistaken, expectation that the arms control process is a dynamic that fosters improved political relations, and thereby independently moderates threats. Historically, the reverse appears to be true—significant hostilities frustrate U.S. arms control endeavors; if and when political hostilities ease, the drive for arms moderates and arms control can move. This is the truth behind Colin Gray’s frequent quip characterizing arms control from the 1920s to the 1990s, “As peace breaks out, can arms control be far behind?”<sup>1</sup> He posits the corresponding reality that “arms control must fail” in the context of politically hostile relations—particularly with authoritarian opponents.

The fanciful expectation that the arms control process itself will foster benign political relations places priority on maintaining the process and agreements, rather than on how the substance of agreements affects relative power positions and whether opponents are abiding by the terms of agreements. Given this priority, to protect the process, Washington typically is loath to call out and seriously act upon opponents’ non-compliance and continues to adhere to the substance and “spirit” of an agreement long after

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<sup>1</sup> Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 25.

opponents have done neither. Such behavior may prolong an agreement and process, but it betrays the integrity of both and can damage U.S. security.

It is only too easy to spin out yarns about arms control arrangements that would solve political problems, limit threats, and contribute to Western security. Doing so is a popular sport among American academics and commentators—as if opponents with hostile designs actually are willing to limit the capabilities they deem critical to their political goals and will abide by agreements that do so.

The difficulties almost always ignored, however, are that authoritarian states hostile to the West typically violate arms control restrictions that become inconvenient and will not oblige Washington's visions by giving up power they believe to be critical to their revisionist/expansionist goals. Their hostile political goals are the priority drivers of their armaments, not adherence to agreements, and their arms control agenda is to secure advantages over the United States to the extent possible to help advance those goals. This should not be difficult to understand, but such harsh realities often are essentially denied or downplayed in U.S. arms control parlance, for fear that limiting U.S. power might be seen as imprudent. When the enduring American idealistic vision of non-zero-sum agreements to which parties will righteously adhere meets reality, the results are predictably disadvantageous for the United States. Dr. Dodge's work shows this unfortunate dynamic happening repeatedly for a century.

Not since Colin Gray's seminal works on this subject, *The Soviet-American Arms Race* (1976) and *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (1992), has a book-length, scholarly work so effectively demolished the enduring arms control pathologies that have served only to undermine American practice for a century. With her new text, Dr. Dodge goes beyond those earlier works by identifying the

interrelated conceptual myths and fantasies that have wreaked havoc on U.S. arms control practice, and illustrates those myths and fantasies with historical cases from the early twentieth century to the present. To demonstrate her points, she moves seamlessly from the conceptual to the empirical.

Dr. Dodge concludes that, unless Washington can control for these enduring arms control pathologies, with a designated Red Team specifically tasked to stand guard against them, the process almost inevitably will continue to lead to U.S. negotiating positions and agreements that fail to live up to their hype and ultimately disadvantage U.S. and Western security. This is an inconvenient truth that runs counter to most official and public commentary on the subject in Washington, and in the West in general. Indeed, by starkly calling out the problem set as vividly as she does, Dr. Dodge shows herself willing to risk the wrath of a well-funded American arms control industry, much of which is deeply invested in the myths and fantasies that drive U.S. arms control enthusiasms and practice, and will disdain an honest headline that this emperor truly has no clothes.

Dr. Dodge's efforts here should be considered a great public service because, in American political culture, arms control typically is assumed to be an unalloyed good—every administration yearns to show its virtue by bringing home a shiny arms control trophy. This is unlikely to change. Consequently, if Washington is to persist in the endeavor, despite its near consistent record of failure, it should approach the process in a manner that is worthy of the effort. To do so, it must, as Dr. Dodge concludes, control for the enduring pathologies she highlights. If not, the process will continue to generate disappointment and damage to U.S. security. And, if administrations continue to publicly invest so much hype and effort into the endeavor, they will continue to resist acknowledging its failures and opponents' unmitigated hostility, threats and

noncompliance—until compelled to do so by opponents' manifest brazenness. As Dr. Dodge suggests, a lower level of public investment in pursuit of reflected political virtue would limit the need for pretense and opacity when the results inevitably fall short.

In summary, Michaela Dodge has delivered an analysis that demonstrates the great need for realism in the U.S. approach to arms control and the dangers of contrary existing practice. This is a unique text that tells an unvarnished truth. It is an understatement to say that anyone who is interested in arms control, has a role in the practice of arms control, or comments on arms control should read *Enduring Arms Control Myths: A Century of Experience*, and be open to the hard lessons it presents. As America seeks to find its way in a new and much more dangerous nuclear threat environment, getting arms control right could not be more important.

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Missouri State University  
Co-Founder, National Institute for Public Policy*

## Acknowledgments

I have been extremely fortunate to learn to think about nuclear deterrence and policy issues from some of the most brilliant, knowledgeable, and dedicated policy practitioners and public servants in the world. They are not only first-rate scholars, but also are among the kindest, humblest, and most generous people I have ever met — a welcome contrast to the seemingly endless stream of commentary on the deterioration of the public discourse and increasing polarization within the U.S. polity.

I am particularly grateful to Susan Koch, Robert Joseph, and Mark Schneider for their careful review of the initial draft of the *Occasional Paper*. I would also like to thank Keith Payne, whose thoughtful comments significantly improved the final version. Conversations with Dean Cheng, Paula DeSutter, Robert Soofer, Pranay Vaddi, and Kenton White, and others, sharpened my thinking further and illuminated aspects of the question of how the United States conducts arms control from different angles that were not intuitively apparent to me. I am grateful for their time and friendship.

I am also grateful to Amy Joseph for her highly capable support in producing the final *Occasional Paper*.

I bear the responsibility for any remaining errors.

Finally, I dedicate this *Occasional Paper* to my sons, who brought to life many lessons in deterrence, credibility, denial, and arms control.



## Executive Summary

*"In recent years the United States has gone well beyond treating arms control agreements as the supreme law of the land. We have elevated them into a kind of holy writ. Arms control has become a form of secular religion, with the arms control community as its faithful acolytes."*<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary arms control has been guided by almost canonical concepts and propositions that are intellectually seductive because they promise relatively easy solutions to some of the most difficult national security problems. Yet, as the following study shows, most of the propositions that have historically guided U.S. arms control efforts are not only incorrect, but also harm the U.S. ability to effectively counter its adversaries.

The historical pattern indicates that one of the reasons is that, while the United States follows treaties to the letter and imposes restraint on its existing or prospective programs that would violate even the "spirit" of an agreement (whatever this "spirit" is), adversaries simply ignore them when they are inconvenient. At the same time, they use treaties to restrict U.S. programs that threaten the advancement of their goals. The case studies also illustrate that multiple arms control fallacies usually operate at the same time and feed off each other, often compounding the resultant U.S. national security problems.

For arms control advocates, hope springs eternal that the next agreement will improve political relations among

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<sup>2</sup> James Strom Thurmond, quoted in Government Printing Office, "Military Implications of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)," *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Third Congress*, August 9, 11, and 18, 1994, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31210018779619&seq=1>, p. 99.

adversaries. For example, despite the worsening national security environment and Moscow's decades-long history of violating agreements, the Biden Administration emphasized the importance of arms control, not deterrence, as the "most effective" tool to prevent nuclear "use." Ironically, there were no nuclear arms control negotiations under Biden and Russia violated, and then illegally "suspended," the now-expired New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).<sup>3</sup> President Trump has expressed sweeping arms control goals, raising a question that, until recently, seemed sidelined: what new arms control steps will the United States take with regard to a follow-on agreement to New START?<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, a critical issue now is to understand the demonstrably fallacious concepts and expectations that have driven U.S. arms control positions, and continue to have harmful effects. Some of these are unique to the nuclear age; others can be seen many decades earlier. By demonstrating the mendacity of such concepts and expectations, this *Occasional Paper* provides a more factually-grounded framework for any future U.S. arms control endeavors. This is a matter of simple prudence to help contemporary U.S. policymakers avoid basing their decisions regarding arms control on demonstrably misguided concepts/expectations.

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<sup>3</sup> Department of State, "U.S. Countermeasures in Response to Russia's Violations of the New START Treaty," Fact Sheet, June 1, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-countermeasures-in-response-to-russias-violations-of-the-new-start-treaty/>; and, Boris Bondarev, "The Fallacy of Negotiating With Putin," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 20, Issue 76 (May 10, 2023), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-fallacy-of-negotiating-withputin/>.

<sup>4</sup> Amy F. Woolf, Nikolai Sokov, and Dai Huaicheng, "Evaluating Current Arms-control Proposals: Perspectives from the US, Russia and China," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, October 2024, [iiss\\_mdi\\_evaluating-current-arms-control-proposals\\_22102024.pdf](https://www.iiss-mdi.org/evaluating-current-arms-control-proposals_22102024.pdf).

The study is based on an examination of government reports, Congressional hearings, academic commentaries, and pertinent diplomatic histories, including the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, the London Naval Treaty of 1930, the nuclear testing regime, as well as interviews with experts of diverse backgrounds and opinions on arms control. Arms control is not new; it was not new when nuclear weapons were invented in 1945, and the pathologies underlying problematic U.S. arms control behavior have extended from the pre-nuclear age to the present.

### **Chronic Arms Control Fallacies Continuing to Shape the Negotiations Process**

There are several chronic pathologies recurring in the U.S. arms control process to date. They are important to counter as the United States prepares for the next round of arms control negotiations with adversaries.

#### ***Fallacy #1: Economic Liberalization Will Lead to Peace***

After the end of the Cold War, the United States assumed that globalization would lead to liberalization of political regimes around the world, including in China and Russia. The assumption held that as these regimes liberalize, their political interests would align more closely with those of the West, which would include a desire to renounce war as a too-costly instrument of foreign policy. The West's large military reductions and enthusiasm for unilateral arms control after the end of the Cold War were based on this premise. Yet, this universal harmonization of interests stemming from political interests did not happen. Economic liberalization has not automatically translated into political liberalization, and some countries have used their new-

found wealth to arm up rather than democratize. China is a classic example of this dynamic, and the United States and its allies are now left comparatively weaker as they face belligerent revisionist adversaries.

***Fallacy #2: The Arms Control Process on its Own Right  
Can Improve Political Relations Among States***

Chief among prominent fallacies that have shaped U.S. arms control beliefs is that arms control can independently improve political relations among countries and that these countries share a general objective of the desirability of disarmament. From this point of view, the process of obtaining an arms control agreement becomes almost as important as the agreement itself, and the contents of the agreement are secondary, because the process is said to improve political relations between states. A close examination of the historical record shows that this common assumption is wrong. U.S. adversaries understand full well that weapons serve political means, and so does the process designed to control the weapons. They use the arms control process to restrain those U.S. capabilities that potentially create most strategic dilemmas for them, and leave the door open as much as possible for the development of their own capabilities that challenge the U.S. attainment of its own objectives.

During the Cold War, the United States mistakenly separated thinking about an adversary's political goals and the arms control process. This step was an essential enabler of negotiations because it made it easier to convince the American public that the process of negotiating with the Soviet Union served U.S. interests regardless of adversaries' political objectives. Otherwise, why negotiate with an adversary with fundamentally different political goals, bent on destroying the United States and its allies, and investing massive resources in weapons capable of doing so? Why

negotiate with an adversary that uses the process of negotiations to weaken the United States and restrain U.S. programs that generate the most challenges for its ability to pursue its goals?

Despite decades of advocacy to the contrary, the arms control process never had any innate power to improve political relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, no matter the wishes of U.S. participants. It has no innate power to improve relations between the United States and its self-declared adversaries today, and therefore it does not offer a unique means of resolving fundamental national security challenges.

***Fallacy #3: U.S. Armaments Are the Driver of  
Adversaries' Arms Buildups; U.S. Inaction Stops It***

U.S. arms control advocates in and out of government have been prone to believe that U.S. actions are the most important driver of adversaries' actions, and that if the United States stops pursuing armaments or reduces them, others will follow. Based on this assumption, they advocate U.S. unilateral restrictions and unilateral force reductions and demand that the United States refrain from pursuing certain programs and activities involving modernization lest they cause adversaries to react in ways deemed undesirable to the United States. Yet, adversaries have political goals and pursue military policies and programs to achieve those goals with minimal regard for U.S. (in)actions. They do not engage in benign reciprocity in this regard despite Washington's belief that it can set a "good example" and appeal to opponents' "better angels."

The U.S. multi-decade cessation of nuclear testing, unilateral reductions, and an almost complete halt to nuclear forces modernization, were not reciprocated by any of its adversaries. Washington delayed, scaled down, or altogether stopped its nuclear modernization programs as

soon as the Cold War ended, and stopped all nuclear warhead testing and yield-producing experiments in the 1990s following President Clinton's signature of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The U.S. Senate rejected the treaty after a full floor debate, but Washington has been complying with its terms ever since, despite its adversaries having active nuclear testing programs.

Russian, Chinese, or North Korean nuclear warhead production complexes are more capable of producing new nuclear warheads than is the U.S. nuclear warhead complex. After the end of the Cold War, China substantially increased its military spending and launched a major nuclear weapons buildup.<sup>5</sup> This cycle appears to be a repeat of the 1970s and 1980s when Moscow dramatically increased the number and lethality of its strategic nuclear warheads following the signing of the 1972 ABM Treaty that prohibited U.S. missile defense research and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) I agreements—confounding U.S. expectations at the time.

#### ***Fallacy #4: Assuming That Adversaries Share U.S. Assumptions***

The United States often bases its arms control efforts on demonstrably wrong assumptions about its political adversaries, namely that they perceive and understand rationality the same way as does Washington, and share its priorities. This is profoundly ignorant because foreign leaders likely define rationality differently based on their divergent strategic cultures and individual experiences.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Gertz, "EXCLUSIVE: China building third missile field for hundreds of new ICBMs," *The Washington Times*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/aug/12/china-engagedbreathhtaking-nuclear-breakout-us-str/>.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Faris, "Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?," *Information Series*, No. 635 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2, 2025),

The mirror imaging results in suboptimal arms control agreements and treaties that disadvantage the United States and allies in the long run.

During the Cold War, a significant part of the U.S. national security establishment embraced the expectation that if the United States did not deploy strategic missile defenses, Moscow would, correspondingly, arrest its offensive missile buildup—but if the United States deployed such defenses, Moscow would respond by expanding its offensive missile capabilities. The Soviet Union, far from subscribing to this logic, took advantage of U.S. missile defense restraint to expand its arsenal of strategic nuclear warheads. This dynamic continued following the Cold War, after the initial economic shock from the breakup of the Soviet Union passed. In contrast to popular expectations, the U.S. 2002 withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was followed by the signature of the Moscow Treaty, which reduced U.S. and Russian offensive strategic forces.

***Fallacy #5: Assuming That Other States Will Comply  
with Their Arms Control Obligations***

The U.S. arms control community tends to assume that other countries will abide by their treaty agreements as much as the United States, and that when these countries decide to violate their international obligations, the United States will be able to bring to bear enough pressure to make them return to compliance. In reality, the asymmetry between compliance cultures of the United States and authoritarian states means that adversaries have plenty of time to exploit treaty and agreement loopholes and, if that is inadequate, violate them. As a consequence, the United States is left alone complying with agreements that limit its

own options in dealing with revisionist adversaries. The dynamic has been in play for over a century.

Germany was violating provisions of the Versailles Treaty the day the treaty was signed in 1919. Shortly thereafter Japan and Germany built significantly over the tonnage permitted by the Washington Naval Agreements with very few consequences for their violations. The Soviet Union has pushed agreements to their limits and often deployed larger forces than agreements permitted or violated them outright when it suited its interest. Moscow's violations rarely incurred substantive costs for the violator.

Democratic governments have historically found it extremely difficult to bring determined violators back into compliance with their treaty obligations. This is partly because democratic leaders become invested in the arms control status quo as soon as they get elected. No government wishes to tell the voters they are potentially less safe under its aegis than before. The resulting dynamic sees aggressors' violations diminished in the public discourse, and those who question the conciliatory approach in the face of another party's violations are often labeled as alarmists, if not enemies of arms control and peace.

## **Implementing Long-Overdue Corrections**

The United States ought to take the steps below to correct the pathologies in its arms control thinking. Should the United States fail to do so, the nation and its allies would be better off without arms control. Arms control processes and treaties or agreements that do not correct for these long-standing pathologies would leave Washington disadvantaged vis-à-vis revisionist adversaries who are willing to disregard their arms control obligations and use weapons to advance their goals in opposition to U.S. and allied interests.

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### *Create a Red Team for the Arms Control Process*

In arms control endeavors, the United States must devise mechanisms to guard against unwarranted idealism, mirror imaging and its related foolish expectations of “action-reaction” and opponents’ arms control compliance, and a political investment in the process that works against calling out arms control failures. These misconceptions lead to misguided and harmful arms control practices and are the major driver behind the continued failure of arms control to meet its proponents’ expectations and promises. The pathologies must be consciously guarded against, or the United States and its allies will find themselves consistently disadvantaged against revisionist, hostile, and better-armed adversaries.<sup>7</sup>

At a minimum, every U.S. arms control negotiation should be advised by a red team specifically designed to watch for the pathologies at play analyzed in this *Occasional Paper*. Arms control negotiations ought to start with a solid analysis of the other states’ political objectives and due consideration of the connection between weapons to be subjected to arms control and political objectives they are meant to advance. The connections between arms and opponents’ political objectives are vastly more important in an arms control process than the weapons’ technical characteristics that the arms control process traditionally tends to dwell on, and is much more analytically demanding.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Keith B. Payne, “A Fading Western Alliance System? Who Is to Blame and Why Should We Care,” *Information Series*, No. 662 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 8, 2026), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/keith-b-payne-a-fading-western-alliance-system-who-is-to-blame-and-why-should-we-care-no-662-june-8-2026/](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-a-fading-western-alliance-system-who-is-to-blame-and-why-should-we-care-no-662-june-8-2026/).

<sup>8</sup> Keith B. Payne, “Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult,” *Information Series*, No. 527 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 6, 2022), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/keith-b-](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-)

### *Tailor Arms Control*

Realistic analyses of the connection between arms and other parties' strategic goals, and the low priority that opponents place on compliance should inform U.S. arms control goals and practices. U.S. arms control goals and practices must be "tailored" to the character of opponents no less than deterrence, and for the same reasons.<sup>9</sup> Opponents will differ in material ways, and an approach to arms control predicated on the usual mirror-imaging pathologies will likely doom the outcome of the process.

In the absence of such an informed practice, it is misguided to measure the success of arms control negotiations by the achievement of an agreement. Setting the conclusion of an agreement as the standard of success essentially denies the significance of the opponent's character and the specific content of the agreement. It also creates an environment in which continued quietude regarding noncompliance is prized above seriously exploring all options to adjust for the other party's noncompliance.

Countries hostile to U.S. interests will not consent to agreements that meaningfully limit their capabilities if those capabilities are useful for advancing their priority interests. That is why eminent strategist Colin S. Gray observed that arms control is either impossible, or unimportant: "The political antagonism that generates the objective need for alleviation via arms control—always

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payne-deterrence-is-not-rocket-science-it-is-more-difficult-no-527-july-6-2022/.

<sup>9</sup> Faris, "Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?," op. cit.; and Keith B. Payne, "Nuclear Deterrence In a New Era: Applying 'Tailored Deterrence,'" *Information Series*, No. 431 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 21, 2018), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/payne-keith-b-nuclear-deterrence-in-a-new-era-applying-tailored-deterrence-information-series-no-431/](https://nipp.org/information_series/payne-keith-b-nuclear-deterrence-in-a-new-era-applying-tailored-deterrence-information-series-no-431/).

assuming, again fallaciously, that arms control could control—is the very reason why arms control must fail....”<sup>10</sup>

U.S. arms control goals and practice should be informed by an acute understanding of the other party’s priority goals and hostility toward the United States, and how misinformed U.S. arms control enthusiasms can advance their goals. Arms control, as typically practiced by Washington, will be misguided and unable to achieve anything fundamentally helpful with countries that are openly hostile to U.S. interests. This, of course, is why U.S. arms control must be tailored by an unvarnished understanding of opponents, untainted by the pathologies discussed here, and rank idealism.

***Realize that Arms Control  
Disproportionately Impacts Democracies***

Arms control impacts democracies differently than it does authoritarian regimes, because democracies seek to abide by arms control treaties while autocracies often will not, leaving compliance asymmetry that often disadvantages democracies. The United States should refrain from investing significant political capital in the arms control process and welcoming a signature of arms control agreements with unwarranted visibility and expectations. Both of these dynamics work against a prompt publication of concerns with another party’s noncompliance and violations, particularly if they happen on the watch of a government that concluded agreements with violators in the first place. Giving less prominence to the process would make it easier to discuss compliance concerns and violations earlier on.

Congress should also demand a detailed analysis of most likely compliance issues and violations, and require

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<sup>10</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Weapons Don’t Make War* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), p. 174.

that the administration articulates concrete consequences for instances of noncompliance and violations. While such a document cannot be binding on future Congresses and administrations, ideally, it would serve as a natural follow-up point for a discussion about their consequences after detecting noncompliance and violations. The ideal would be that the government exercises more effort imposing consequences for noncompliance and violations than debating whether they happened in the first place.

The compliance asymmetry is evident with regard to the United States stopping all nuclear warhead testing and yield-producing experiments in the 1990s following President Clinton's signature of the CTBT, a multilateral treaty which the Senate rejected after a full floor debate, as stated above. Since then, the United States lost much of the warhead development and production skills and capabilities.<sup>11</sup> Russia and China did not bind themselves by similar restrictions, despite signing the CTBT and, as a result, their respective nuclear warhead production complexes are much more capable of producing new nuclear warheads than is the U.S. nuclear warhead complex.

The United States must reconstitute flexibility and resilience within the nuclear weapons complex so as to respond in a more timely way to opponents' arms control violations. Washington should proceed with greater urgency to reconstitute its ability to produce more plutonium pits (substantially more than the current program of 80 per year). The United States should be able to conduct a fully instrumented nuclear test within the next

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<sup>11</sup> Mark B. Schneider, "The Enormous Costs of 'Science Based Stockpile Stewardship' for Nuclear Weapons," *RealClearDefense*, January 7, 2025, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2026/01/07/the\\_enormous\\_costs\\_of\\_science\\_based\\_stockpile\\_stewardship\\_for\\_nuclear\\_weapons\\_1157136.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2026/01/07/the_enormous_costs_of_science_based_stockpile_stewardship_for_nuclear_weapons_1157136.html).

two years.<sup>12</sup> It also ought to expand the Stockpile Responsiveness Program to help reconstitute skills necessary for developing nuclear warheads with new military capabilities should the United States decide such capabilities are necessary to strengthen deterrence.

## **Conclusion**

Arms control will continue to be a part of national security discussions for years to come. In the future, the United States must not repeat mistakes of the past, namely approaching arms control with the same vapid misconceptions and pathologies that have historically proven wrong. The 1990s were supposed to bring the new era of globalization and interconnectedness which were to lead to the “end of history,” an era of international cooperation that transcends national interests and obviates the need for arms—a new world order. This was an illusion.

Yet, the United States continued the arms control process based on fallacies that predate the end of the Cold War, and in some cases predate the Cold War by decades. As a consequence, the United States today is less equipped to counter its revisionist adversaries and uphold its extended deterrence commitments. If the United States will not correct the flawed misconceptions that have gained prominence within the arms control discourse over the past several decades—its arms control pathologies—U.S. negotiations will be doomed to the same misguided approaches that have created or magnified U.S. national security problems both recently and in decades past.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Scheber, *A Responsive Nuclear Warhead Infrastructure: What Still Needs to Be Done? Why Is Responsive Infrastructure More Urgent Now Than in the Past?*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2025), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Vol.-5-No.-8.pdf>.

While there are no easy institutional solutions to overcome these established arms control misconceptions, a broader awareness of these enduring problems is a necessary beginning to avoid falling into the same traps. As typically practiced to date, the United States is likely to be more secure without arms control treaties; they do not fundamentally alter the challenges it faces from revisionist powers bent on changing the status quo, and they disproportionately restrain law-abiding democracies. There should be no rush to negotiate another arms control agreement.

To paraphrase Senator Ben Sasse, arms control treaties will not bring about heaven, and their lack will not cause hell.<sup>13</sup> In fact, avoiding the investment in misguided arms control removes an institutional obstacle to calling out adversaries for what they are, and could contribute to strengthening the case for necessary U.S. nuclear and conventional weapons modernization and missile defense programs. Without these, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to keep peace in the future.

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<sup>13</sup> Ross Douthat, "How Ben Sasse Is Living Now That He Is Dying," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/09/opinion/ben-sasse-death-pancreatic-cancer.html>.

## Chapter I. Introduction

*"Common sense has rendered such nightmares impossible. Are you quite sure? It would be a pity to be wrong. Such a mistake could only be made once – once for all."*<sup>14</sup>

Contemporary arms control has been guided by almost canonical concepts and propositions that are intellectually seductive because they promise relatively easy solutions to some of the most difficult national security problems. Yet, as the following study shows, most of the propositions that have historically guided U.S. arms control efforts are not only incorrect, but also harm the U.S. ability to effectively counter its adversaries. The historical pattern indicates that one of the reasons is because while the United States follows treaties to the letter and imposes restraint on its existing or prospective programs that would violate even the "spirit" of an agreement (whatever this "spirit" is), adversaries simply ignore them when they are inconvenient. At the same time, they use treaties to restrict U.S. programs that threaten the advancement of their goals. The case studies also illustrate that multiple arms control fallacies usually operate at the same time and feed off each other, often compounding the resultant U.S. national security problems.

For arms control advocates, hope springs eternal that the next agreement will improve political relations among adversaries. For example, despite the worsening national security environment and Moscow's decades-long history of violating agreements, the Biden Administration emphasized the importance of arms control, not deterrence, as the "most effective" tool to prevent nuclear "use."

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<sup>14</sup> Winston Churchill, quoted in Leonard Wainstein, "The Dreadnought Gap," in Robert J. Art and Kenneth Waltz (eds.), *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), p. 159.

Consequently, a critical issue now is to understand the demonstrably fallacious concepts and expectations that have driven U.S. arms control positions, and continue to have harmful effects. Some of these are unique to the nuclear age; others can be seen many decades earlier. By demonstrating the mendacity of such concepts and expectations, this *Occasional Paper* provides a more factually-grounded framework for any future U.S. arms control endeavors. This is a matter of simple prudence to help contemporary U.S. policymakers avoid basing their decisions regarding arms control on demonstrably misguided concepts/expectations. The findings will hopefully help inform policymakers about the incorrect assumptions underlying Washington's traditional rationales for its arms control enthusiasms, including, for example, those based on the expectations that U.S. restraint will lead to opponents' restraint and that agreements will drive political reconciliation.

There have been a few past analyses on this subject that remain useful; most notable are Gray's decades-old classic works.<sup>15</sup> His unparalleled 1992 text, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail*, is now largely unavailable for new readers. There has since been scant comparable work—despite extensive additional historical evidence demonstrating the fallacies of the “iron laws” that have been used to justify traditional U.S. arms control policies. Despite the fact that history has consistently proven these ideas to be problematic, or simply mistaken,<sup>16</sup> they have

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<sup>15</sup> Colin S. Gray, *The Soviet-American Arms Race* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1976); Gray, *Weapons Don't Make War*, op. cit.; and Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith B. Payne, *The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2021), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.

continued to shape U.S. arms control expectations—with demonstrably harmful effects.<sup>17</sup>

The following chapters identify and analyze fallacious claims that have long influenced U.S. arms control enthusiasms. This *Occasional Paper* builds on some of the previously published studies by the National Institute for Public Policy.<sup>18</sup> The study is based on an examination of government reports, Congressional hearings, academic commentaries, and pertinent diplomatic histories, including the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, the London Naval Treaty of 1930, the nuclear testing regime, as well as interviews with experts of diverse backgrounds and opinions on arms control.

President Trump's expressed interest in renewed negotiations makes it imperative to hold accountable these influential but manifestly mistaken concepts that have shaped U.S. arms control behavior. Yet, the United States ought not to be concerned about being in an environment without strategic arms control. The inherent pathologies of the process and outcomes, as practiced by Washington, make it an utterly unsuitable tool for the United States to address the upcoming national security challenges and strategic conflict between the United States, and its adversaries, Russia and China.

Washington faces ongoing challenges in considering arms control treaties outside the traditional, faulty narratives that the arms control process improves relations among states and reliably leads to the United States and allies being more secure upon its conclusion than at its start.

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<sup>17</sup> Keith B. Payne, "Arms Control: Past Practices Threaten Extended Deterrence Today," *Information Series*, No. 594 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 19, 2024), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/keith-b-payne-arms-control-past-practices-threaten-extended-deterrence-today-no-594-july-16-2024/](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-arms-control-past-practices-threaten-extended-deterrence-today-no-594-july-16-2024/).

<sup>18</sup> Trachtenberg, Dodge, and Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, op. cit.

That narrative has been proven wrong repeatedly and enduring concepts and expectations have led to treaties and agreements that fail to deliver as anticipated and, in fact, lead to unexpected consequences that have undermined U.S. and allied security. In particular, there has been a long history of noncompliance with arms control treaties by fascist and communist states, but also of these states using arms control to constrain democracies from having the military capabilities needed to meet the threats posed by aggressive autocratic states.

The following chapters discuss multiple prominent flawed ideas; some of these are unique to the nuclear age while others can be seen many decades earlier.<sup>19</sup> They all share a degree of optimism, or perhaps naïveté, with regard to the supposed benefits of the arms control process and treaties for U.S. and allied security. A common trait for these narratives is that arms control is presented as an unalloyed good no matter the context and the results; the risks of poorly conducted arms control are dismissed, and opponents' violations typically are downplayed or rationalized for long periods, in the forlorn hope that opponents will, for some reason, move to compliance. For example, contemporary proponents of arms control have virtually ignored Russian violations of New START and insisted that the United States stay within the treaty limits despite the fact that the national security environment has worsened dramatically since the treaty entered into force in 2011.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 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/](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-and-arms-control-ending-the-deceptive-holiday-from-history-no-616-february-10-2025/).

<sup>20</sup> Rose Gottemoeller, *Hearing on Strategic Competition in an Unconstrained, Post-New START Treaty Environment*, U.S. Senate, 199<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session (Committee on Armed Services), February 3, 2026,

Given geopolitical developments, among the most prominent being an aggressive Russia and a powerful China bent on changing the international order, there is very little reason why one ought to be optimistic about potential national security accomplishments of future arms control treaties. Indeed, China will not negotiate about meaningful nuclear weapons limitations and Russia has no interest in effective and verifiable arms control. Today's adversaries are unlikely to help solve U.S. security problems for Washington, arms control or not.

Generally, U.S. problems in nuclear deterrence and allied assurance are caused by the inadequacy of its military capabilities, a lack of diversity in the nuclear weapons stockpile, and a decrepit infrastructure incapable of flexibility and resilience in the face of worsening national security conditions, particularly regional. The situation is often directly caused or exacerbated by the legacy of U.S. arms control enthusiasms, regardless of the well-meaning intentions of Americans running the process. In fact, U.S. history of arms control inspires very little confidence that the process can actually benefit U.S. national security. Indeed, it often has created or magnified national security challenges – with zero accountability for its proponents.

***Fallacy #1: Economic Liberalization  
Will Lead to Peace***

After the end of the Cold War, the United States assumed that globalization would lead to liberalization of political regimes around the world, including in China and Russia. The assumption held that as these regimes liberalize, their political interests would align more closely with those of the West, which would include a desire to reduce the role and

number of nuclear weapons and renounce war as a too-costly instrument of foreign policy. The West's large military reductions and enthusiasm for unilateral arms control after the end of the Cold War were based on this premise. Yet, this universal harmonization of interests did not happen. Economic liberalization has not automatically translated into political liberalization, and some countries have used their new-found wealth to arm up rather than democratize. China is a classic example of this dynamic, and the United States and its allies are now left comparatively weaker as they face belligerent revisionist adversaries.

***Fallacy #2: The Arms Control Process on its Own Right  
Can Improve Political Relations Among States***

Chief among prominent fallacies that have shaped U.S. arms control beliefs is that arms control can independently improve political relations among countries and that these countries share a general objective of the desirability of disarmament. From this point of view, the process of obtaining an arms control agreement becomes almost as important as the agreement itself, and the contents of the agreement are secondary, because the process is said to improve political relations between states. But U.S. adversaries understand full well that weapons serve political means, and so does the process designed to control the weapons. They use the arms control process to restrain those U.S. capabilities that potentially create most strategic dilemmas for them, and leave the door open as much as possible for the development of their own capabilities that challenge the U.S. attainment of its own objectives.

During the Cold War, the United States mistakenly separated thinking about an adversary's political goals and the arms control process. This step was an essential enabler of negotiations because it made it easier to convince the American public that the process of negotiating with the

Soviet Union served U.S. interests regardless of adversaries' political objectives. Otherwise, why negotiate with an adversary with fundamentally different political goals, bent on destroying the United States and its allies, and investing massive resources in weapons capable of doing so? Why negotiate with an adversary that uses the process of negotiations to weaken the United States and restrain U.S. programs that generate the most challenges for its ability to pursue its goals?

Despite decades of advocacy to the contrary, the arms control process never had any innate power to improve political relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, no matter the wishes of U.S. participants. It has no innate power to improve relations between the United States and its self-declared adversaries today, and therefore it does not offer a unique means of resolving fundamental national security challenges.

***Fallacy #3: U.S. Armaments Are the Driver of  
Adversaries' Arms Buildups; U.S. Inaction Stops It***

U.S. arms control advocates in and out of government have been prone to believe that U.S. actions are the most important driver of adversaries' actions, and that if the United States stops pursuing armaments or reduces them, others will follow. Based on this assumption, they advocate U.S. unilateral restrictions and unilateral force reductions and demand that the United States refrain from pursuing certain programs and activities involving modernization lest they cause adversaries to react in ways deemed undesirable to the United States. Yet, adversaries have political goals and pursue military policies and programs to achieve those goals with minimal regard for U.S. (in)actions. They do not engage in benign reciprocity in this regard despite Washington's belief that it can set a "good example" and appeal to opponents' "better angels."

***Fallacy #4: Assuming That Adversaries  
Share U.S. Assumptions***

The United States often bases its arms control efforts on demonstrably wrong assumptions about its political adversaries, namely that they perceive and understand rationality the same way as does Washington, and share its priorities. This is profoundly ignorant because foreign leaders likely define rationality differently based on their divergent strategic cultures and individual experiences.<sup>21</sup> The mirror imaging results in suboptimal arms control agreements and treaties that disadvantage the United States and allies in the long run.

During the Cold War, a significant part of the U.S. national security establishment embraced the expectation that if the United States did not deploy strategic missile defenses, Moscow would, correspondingly, arrest its offensive missile buildup—but if the United States deployed such defenses, Moscow would respond by expanding its offensive missile capabilities. The Soviet Union, far from subscribing to this logic, took advantage of U.S. missile defense restraint to expand its arsenal of strategic nuclear warheads. This dynamic continued following the Cold War, after the initial economic shock from the breakup of the Soviet Union passed. In contrast to popular expectations, the U.S. 2002 withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was followed by the signature of the Moscow Treaty, which reduced U.S. and Russian offensive strategic forces.

***Fallacy #5: Assuming That Other States Will Comply  
with Their Arms Control Obligations***

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<sup>21</sup> Faris, “Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?,” op. cit.

The U.S. arms control community tends to assume that other countries will abide by their treaty agreements as much as the United States, and that when these countries decide to violate their international obligations, the United States will be able to bring to bear enough pressure to make them return to compliance. In reality, the asymmetry between compliance cultures of the United States and authoritarian states means that adversaries have plenty of time to exploit treaty and agreement loopholes and, if that is inadequate, violate them. As a consequence, the United States is left alone complying with agreements that limit its own options in dealing with revisionist adversaries. The dynamic has been in play for over a century.

Germany was violating provisions of the Versailles Treaty the day the treaty was signed in 1919. Shortly thereafter Japan and Germany built significantly over the tonnage permitted by the Washington Naval Agreements with very few consequences for their violations. The Soviet Union has pushed agreements to their limits and often deployed larger forces than agreements permitted or violated them outright when it suited its interest. Moscow's violations rarely incurred substantive costs for the violator.

Democratic governments have historically found it extremely difficult to bring determined violators back into compliance with their treaty obligations. This is partly because democratic leaders become invested in the arms control status quo as soon as they get elected. No government wishes to tell the voters they are potentially less safe under its aegis than before. The resulting dynamic sees aggressors' violations diminished in the public discourse, and those who question the conciliatory approach in the face of another party's violations are often labeled as alarmists, if not enemies of arms control and peace.

## **Conclusion**

Arms control misconceptions continue to negatively impact the U.S. approach to the arms control process. Particularly troubling is the U.S. inability to give due consideration to adversaries' revisionist political objectives and the role their weapons play in achieving them. While the United States assumes adversaries share some U.S. national security objectives, Washington often fails to appreciate their differences and assumes that adversaries will make the same calculations as the United States.

Revisionist adversaries then utilize the arms control process to restrain U.S. programs that make the achievement of their political goals more difficult, and ignore arms control treaties when it suits their interests. U.S. compliance culture ensures that Washington remains bound to arms control treaties long past when it learns the other state is violating its arms control obligations, leaving the nation worse off to meet its deterrence and assurance obligations in the face of rising revisionist threats. A U.S. failure to correct these misconceptions will result in U.S. negotiations doomed to the same old wrong-headed approaches that have created or magnified U.S. national security problems both recently and in decades past.

## Chapter II. The Fallacy That a Liberal Economic Order Will Lead to Peace

*"...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."*<sup>22</sup>

This chapter explores the misguided assumption that adversaries will moderate their aggressive goals and behaviors because of the economic advantages stemming from doing so in a liberal international economic order, or because of obvious economic disadvantages of wars. A related assumption is that arms control can help expand this cooperative space and potential even if the other party's goals are decidedly unfriendly toward the United States. These assumptions have led to treating arms control as the priority for dealing with difficult challenges of the day. In reality, the United States pursued the process in a way that has disadvantaged U.S. and allied security, limited the U.S. ability to assure allies, and deter revisionist adversaries that do not share U.S. preconceived notions. The necessary corrections have proven difficult to make even now, when both assumptions are demonstrably false.

Prior to World War I, Sir Norman Angell argued persuasively that the common advantages of international trade and cooperation had rendered aggression so costly and disadvantageous that all countries behaving rationally would increasingly cease war and the preparation for war in favor of the mutual benefits available via amity and undisturbed economic cooperation.<sup>23</sup> Sir Norman's

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<sup>22</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1965), p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage* (London: William Heinemann, 1912), pp. 119, 220; and, Michael Rühle, "From Pacifism to Nuclear Deterrence:

advocacy of disarmament as a natural corollary of this supposed dynamic had a powerful effect within the British elite prior to World War I and jeopardized the needed British preparation for conflict. Of course, economic arguments only partially, and sometimes not at all, shape leaders' calculations when deciding how to best advance their interests.

History shows that leaders are willing to pay massive economic penalties for advancing their national interests through war—and that the population often supports them in their endeavors. Fear, honor, and interest defined from a leader's vantage point are not easily reducible to monetary figures, if such a thing is possible at all. There is no universally shared conception of rationality informing a decision-making; that is why adversaries' beliefs and values must be taken into account when Washington is devising a strategy to influence their behavior.<sup>24</sup>

During the Cold War, much the same argument was applied by some to the Soviet Union as the rationale for détente era arms control agreements. It was later similarly repeated in the expectation that China would rise peacefully and take its place within the civilized "international community." Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was virtually unthinkable by much of the U.S. and European foreign policy establishment until the very last moment, when Russia's preparations made it obvious that doing so is what Russia intended. The United States supposedly could prudently remove regional forces, including nuclear, from Europe and Asia. That expectation has proven again to be a serious mistake.

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Norman Angell and the Founding of NATO," *Information Series*, No. 582 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 4, 2024), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/IS-582.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Faris, "Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?," op. cit.

## The More Things Change...

During the post-Cold War era, many U.S. officials believed the potential for conflicts among great powers was a thing of the past, and therefore the United States could move away from maintaining military capabilities or a defense industrial base associated with the need to prepare for great power confrontation and even war. In 1990, then-President George H. W. Bush stated:

A new partnership of nations has begun ... An era in which the nations of the world, east and west, north and south, can prosper and live in harmony. ... A world quite different from the one we've known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.<sup>25</sup>

One of the standard arguments was that increasing economic interdependence and the associated goal of prosperity would trump political hostilities and lead to more peaceful relations, including among political opponents.

The first post-Cold War U.S. administration assumed that there was emerging "a new world order, where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind—peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law."<sup>26</sup> The presumption was that

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<sup>25</sup> George H. W. Bush, address to a joint session of Congress, reprinted in, "Bush 'Out of These Troubled Times...A New World Order,'" *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/09/12/bush-out-of-these-troubled-times-a-new-world-order/b93b5cf1-e389-4e6a-84b0-85f71bf4c946/>.

<sup>26</sup> George H.W. Bush, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union*, January 29, 1991,

the states' political goals and norms were increasingly compatible, and even mutually reinforcing. This assumption prevailed for over two decades—driving the basic contours of much U.S. policy away from the preparation for potential war—despite increasing evidence that the underlying assumption was divorced from reality.<sup>27</sup> The underlying expectation again was, in contrast to historical experience, that “this time it will be different.”

Widely shared, but overly optimistic, assumptions about relations with foes were the basis for numerous official statements, reports, and academic treatises—with the frequent associated recommendation or decision regarding reductions in U.S. military capabilities. The problem of military capabilities reductions also pertained to U.S. allies' capabilities, which never were sufficient to counter the Soviet threat. NATO members' military modernization took a steep nosedive after the end of the Cold War when governments wanted to reap the benefits of the “peace dividend,” and only Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is (all too) slowly driving the change.<sup>28</sup>

The supposedly changed strategic environment was a part of the basis for the Global Zero Commission Report's

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<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-1>.

<sup>27</sup> Nadia Schadlow, “The End of American Illusion,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (September/October 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2020-08-11/end-american-illusion>.

<sup>28</sup> “Defence expenditure as percentage of GDP NATO total and NATO Europe,” *NATO Factsheet*, February 2024, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/2/pdf/FA\\_CTSHEET-NATO-defence-spending-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/2/pdf/FA_CTSHEET-NATO-defence-spending-en.pdf); and, Jarosław Wołkonowski, “NATO defense expenditures in 1949-2017,” SHS Web of Conferences, 2018, [https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2018/18/shsconf\\_infoglob2018\\_01032.pdf](https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2018/18/shsconf_infoglob2018_01032.pdf).

recommendations that the United States massively reduce and de-alert its nuclear forces.<sup>29</sup> Taking these steps unilaterally “would lay the groundwork for increasing security cooperation among the former Cold War adversaries and encourage them to consider comparable unilateral actions.”<sup>30</sup> The report recommended deep reductions in U.S. nuclear forces because: “Russia and China are not enemies of the United States.”<sup>31</sup> The report added, moreover, “regarding Russia and China, large-scale conflict with the United States is implausible,” and, “The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future....”<sup>32</sup> This statement is illustrative of a general thrust within the arms control community at the time.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has unilaterally reduced by over 90 percent the number of its tactical nuclear weapons (relative to the peak deployed number during the Cold War).<sup>33</sup> De-alerting proposed by some proponents of arms control would also strip U.S. nuclear forces of survivability, a key attribute for deterrence.<sup>34</sup> In the end, U.S. post-Cold War reductions only

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<sup>29</sup> General James Cartwright (Ret.), et al., *Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission Report: Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Strategy, Force Structure and Posture* (May 2012), p. 6, [https://www.globalzero.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/gz\\_us\\_nuclear\\_policy\\_commission\\_report.pdf](https://www.globalzero.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 10, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Department of Energy, “Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile,” 2024, [https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/U.S.%20Nuclear%20Weapons%20Stockpile%20Transparency%207\\_22\\_24.pdf](https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/U.S.%20Nuclear%20Weapons%20Stockpile%20Transparency%207_22_24.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Tim Miller and Rebecca Davis, “De-Alerting Nuclear Forces,” United States Air Force Institute for National Security Studies, 2009, [https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/6\\_Dealerting-INSS-Publication-Version.pdf/](https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/6_Dealerting-INSS-Publication-Version.pdf/).

benefitted U.S. adversaries that took advantage of the regional deterrence gap the United States has created and to which its infrastructure and political system are now too slow to adjust.

The U.S. Government's optimism with respect to political relations among states was reflected in the Obama Administration's 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, which stated that, "Russia and the United States are no longer adversaries, and prospects for military confrontation have declined dramatically" and, for the first time ever, placed non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament as the administration's top nuclear policy priorities.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the 2010 *Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report* noted, "As the President has made clear, both Russia and China are important partners for the future, and the United States seeks to continue building collaborative and cooperative relationships with them."<sup>36</sup> These statements became reflective of U.S. policy despite the fact that Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and despite Moscow's repeated nuclear threats against U.S. allies willing to host an element of a U.S. missile defense system in Europe.<sup>37</sup> They did not reflect the reality of revanchist geopolitical foes bent on expanding their spheres of influence.

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<sup>35</sup> Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, February 2010, pp. ii, iv, [https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/defensereviews/npr/2010\\_nuclear\\_posture\\_review\\_report.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/defensereviews/npr/2010_nuclear_posture_review_report.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> Department of Defense, *Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report*, February 2010, pp. 4-5, [https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/BMDR/BMDR\\_as\\_of\\_26JAN10\\_0630\\_for\\_web.pdf](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/BMDR/BMDR_as_of_26JAN10_0630_for_web.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Michaela Dodge, *What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2024), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Vol.-4-No.-1.pdf>.

## Deadly Consequences

Subsequent events demonstrate that adversaries have their own ideas and political calculations that defy enduring American expectations that opponents will engage in benign cooperation based on shared Western norms and the goal of overall economic prosperity. As 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.”<sup>38</sup>

After Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, President Obama repeatedly advocated “concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons” and steps to reduce “the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy,” seemingly assuming as if the United States and Russia shared strategic objectives.<sup>39</sup> President Obama actually won a Nobel Peace prize for this disarmament advocacy, even though this advocacy accomplished nothing substantive for U.S. national security. The Nobel Committee’s decision reflected its own biases and the well-known idealist ideas that shaped U.S. foreign policy after the end of the Cold War:

Multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play. Dialogue and negotiations are preferred as instruments for resolving even the most difficult international conflicts. The vision of a world free

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<sup>38</sup> Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race*, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in, Casey Michel, “Ukraine Now Faces a Nuclear Decision,” *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/07/ukraine-now-faces-a-nuclear-decision/>.

from nuclear arms has powerfully stimulated disarmament and arms control negotiations.<sup>40</sup>

The U.S. Government's general buy-in to the idealist cooperative vision made it harder to acknowledge and discuss the gathering storm across the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, including for U.S. allies.<sup>41</sup> For example, during the supposed "reset" era, allies actively censored themselves from discussing Russia's threat for fear of the American administration's retribution, e.g., in the form of less leadership attention to their country or weapon procurement delays.<sup>42</sup> Only the gravest shock to this prevailing worldview, in this case Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, forced an American administration invested in the idealist narrative to begin, partially, to recognize its mistake.

Ukraine is paying an enormous price for the West's collective naïveté about opponents' goals and motives. Driven by concerns over proliferation and to placate Moscow, the Clinton Administration spearheaded Kyiv's denuclearization. It downplayed Ukrainian concerns over its security and believed the Russians would, in fact, be willing to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity. President Clinton has since expressed regret over pressuring the Ukrainians to give up nuclear weapons on

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<sup>40</sup> "Nobel Peace Prize 2009," *Press Release*, October 9, 2009, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/press-release/>.

<sup>41</sup> Keith B. Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence With Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2023).

<sup>42</sup> Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 2022), p. 132, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/OP-Vol.-2-No.-4.pdf>.

their territory.<sup>43</sup> Most Ukrainians feel similarly.<sup>44</sup> Ukraine's cautionary tale of being invaded after giving up nuclear weapons illustrates the cost of Washington's enduring naïve expectations and is hardly lost on U.S. allies—and adversaries.<sup>45</sup>

The corrections U.S. administrations have pursued since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have been wholly inadequate given the challenging environment the United States and its allies face today.<sup>46</sup> The 2023 congressionally mandated bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission concluded that "the United States must re-evaluate the size and composition of the U.S. nuclear force that would be adequate to fulfill longstanding roles of that force. These roles include deterrence, assurance, achieving objectives should deterrence fail, and hedging against adverse

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<sup>43</sup> Azmi Haroun and Erin Snodgrass, "Bill Clinton says he feels 'terrible' for pushing a 1994 agreement with Russia that resulted in Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons," *Business Insider*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/bill-clinton-feels-terrible-convincing-ukraine-to-give-up-nukes-2023-4>.

<sup>44</sup> Victor Morton, "Ukraine foreign minister: Giving up nuclear weapons wasn't smart," *The Washington Times*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/22/dmytro-kuleba-ukraine-foreign-minister-giving-nucl/>; and, William Broad, "Ukraine Gave Up a Giant Nuclear Arsenal 30 Years Ago. Today There Are Regrets," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/05/science/ukraine-nuclear-weapons.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Michaela Dodge, "Geopolitical Consequences of Ukraine's Defeat," *Information Series*, No. 612 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 13, 2025), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/#\\_ednref62](https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-geopolitical-consequences-of-ukraines-defeat-no-612-january-13-2025/#_ednref62).

<sup>46</sup> For suggestions regarding a more sound U.S. nuclear posture, see Keith B. Payne et al., "A New Strategic Review for a New Age" (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2025), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2025-A-New-Strategic-Review.pdf>

events.”<sup>47</sup> Further, the Commission argued that: “U.S. defense strategy to address the two nuclear-peer threat requires a U.S. nuclear force that is either larger in size, different in composition, or both; therefore, decisions must be made now to meet evolving deterrence requirements.”<sup>48</sup>

Corrections will be extremely difficult, partially due to the atrophy that the U.S. defense industrial base and nuclear weapons complex has experienced since the end of the Cold War.<sup>49</sup> They will also have to contend with an historical pattern of U.S. Governments, invested in their naïve expectations, being slow or unwilling to make public bad news about the state of the threat—until it becomes too obvious to ignore. Flexibility and resilience take resources but, given the persistence of naïvely optimistic expectations, U.S. post-Cold War administrations have failed to make a compelling case for the needed defense spending, even though a sound defense posture underpins U.S. prosperity globally.

The post-Cold War expectation of the end of realist history created a permissive environment for imprudent, idealistic arms control initiatives and U.S. unilateral weapon reductions. The presumption was that a new cooperative era of international relations would allow the United States to safely take an extended “holiday from history.”<sup>50</sup> Given Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia, and its

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<sup>47</sup> 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, p. 90, <https://ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Scheber, *A Responsive Nuclear Warhead Infrastructure: What Still Needs to Be Done? Why Is a Responsive Infrastructure More Urgent Now Than in the Past?*, op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Gates, “We need a more realistic strategy for the post-Cold War era,” *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/03/why->

2014 military operations against Ukraine, culminating in February 2022 in the largest land war in Europe since the end of World War II, these powerful expectations—which have been a long-standing norm—were completely misguided and were recognized as such by a few realist voices at the time. One of those dissenting voices was Gray, one of the most preeminent strategists of our time. In 1999, he observed that the return of Russia as a politico-military challenge to the West (which he fully expected) “immediately would threaten independent Ukraine [and] the Baltics.”<sup>51</sup>

These same idealistic expectations were reflected in the U.S. retreat from the two-war force projection standard it previously used as an adequacy metric for its military posture. Planning for a two-war standard naturally requires more resources than planning for lesser contingencies, which the United States has not been willing to provide.<sup>52</sup> This lowering of adequacy standards had a direct effect on U.S. preparations—as was the intention. As a consequence, the United States spent an estimated 3.2 percent of its GDP on defense in 2025, less than in 2014 when it was facing much less lethal adversaries and despite President Trump’s own call for NATO countries to spend at least 5 percent of GDP on defense.<sup>53</sup>

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ukraine-should-force-a-total-overhaul-of-our-national-security-strategy/.

<sup>51</sup> Colin S. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age* (London: Lynn Reiner Press, 1999), pp. 39-41.

<sup>52</sup> David Trachtenberg, *The Demise of the “Two-War Strategy” and Its Impact on Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, *Occasional Paper*, No. 6, Vol. 4 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2024), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Vol.-4-No.-6.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025),” December 2025, p. 4, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/finance/def-exp-2025-en.pdf>.

The number of Army installations in Europe decreased from 245 to 145 between 2003 and 2010.<sup>54</sup> Today, there are no more than 40 military bases across Europe, a far cry from previous U.S. presence.<sup>55</sup> The United States withdrew its last battle tank from Europe in April 2013. Sgt. Jeremy Jordan of the 529th Military Police Company commented on the occasion that, “As these tanks sail back to the U.S., we are closing a chapter in history.”<sup>56</sup> The following year, Russia invaded Ukraine.

Even Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine was not enough to fundamentally change Washington’s reckless optimism regarding the future of great power relations. In fact, then-Secretary of State John Kerry said Russia’s aggression sprang not from its expansionist, aggressive agenda, but from its feelings of “weakness.”<sup>57</sup> He went on to say that, “you just don’t, in the 21st century, behave in 19th-century fashion by invading another country....”<sup>58</sup> Except Russia did, in 2008, 2014, and then again in 2022. This is in addition

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<sup>54</sup> United States Army in Europe, Diane Devens, “Efficient Basing in Europe – Base Realignment and Closure by Any Other Name,” *U.S. Army Journal of Installation Management* (September 2010), p. 51, <https://www.scribd.com/document/39767575/US-Army-Journal-of-Installation-Management-Fall-2010>.

<sup>55</sup> Molly Carlough, Benjamin Harris, and Abi McGowan, “Where Are U.S. Forces Deployed in Europe?,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 6, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/article/where-are-us-forces-deployed-europe>.

<sup>56</sup> John Vandiver, “US Army’s last tanks depart from Germany,” *Stars and Stripes*, April 4, 2013, <https://www.stripes.com/migration/us-army-s-last-tanks-depart-from-germany-1.214977>.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Rebecca Kaplan, “John Kerry warns of consequences for Russia after Ukraine invasion,” CBS News, Face the Nation, March 2, 2014, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-kerry-warns-of-consequences-for-russia-after-ukraine-invasion/>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

to conducting more-or-less overt campaigns of aggression against U.S. NATO allies.<sup>59</sup>

The change in perceptions would not come until the first Trump Administration's *National Security Strategy* released in 2017.<sup>60</sup> Yet, even the Trump Administration had difficulties implementing sufficient defense budget increases and a comprehensive economic strategy to counter China. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, the Biden Administration continued to promote arms control as the most reliable and effective way to prevent nuclear war, and to refer to the deadly nature of conflict with the newly allied Russia and China as a "competition," as if a relatively benign sporting event.<sup>61</sup> Despite increasing evidence of China's economic and technical support for Russia after its brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the United States, and the West in general, remain rather lukewarm in their implementation of punitive measures that would dissuade countries like China or India from trading with Russia and benefiting its wartime economy, particularly from cheap oil.

## Conclusion

Even though the situation is slowly changing, real U.S. defense spending and acquisition processes have yet to contend with a very different (and much worse) reality than successive post-Cold War administrations have confidently

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<sup>59</sup> Michaela Dodge, "Russia is at War with the West," *Information Series* No. 636 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 11, 2025), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michaela-dodge-russia-is-at-war-with-the-west-no-636-september-11-2025/](https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-russia-is-at-war-with-the-west-no-636-september-11-2025/).

<sup>60</sup> The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> "A Conversation With Secretary Antony Blinken," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-secretary-antony-blinken>.

expected. The assumption that shared values, economic prosperity, and arms control enthusiasm will automatically translate to democratization, moderation, armament restraint, and an aversion to the expansionist use of force has again been proven wrong, particularly in cases of Russia and China. These two countries are now effectively allied to upend the current world order and advance their interests at the expense of the United States and its allies.

The parallel to Western expectations about Germany in the 1930s is striking. The general expectation was that National Socialism would ultimately be tamed by responsible German politicians and that Adolf Hitler would become a traditional “statesman.”<sup>62</sup> The result was a recklessly slow program of British rearmament. Due to its lack of preparedness and hope that appeasing Hitler would moderate his appetite, the United Kingdom ended up almost perishing at Hitler’s hands. The more recent U.S. repetition of naïve expectations regarding revisionist dictatorships intent on reshaping the world order to their image persisted for many more years than did British fascination with Sir Norman Angell’s earlier misguided thesis about the pacifying effects of economic interdependencies.

The first step toward correction is a recognition that autocratic states often do not share the Western definition of “reasonable” norms, or an enthusiasm for arms control inhibiting their power, and have proven willing to sacrifice their economic prosperity in the pursuit of their revisionist

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<sup>62</sup> There were some exceptions. For example, prior to the outbreak of war in 1939, R.C.K. Ensor, a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, began a frank and concise series of monographs that described Hitler and his policy directions quite accurately. See, R.C.K. Ensor, *Herr Hitler’s Self-Disclosure In Mein Kampf*, Oxford Pamphlets On World Affairs, No. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, July 6, 1939); and, *Who Hitler Is*, Oxford Pamphlets On World Affairs, No. 20 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939).

political goals. Put simply, foreign leaders' positions often do not conform to Western expectations of an objective and universal understanding of what is reasonable. They have been willing to pursue high-risk gambits and risks, what Western leaders characterize as irrational policies and risks, for the sake of their grandiose agendas. The United States must not be seduced by the fallacies that a liberal international order is desired by all or that the arms control process can solve underlying political tensions among adversaries.



### **Chapter III. The Fallacy That the Arms Control Process Will Independently Improve Political Relations**

*"We don't mistrust each other because we're armed; we're armed because we mistrust each other."*<sup>63</sup>

An important example of an influential, enduring expectation that has typically proven to be fundamentally mistaken is that arms control negotiations and agreements will drive improved political relations, and 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 armaments limits of the agreement. Specific limits are far less important than creating improved political conditions via a cooperative arms control process. This fallacy has resulted in arms control agreements that disadvantage the United States, because the process was deemed more important than the substance and U.S. concessions less important than the continuation of the process and achievement of an agreement. The resultant atrophy and nuclear force reductions have been extremely difficult to reverse now that the extent of U.S. adversaries' armaments has become clear.

#### **Arms Control and Political Expectations between World War I and II**

The notion that arms control will markedly improve political relations with opponents is, perhaps, the most

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, "Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev" (undated), <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/the-presidency/mikhail-gorbachev>.

prominent and enduring, but most obviously wrong, expectation. For example, despite expectations advanced on behalf of the League of Nations, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and the Naval Arms Agreements, there was little/nothing that these diplomatic/arms control efforts did to promote improved political relations with the aggressive, expansionist powers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The renowned American diplomat, George Kennan, pointed to the inability of arms negotiations to be the dynamic for changed political relations in his assessment of the ill-fated 1925-1935 disarmament discussions under the League of Nations:

It had been pointed out by thoughtful people, many years before these discussions began, that armaments were a symptom rather than a cause, primarily the reflection of international relations, and only secondarily the source of them. I know of no sound reason why, even in 1925, anyone should have supposed that there was any likelihood that general disarmament could be brought about by multilateral agreement among a group of European powers whose mutual political differences and suspicions had been by no means resolved. The realities underlying the maintenance of national armaments generally were at that time no more difficult to perceive than they are today.<sup>64</sup>

And,

The evil of these utopian enthusiasms was not only, or even primarily, the wasted time, the misplaced emphasis, the encouragement of false hopes. The evil lay primarily in the fact that these

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<sup>64</sup> George F. Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 20-23.

enthusiasms distracted our gaze from the real things that were happening... The cultivation of these utopian schemes, flattering to our own image of ourselves, took place at the expense of our feeling for reality. And when the rude facts of the power conflict finally did intrude themselves directly upon us, in the form of enemies against whom we were forced to fight in the two World Wars, we found it difficult to perceive the relation between them and the historical logic of our epoch, because we understood the latter so poorly.<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, interwar arms control agreements absorbed the diplomatic energies of democracies—but left them befuddled and weakened. The arms control and disarmament process “legitimized the most irresponsible elements within democracies by framing discussion of the military problems posed by Germany and Japan not in military terms, but in terms of the agreements and of the international law that underlay them.”<sup>66</sup> Democratic states were therefore more easily able to justify the disarmament that they wanted to pursue anyway given the immense social and economic exhaustion of World War I and later pressures of the 1930’s economic crisis. In fact, they infamously chose appeasement rather than confrontation in a vain hope that Hitler’s National Socialist regime would moderate and spare them.<sup>67</sup>

The shift in the discussion from other states’ hostile political intentions to general arms control desirability was

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Malcolm Wallop and Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Arms Control Delusion* (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1987), p. 18.

<sup>67</sup> A. Wess Mitchell, *Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from Attila the Hun to Kissinger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025), pp. 137-167.

necessary because a realistic discussion of threats would suggest the impotence of prevailing arms control and disarmament ideas in the face of determined foes. Recognition of the seriousness of other states' revisionism would require costly rearmament that democracies typically do not wish for, and prefer to disdain, until threats become so direct and imminent that they can no longer be ignored. Moreover, national rearmament would have "undermined the very system of collective security" democracies were trying to establish at the time.<sup>68</sup> Thus the imperative became to protect the potential for collective security at the expense of more immediate security, with terrible results for states given to the delusion that other states wished for disarmament as much as they did.

The scale of the West's self-deception in the 1930s becomes even clearer when one considers that Germany's revanchist goals following its signature of the Versailles Treaty and Adolf Hitler's ideas for world domination were no secret. Hitler published his manifesto *Mein Kampf* in 1922. The book outlined Hitler's aggressive agenda, yet most western leaders responded belatedly to Germany's aggressive designs well after Hitler became the Chancellor in 1933. Instead, they chose to appease Hitler, feeding his appetite for expansion one piece of the Rhineland and Sudetenland at a time.

Rather than reconciling the fundamental political differences between revisionist and status quo powers during the interwar period, the arms control process further exacerbated them. No less astute an observer than Sir Winston Churchill remarked in 1932 that rather than improving political relations among countries, arms control and disarmament negotiations "focused the attention of the leading men in all nations upon the competitive aspect of armaments, and upon technical questions which they never

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<sup>68</sup> Wallop and Codevilla, *The Arms Control Delusion*, op. cit., p. 17.

would have heard of. This process has intensified the suspicions and the anxieties of the nations, and has brought the possibilities of war nearer to us than they were some years ago.”<sup>69</sup>

The process also reduced key discussions about why the National Socialists were violating agreements (in other words, what political purposes would German weapons serve) into technical questions of compliance with the Versailles Treaty and other treaties, thus reframing what should have been the most important consideration. The eminent strategist Gray later observed a similar dynamic with respect to arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union: “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].”<sup>70</sup> What mattered, Gray said, was “the net freedom of action permitted each side and of the implications of that judgment for conflict outcomes at all levels.”<sup>71</sup> In short, as in the past, for the hopeful democracy, the arms control process focused attention on technical measures associated with the arms control process itself rather than on the implications of the balance of forces in light of the opponents’ hostile political agendas.

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in, Randolph Churchill, *Arms and Covenant, Speeches by the Right Hon. Winston S. Churchill* (London, UK: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1938), p. 42.

<sup>70</sup> Colin S. Gray, “The Strategic Implications of the Nuclear Balance and Arms Control,” in Richard Staar, ed., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), p. 24.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

## Nuclear Arms Control during the Cold War and the Necessities of Ignoring Political Relations

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union sought strategic advantage wholly inconsistent with the U.S. overarching concept of a mutual deterrence balance. It intentionally worked to preclude U.S. strategic advantages necessary to sustain extended deterrence and allied assurance. The Soviet Union was interested in positioning itself to win a potential military nuclear war with the United States, had much larger conventional forces in Europe, and expanded its strategic and theater nuclear forces, including during periods in which U.S. nuclear forces were declining—dramatically so in Europe.

Consequently, the Soviet Union used the arms control process to limit U.S. armaments while expanding its own capabilities to meet the demands of its explicitly “war-fighting” nuclear doctrine.<sup>72</sup> Moscow knew it could not win a military competition with a fully engaged United States, so it used the arms control process to help restrain Washington in areas of U.S. advantage (e.g., missile defense) while leaving space for its own nuclear force expansion as wide open as possible, including violating arms control agreements when it suited Soviet interests. Moscow understood and played on the same enduring and naïve arms control expectations that drove democracies during the interwar period—and succeeded brilliantly.

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<sup>72</sup> Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), p. 85; Lothar Rühl, “Offensive Defence in the Warsaw Pact,” *Survival*, Vol. 33, No. 5 (September/October 1991), pp. 442-450; Beatrice Heuser, “Warsaw Pact Military Doctrines in the 1970s and 1980s: Findings in the East German Archives,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (October-December 1993), pp. 437-458; and, Beatrice Heuser, “Victory in a Nuclear War? A Comparison of NATO and WTO War Aims and Strategies,” *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (November 1998), pp. 311-327.

The U.S. political system made it easier for the Soviets to manipulate arms control and disarmament sentiments in their favor. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's "mutual assured destruction" concept helped to create space for Soviet manipulation, because it abstracted the actor from the weaponry. The theory behind the "assured destruction" paradigm postulated that if both countries have enough nuclear weapons to retaliate against each other's society, they would each be deterred from attacking first, regardless of strategic cultures, political goals, histories, or asymmetric stakes in conflict. Because the number of U.S. weapons needed for this deterrence task was relatively small, there was an enormous margin available for the United States to focus on the presumed political goals of arms control rather than the military significance of those force numbers, which was the Soviet focus.

According to Senator Wallop and Codevilla, "U.S. planners, discomfited by the prospect of dealing militarily – and in terms of the budget – with an open-ended Soviet military challenge, decided to abstract from that challenge, not to deal with it on its own terms. We would find terms that would give us the assurance of peace at relatively low cost *regardless of what the Soviets did.*"<sup>73</sup> Further, American representatives decided that they could model desirable behavior and that Soviet leaders would follow their example. The prevalent belief at the time was that if the Americans educated the Soviets, they would see nuclear deterrence exactly the same way. The arms control process became means to that education, reflecting the fallacy that the process can improve political relations between the two states.

Reflecting another persistent myth that U.S. actions drive adversaries' reactions (see Chapter IV for a more

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<sup>73</sup> Wallop and Codevilla, *The Arms Control Delusion*, op. cit., p. 51. Emphasis in original.

detailed discussion of this particular myth), Jerome Wiesner, the former Chairman of President Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee, could claim in all seriousness that U.S. unilateral disarmament steps could "even start a peace race" in which both sides realize that large numbers of offensive nuclear forces are unnecessary, and resources would be better spent on other priorities, e.g., social programs.<sup>74</sup> The supposed peace race led by the good U.S. example, and notions of a "stable" deterrence balance, rationalized the intentional sacrifice of U.S. nuclear superiority in the 1960s so that the Soviets could catch up. But this was a worthy sacrifice, according to arms control proponents, because relations between the two states would improve and the number of weapons each wielded against the other would decrease, with associated desirable lowering of the costs and increases in security.<sup>75</sup>

None of this actually happened, of course, but the approach fit long-standing U.S. expectations about arms control and its importance in shaping political relations with other states. These were, as always, extremely convenient narratives because they relieved Washington of the hard and unpleasant tasks of understanding Moscow and countering the threat on its own terms. The real world held no approximation to Washington's idealistic vision of the arms control process; nevertheless, the prospects for cost reductions, while improving political relations, were too seductive to be ignored. This approach to arms control does not fit the reality of relations among opponents, but it has

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<sup>74</sup> ABM, MIRV, SALT, and the Nuclear Arms Race: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Law and Organization of the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, 91<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Foreign Affairs, 1970), [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b643705&view=1up&seq=7](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b643705&view=1up&seq=7).

<sup>75</sup> Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence With Disarmament*, op. cit.

been Washington's convenient, self-serving approach for decades.

Committed to this vision, the United States consciously slowed its nuclear forces development and deployment in the 1970s so that the Soviets could catch up and secure their place in a supposedly "stable" balance of terror. Once the Soviets arrived at U.S. force levels, it was expected that Moscow would be more amenable to arms control negotiations in which both countries would achieve mutually agreed nuclear force reductions. Thus, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) process was born, and accomplished precisely nothing of the expected limitation on the continuing Soviet nuclear expansion—actually allowing Russian strategic nuclear weapons to increase about four-fold from 1972 to 1985. Had the SALT agreements not been terminated by President Ronald Reagan in 1986 (due to Russian violations) the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads would have continued to increase.<sup>76</sup> President Reagan's decision got the Soviet Union's attention and apparently facilitated the negotiation of the INF and START Treaties.

William Van Cleave, who served on the SALT delegation and was the only participant to testify against the agreement, assessed a decade after President Richard Nixon signed the agreements that "Arms control, when combined with related strategic concepts, helped blind Americans to Soviet motivations and objectives. It also led many to disparage the fundamental political and ideological differences between the United States and the USSR. After all, if political differences were irrelevant to agreement on strategic stability, how important could they be?"<sup>77</sup> Van Cleave's comments illustrate the fallacy that the

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<sup>76</sup> National Security Council Meeting, "Interim Restraint Policy," Reagan Library, Mimeograph, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> William R. Van Cleave, "The Arms Control Record: Successes and Failures," in Staar, ed., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality*, op. cit., p. 6.

arms control process independently improves political relations between states and that political hostilities are of secondary importance to the supposed shared desire to codify “stable” nuclear deterrence.

How did the U.S. restraint expressed prior to, during, and after SALT negotiations (both I and II) work out for the United States? Then-Secretary of Defense Harold Brown’s 1979 quote sums it best: “Soviet spending has shown no response to U.S. restraint—when we build, they build; when we cut, they build.”<sup>78</sup> The Soviet Union was not only able to catch up and then exceed U.S. nuclear forces numerically, but also obtained a large advantage in total yield of their nuclear warheads, thus placing many U.S. nuclear forces at risk,<sup>79</sup> which is roundly considered a condition that jeopardizes deterrence.

The shift in the nuclear balance of strategic nuclear power facilitated by the arms control process resulted in Moscow challenging U.S. interests in Mozambique, Ethiopia, Angola, South Yemen and, finally, through direct military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979, according to Georgy Shakhnazarov, a member of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He reflected on the situation throughout the 1970s after the end of the Cold War: “How was it [the situation in 1977-1979] different from the previous years? It was different because the Soviet Union entered that period at the peak of its military might. Never before did we have such a powerful military force.

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<sup>78</sup> Testimony of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown before the U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on the Budget, *Outlook and Budget Levels for Fiscal Years 1979 and 1980: Hearings Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on the Budget*, 96<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, Part 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 500.

<sup>79</sup> George Rathjens and Jack Ruina, “Nuclear Doctrine and Rationality,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (Winter 1981), p. 180.

And it had to fire, it was seeking to find a use for itself.”<sup>80</sup> Moscow attributed its freedom to expand, at the expense of the West, to its ability to engage under the shadow of its nuclear force advantages<sup>81</sup>—in the words of Paul Nitze, Moscow was “detering our [U.S.] deterrent.”<sup>82</sup>

## **Peak Delusion: Arms Control and the End of the Cold War**

The history of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty implementation, followed by the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) in the early 1990s, is illustrative of mistaken expectations that the arms control process will improve political relations between hostile countries. It is also an example of the associated reckless U.S. behavior after the end of the Cold War that political representatives justified by the expectation that “this time will be different.” The PNIs started as U.S. unilateral statements regarding reductions of forward-deployed nuclear forces that were supposed to be reciprocated by Russia (but were not). The history of the INF Treaty is much longer, but it was the change in political relations between the countries under General Secretary Mikheil Gorbachev that made its conclusion possible.<sup>83</sup>

Both the PNIs and the INF Treaty reflected political relations that were changing, which made their

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<sup>80</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and David A. Welch, eds., “Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1977-1980,” transcript from The Carter-Brezhnev Project, p. 38 (Washington, D.C.: National Security Archive, 1995), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/carterbrezhnev/>.

<sup>81</sup> Keith B. Payne, *Nuclear Deterrence in U.S.-Soviet Relations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 79-110.

<sup>82</sup> Paul Nitze, “Detering Our Deterrent,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 5 (Winter 1976-1977), p. 208.

<sup>83</sup> Bush, address to a joint session of Congress, reprinted in, “Bush ‘Out of These Troubled Times...A New World Order,’” op. cit.

implementation possible as the Cold War was ending, and impossible for Russia to observe as relations with Moscow soon grew more hostile. The combination of Washington's post-Cold War optimism about increasing economic interdependence, a supposed "new world order," and the political pull in Washington to abide by arms control obligations even after Russian noncompliance, made it extremely difficult for the United States to adapt to Russia's increasing belligerence, arms control violations, and the emergence of more severe nuclear threats.

The INF Treaty was rationalized, in part, by the important argument that the remaining and expected U.S. theater nuclear forces at the time would sustain extended deterrence in the absence of those INF forces eliminated by treaty.<sup>84</sup> Yet, the subsequent PNIs and U.S. further termination of most theater nuclear forces and programs destroyed that rationale. These reductions were based on the fallacious notion that post-Cold War conditions marked the "end of history" and the beginning of a new, more peaceful, international order. Yet, Russia did not abide by its political commitment to reciprocate U.S. elimination of most of its regional nuclear forces<sup>85</sup> and engaged in manifest violations of the INF Treaty for years. Washington tried in vain to bring Russia back into compliance with its INF Treaty obligations, leaving the United States no recourse, after years, other than to withdraw from the treaty. Russia, of course, uses U.S. withdrawal for its political propaganda, blaming the United States, rather than its own violations,

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<sup>84</sup> Trachtenberg, Dodge, and Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, op. cit.

<sup>85</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Adherence and Compliance With Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, June 2020, pp. 23-24, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-Adherence-to-and-Compliance-with-Arms-Control-Nonproliferation-and-Disarmament-Agreements-and-Commitments-Compliance-Report-1.pdf>.

for the demise of the treaty and worsening national security conditions.

The military was not exempt from the kind of wishful and fatuous arms control thinking that has shaped politics of the process over the decades. During deliberations on the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Shalikashvili stated that, “if we become signatories [to the treaty], I believe we will be able to speak with a stronger voice to the rest of the world that they too should become signatories. We will have a lot less influence over them if we should stay out of that.”<sup>86</sup> The idea that there is a world community that shares values, goals, and political objectives has been proven wrong over and over throughout arms control history. It is just as irrational to assume that the “world community” will be strong enough to enforce compliance with arms control obligations. The 2025 compliance report is a sobering read: with key U.S. adversaries violating the provisions of the CWC, the U.S. “stronger voice” quite unsurprisingly was ineffective in bringing them into compliance with terms of the convention.<sup>87</sup>

The reality is that while adversaries can and do push beyond the boundaries of arms control compliance to engage in material violations when necessary to achieve their objectives, the United States has no such option due to the nature of its political system and the investment political leaders have in the arms control process. The U.S. political

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<sup>86</sup> U.S. Government Printing Office, “Military Implications of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC),” *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Third Congress*, August 9, 11, and 18, 1994, p. 63, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31210018779619&seq=1>.

<sup>87</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Compliance with the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction, Condition (10)(C) Report*, April 2025, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Condition-10-c-Report-Accessible-4.23.2025.pdf>.

system simply does not permit the military to develop, deploy, and utilize weapons that arms control prohibits.

Arms control treaties to which the Senate gives its advice and consent become the law of the land. Indeed, the United States often complies not just with the letter of agreements, but with their “spirit,” a term so unclear it should have never become a part of the national security parlance. Because the military services know they will not be permitted to develop any weapons that might violate U.S. arms control obligations, they do not like to “waste” scarce resources by thinking through what they *could* be doing with weapons prohibited by arms control, and Congress generally does not like to fund even treaty-permitted exploratory technical work that might threaten the “spirit” of arms control. In fact, arms control prohibitions often bleed through into other areas that originally had nothing to do with the weapon system regulated by arms control, as was the case with *theater* missile defenses limited by the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which concerned *strategic* missile defense systems.<sup>88</sup>

At the end of the Cold War, Washington quickly dismantled its theater nuclear weapons and intermediate-range ballistic missile infrastructure and has not been able to restart it on a scale comparable to its adversaries in all the years of Russia’s violations and noncompliance with the INF Treaty and the PNIs. These realities have contributed to the contemporary significant “gap” in Western nuclear deterrence capabilities for extended deterrence, heightening allies’ questions about U.S. credibility as the guarantor of their security.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> U.S. Department of State, “First Agreed Statement of September 26, 1997, Relating to the ABM Treaty,” *Factsheet*, September 26, 1997, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/arms/factsheets/missdef/first.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Keith B. Payne, Michaela Dodge, Matthew R. Costlow, and David J. Trachtenberg, *The Pernicious Effects of Arms Control Misconceptions on*

The first Trump Administration's short-term fix of providing the W76 warhead with a low-yield option is a stopgap measure from a deterrence perspective, because with each low-yield warhead converted for this mission, the United States loses strategic coverage at the time when U.S. strategic forces are assuming a greater deterrence burden due to adversaries' expanding nuclear arsenals. It seems likely that awareness of the gap between U.S. and Russia's regional deterrence capabilities contributed to Moscow's calculations when, under the cover of its nuclear escalation threat, it decided to invade Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and then again on a full-scale basis in 2022. Russia has since brandished nuclear threats to slow down and limit Western aid to Ukraine, and regularly engages in nuclear intimidation of the United States and its allies – with some apparent measures of success.<sup>90</sup>

### **New START: The Most Recent Case of Old Misplaced Enthusiasms**

The fallacy that the arms control process is a solution to political difficulties was on full display during the Senate's consideration of New START. At the time, Ambassador Steven Pifer argued, against all evidence, that "The relationship [between the United States and Russia] has improved substantially since then [the treaty negotiations started], and New START has been a major driver of that improvement."<sup>91</sup> This typical statement came against the

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*Extended Deterrence and Assurance, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 4, No. 9 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2024), pp. 61-80, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Vol.-4-No.-9.pdf>.

<sup>90</sup> Dodge, *What Do Russia's Nuclear Threats Tell Us About Arms Control Prospects?*, op. cit.

<sup>91</sup> "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,

realities that Russia declared itself openly hostile to U.S. interests in 2007,<sup>92</sup> and invaded Georgia in 2008—to be followed by the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, only a few years after New START entered into force in 2011. 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! New START clearly did not improve U.S.-Russia relations. Indeed, after concluding New START Russia increased its nuclear weapons buildup.<sup>93</sup> Thus continued the decades-old cycle of unwarranted optimism regarding arms control, followed by disappointment that went largely unremarked because doing so would acknowledge the fallacies embedded in the original wishful thinking.

These were precious years during which the United States could have pursued programs that would have revitalized its nuclear production complex and defense industrial base and built them on a more sound footing for the emerging, worsening geopolitical environment. Successive administrations failed to even speed up the existing program of record on nuclear modernization. Washington could have strengthened its allies and

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and 29, 2010), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg65071/html/CHRG-111shrg65071.htm>.

<sup>92</sup> 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>.

<sup>93</sup> Mark B. Schneider, “The Russian Nuclear Weapons Buildup and the Future of the New START Treaty,” *National Institute for Public Policy*, No. 414, October 27, 2016, [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/schneider-mark-the-russian-nuclear-weapons-buildup-and-the-future-of-the-new-start-treaty/](https://nipp.org/information_series/schneider-mark-the-russian-nuclear-weapons-buildup-and-the-future-of-the-new-start-treaty/).

pressured them to spend more on defense rather than silencing them to not discuss the nature of Russia's threat. Instead, Washington lost these critical years due to its enduring wishful thinking and mirror imaging, with the arms control process playing no small part in both reflecting and sustaining the delusion.

The long-standing presumption regarding the connection between arms control efforts and improved political relations leads to the pursuit of arms control for the sake of its expected political effect, while the substance is considered secondary—leading to poorly thought out and constructed agreements. They cannot be otherwise. Political hostility works against arms control agreements having significant effect on forces believed to truly matter, or on the political hostility that drives the felt need for those forces.<sup>94</sup> Yet, democracies typically are more willing than autocracies to make arms control concessions and are slower to respond when adversaries violate agreements and expand their capabilities.

New START illustrates the fallacy of the belief that the arms control process independently improves political relations and therefore is worth concessions from democracies in its pursuit. Substantively, New START was a deeply flawed agreement with a greatly weakened verification regime relative to previous regimes; it required the United States to bear a majority of reductions while permitting Russia to build up to the treaty limits, a point well-recognized (and welcomed) by Russian negotiators.<sup>95</sup>

The Obama Administration misrepresented or blatantly denied information that the treaty required U.S. unilateral reductions in an effort to persuade the Senate to give the advice and consent to the treaty, which happened

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<sup>94</sup> Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail*, op. cit.

<sup>95</sup> U.S. Department of State, "A Rebuttal to Sen. Kit Bond's November 18, 2010 Floor Speech in the U.S. Senate on the New START Treaty," November 24, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/151981.htm>.

unprecedentedly in the lame duck session.<sup>96</sup> Political expediency, leadership investment in arms control, and unwarranted arms controllers' optimism, won over a sound treaty and geopolitical relationship assessment, which should have resulted in the rejection of New START (and most likely would have after the 2010 mid-term elections in which a few Senators who supported the treaty lost their seats). Then-Russian defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov was undoubtedly pleased when he said, following New START's entry into force, that Russia could build up to the treaty limits by 2028 (past the treaty's 2026 expiration date).<sup>97</sup> Indeed, the last Russian New START data exchange from 2022 indicated Russia had more deployed warheads and delivery vehicles than it had in 2011 when New START went into effect.<sup>98</sup> Russian defense expert Vladimir Dvorkin acknowledged that "Russia does not need to reduce anything. Only the U.S.A. will have to reduce its arsenals."<sup>99</sup>

There was no accountability for the Obama Administration's misrepresentations. In fact, many of the perpetrators of these misleading (at best) narratives continue their advocacy for the *next* arms control

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<sup>96</sup> Keith Payne, "Postscript on New START," *National Review*, January 18, 2011, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2011/01/postscript-new-start-keith-b-payne/>.

<sup>97</sup> Keith B. Payne, "New START: From Russia with Glee," *National Review*, June 13, 2011, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2011/06/new-start-russia-glee-keith-b-payne/>.

<sup>98</sup> U.S. Department of State, "New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms of the United States and the Russian Federation, February 2011 – March 2022," Fact Sheet, March 1, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty-aggregate-numbers-of-strategic-offensive-arms-of-the-united-states-and-the-russian-federation-february-2011-march-2022/>; and, U.S. Department of State, "New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms," *State.gov*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty-aggregate-numbers-ofstrategic-offensive-arms-4/>.

<sup>99</sup> Payne, "New START: From Russia with Glee," *op. cit.*

agreements with the Russians based on the same flawed assumptions that got the United States into a difficult position of maintaining deterrence, with greatly reduced and aging capabilities, in the first place.

When the Biden Administration extended New START in February 2021 with no preconditions, arms control advocates postulated that such an extension “would provide the new president with an early win and positive momentum, help restore U.S. credibility on arms control issues, and create the potential for more ambitious steps to reduce the nuclear danger and move us closer to a world without nuclear weapons.”<sup>100</sup> Such assertions now should be recognized as deeply foolhardy. Instead, Russia invaded Ukraine the second time in eight years in February 2022 — this time on a massive scale — in an attempt to subjugate the entire country, and used its expanded nuclear capabilities to issue explicit nuclear threats to deter and delay Western help for Ukraine,<sup>101</sup> a strategy that clearly has worked, at least in part.

Recent proposals to extend New START yet again despite Russia’s treaty violations and military aggression were that much more nonsensical because, by 2021 the scale of China’s nuclear modernization had become apparent. The U.S. force posture under New START was established at a time when the U.S. political leadership assumed a much more benign political environment. Even in those benign conditions, U.S. military leaders said it reflected the

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<sup>100</sup> Daryl G. Kimball, “Biden’s First Challenge: Extend New START,” *Arms Control Association* January/February 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-01/focus/bidens-first-challenge-extend-new-start>.

<sup>101</sup> Michaela Dodge, “Next Steps in Arms Control? Lessons from Moscow’s New START Violations,” *Information Series*, No. 619 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 4, 2025), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michaela-dodge-next-steps-in-arms-control-lessons-from-moscows-new-start-violations-no-618-march-4-2025/#\\_edn4](https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-next-steps-in-arms-control-lessons-from-moscows-new-start-violations-no-618-march-4-2025/#_edn4).

minimum acceptable force posture. Under contemporary conditions, it can only be inadequate given the expansion of multiple opponents' nuclear capabilities and their manifestly hostile agendas. Then-Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command Admiral Charles Richard referred to China's nuclear expansion as "breathtaking" and a "strategic breakout."<sup>102</sup> Perhaps even more worrisome is Russia and China's strategic cooperation aimed at disrupting the U.S. alliance system and redrawing respective regional maps.<sup>103</sup> Never before has the United States had to worry simultaneously about two nuclear-armed peer competitors (with theater nuclear forces far superior to the United States) aligned with an increasingly nuclear capable "rogue" state, i.e., North Korea.

Ultimately, the Trump Administration "allowed," New START to expire. President Trump stated, "Rather than extend 'NEW START' (A badly negotiated deal by the United States that, aside from everything else, is being grossly violated), we should have our Nuclear Experts work on a new, improved, and modernized Treaty that can last long into the future."<sup>104</sup> This was a step in the right direction. The freedom to adjust the U.S. strategic posture as befitting the threats that the country and its allies face is at a premium as the United States modernizes its strategic

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<sup>102</sup> John Vandiver, "'Breathtaking expansion': US Strategic Command leader expects further revelations of China's nuclear weapons advancement," *Stars and Stripes*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2021-10-18/china-us-russia-nuclear-weapons-hypersonics-stratcom-3283272.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Peppino DeBiaso, "The Rise of a New Axis: Great Power Struggle and the Future of Conflict," *Information Series*, No. 622 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 8, 2025), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/peppino-debiaso-the-rise-of-a-new-axis-great-power-struggle-and-the-future-of-conflict-no-622-april-8-2025/](https://nipp.org/information_series/peppino-debiaso-the-rise-of-a-new-axis-great-power-struggle-and-the-future-of-conflict-no-622-april-8-2025/).

<sup>104</sup> President Donald Trump, Truth Details, February 5, 2026, <https://www.trumpstruth.org/statuses/36491>.

delivery systems. Planning against adversaries' capabilities, rather than against arms control limits that have been violated, would be a worthy first step to deal with a more dangerous security environment.

Despite U.S. efforts to keep the arms control process alive, Russia violated and then illegally suspended New START anyway. The Biden Administration's New START extension resulted in none of the promised advantages; in fact, the treaty continued to hamstring U.S. strategic forces, a very undesirable state given adversaries' nuclear weapon modernization and the reality that U.S. strategic nuclear forces have a greater regional deterrence burden. New START's proponents argued that the treaty would improve relations between Russia and the United States. In reality, the treaty had no apparent moderating effect on Russia's political revisionism and military expansionism. Indeed, continued U.S. adherence to a treaty that Moscow, again, willfully violated, likely fed into Moscow's dismissive expectations regarding U.S. willingness to counter Russia's misbehavior.

## Conclusion

The missed reality underlying the presumption that arms control will improve political relations among opponents is that the need for arms control typically *is a consequence of the armaments that follow* from political friction among countries, and the process of reaching an agreement has not proved to be a useful vehicle for transforming those political relations, as masterfully demonstrated by Gray.<sup>105</sup> The frequent claim that arms control agreements will ameliorate political hostilities in a meaningful way is demonstrably false, and, in fact, the opposite seems to be true.

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<sup>105</sup> Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail*, op. cit.

This pathology has been a feature of diplomatic relations at least since the Versailles Treaty, when democracies refused to believe that Germany would engage in behaviors that could risk escalation to conflict, thus repeating the horrors of World War I. Germany quietly, and later, not-so-quietly, pursued various forms of rearmament in violation of the Versailles Treaty, which itself was a target of revanchist German wrath. The democracies' frustrated expectations of arms control and their timid response to Germany's increasing political hostility contributed to the incredible destruction of World War II, in which the United Kingdom almost perished and other countries in Europe essentially ceased to exist until Hitler's defeat.

As Gray illustrated historically, the character of political relations is the decisive dynamic underlying countries' armament programs.<sup>106</sup> Real reconciliation of hostile political relations will lead naturally to reduced military requirements and the increased potential for arms control — 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 that would solve a state's security problems *"is either impossible or unimportant."*<sup>107</sup>

Understanding this reality is critical because, when the arms control process 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. In short, arms control advocates often place priority on the pursuit of a political dynamic that does not exist and subordinate the substance of agreements to that end. When the hoped-for political effects do not happen, the United

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<sup>106</sup> Gray, *Weapons Don't Make War*, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>107</sup> Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail*, op. cit., pp. x, 16-19. (Emphasis added.)

States typically is left with a disadvantageous agreement and reduced armaments in a worsened threat environment—as New START illustrated perfectly. Given the underlying lack of realism with which Washington continues to pursue arms control, its arms control initiatives often are frustrated and the practical results are harmful to Western security.

One of the leading international relations scholars during the second half of the twentieth century, Hedley Bull, observed that:

unless the political conditions for arms control are present, the question of what method or procedure is appropriate in arms control negotiations, and the question how the technical problems involved in arms control can be solved, are of minor importance, and attempts to solve them in abstraction from political circumstances are of no significance. The view that international negotiations about arms control are concerned with the search for solutions to these problems, or that their failure to issue in agreements arises from the difficulty of finding these solutions, is, on the whole, mistaken.<sup>108</sup>

The fundamental problem is political hostility, which the arms control process does not ameliorate, as Winston Churchill recognized almost a hundred years ago.<sup>109</sup>

Technical arms control discussions are secondary to the discussions about the compatibility of parties' specific political aims. If political aims are aligned, technical discussions will follow, but never the other way around, at

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<sup>108</sup> Bull, *The Control of the Arms Race*, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>109</sup> Winston Churchill, "A Disarmament Fable," *International Churchill Society*, August 24, 1928, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1915-1929-nadir-and-recovery/a-disarmament-fable/>.

least not in a fashion that would actually advance U.S. and allied national security goals. The speed with which the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia agreed on arms control after the fall of the Soviet Union is illustrative of this proposition, as does the failure of arms control since the stark renewal of Russian hostilities.

In fact, an adversary often will use arms control not to promote political amity, but to restrain areas of U.S. advantage and to secure exploitable military advantages for itself. Past arms control agreements have prevented the United States from developing military capabilities that would make the exercise of U.S. power in defense of itself and allies more credible. For example, making U.S. nuclear modernization and defense more difficult was the logic behind the Soviet Union's participation in the SALT process. Through SALT, the Soviets were also able to stop U.S. missile defense developments and give themselves strategic space to build up their nuclear forces to U.S. levels and beyond.

This dynamic was also illustrated by PNIs that Russia has not reciprocated despite its political commitment to do so—the contemporary result being a serious “gap” in the Western regional deterrence position given Moscow's and Beijing's renewed hostilities and enormous advantages in non-strategic nuclear forces. The CTBT contributed to an across-the-board deterioration of U.S. nuclear warhead design and production skills.<sup>110</sup> The effects of the U.S. cessation of all nuclear warhead testing include a nuclear workforce with a different makeup of specialized skills than that which would be necessary should the United States need to develop new nuclear warheads, potentially with new nuclear effects, thereby creating an asymmetry to the U.S. disadvantage.

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas Scheber, *A Responsive Nuclear Warhead Infrastructure: What Still Needs to Be Done? Why Is A Responsive Infrastructure More Urgent Now Than in the Past?*, op. cit.

The diversity of Russian and Chinese non-strategic nuclear weapons gives them a range of credible regional coercive options unavailable to the United States or NATO.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, the United States has no comparable regional deterrence options. Moreover, despite adversaries building up their nuclear forces, Washington also continues to bind its strategic forces that have taken on a greater regional deterrence burden due to steep reductions in theater nuclear forces, as well as significant reductions of conventional forces after the end of the Cold War. This is an invitation for adversaries to take advantage of regional deterrence asymmetries. The dynamic is not dissimilar to Germany's drive to exploit armament loopholes of the Versailles Treaty and then blatantly violating the treaty without fear of consequences.

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<sup>111</sup> Mark B. Schneider, "Russian Nuclear Targeting," *RealClearDefense*, October 4, 2022, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/10/04/russian\\_nuclear\\_targeting\\_857030.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/10/04/russian_nuclear_targeting_857030.html).



## Chapter IV. U.S. Armaments Incite Opponents' Arms Buildup; U.S. Inaction Stops It<sup>112</sup>

*"To spell out the obvious is often to call it into question."*<sup>113</sup>

This chapter discusses an example of a demonstrably fallacious rationalization for U.S. self-restraint and arms control that is called the "action-reaction" thesis.<sup>114</sup> The thesis holds that U.S. armaments mechanistically drive and increase other states' armaments and that U.S. restraint moderates them. This thesis essentially dismisses the fact that other states deploy arms to advance their political objectives. Such an action-reaction thesis has been repeated by commentators and officials for decades as an "iron law" of arms racing.<sup>115</sup> It is illustrative of an enduring pathology in U.S. arms control thinking, namely, that opponents build weapons in a near-automatic response to U.S. triggering armaments rather than for the specific goal of advancing their, usually disruptive, political and military objectives. The related fallacy is that when the United States stops

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<sup>112</sup> Research and some parts of the discussion in this chapter draw on Trachtenberg, Payne, and Dodge, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, op. cit. The author is grateful to the National Institute for its permission to utilize this material.

<sup>113</sup> Eric Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind, and Other Aphorisms* (New York: Harper, 1955), Section 220.

<sup>114</sup> Serious studies of the U.S.-Soviet arms competition find no consistent "action-reaction" dynamic, and instead identify multiple dynamics at work. See, Gray, *The Soviet-American Arms Race*, op. cit., passim. See also, Ernest R. May, John D. Steinbruner, Thomas W. Wolfe, and Alfred Goldberg, eds., *History of the Strategic Arms Competition 1945-1972*, Part II, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Historical Office, March 1981, pp. 810-811, <https://archive.org/details/HistoryoftheStrategicArmsCompetition19451972Part2>.

<sup>115</sup> Walter Pincus, "First Law of Nuclear Politics: Every Action Brings Reaction," *The Washington Post*, November 28, 1999, p. B2.

building weapons, or unilaterally reduces them, opponents will follow suit and the arms race will stop.

## **The British Dreadnought Debate Prior to World War I**

The seeds of this argument can be traced back at least to the British Dreadnought debate of the early twentieth century, in which British increases in naval power were said to be largely responsible for the German naval armament program prior to World War I, without serious consideration of Germany's broader strategic objectives at the time.<sup>116</sup> The corresponding assertion by proponents of arms control at the time was that British inaction would allow Germany to decide on comparable inaction, creating a feasible path to further arms control measures and peaceful relations.

But, in the Dreadnought case, Germany's political objectives had to do with contesting the regional naval balance with Britain rather than with responding to the British naval program. As early as 1900, German Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz argued that the German fleet had to be so strong that its defeat "would so substantially weaken the enemy that in spite of a victory...his own position in the world would no longer be secured by an adequate fleet."<sup>117</sup> At the time, the British government tried to reduce naval spending to respond to fiscal pressures and expectations to fund social programs, including through attempts to reach an understanding with Germany that its naval construction

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<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Leonard Wainstein, "The Dreadnought Gap," in Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz, eds., *The Use of Force* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1975), *passim*.

<sup>117</sup> Tong-Chin Rhee, "Anglo-German Naval Rivalry as a Factor in the Deterioration of Their Relations before 1914: A Study of Their Negotiations, 1909-1911," *University of Dayton Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (September 1969), <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol6/iss2/6>.

would slow down.<sup>118</sup> Yet, the Germans were not interested in moderating their naval buildup and were unresponsive to British disarmament proposals. They were, however, interested in keeping the negotiations going as an “expedient device to pass the ‘danger zone’ (i.e., until Germany attained enough naval strength) without provoking the British ‘preventive war.’ Except for the purpose, Germany was not seriously considering a sincere understanding with London.”<sup>119</sup>

Over the years, the United Kingdom’s Dreadnought policy became a caricature within the arms control community. The caricature portrayed a story in which British business interests driven by naval armaments maker Herbert Hall Mulliner prevailed over a rational threat assessment and thereby was solely responsible for starting the German naval buildup.<sup>120</sup> In reality, Mr. Mulliner had no influence over the Admiralty’s preparation of its shipbuilding program.<sup>121</sup>

Germany was building up militarily to advance its own geopolitical objectives, according to its own doctrinal demands; there was no British-led, action-reaction arms race, as arms control proponents asserted later. Astute observers commented that “It is not merely or even principally the question of naval armaments which is the

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<sup>118</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era 1904-1919, Volume I: The Road to War, 1904-1914* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1961), p. 143.

<sup>119</sup> Rhee, “Anglo-German Naval Rivalry as a Factor in the Deterioration of Their Relations before 1914: A Study of Their Negotiations, 1909-1911,” op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>120</sup> Phillip Noel Baker, *Address In Reply To Her Majesty's Most Gracious Speech*, May 22, 1979, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/1979-05-22/debates/e7751aa6-b620-4153-95bf-c1110a81575a/AddressInReplyToHerMajestySMostGraciousSpeech>.

<sup>121</sup> Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era 1904-1919, Volume I: The Road to War, 1904-1914*, op. cit., pp. 156-159.

cause of the existing estrangement. The building of the German fleet is but one of the symptoms of the disease. It is the political ambitions of the German Government and nation which are the source of the mischief."<sup>122</sup> Arms control could not change these hostile German political ambitions.

Rather than causing an action-reaction arms race, "the determination of Britain to maintain her supremacy at sea had contributed not a little towards strengthening the [German] current of opinion in the direction of better relations with England."<sup>123</sup> Contrary to the arms control pathology, i.e., the belief that the arms control process can modify revisionist state's political intentions, the Dreadnought case shows that states with disruptive agendas that demand an arms buildup will not moderate their political or armament goals by democratic states' self-restraint. In fact, in the German and British case, the process itself contributed to Germany's determination and the growth of mistrust between them.

Germany did not engage in negotiations in a bid to moderate its political ambitions or armaments. Rather, Berlin used the process to extract concessions from Britain and secure military advantage. German Secretary of State Baron Wilhelm von Schoen stated that "If the English ... want a naval agreement, they must pay a price for it in the political sphere. We have no wish for a naval agreement. For this reason we cannot accept (the British) arguments that England cannot give us more than she has given France and Russia. England wants something from us, and must pay for it."<sup>124</sup> Given Germany's openly belligerent ambitions, Britain did not accept reductions which would have left it

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<sup>122</sup> Eyre Crowe, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>124</sup> Rhee, "Anglo-German Naval Rivalry as a Factor in the Deterioration of Their Relations before 1914: A Study of Their Negotiations, 1909-1911," *op. cit.*, p. 73.

with the barest minimum of superiority (British 21 dreadnoughts to German 20), which was just as well, because such reductions would have left it in an undesirable position of relative regional parity, if not inferiority, upon the outbreak of World War I.<sup>125</sup>

### **“Action-Reaction” Dynamic in the Post-Cold War Era**

More recently, the historically disproven assertion of a predictable “action-reaction” dynamic led by the United States has been a primary rationale for U.S. arms control initiatives that, in the end, proved disadvantageous for U.S. security, such as the 1972 ABM Treaty and the PNIs two decades later. These initiatives have undermined U.S. deterrence and extended deterrence credibility by unilaterally eliminating areas of U.S. technological advantage (in the case of the ABM Treaty) or capabilities that the United States reduced (nearly eliminated), but opponents did not (PNIs). The unreciprocated steps make it more difficult to face contemporary security challenges in an environment with two revisionist nuclear peers and an increasingly well-armed North Korea. Yet, the “action-reaction” thesis has been, and remains, a mainstay in U.S. arms control enthusiast thinking. For example, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Walter Pincus has, for decades, published commentaries promoting arms control agreements based on this logic.<sup>126</sup> Almost all proposals for U.S. nuclear reductions are predicated on this “action-reaction” dynamic.

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<sup>125</sup> Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era 1904-1919, Volume I: The Road to War, 1904-1914*, op. cit., pp. 178-179.

<sup>126</sup> Pincus, “First Law of Nuclear Politics: Every Action Brings Reaction,” op. cit.

Despite the comprehensive restraint the United States followed in its nuclear weapons program after the end of the Cold War, including a complete cessation of yield-producing experiments and the absence of new nuclear warhead deployments,<sup>127</sup> no opponents followed the (“inaction”) path the United States had chosen. Significantly, those same opponents now want to revise the world order in ways damaging to the United States and its allies – using their advantages in nuclear weaponry to help advance their goals, particularly in the regional context where the U.S. nuclear disadvantage is most obvious. China is now building up its nuclear forces to match or surpass U.S. strategic force numbers, and Russia has never stopped its nuclear warhead production.

### **Practical Effects of U.S. Inaction during the Cold War**

In line with the action-reaction syndrome, arms control proponents during the Cold War held that U.S. actions fueled the arms race by spurring the Soviets to a nuclear buildup and that, if the United States stopped its own strategic programs, the Soviets would follow suit. And so, the ABM Treaty and SALT I were expected to arrest the further buildup of Soviet strategic nuclear warheads, particularly because of missile defense restrictions. The expectation was that, because Washington and Moscow would forego their missile defense systems via the ABM Treaty, each country would have unobstructed targeting of the other’s population and industry, with relatively few weapons. It was assumed that no country would then strike first for fear of retaliation that would surely follow and cause catastrophic damage. This mutual societal

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<sup>127</sup> Scheber, *A Responsive Nuclear Warhead Infrastructure: What Still Needs to Be Done? Why Is A Responsive Infrastructure More Urgent Now Than in the Past?*, op. cit., p. 34.

vulnerability supposedly would lead to fewer nuclear weapons and “stability” in the deterrence relationship. This notion was the basis of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s “assured destruction” logic. Further, because mutual vulnerability was expected to preclude either side from gross provocations, such a condition was deemed to be “stable” at most prospective levels of conflict,<sup>128</sup> and would allow each side to avoid further offensive arms deployments. Action-reaction would be replaced by “stable” inaction-inaction.

In reality, U.S. inaction-inaction expectations came from mirror imaging, not from a sound assessment of the Soviets. Harvard professor and Soviet scholar Richard Pipes explained the difference between the U.S. and Soviet thinking:

The prevalent U.S. doctrine holds that an all-out war between countries in possession of sizable nuclear arsenals would be so destructive as to leave no winner; thus resort to arms has ceased to represent a rational policy option for the leaders of such countries vis-à-vis one another.... Soviet doctrine, by contrast, emphatically asserts that while an all-out nuclear war would indeed prove extremely destructive to both parties, its outcome would not be mutual suicide: the country better prepared for it and in possession of a superior strategy could win and emerge a viable society.<sup>129</sup>

The practical result of the ABM Treaty’s missile defense restrictions, promoted on the basis of the action-reaction

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<sup>128</sup> Louis Halle, “Does War Have a Future,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (October 1973), p. 23.

<sup>129</sup> Richard Pipes, “Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight & Win A Nuclear War,” *Commentary*, July 1977, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/richard-pipes-2/why-the-soviet-union-thinks-it-could-fight-win-a-nuclear-war/>.

syndrome, was the exact opposite of what its proponents argued would happen when the SALT agreements (of which the ABM Treaty was a part) were considered in Congress. For the Soviets, U.S. inaction on missile defense meant an opportunity to exploit an opening to launch an extensive nuclear missile armament program before the ink on the treaty was dry. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's senior military assistant, and later head of the National Security Agency, Lt. General William Odom, observed regarding the "assured destruction" paradigm that "Everything in Soviet nuclear weapons policy reflected a lack of understanding and interest in western deterrence theory."<sup>130</sup> Indeed, according to Colonel General Nikolai Detinov, a leader of Soviet arms control activities, the U.S. push for the ABM Treaty came as a "pleasant surprise" because it freed Moscow to spend more on its ICBM arsenal.<sup>131</sup> As Odom concluded, "Thus the ABM Treaty appeared to have allowed a considerably larger number of offensive nuclear weapons in the Soviet arsenal than there would have been without it."<sup>132</sup>

As a consequence of the Soviet buildup following the ABM Treaty, by the early 1980s, many U.S. nuclear forces were vulnerable to a Soviet first strike.<sup>133</sup> The Soviets did so safe in the knowledge that the United States would not obviate their missile force investments via U.S. missile defense. There could be no other legacy for an arms control effort based on the action-reaction thesis and the "assured

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<sup>130</sup> William Odom, "The Origins and Design of Presidential Decision-59: A Memoir," *Nonproliferation Policy Education Center*, p. 195, [https://npolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Getting\\_MAD-Ch6\\_Odom.pdf](https://npolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Getting_MAD-Ch6_Odom.pdf).

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in, William Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) p. 71.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century*, op. cit., p. 160.

destruction” approach to deterrence. These are intellectual constructs that completely disregarded the Soviet Union’s political goals and strategic culture, and vastly ignored the link between the attainment of those goals and the weapons the Soviet Union built as a means to achieve them.

The U.S. understanding of an arms race driven by U.S. actions and technological developments to which the Soviets were compelled to respond, without regard for the Soviet strategic culture, resources, or political objectives, was a primary rationale for the ABM Treaty and the SALT process. The experience illustrates the fallacy of such thinking. Despite almost a complete cessation of U.S. missile defense efforts, the Soviets greatly increased the number of their strategic nuclear warheads.

Throughout the 1970s, U.S. hard target capabilities deteriorated, even as the Soviets super-hardened their ICBM silos and increased the size, throw weight and the accuracy and number of their high-yield warheads—leading to the Minuteman III’s vulnerability in the early 1980s. The United States limited the size and power of its missiles, and the accuracy, yields, and number of ICBM warheads specifically to limit the U.S. counterforce potential.<sup>134</sup> U.S. restraint was not met with Soviet restraint. By 1977, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld noted that “it should now be evident that the Soviets have taken the initiative in a wide range of programs, that restraint on our part (whatever its reason) has not been reciprocated—and is not likely to be....”<sup>135</sup> Proponents of arms control argued that the SALT process was required to stop the arms race based on the assumption that Soviet programs are driven by U.S. actions and that should U.S. actions cease,

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., pp. 172-173.

<sup>135</sup> Donald H. Rumsfeld, *Annual Defense Department Report FY 1978*, January 17, 1977, p. 62, [https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual\\_reports/1978\\_DoD\\_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-150750-460](https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/1978_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-150750-460).

the Soviets would arrest their own buildup and technological developments. This expectation proved to be completely fallacious, and Soviet forces grew even as the United States stopped its nuclear buildup.

### **Continuing the Folly: U.S. Nuclear Policy After the End of the Cold War**

The end of the Cold War saw the continuing emphasis on arms control based on several fallacies critiqued in this study, including that U.S. restraint would lead other countries to follow suit, and that the lack of U.S. restraint would lead to an “action-reaction” arms race. This faulty but powerful expectation was abetted by a new and equally reckless expectation that history was at its end and great power conflicts were things of the past. During the 1990s, Washington consciously gave up the capacity to build new nuclear weapons based on the claim that, to promote non-proliferation, Washington had to lead by example and move away from nuclear capabilities. This was simply a replay of the action-reaction arms control syndrome in new circumstances.

A frequent quip of the 1990s in this regard was that “a drunk cannot advocate for abstinence,” meaning that the United States must lead towards nuclear disarmament, or others would not follow. The message, of course, was that U.S. nuclear abstinence was necessary for non-proliferation, as if U.S. policies were the mechanistic determinants shaping other states’ nuclear programs.

This naïve expectation trickled down to military services, leading them to undervalue the importance of the nuclear mission. The Secretary of Defense Task Force on Department of Defense Nuclear Weapons Management observed that, “in the years following the end of the Cold War, senior Air Force leaders devalued nuclear capabilities” and “failed to acknowledge and did not anticipate the full

consequences of their decisions, especially in the air-breathing leg of the nuclear triad.”<sup>136</sup> The practical results of this replay of the action-reaction syndrome have been far from the “end of history” vision that captured many in Washington after the Cold War. History was not over and other countries did not follow where the United States led.

U.S. forward-deployed nuclear forces became one of the first casualties of Washington’s post-Cold War vision of a “new world order.” U.S. leaders expected the 1990s PNIs to result in mutual U.S.-Russian deep reductions in tactical nuclear forces. But while the United States implemented its obligations under the PNIs and reduced its nuclear arsenal in Europe by 97 percent relative to its 1970’s peak,<sup>137</sup> the Russians did not. Moscow retained almost all types of regional nuclear weapons which it had during the Cold War and even expanded the diversity of its arsenal. The consequent Russian regional nuclear superiority undoubtedly contributed to Moscow’s confident ambitions in Georgia and Ukraine.

With the 1987 INF Treaty, the United States eliminated its intermediate-range nuclear forces and consequentially increased the deterrence burden on both U.S. strategic systems and shorter-range, forward-deployed nuclear forces.<sup>138</sup> Contrary to the expectations that U.S. inaction would preempt an “arms race,” the Russians violated the INF Treaty for years and deployed systems of the

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<sup>136</sup> James Schlesinger et al., “Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on Department of Defense Nuclear Weapons Management. Phase I: The Air Force’s Nuclear Mission,” September 2008, p. 29, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA486299.pdf>.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>138</sup> William R. Van Cleave, as quoted in, U.S. Senate, *The INF Treaty*, Part 3 (Washington, D.C.: United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, February 19, 1988), pp. 159-160.

prohibited range until Washington, in response, finally withdrew from the treaty in 2019.<sup>139</sup>

U.S. intermediate-range nuclear forces remain non-existent and tactical nuclear forces decreased from a few thousand in the early 1990s to a few hundred, even as adversaries built up their regional nuclear capabilities.<sup>140</sup> Despite U.S. reductions and almost a complete pause on modernization, Russia and China have never stopped modernizing their nuclear weapons while North Korea, India, and Pakistan have emerged as nuclear-armed powers. What temporary slowdown there was in Russia's nuclear program had to do with the lack of resources and the economic shock after the fall of the Soviet Union; it was not a benign reaction to U.S. reductions. Washington's expectation of a cooperative "inaction-inaction" dynamic proved to be completely fatuous. If it had been realized, opponents' strategic and theater nuclear arsenals would look much different.

The fallacies of the venerable "action-reaction" explanation of arms racing and expectations of a "new world order" are further illustrated by the post-Cold War deterioration of the U.S. nuclear warhead infrastructure, which has left the United States with an inability to produce plutonium pits for nuclear warheads, and the conclusion of U.S. yield-producing nuclear testing. The United States stopped conducting these experiments in another effort to lead by example and move others away from nuclear

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<sup>139</sup> Mark B. Schneider, "Russian Violations of the INF and New START Treaties," *Information Series*, No. 410 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 15, 2016),

[https://nipp.org/information\\_series/schneider-mark-russian-violations-of-the-inf-and-new-start-treaties-information-series-no-410/](https://nipp.org/information_series/schneider-mark-russian-violations-of-the-inf-and-new-start-treaties-information-series-no-410/).

<sup>140</sup> Keith B. Payne, "US Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence," *Air & Space Power Journal*, Volume 29, Issue 4 (July-August 2015), p. 64, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-29\\_Issue-4/V-Payne.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Volume-29_Issue-4/V-Payne.pdf).

weapons.<sup>141</sup> Meanwhile, U.S. adversaries have kept building new nuclear warheads, conducting yield-producing experiments, and maintaining infrastructures capable of producing new nuclear warheads.

Russia and China are now taking advantage of U.S. foolishness in assuming that they would follow where the United States leads—Washington’s own enduring “inaction-inaction” expectation. Russia, originally a party to the INF Treaty, implemented the treaty at first, but started violating it as soon as it became politically expedient. It has never fully implemented its obligations under the PNIs. And, unlike the United States, Russia and China reportedly have conducted yield-producing experiments in violation of their CTBT obligations.<sup>142</sup> These testing activities are reportedly helping to improve Russia’s nuclear capabilities.<sup>143</sup> North Korea conducted six nuclear weapon tests since its first in 2006.<sup>144</sup> China is massively increasing

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<sup>141</sup> Mark B. Schneider, *The Case for Resumed Nuclear Testing, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 9 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2024), pp. 49-50, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Vol.-5-No.-9.pdf>.

<sup>142</sup> William J. Perry and James R. Schlesinger, *America’s Strategic Posture - The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009), p. 83, [http://media.usip.org/reports/strat\\_posture\\_report.pdf](http://media.usip.org/reports/strat_posture_report.pdf); and, “United States Statement by Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security The Honorable Thomas DiNanno to the Conference on Disarmament,” U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva, February 6, 2026, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2026/02/06/u-s-statement-at-the-conference-on-disarmament/>.

<sup>143</sup> Lieutenant General Robert P. Ashley, Jr., “Russian and Chinese Nuclear Modernization Trends, Remarks at the Hudson Institute,” Defense Intelligence Agency, May 29, 2019, <https://www.dia.mil/Articles/Speeches-and-Testimonies/Article/1859890/russian-and-chinese-nuclear-modernization-trends/>.

<sup>144</sup> Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Daniel M. Gettinger, “North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs,” Congressional Research

its nuclear arsenal, indicating an extensive and capable nuclear warhead production infrastructure. China has also reportedly conducted nuclear explosive tests in violation of its obligations under the CTBT.<sup>145</sup>

Despite the unwillingness of other states to follow U.S. nuclear restraint, Washington continues to put itself at a unilateral disadvantage vis-à-vis its adversaries because it pathologically assumes that others will follow where it leads, disregarding that their political objectives are fundamentally at odds with U.S. interests and security, and the major impetus in their armament procurement decisions. Rather than recognizing this reality, calls for continued U.S. adherence to a nuclear testing moratorium are repeated on the grounds that “a return to testing at this time would likely benefit U.S. adversaries more than it would the United States. Worse still, it might rekindle an even greater and broader arms race than in the first few decades of the Cold War.”<sup>146</sup> This is the same fatuous misconception—that arms races are driven by prior U.S. actions—that led the United States into its current disadvantageous predicament. Continuing to abide by this enduring “action-reaction” pathology in thinking will worsen the U.S. national security position by inhibiting steps needed to address emerging threats.

Moreover, because arms races are driven by political hostilities, not an “action-reaction” dynamic,<sup>147</sup> it should not

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Service, *InFocus*, September 26, 2025,

[https://www.congress.gov/crs\\_external\\_products/IF/PDF/IF10472/IF10472.40.pdf](https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF10472/IF10472.40.pdf).

<sup>145</sup> DiNanno, “United States Statement by Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security The Honorable Thomas DiNanno to the Conference on Disarmament,” op. cit.

<sup>146</sup> Siegfried Hecker, “Lessons From Los Alamos,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 26, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/lessons-alamos>.

<sup>147</sup> Colin S. Gray, “The Arms Race Is About Politics,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 9 (Winter 1972-1973), pp. 117-129, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148088>.

come as a surprise that the countries least willing to follow U.S. restraint are those most intent on challenging Washington's interests. The across-the-board deterioration in U.S. nuclear competencies has created an opening for these adversaries to pursue coercive policies that undermine the post-Cold War status quo. The United States unilaterally undercuts the very capabilities that make its extended deterrence commitments more credible in the vain hope that other states will reciprocate.<sup>148</sup> The consequence is the continued deterioration of extended deterrence, allied assurance, and regional security.

The relative speed with which the United States and Russia concluded major arms control treaties immediately following the Cold War illustrates that it is the state of political relations, not the process itself, that drives the success or frustration of arms control negotiations. Arms control negotiations reflect this process; they do not drive political relations and have no independent power to improve them. Russia most likely had no realistic alternative to nuclear force reductions in the 1990s regardless of arms control talks due to the collapse of its economy and the break-up of the Soviet Union, which severely limited its capacity to continue the armaments course set by the Soviet Communist Party during the Cold War.

The promptness with which Russia abandoned nuclear force reductions when its aggressive political goals and available resources returned, is a testament to the folly of expecting an arms control process to drive benign political relations, as opposed to hostile political relations frustrating the outcome of U.S. arms control enthusiasms. History shows that when adversaries perceive that weapons that can help them obtain political goals conflict with their arms control obligations, they disregard their arms control

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<sup>148</sup> Payne, Dodge, Costlow, and Trachtenberg, *The Pernicious Effects of Arms Control Misconceptions on Extended Deterrence and Assurance*, op. cit.

obligations rather than change their political goals—regardless of America’s attempts to provide an example of restraint. Arms control is not a morality play. The “inaction-inaction” metaphor simply fails, and dangerously so for the United States.

## **Conclusion**

For decades, and still today, the “action-reaction” thesis has been considered by many to be a proven “iron law” of international relations: U.S. military acquisitions supposedly are the primary cause of arms racing.<sup>149</sup> Other countries’ extensive military buildups are explained as the consequence of prior U.S. nuclear modernization efforts and superior conventional capabilities, even though the United States has reduced both massively since the end of the Cold War. No U.S. reductions are ever enough to penetrate the causality created in the “action-reaction” minds of its proponents. When U.S. reductions and programmatic stops directly cause challenges to the U.S.-led global order and its alliance structure, the answer is that whatever restraint the United States exhibited was just not enough. The instinct of the proponents of arms control is, to borrow a famous quote from United Nations Representative Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, to “always blame America first.”<sup>150</sup>

The corollary is that U.S. inaction will lead to opponents’ corresponding inaction; thus, Washington can preclude arms races if it stops inciting them by pursuing the programs necessary to sustain the global status quo and

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<sup>149</sup> Pincus, “First Law of Nuclear Politics: Every Action Brings Reaction,” *op. cit.*

<sup>150</sup> Jeane Kirkpatrick, “‘Blame America First’ - Remarks at the 1984 Republican National Convention,” August 20, 1984, <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/communication/remarks-1984-rnc-aug-20-1984>.

U.S. alliance structure in the context of revisionist adversaries' efforts to upend them. U.S. restraint supposedly will lead to actions by other states to limit their own armaments.<sup>151</sup> For example, despite China's massive nuclear weapons buildup over the past several years and Russia's extensive nuclear threats backed by new nuclear capabilities, arms control enthusiasts continue to assert that U.S. military efforts raise "the potential of a new arms race,"<sup>152</sup> and that U.S. nuclear modernization "encourages Russia to build more capable weapons of its own, accelerating an emerging and destabilizing international arms race."<sup>153</sup> This thesis, of course, ignores the reality that opponents' internal decision-making dynamics and geopolitical goals drive their armaments, and the chronology that both Moscow's and Beijing's nuclear buildups well preceded the more recent U.S. nuclear modernization program.

The "action-reaction" model has influenced generations of advocates, including former Defense Secretary William Perry, who recommended against the Obama Administration's modernization of intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs).<sup>154</sup> Perry also protested the Obama Administration's plan to develop the new Long

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<sup>151</sup> Beatrice Fihn, "Nuclear Weapons Are Not a Fact of Life," *New York Times Online*, December 26, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/26/opinion/nuclear-weapons.html>.

<sup>152</sup> Laurence Norman, Daniel Kiss, Ming Li, and Peter Saidel, "The Bomb Is Back as the Risk of Nuclear War Enters a New Age," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 13, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/nuclear-bomb-weapons-war-explained-01d6e397>.

<sup>153</sup> Union of Concerned Scientists, "Nuclear Weapons Solutions," <https://www.ucsusa.org/nuclear-weapons/solutions>.

<sup>154</sup> Quoted in, Aaron Mehta, "Former Sec Def Perry: US on 'Brink' of New Nuclear Arms Race," *Defense News*, December 3, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/2015/12/03/former-secdef-perry-us-brink-new-nuclear-arms-race/76721640/>.

Range Standoff weapon (LRSO), stating, “President Obama can lead the world to a stabler and safer future by canceling plans for a new U.S. nuclear-capable cruise missile.”<sup>155</sup> Earlier, many senior commentators recommended cancelling U.S. programs because they might undermine arms control *talks* between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>156</sup> Washington’s “action-reaction” and “inaction-inaction” pathology has been evident for decades, with harmful effects.

Despite many assertions to the contrary, current U.S. programs are slow and uncertain—hardly the spur for opponents’ preceding arms racing. Nevertheless, the action-reaction myth has endured for decades and mistakenly continues to be treated by many as an “iron law.” Proponents of arms control continue to argue that the United States can and must restrain/reduce its nuclear weapons so that others will follow, a dynamic repeatedly disproven. This U.S. arms control pathology, while demonstrably inconsistent with actual history, is the rationale underlying foolish U.S. arms control enthusiasms, past and present. In addition, it complicates obtaining congressional support for U.S. offensive and defensive forces programs. The consequences of this mindset are limits on U.S. armament programs based on the myth that others will mimic U.S. restraint despite their aggressive agendas and reasons for arming.

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<sup>155</sup> William Perry and Andy Weber, “Mr. President, kill the new cruise missile,” *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/mr-president-kill-the-new-cruise-missile/2015/10/15/e3e2807c-6ecd-11e5-9bfe-e59f5e244f92\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/mr-president-kill-the-new-cruise-missile/2015/10/15/e3e2807c-6ecd-11e5-9bfe-e59f5e244f92_story.html).

<sup>156</sup> Arthur Goldberg, “The Attitude of the World Community toward the ABM,” in Abram Chayes, Jerome Wiesner, eds., *ABM: An Evaluation of the Decision to Deploy an Antiballistic Missile System*, Signet Broadside (New York: New American Library, January 1, 1969), p. 213.

## Chapter V. The Mirror-Imaging Fallacy: Assuming That the Adversary Shares U.S. Assumptions

*“‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.”<sup>157</sup>*

The United States often bases its arms control efforts on demonstrably wrong assumptions about its political adversaries, namely, that they perceive and understand rationality the same way as does Washington, and that they share its priorities. The assumption is rooted in the mirror-imaging fallacy. U.S. leaders and their government representatives often act as if other political leaders will think and act as they do, and have very little appreciation for the profound differences between and among them, if they are aware of them at all.

For example, the United States approached the SALT talks “...as a seminar. We would educate the Soviets, and they will see things the way we do. Then we could come to a mutually beneficial agreement.”<sup>158</sup> This approach is profoundly misleading because foreign leaders define rationality differently based on divergent strategic cultures and individual experiences, precisely the factors the Americans tend to disregard as unimportant.<sup>159</sup> Mirror imaging contributes to misconceived arms control agreements and treaties that disadvantage the United States and allies in the long run.

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<sup>157</sup> Jeremiah 8:11 (New International Version).

<sup>158</sup> J.D. Crouch, Nuclear Strategy Forum Remarks, “Challenging the Arms Control Mythology: A Century of Experience,” September 2025, available in *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (April 2026), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Proceedings-September-2025.pdf>.

<sup>159</sup> Faris, “Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?,” *op. cit.*

## Mirror Imaging and Missile Defense

Mirror imaging refers to an expectation that mutual societal vulnerability would create a stable deterrence relationship because adversaries value societal assets the same way as do U.S. leaders. This particular concept emerged most prominently early in the Cold War with the U.S. “Assured Destruction” approach to nuclear deterrence and arms control stability.<sup>160</sup> A significant part of the U.S. national security establishment embraced the expectation that if the United States developed strategic defenses, it would cause deterrence and arms race “instability.” An adversary would then be incentivized to either strike first to prevent a U.S. first strike, or increase the number of its offensive weapons, leading to an unrestricted arms race—hence, “action-reaction.”

In contrast, it was expected that, if the United States chose not to mitigate its vulnerability with missile defenses, adversaries would not be compelled to pursue a corresponding nuclear buildup: “In fact, the chief virtue of assured destruction may be that it removes the need to race—there is no reward for getting ahead,” stated two prominent scientists working for then-Secretary of Defense McNamara in the late 1960s.<sup>161</sup> Because of mirror imaging, the United States expected that leaders in Moscow would subscribe to the same logic and view the missile defense issue similarly. President Lyndon Johnson invited Secretary of Defense McNamara to explain the “action-reaction” thesis to the Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin at the 1967

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<sup>160</sup> Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century*, op. cit., especially chapters 2-3.

<sup>161</sup> Richard L. Garwin and Hans A. Bethe, “Anti-Ballistic-Missile Systems,” *Scientific American*, Vol. 218, No. 3 (March 1968), pp. 23-24, <https://fas.org/rlg/03%2000%201968%20Bethe-Garwin%20ABM%20Systems.pdf>.

Glassboro, NJ summit.<sup>162</sup> Kosygin incredulously replied that defensive weapons are moral, and offensive weapons are immoral and charged McNamara with caring more about weapon costs than lives spared, a strange position indeed from a representative of an authoritarian regime killing its opponents by hundreds of thousands.<sup>163</sup>

The Soviet Union, far from subscribing to the U.S. approach to missile defense, took advantage of U.S. missile defense policy restraint to build up Moscow's nuclear arsenal and delivery vehicles even after work on the U.S. missile defense program stopped. After the fall of the Soviet Union, in contrast to popular "action-reaction" expectations, the U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 was followed by the Moscow Treaty, which reduced strategic forces between the United States and Russia.

## **Missile Defense Prohibitions: Expectations versus Reality**

President Nixon's Secretary of State William Rodgers argued that one purpose of the 1972 ABM Treaty that severely limited missile defense systems and codified assured destruction "was to serve as a kind of teaching aid to enable the Soviet leadership to understand the logic of assured mutual vulnerability and to signal their belief in it."<sup>164</sup> The United States believed that if it explained its point

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<sup>162</sup> Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century*, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>163</sup> James S. Robbins, "The Necessity of Missile Defense," October 20, 2010, <https://www.atlassociety.org/post/the-moral-necessity-of-missile-defense>.

<sup>164</sup> Quoted in a 1998 speech by Margaret Thatcher, "Deterrence is Not Enough: Security Requirements for the 21st Century," *Information Series*, No. 518 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 23, 2022), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/special-issue-a-speech-by-the-rt-](https://nipp.org/information_series/special-issue-a-speech-by-the-rt-)

of view that missile defenses were “destabilizing” and societal vulnerability desirable, the Soviets would accept it as their own, a sign of an operative mirror-imaging pathology, as is the assumption that U.S. adversaries make the cost-benefit calculus according to shared notions of value and rationality.

This mirror imaging and misreading of other strategic cultures is a common U.S. flaw in dealing with other nations. In fact, the Soviet leadership learned from the SALT process precisely the kinds of lessons the United States did not want it to learn – that Moscow can use U.S. eagerness to pursue arms control and the U.S. aspiration for codified mutual vulnerability to extract concessions to improve its geopolitical standing and slow down programs that would have created obstacles in achieving Soviet objectives.

The SALT agreements also illustrate the asymmetry between a nation committed to following the letter and “spirit” of a treaty (and thereby severely limiting its missile defense program) and one that uses the treaty to advance its standing and gain a competitive advantage by a treaty-induced impediment to its opponent’s efforts. While the Soviets “kept building” throughout the 1970s, Gray observed, “The United States and its European allies considered the SALT agreements a success in curbing rearmament. Their military expenditures declined steadily during the 1970s, as did funds for research and development, especially in the area of missile defense systems. Critics [of SALT], therefore, have reformulated the abbreviation SALT to read ‘Stop American Lead in Technology.’”<sup>165</sup> The United States assumed that agreements would have the same effect on the Soviets as

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hon-the-baroness-thatcher-lg-om-frs-deterrence-is-not-enough-security-requirements-for-the-21st-century-december-3-1998/.

<sup>165</sup> Colin S. Gray, “The Strategic Implications of the Nuclear Balance and Arms Control,” in Staar, eds., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality*, op. cit., p. 68.

they had on the Americans – an increase in their feelings of security and a reduction in the felt need for more armaments.

But rather than arresting the growth in strategic offensive weapons, the intentional minimization of U.S. strategic missile defense options and their development preceded the greatest growth in Soviet strategic warheads – from approximately 2,500 in 1972 to more than 10,000 in the late 1980s.<sup>166</sup> The Soviets did not make the same calculus as the United States and self-admittedly exploited the treaty to invest freed-up resources into their strategic missiles.<sup>167</sup>

While the United States convinced itself that missile defenses were “destabilizing” and that the Soviet Union understood the matter similarly, the Soviets built up their own missile defense program in long-standing violations of the ABM Treaty. The most egregious of these was the Soviet construction of a radar near Krasnoyarsk in Siberia with parameters prohibited by the treaty.<sup>168</sup> The U.S. intelligence community discovered the radar in 1983.<sup>169</sup> This case

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<sup>166</sup> See, Amy F. Woolf, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization*, CRS Report R45861, Congressional Research Service, July 20, 2020, pp. 8-9, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R45861.pdf>; also see, Robert S. Norris and Thomas B. Cochran, *Nuclear Weapons Databook: US-USSR/Russian Strategic Offensive Nuclear Forces 1945-1996* (Washington, D.C.: National Resources Defense Council, Inc., January 1997), [https://fas.org/nuke/norris/nuc\\_01009701a\\_181.pdf](https://fas.org/nuke/norris/nuc_01009701a_181.pdf).

<sup>167</sup> William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 71, 85-86.

<sup>168</sup> Susan Koch, Thomas Scheber, and Kurt Guthe, *Securing Compliance with Arms Control Agreements* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2018), pp. 23-48, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2018-Arms-Control-for-web-2.pdf>.

<sup>169</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, *The Krasnoyarsk Radar: Closing the Final Gap in Coverage for Ballistic Missile Early Warning*, June 19, 1986, CIA Special Collections Release as Sanitized, 2000, p. 1, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB314/doc08.pdf>.

highlights the difficulties the United States has when adversaries are found in violation of their arms control obligations, despite arms control advocacy generally trivializing concerns over compliance enforcement during ratification deliberations.

On March 23, 1983, President Reagan gave his famous “Star Wars” speech in which he asked: “What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?”<sup>170</sup> The Soviets severely disliked the idea of a U.S. missile defense system, because it would complicate their ability to target U.S. strategic retaliatory capabilities and other U.S. military assets, and strengthen U.S. resistance to Soviet regional expansionism. Unlike the belief shared by a majority of the U.S. political elite, the Soviets were not in the business of maintaining *mutual* vulnerability and a “stable” balance of terror.

Then-Senator John Kerry (D-MA) argued that “You cannot have SDI and arms control at the same time.”<sup>171</sup> He was by no means the only one sharing such an opinion.<sup>172</sup> Four former senior officials, both Republican and Democrat, authored a *Foreign Affairs* article, “The President’s Choice: Star Wars or Arms Control.”<sup>173</sup> Strobe Talbott, a journalist who later became Deputy Secretary of State during the

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<sup>170</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Strategic Defense Initiative Address to the Nation*, March 23, 1983, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreagansdi.htm>.

<sup>171</sup> W. Bruce Weinrod, “Strategic Defense: Implications for Arms Negotiations,” The Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder*, October 16, 1985, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/strategic-defense-implications-arms-negotiations>.

<sup>172</sup> See also McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith, “The President’s Choice: Star Wars or Arms Control,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 2, Winter 1984/85, pp. 273, 277.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

Clinton Administration, argued that the SDI program would lead to, "unceasing competition without stability."<sup>174</sup> Others stated that "deploying defensive systems or...increasing their capability to destroy the opponent's forces first, will almost certainly be futile, because these efforts will lead to more nuclear offensive arms for both and may add to the danger of a nuclear holocaust."<sup>175</sup> Such statements are also illustrative of the "action-reaction" arms race notions discussed in the previous chapter and reflect the mirror-imaging pathology that adversaries will behave predictably according to U.S. presumptions. Notably, none of these dire predictions have come to pass.

Reagan's policies fostered a sense in Soviet leaders that their system required political reforms to be able to continue to compete with the United States. These political changes facilitated the end of the Cold War and led to progress in arms control. It would be wrong to postulate that the arms control process contributed to or played a major role in ending the Cold War. In fact, proponents of arms control wanted to curtail the very programs that directly contributed to the U.S. Cold War victory, often arguing that these programs made arms control progress impossible and would preclude Moscow's political transformation. Such is a consequence of unbending adherence to historically disproven fallacies and arms control myths: the United States is in a worse position to ward off adversaries' aggressive policies that are not moderated by arms control.

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<sup>174</sup> Cited in Mark W. Davis, "Reagan's Real Reason for SDI," *Policy Review* (Palo Alto, CA: The Hoover Institution, October 1, 2000), <https://www.hoover.org/research/reagans-real-reason-sdi>.

<sup>175</sup> George Rathjens and Jack Ruina, "Nuclear Doctrine and Rationality," *Daedalus*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (Winter 1981), p. 181.

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## U.S. Withdrawal from the ABM Treaty

Prior to the U.S. 2002 withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, critics argued that such a step “could result in more nuclear weapons on Russian soil... [and] could result in many more nuclear weapons in China, prompting a buildup in India and Pakistan....”<sup>176</sup> This is the same mechanistic “action-reaction” argument, refuted by practice, that opponents of U.S. missile defense programs have been touting since the late 1960s. Yet, despite the missile defense program being freed from the ABM Treaty’s legal restrictions, the presumption against it continues to prevail based on the myth that missile defenses are destabilizing because they obstruct the supposedly “stable” mutual vulnerability between the United States and its peer adversaries.

The George W. Bush Administration decided to deploy a limited missile defense system primarily against North Korean and prospective Iranian ballistic missiles.<sup>177</sup> The decision to deploy a limited missile defense system recognized that even if the foundational theory of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War applied, and many in the Bush Administration were skeptical that it did, the theory would not apply to states like Iran and North Korea.<sup>178</sup>

President Bush believed that the United States entered a new era of relations with Russia. In May 2001, he said that “Today, the sun comes up on a vastly different world. The

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<sup>176</sup> “Remarks of Senator Carl Levin on National Missile Defense,” National Defense University Forum Breakfast on Ballistic Missile Defense, May 11, 2001, p. 4, cited in, Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century*, op. cit., p. 224.

<sup>177</sup> See, President George W. Bush, Speech by President George W. Bush, National Defense University, May 1, 2001, <https://fas.org/nuke/control/abmt/news/010501bush.html>.

<sup>178</sup> The White House, *President Announces Progress in Missile Defense Capabilities*, December 17, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/12/20021217.html>.

Wall is gone, and so is the Soviet Union. Today's Russia is not yesterday's Soviet Union. Its government is no longer Communist. Its president is elected. Today's Russia is not our enemy, but a country in transition with an opportunity to emerge as a great nation, democratic, at peace with itself and its neighbors. The Iron Curtain no longer exists. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are free nations, and they are now our allies in NATO, together with a reunited Germany."<sup>179</sup>

This idealism reflects the "end of history" fallacy discussed in Chapter II, still strong a decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Russia's brutal wars against Chechnya. It also reflects a mirror-imaging assumption that Russia at the time wanted to be part of the Western international community. U.S. elites mistakenly believed that its concepts could be operationalized and transposed, despite Russia's unique political and security context.

Russia openly declared itself in a conflict with the West in 2007,<sup>180</sup> yet the illusion within the U.S. body politic lasted well past Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. The Obama Administration even launched a "reset" policy with Russia, ignoring that its tense relationship with Moscow was a result of Moscow's own actions contrary to U.S. interests. The administration officials implementing the "reset" policy yet again assumed that common interests and universal values would drive Moscow's behavior, despite

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<sup>179</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President to Students and Faculty at National Defense University," May 1, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/05/20010501-10.html>.

<sup>180</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; and, Fried and Volker, "The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was," op. cit.

its refusal to share either.<sup>181</sup> The “reset” policy undoubtedly contributed to Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

For all of the panic of arms control proponents’ regarding the Bush Administration’s announcement of the ABM Treaty withdrawal in December 2001, Russia and the United States signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (the Moscow Treaty) in May 2002, limiting the number of operational strategic warheads to 1,700-2,200.<sup>182</sup> The “action-reaction” logic, rooted in mirror-imaging assumptions, worked exactly the opposite of what the arms control proponents had argued for decades; the treaty withdrawal was followed by the largest strategic force reductions in the history of the U.S.-Russia relationship.

But the arms control dogmas outlived the ABM Treaty; the obsolescent arms control notions that missile defenses are “destabilizing” continued to shape U.S. policy well past their logical expiration date. The limited missile defense system currently protecting the United States intentionally has no significant capability to counter Russia’s, or even China’s, nuclear arsenals. Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) interceptors are singularly unsuited for defense against a large-scale attack, particularly because they are too expensive and therefore limited in numbers.<sup>183</sup> The Obama Administration’s 2010 *Ballistic Missile Defense*

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<sup>181</sup> Michael McFaul, “Sustaining the Momentum of the Reset,” *Remarks* at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 7, 2010, [https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-  
eurasia/events/2010/12/sustaining-the-momentum-of-the-reset](https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/events/2010/12/sustaining-the-momentum-of-the-reset).

<sup>182</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation On Strategic Offensive Reductions (The Moscow Treaty),” May 24, 2002, [https://2009-  
2017.state.gov/t/isn/10527.htm](https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/10527.htm).

<sup>183</sup> Some question whether GMD interceptors would be effective against Russia’s and China’s decoys. See for example, Union of Concerned Scientists, “Decoys Used in Missile Defense Intercept Tests,” January 16, 2019, [https://www.ucs.org/resources/decoys-used-missile-defense-  
intercept-tests](https://www.ucs.org/resources/decoys-used-missile-defense-intercept-tests).

*Review Report* states: “While the GMD system would be employed to defend the United States against limited missile launches from any source, it does not have the capacity to cope with large scale Russian or Chinese missile attacks, and is not intended to affect the strategic balance with those countries.”<sup>184</sup>

## Missile Defense and Contemporary Challenges

The rhetorical break with Cold War notions came only with the Trump Administration. The 2019 *Missile Defense Review* notes, “The United States relies on nuclear deterrence to address the large and more sophisticated Russian and Chinese intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities....”<sup>185</sup> Yet, upon the introduction of the review to the public, President Trump stated that “Our goal is simple: to ensure that we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States—anywhere, anytime, anyplace.”<sup>186</sup> The more comprehensive approach to missile defense is reflected in President Trump’s current Golden Dome project, a program designed for a more capable protection of the U.S. homeland.

Perhaps most importantly at this point, the continuing absence of U.S. capabilities to defend against even limited Russian or Chinese missile threats leaves Washington

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<sup>184</sup> Department of Defense, *Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report*, February 2010, p. 13, [https://archive.defense.gov/bmdr/docs/BMDR%20as%20of%2026JAN10%200630\\_for%20web.pdf](https://archive.defense.gov/bmdr/docs/BMDR%20as%20of%2026JAN10%200630_for%20web.pdf).

<sup>185</sup> Department of Defense, *Missile Defense Review*, January 2019, p. IX, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/17/2002080666/-1/-1/1/2019-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.PDF>

<sup>186</sup> Office of the White House, “Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence Announcing the Missile Defense Review,” January 17, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-announcing-missile-defense-review/>.

vulnerable to coercive nuclear threats, both strategic and regional, and thereby likely degrades the U.S. deterrence position. U.S. defense effectiveness in the context of Moscow's and China's aggressive, expansionist designs is essential to the continued security of the U.S. homeland, because historical experience shows that global wars start with regional conflicts. Deterring regional conflicts, then, must be an important objective of U.S. national security strategy. Yet, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has undermined its regional security posture by consciously perpetuating its unmitigated vulnerability. This is a consequence of misguided arms control notions of the 1960s and 1970s, and "end of history" idealism—all rooted in the mirror-imaging assumptions made throughout the decades.

During and since the Cold War, the United States pledged to be a guarantor of security to over 30 allied states around the world and come to their defense if necessary, including with its nuclear weapons. In return, with the exception of the United Kingdom and France, these states agreed they would not develop their own independent nuclear capabilities. U.S. misplaced arms control enthusiasm after the end of the Cold War has placed a strain on its ability to provide capabilities that support this extended deterrence and assurances. The enthusiastic U.S. belief that the world has reached the end of history and that war between great powers is obsolescent, led to unilateral weapons reductions that have left the United States unprepared for a world in which this belief has proven wrong.

The problem is compounded by a lack of U.S. homeland missile defense, which is a large contributor to the uncertainty regarding whether the United States would be willing to fulfill its regional security obligations. The widespread misconception regarding the value of U.S. societal vulnerability stemming from U.S. mirror-imaging

discussed here, has led to generations of U.S. policymakers, academics, and scientists labeling strategic missile defense “destabilizing,” including during debates about New START,<sup>187</sup> and remains an important contributing factor to U.S. reluctance to pursue missile defense against Russia and China.

Russia’s nuclear force developments have been driven by Moscow’s own assessment of the utility of nuclear forces for achieving its political and military goals in the context of its declining conventional forces after the end of the Cold War.<sup>188</sup> They have been independent of U.S. missile defense programs. Russia’s desire to use its military capabilities to remake the world in its own image in ways that are openly hostile to the United States and its allies is the primary reason why a sound arms control agreement with Russia is impossible.<sup>189</sup> U.S. and Russian political objectives are fundamentally at odds, and any arms control treaty cannot help but reflect that stark division. There are no universally shared interests that could lead Russia to pursue strategic arms control as anything other than a zero-sum game, and, U.S. arms control pathologies, unless corrected, will

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<sup>187</sup> See, for example, the statements by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’s in, *The New START and the Implications for National Security*, Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session (Armed Services Committee, 2010), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg65071/html/CHRG-111shrg65071.htm>.

<sup>188</sup> Mark B. Schneider, *How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile*, Occasional Paper, Vol. 3, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf>.

<sup>189</sup> Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, “Putin’s New START Offer: We Won’t Get Fooled Again,” *Information Series*, No. 640 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 21, 2025), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/michaela-dodge-and-keith-b-payne-putins-new-start-offer-we-wont-get-fooled-again-no-640-october-21-2025/](https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-and-keith-b-payne-putins-new-start-offer-we-wont-get-fooled-again-no-640-october-21-2025/).

continue to result in misguided U.S. arms control enthusiasms.

History shows that in times of political contention, and these are the times that matter most from a U.S. and allied perspective, Russia will use arms control as an opportunity to restrain the United States while bending or ignoring arms control agreements whenever it suits Moscow. While U.S. leaders expected Moscow to behave according to their mirror-imaging perceptions of what constitutes a reasonable behavior, including expectations regarding arms control, Soviet leaders behaved differently because they interpreted what was reasonable differently and placed their own political agendas ahead of U.S. understanding of what they should be thinking and doing.

Russia will not agree to deep verifiable force reductions if it thinks that such reductions will make it more difficult to achieve its political objectives. It is precisely in this light that one must understand President Putin's offer to extend the now expired New START, which Russia has violated for half a decade now.<sup>190</sup> The United States would continue to be bound by the treaty's limits, while Russia would continue to ignore them—likely making the nuclear force asymmetry between the two countries even worse. Arms control limits that Russia routinely violates, in combination with New START's weak verification regime,<sup>191</sup> would lead to nothing more than U.S. unilateral disarmament.

Similarly, China's nuclear force expansion, one that then-Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command Charles Richard referred to as "breathhtaking" and a "strategic breakout," is primarily driven by Beijing's revisionist political agenda and a belief that nuclear forces will help to

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<sup>190</sup> Dodge and Payne, "Putin's New START Offer: We Won't Get Fooled Again," *op. cit.*

<sup>191</sup> U.S. Department of State, "A Rebuttal to Sen. Kit Bond's November 18, 2010 Floor Speech in the U.S. Senate on the New START Treaty," November 24, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/151981.htm>.

fulfill it, not by the U.S. nuclear modernization program, delayed and limited in its scope and objectives, or by the presence of a limited U.S. missile defense system.<sup>192</sup> China is bound to object to U.S. missile defense capabilities and try to impede them through arms control, because these will complicate its ability to achieve its revisionist objectives. But Chinese objections should not stop the United States from pursuing the program.

## **Conclusion**

The demonstrably wrong assumption that the United States and adversaries share values and priorities, and that adversaries perceive and understand rationality the same way as the United States, has been extraordinarily powerful in shaping the U.S. approach to arms control negotiations, and particularly missile defense policy. If the United States is to pursue arms control intelligently, Washington must shed its mirror-imaging mindset and understand that other countries will pursue capabilities to advance their own geopolitical goals in ways that cannot be anticipated by mirror imaging, that these goals often will be hostile to U.S. interests, and that opponents will use all available tools, including arms control, to restrain the U.S. ability to frustrate their attainment of these goals.

There are currently no scenarios in which it would be beneficial for the United States to continue to perpetuate the vulnerability of its population, allies, and means to achieve economic prosperity to adversaries' missiles, regardless of whether these come from Iran, North Korea, China, or Russia. Such vulnerability invites adversaries to coerce

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<sup>192</sup> John Vandiver, "'Breathtaking expansion': US Strategic Command leader expects further revelations of China's nuclear weapons advancement," *Stars and Stripes*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2021-10-18/china-us-russia-nuclear-weapons-hypersonics-stratcom-3283272.html>.

Washington into holding the U.S. homeland hostage, thereby undermining extended deterrence and allied assurance.

Yet, U.S. adversaries have over time become adept at using the arms control process and vocabulary to slow down or stop programs that create challenges to their desire to advance political objectives that are generally hostile to the United States, e.g., by holding the U.S. public hostage to their long-range, nuclear-armed missiles. Consequently, the United States ought not limit its missile defense through an arms control process (or in any other way driven by enduring pathologies in U.S. thinking), particularly not with Russia and China threatening Washington and its allies. These countries incorporate missile attacks into their coercive regional strategies, view any U.S. efforts to thwart them as “destabilizing,” and try to devise various means to restrict and limit U.S. missile defenses while advancing their own missile defense programs. For example, Russia deploys scores of nuclear-armed interceptors around Moscow and hundreds of shorter-range air and missile defense interceptors.<sup>193</sup> It is deploying the S-500 system; the main mission for this system is strategic missile defense.<sup>194</sup>

The Soviet Union was successful in limiting U.S. strategic missile defenses during the Cold War through the arms control process and by advancing self-serving arguments against their development—arguments that echoed those of the U.S. arms control community. Almost the same vapid arguments in opposition to U.S. missile

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<sup>193</sup> Department of Defense, “Foreign Nations’ Missile Defense Systems,” *Factsheet*, 2018, <https://www.war.gov/Portals/1/Interactive/2018/11-2019-Missile-Defense-Review/Fact-Sheet-Foreign-Nations-Missile-Defenses-UPDATED190117.pdf>.

<sup>194</sup> Mark B. Schneider and Peter Huessy, “Russian Deployment of Missile Defenses Hidden in Plain Sight,” Gatestone Institute, February 18, 2013, <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3590/russia-missile-defense>.

defense continue to be repeated today, in a fundamentally different strategic context and technological environment.

Far from being destabilizing, the value of missile defense for nations under attack is underscored by the Ukrainian and Israeli governments responses to Russia's and Iran's missile terror in Ukraine and Israel. As missile capabilities continue to proliferate, systems to counter them will increase in importance. The United States should shake its foolish expectations that its adversaries will think and act like Washington, via mirror imaging. They will follow their own political agendas and develop weapons to achieve those agendas in a manner that is much more independent of U.S. actions and thought processes than proponents of arms control assert. The United States does not hold a monopoly on what constitutes a reasonable behavior, and Washington's arms control expectations are bound to be frustrated for as long as it thinks it does.



## Chapter VI. The U.S. Assumption That States Will Comply with Arms Control Obligations, or Can Be Persuaded to Comply

*"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."*<sup>195</sup>

The United States tends to advance arms control initiatives 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 pressure, if necessary. This is a reflection 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."<sup>196</sup> If weapons that violate agreements are unconnected to leaders' geopolitical goals, a symbolic punishment or even public opinion pressure will make countries give them up, the fallacious reasoning goes.

However, this reasoning is historically unsound, because authoritarian states do not care about compliance to the degree democracies do, particularly when treaties regulate weapons these states consider necessary to achieve their political objectives. The principle that treaties must be obeyed (*pacta sunt servanda*) has a meaning in Washington far different from that in Hitler's Berlin, Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang. Nevertheless, Washington typically negotiates as if they all shared the same understanding and willingness to restrict their actions based on a formal agreement. Washington's propensity for

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<sup>195</sup> Dr. John S. Foster Jr. in, "The New START and Implications for National Security," op. cit.

<sup>196</sup> Wallop and Codevilla, *The Arms Control Delusion*, op. cit., p. 42.

idealism and mirror imaging, and optimistic political investment in arms control prevent it from speaking out honestly about violations and increasing threats until the evidence is undeniable and response utterly necessary. In this process, democracies often lose precious time that could have been devoted to countering the threat while it was more manageable.

Charges of noncompliance typically are met by opposition from the violator and from domestic arms control champions with the accusation that Washington simply opposes the beloved arms control process. Charges of noncompliance also challenge the integrity of an arms control regime that a government has instituted with great fanfare, and are an indirect admission of its failure to keep the citizens safe if the size and readiness of military forces have declined—as tends to be the case when a government relies on arms control as a solution to its national security problems. Such an admission is usually accompanied by requests for increases in military funding necessitated by the appearance of a capable adversary committed to a change in the status quo.

A government may fear that accusing another state of violations and imposing consequences in order to bring a state back into compliance will undermine whatever is left of the arms control regime. Ironically, the violator and domestic arms control champions complain that such requests are a threat to the arms control regime and the future of arms control—the very process that has contributed to a worsened threat context. Moreover, the violator's population might be actively supportive of, or ignorant of, violations, or have essentially zero influence over an autocratic government's arms control violations. Consequently, appeals to popular domestic pressure will not moderate its leadership's willingness to violate agreements.

## **Arms Control Treaty Violations and the Period between the Two World Wars**

The enduring expectation that opponents, for one reason or another, will abide by international commitments and that international pressure will prevent them from cheating can be traced at least to the early twentieth century. This expectation can be seen in arguments made by President Woodrow Wilson on behalf of the League of Nations. He claimed that “world public opinion” would compel compliance with the League of Nations for countries that would not do so willingly.<sup>197</sup> The interwar experience, however, shows not only that there is no universal public opinion, but that national public opinions can be made to support national interests quite at odds with U.S. expectations of adherence to universally shared norms.

The case of Germany’s violation of the naval treaties in the period between World War I and II is instructive, because naval violations are comparatively difficult to conceal.<sup>198</sup> This meant that there was relatively less ambiguity about these violations than other, more technically arcane, violations of other arms control treaty provisions. Germany started violating the Versailles Treaty on permitted displacement of its newly-built ships in the early 1920s,<sup>199</sup> and incurred zero punishment for its naval violations; these were effectively legitimized in a more permissive Anglo-German Naval Treaty ratified in 1936. The treaty sanctioned a large buildup of German battleships. But even the Anglo-German Naval Treaty was not permissive enough for Hitler – who immediately went

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<sup>197</sup> See Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 8-18, 27-36.

<sup>198</sup> See Barton Whaley, *Covert German Rearmament, 1919-1939: Deception and Misperception* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, Foreign Intelligence Book Series, 1984), p. 89.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

on to further violate its provisions. The British response to the new rounds of violations was impotent. When questions arose about the displacement of the German battleship *Bismarck*, officially announced at 35,000 standard tons, Thomas Phillips, director of the Plan Division of the Admiralty, stated that "Our principal safeguard against such an infraction of treaty obligations lies in the good faith of the signatories."<sup>200</sup>

Phillips was, in fact, involved in negotiating the Anglo-German Naval Treaty, which likely made him subsequently inclined to understate violations based on the size and capacity of German ships.<sup>201</sup> Arms control negotiators and governments that promote them cannot help but have a vested interest in protecting the appearance of the treaties they negotiate and in which they and their governments invest political capital. This enduring pathology is apparent in virtually all arms control treaties between the United States and the Soviet Union (and Russia later), and in interwar agreements between Great Britain and Germany.

Not until the *Bismarck* was sunk and the British interrogated its survivors did they begin to realize the scale of their self-deception.<sup>202</sup> Still in denial despite mounting evidence, the British Admiralty at first rejected estimates of its own intelligence service. The *Bismarck* displaced, in fact, 41,700 standard tons, 19 percent more than its announced displacement. The full realization of its error came only after the Soviet Admiralty handed over its own intelligence estimate, six years after the construction of the *Bismarck* had begun, and seventeen months after the ship was sunk.<sup>203</sup>

The German heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* officially displaced 10,000 standard units, but its real displacement

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

was almost half again as large at 14,475 standard tons.<sup>204</sup> All large German warships built in the 1920s and 1930s violated pertinent arms control agreements, a fact that the British director of naval construction conveniently wrote off as a possibility that “the designers are not pressed to be meticulously accurate” in Germany, rather than dealing with political implications of admitting that the Germans actually violated the agreement on purpose.<sup>205</sup>

The United States was no better in enforcing compliance with these agreements than the United Kingdom or France. President Wilson was unable to get the Senate to give its advice and consent to the Versailles Treaty, and so a U.S. role as its enforcer was dead on arrival. That did not stop the United States from negotiating yet more treaties in the misguided belief that others would honor them with equally abysmal results. Between the turn of the twentieth century and the 1930s, the U.S. Government negotiated over 90 treaties that had to do with international arbitration and conciliation. Despite tremendous diplomatic efforts, the “ninety-five treaties, including incidentally every single one negotiated by Secretaries of State Bryan, Kellogg, and Stimson, appear to have remained wholly barren of any practical result. Nor is there any evidence that this ant-like labor had the faintest effect on the development of the terrible wars and upheavals by which the first half of this century was marked.”<sup>206</sup>

The United States also pursued the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact in which many states promised to renounce offensive war as an instrument of settling their disputes. It was based on wholly foolish, idealistic expectations about international relations and the ability of states and their populations to come together to enforce compliance with

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<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>206</sup> Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy*, op. cit., p. 19.

terms of the agreement. Kennan, a founding architect of U.S. containment strategy against the Soviet Union, called the agreement "one of the strangest and most bizarre of the episodes of modern diplomacy."<sup>207</sup> In it, a "group of well-meaning peace enthusiasts" managed to get:

two harried Foreign Ministers, M. Briand and Mr. Kellogg, into an embarrassing involvement from which the latter could see no graceful exit except by pressing all the nations of the world into associating themselves with one of the most meaningless and futile of all international engagements. For months, the two unhappy statesmen were obliged to duel publicly with each other to see who could appear most concerned for world peace without sacrificing anything real from the standpoint of national interest. Again, the effort that went into negotiation was formidable.<sup>208</sup>

The effort was also utterly pointless beyond providing employment and busywork to scores of diplomats working on the agreement and securing a Nobel Peace Prize for Frank Kellogg in 1929. He died prior to the outbreak of World War II, thus escaping the direct witness of horrors to which the utopian idealism that was at the core of the Pact undoubtedly contributed.

The list of German interwar violations and subsequent impotence of allied powers to address them or even respond to them is very long.<sup>209</sup> Germany either found workarounds of the treaty provisions, e.g. by smuggling and reconstituting its factories in other countries, or blatantly violated them, e.g., by calling tanks light, medium,

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Koch, Scheber, and Guthe, *Securing Compliance with Arms Control Agreements* op. cit., p. 8.

and heavy tractors. German violations became open after Adolf Hitler became the chancellor in January 1933, and further worsened after that. In fact, Germany “switched from dissimulative deception that concealed the facts of secret preparations to simulative deception that concealed weakness.”<sup>210</sup> Many Germans, and almost all politicians, captains of industry, and military leaders not only supported these violations, but were complicit in their cover-up.<sup>211</sup>

German violations happened while the British Empire and France had almost ideal conditions for verification, including almost unlimited access to anywhere in Germany at any time for the first several years of the Versailles Treaty’s implementation. Despite clear evidence of German violations, Britain and France did not respond in the face of Germany’s increasing assertiveness and aggression. They essentially dismissed treaty enforcement and put off their own armaments for as long as possible.

The lack of political will to enforce treaties in which a government has been invested and from which much is expected is an enduring arms control pathology tied to asymmetric compliance in democracies. British politician and Nobel laureate for his campaign on disarmament, Phillip Noel-Baker, observed that the system of inspection did not fail in Germany, but that it “was never enforced” after 1925.<sup>212</sup> He went on to state that “This happened, not because it would have been difficult to enforce the Treaty, if the other nations had desired to do so, but because there was no general will to enforce it.”<sup>213</sup> Ignorance of German violations led to more serious violations, as historian Barton

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<sup>210</sup> Whaley, *Covert German Rearmament, 1919-1939: Deception and Misperception*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>212</sup> Phillip Noel-Baker, *The Arms Race; A Programme for World Disarmament* (London, UK: Atlantic Books, 1954), pp. 535-536.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

Whaley observed: "By failing to demand rigorous verification of alleged infractions, they [the national leaders] showed apathy. By failing to apply sanctions when intelligence did occasionally bring undeniable proof of infractions to their attention, they showed themselves impotent as well. And the opponent's perception of this impotence was a spur to ever more audacious infractions."<sup>214</sup>

The important point here is that the causes for violations and the lack of political will to enforce agreements did not follow from the technical issues of the verification regime. Violations and failures of enforcement reflected overarching political interests and hostilities. The problem cannot be fixed by tinkering with the technical details of a verification regime because the problem is much deeper.

The United States has never come close to a verification regime that would provide it with so many opportunities to catch a violator red-handed in its arms control dealings with the Soviet Union (and other states) because the Soviets would not agree to it. And even if the Soviets *were* caught blatantly cheating, there was not much that would really hurt them that the United States was likely to do in response; this had become obvious to Moscow – as it is now obvious to Beijing.

Yet, not even the harrowing experience of the complete failure of the interwar disarmament movement could curb Sir Noel-Baker's optimism about its future arms control prospects. With the development of atomic weapons, he said that "Scientists and engineers have eliminated the barriers of time and space, and all nations now form one society, bound by bonds of common interest which they cannot break."<sup>215</sup> This is quite obviously nonsense; no

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<sup>214</sup> Whaley, *Covert German Rearmament, 1919-1939: Deception and Misperception*, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>215</sup> Noel-Baker, *The Arms Race; A Programme for World Disarmament*, op. cit., pp. 562-563.

invention can erase profound geopolitical differences among various states around the world. These differences mean that some states, including Russia, will see arms control as a means to exploit enduring Western arms control pathologies to advance their interests in opposition to American interests. They value some of these interests so highly that they will risk or pursue war to achieve them, as evidenced in Ukraine.

The United States, preoccupied with its economic woes, was no better in terms of understanding the implications of German violations and preparing to counter them. U.S. reporter and political commentator Walter Lippmann observed that:

The nazi regime came to power on January 30, 1933, and very soon showed its character by destroying German liberties, by glorifying war, and by menacing its weaker European neighbors. But although all this aroused protest, we must note that the rearmament of Germany, the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, the conquest of Austria in 1938, the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1938, its total occupation in 1939, and the invasion of Poland in 1939, did not cause the Administration to ask for, or Congress to take, any important measures to arm the United States.<sup>216</sup>

And so the United States entered World War II in far worse shape than if it had prepared for conflict as soon as German goals became obvious.

German and Japanese interwar arms control violations were at the forefront of statesmen's minds after the end of World War II, particularly after the United States and the Soviet Union developed nuclear weapons. But the Soviet

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<sup>216</sup> Walter Lippmann, *U.S. War Aims* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1944), p. 43.

Union was not a surrendered power. Moscow learned its own lessons from the Versailles Treaty's failed arms control experiment. Most notable among these were that violations are very likely to go unpunished by cautious democracies, particularly if they are made to seem ambiguous, and that the arms control process can be exploited to the disadvantage of democracies by generating pressures on military modernization and technological innovation.

This pathology makes it more difficult to walk away from poorly structured arms control treaties; the adage goes that the proponents of arms control have never seen a treaty they did not like. Treating the arms control process as an objective and unalloyed good is also perhaps why the arms control movement has been short on reflections on the disadvantages of the arms control process or why agreements did not perform as their advocates postulated when these agreements were debated in the U.S. Congress. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, advocates quickly latched onto the narrative that arms control helped to end the Cold War. In reality, it is much more likely that arms control helped to prolong the deadly competition with the Soviets by channeling competition away from areas in which the United States had undisputed advantage, including nuclear warhead modernization and missile defense. One by one, the United States gave up these advantages and, in return, saw the reinvigoration and expansion of Soviet nuclear programs and continuing modernization of Moscow's missile defense systems.

### **Violations and Punishments Traditionally Do Not Go Together**

Fred Iklé, who served 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.”<sup>217</sup> The West’s track record with regard to bringing a violating state into compliance with its arms control obligations is poor. This is because democratic governments do not want to undermine the arms control regime they have promoted, or because they do not want to publicly acknowledge that the national security situation worsened in the context of the arms control promises they made. A government held responsible for a worsening national security situation, after all, may not win elections.

Not coincidentally, the discussions regarding what the United States would actually do when violations are discovered almost never goes beyond perfunctory when treaties are being considered in the Senate during the advice and consent process. A part of the reason is that one administration cannot credibly commit future administrations to a specific course of action if violations are discovered, which in itself is a difficult task. Administrations are reluctant and slow to respond when noncompliance and violations are discovered.

During the Senate’s arms control deliberations, the executive branch often dismisses or downplays the potential for non-compliance, its significance if discovered, and the challenge of enforcing compliance. The working assumption of the SALT process was that the Soviets would be deterred from violating the agreements because the United States could detect them, and that the consequences for their violations would be so grave that Moscow would never attempt it.<sup>218</sup> Yet, once treaties are ratified, the

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<sup>217</sup> Fred Iklé, “After Detection: What?,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (January 1962), p. 208.

<sup>218</sup> Kenneth Adelman, “Verification in an Age of Mobile Missiles,” U.S. Department of State, *Current Policy*, No. 987, June 26, 1987, p. 33, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/2023-09/40-219-6927378-004-001-2023.pdf#page=2>.

executive branch calls out violations publicly only grudgingly, or not at all, and often after an opponent discussed them publicly in the press, as has been the case, for example, with Russia's arms control violations.<sup>219</sup>

Soviet violations of the ABM Treaty illustrate this persistent arms control myth that other states will abide by their international obligations and that the United States will be able to bring them back into compliance when they do not.<sup>220</sup> The Reagan Administration found the Krasnoyarsk radar to be a violation of the ABM Treaty in 1985, two years after the initial discovery.<sup>221</sup> Only in 1989 did the Soviet Union admit that the radar was a violation of the ABM Treaty—and it was the internal political change within the Soviet regime (rather than U.S. pressure) that allowed the Soviet Union to admit the violation in the first place. The admission itself had little to do with U.S. (limited) efforts to enforce compliance, but had everything to do with the changing internal political dynamic in Moscow, and the resultant change in the political relationship between the two countries.

A similar pattern is discernible regarding Russia's violations of the INF Treaty until 2019, when the United States withdrew from it following years of failed attempts to bring Russia back into compliance with the treaty terms. The U.S. Department of State found Russia in violation of its treaty obligations in 2014.<sup>222</sup> It is worth bearing in mind

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<sup>219</sup> Schneider, *How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile*, op. cit.

<sup>220</sup> Koch, Scheber, and Guthe, *Securing Compliance with Arms Control Agreements*, op. cit., pp. 23-40.

<sup>221</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Message to the Congress Transmitting a Report on Soviet Noncompliance With Arms Control Agreements," March 10, 1987, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/message-congress-transmitting-report-soviet-noncompliance-arms-control-agreements-0>.

<sup>222</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and

that the public revelation of Russia's violations was preceded by at least a year worth of meetings during which the United States gave Russia an opportunity to explain its noncompliance with and then violations of the treaty. The United States took two more years to call a meeting of the Special Verification Commission, a treaty-established body to discuss compliance and verification concerns. The violation allegation was repeated in every State Department Annual Compliance Report between 2014 and 2018, with no success in bringing the Russians back into compliance or even admitting the violation.<sup>223</sup> Despite Russia's violations, proponents of arms control quite predictably argued against the United States withdrawing from the treaty.<sup>224</sup>

The State Department's 2018 Annual Compliance Report made apparent that the Russians actually expanded their treaty-violating activities after the United States made its findings public and while the treaty was still in effect.<sup>225</sup> When the United States finally charged Russia with violations of the treaty, Washington was unable to bring Moscow back into compliance with its arms control

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Commitments," July 2014, p. 8, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/230108.pdf>.

<sup>223</sup> Amy F. Woolf, "Russian Compliance with the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty: Background and Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, Report R43832, June 27, 2019, [https://www.congress.gov/crs\\_external\\_products/R/PDF/R43832/R43832.36.pdf](https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R43832/R43832.36.pdf).

<sup>224</sup> Steven Pifer, "Don't Scrap the INF Treaty," Brookings, June 9, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/dont-scrap-the-inf-treaty/>. Germany has since agreed to host U.S. intermediate-range missiles. See Peter Felstead, "Germany agrees to host conventionally armed long-range US missiles on its territory," *European Security & Defense*, July 11, 2024, <https://euro-sd.com/2024/07/major-news/39264/germany-to-host-us-missiles/>.

<sup>225</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, April 2018, pp. 10-12, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/AVC-2018-Compliance-Report.pdf>.

obligations. Moreover, even as the scale of Russia's violations grew, the United States remained bound by the treaty provisions, demonstrating the perennial pathology of a democracy hoping for the best and failing to prepare for the alternative.

Even when the United States finally identifies an opponent's treaty violations, it is extremely slow to impose costs in retaliation. Publicly calling out an adversary's violations might require more defense spending or suggest the failure of an arms control agreement that the government was in favor of in the first place, or perhaps more specifically, a failure of those who were advocating for an arms control agreement in the first place, thus undermining the perception of their or the government's competence on foreign and defense policy.<sup>226</sup>

The argument, or some comparable rationale, that opponents essentially share U.S. norms and respect for agreements, and thus will similarly abide by arms control agreements, has been repeated on behalf of numerous subsequent arms control agreements/enthusiasms, despite repeated examples of opponents' non-compliance. The enduring expectation that "this time it will be different" meets Albert Einstein's definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.<sup>227</sup> With regard to America's enemies, however, the consistent reality is their noncompliance and the absence of effective enforcement tools that Washington is willing to employ.

Arms control history is littered with agreements that adversaries have violated. The Russians are chronic cheaters and circumventers of arms control agreements. Consequently, Washington often is reduced to relying on deceptive opponents to abide by agreements while U.S.

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<sup>226</sup> Iklé, "After Detection: What?," *op. cit.*, p. 212.

<sup>227</sup> Christina Sterbenz, "12 Famous Quotes That Always Get Misattributed," *Business Insider*, October 7, 2013, <https://www.businessinsider.com/misattributed-quotes-2013-10>.

institutions discourage deviation from agreements in effect, even when these are blatantly violated by other parties. Russian cheating was a contentious issue during the Senate's consideration of New START and the difference between the Obama Administration's statements regarding what would happen if Russia cheated and the subsequent reality is quite stark. The problem is compounded by the fact that when Washington withdraws from a treaty following Moscow's material violations, the administration doing so is roundly criticized by arms control enthusiasts for destroying arms control rather than lauded for trying to maintain the integrity of the process.

Further, arms control treaties limit the ability of a compliant state to learn about weapons that they supposedly control or regulate. This opens up an opportunity for an unscrupulous adversary to learn more about the regulated systems, potentially gaining an advantage over the compliant party that he can, and usually does, exploit. Such was the case of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which led to a deep reduction in work on U.S. missile defense programs, while the Soviets not only built up their offensive nuclear forces (which proponents of SALT said they would not do), but also continued to build up their own missile capabilities, including continued modernization of their strategic missile defenses.<sup>228</sup>

### **Too Slow to Call Out Violations, Almost Nonexistent Punishment**

Reflecting the tendency to protect the idealistic arms control narrative regarding opponents' compliance and intentions, Washington typically is exceedingly slow to call out violations and continues to abide by agreements despite

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<sup>228</sup> William R. Van Cleave, *Fortress USSR: The Soviet Strategic Defense Initiative and the U.S. Strategic Defense Response* (Menlo Park, CA: Stanford University, Hoover Institution Press, 1986).

opponents' violations. This certainly was true with regard to Russian violations and circumventions of the 1987 INF Treaty. And, for years now, the United States has been unable to verify Moscow's compliance with New START, the most recent arms control agreement with the Russians, through on-site inspections, which were a key element of its verification regime.

New START provides a useful example of a contrast between the executive branch's arms control rhetoric prior to the Senate giving its advice and consent, and actual practice. Prior to the treaty ratification, the U.S. Department of State argued that "The costs and risks of Russian cheating or breakout, on the other hand, would likely be very significant. In addition to the financial and international political costs of such an action, any Russian leader considering cheating or breakout from the New START treaty would have to consider that the United States will retain the ability to upload large numbers of additional nuclear warheads on both bombers and missiles under the New START, which would provide the ability for a timely and very significant U.S. response."<sup>229</sup> None of these tools were wielded once it became clear that Russia, as usual, began violating the treaty.

The State Department's 2023 *Annual Compliance Report* noted that Russia's denial of U.S. inspections to monitor compliance constituted a specific violation and that "the United States cannot certify the Russian Federation to be in compliance with the terms of the New START Treaty."<sup>230</sup> Then-Undersecretary of State for Arms Control Bonnie Jenkins offered the covering assurance that "we're not

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<sup>229</sup> "The New START and Implications for National Security," op. cit.

<sup>230</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty*, 2023, p. 5, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2022-New-START-Implementation-Report.pdf>.

seeing any evidence that Russia is in noncompliance.”<sup>231</sup> Of course, evidence of cheating would be hard to acquire when Moscow had essentially shut down the key verification measures required by the treaty.<sup>232</sup>

In February 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that the Russian Federation would suspend New START’s implementation altogether.<sup>233</sup> Downplaying this Russian move, two leading treaty negotiators wrote that “We do not see that Russian suspension constitutes an extraordinary event that jeopardizes US supreme interests.”<sup>234</sup> Russia completely stopped New START’s implementation after several years of noncompliance and violations, yet the two negotiators maintained that these actions did not “jeopardize US supreme interest.” That is an absurd position; if treaties are important, so are violations and suspensions.

Systemic cheating is not limited to Russia. The 2024 U.S. Department of State’s *Adherence to and Compliance With Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and*

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<sup>231</sup> Jamey Keaten and Jim Heintz, “US calls on Russia to stay with nuclear weapons treaty,” *Associated Press*, February 27, 2023, [https://sports.yahoo.com/us-calls-russia-stay-nuclear-170314165.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAJs0711oJK8Jm6uqXJ8TdCsHuzra91Z2SfxOP549IL41Y19vVLhDMWoDvCEOXBQcBfSSE0dHAiTIO\\_wh5zzp3FbQb7lrtFdWUpOWzK\\_iuHOjGDhvIMHbLepm\\_ALQwCr5td4X2eBQNwz7jvGMG3NN3X7sq7eLcfZrxoH7q9h9OW](https://sports.yahoo.com/us-calls-russia-stay-nuclear-170314165.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAJs0711oJK8Jm6uqXJ8TdCsHuzra91Z2SfxOP549IL41Y19vVLhDMWoDvCEOXBQcBfSSE0dHAiTIO_wh5zzp3FbQb7lrtFdWUpOWzK_iuHOjGDhvIMHbLepm_ALQwCr5td4X2eBQNwz7jvGMG3NN3X7sq7eLcfZrxoH7q9h9OW).

<sup>232</sup> This paragraph draws on Michaela Dodge, “Next Steps in Arms Control? Lessons from Moscow’s New START Violations,” *op. cit.*

<sup>233</sup> Mark Trevelyan, “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/>.

<sup>234</sup> Rose Gottemoeller and Marshall L. Brown, Jr., “Legal aspects of Russia’s New START suspension provide opportunities for US policy makers,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, March 2, 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/2023/03/legal-aspects-of-russias-new-start-suspension-provide-opportunities-for-us-policy-makers/>.

*Commitments* notes compliance concerns with China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, among other states.<sup>235</sup> These concerns include noncompliance regarding nuclear and biological weapons limitations. Consultations are the most often proposed recourse, but they have typically failed to return determined cheaters to compliance.

The U.S. democratic system's division of power, checks and balances, and relative transparency make intentional subversion by the United States of signed agreements nearly impossible. America's authoritarian adversaries do not face similar inherent restraints and do not care to spend precious resources on compliance when it is not in their interest. If an arms control commitment prohibits a desired action, autocratic opponents often will engage in noncompliance.

The Soviets, and now the Russians, have been deceiving the United States for decades—a reality abetted by U.S. idealism and arms control pathologies. In rare instances violations were corrected. Such was the case during the Reagan Administration with regard to the Krasnoyarsk radar, which was recognized as a violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty after years of Moscow's denials.<sup>236</sup> The admission was preceded by years of significant violations of the SALT agreements to which successive administrations had limited responses. In 1986, President Reagan said he would no longer be bound by provisions of SALT II, an agreement so flawed that it was never ratified. Some in Congress fought him every step of the way, preferring that the United States should "abide selectively

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<sup>235</sup> U.S. Department of State, *2024 Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty*, January 17, 2025, [https://2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/UNCLASS\\_NST-Implementation-Report\\_2024-FINAL-Updated-Accessible-01.17.2025.pdf](https://2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/UNCLASS_NST-Implementation-Report_2024-FINAL-Updated-Accessible-01.17.2025.pdf).

<sup>236</sup> Koch, Scheber, and Guthe, *Securing Compliance with Arms Control Agreements*, op. cit., p. 28.

by an unratified and expired agreement that the Soviet Union has chosen to violate."<sup>237</sup>

The disadvantages of the U.S. approach to arms control are apparent, beset as it is by multiple arms control pathologies. Presidential administrations frequently want to achieve an agreement during their tenures—often seeming as an exercise in virtue signaling. Autocracies know this, and exploit deadlines to drive a better bargain. One of the foremost national security experts and participant in the SALT process Van Cleave observed that “We should remind ourselves that in the democratic states of the West there is always arms control, even without negotiated agreements. Arms are controlled and limited by the West’s traditional values, by its political and budgeting processes, and by the influence of the media and of public opinion.”<sup>238</sup> This is another way in which democracies are limited in the arms control process in a way that autocracies are not, further compounding the pathologies inherent in unwarranted idealism, mirror imaging, asymmetrical compliance, and an inability to bring a determined adversary back into compliance with its arms control obligations. The process reduced Congress’s willingness to fund nuclear weapons modernization and treat the Soviet challenge with due seriousness. As President Nixon’s National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger observed, “We will not draw the appropriate conclusion if we do not admit that SALT may have had a perverse effect on the willingness of some in Congress, key opinion makers, and even Administration officials to face fully the relentless Soviet military buildup.”<sup>239</sup>

This dynamic is illustrative of democratic governments believing that other countries will abide by treaties, and that

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<sup>237</sup> Adelman, “Verification in an Age of Mobile Missiles,” op. cit.

<sup>238</sup> Van Cleave, “The Arms Control Record: Successes and Failures,” in Staar, ed., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>239</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 10.

violations can be remedied through good will and consultations. When that does not happen, they do not want to be the ones telling their voters that their arms control victories really were failures and that the national security situation worsened on their watch. As a consequence, support for military programs that address new threat developments becomes much more difficult.

## **Conclusion**

The United States and other democratic governments generally assume that their adversaries will honor arms control treaties. When that does not happen, they face challenges in admitting to the public that adversaries are violating arms control obligations, because they do not want to appear responsible for the worsening national security environment and undermining an arms control regime by calling out violations. Enforcing compliance becomes difficult in such conditions, and the United States is left to comply with treaties that adversaries ignore. Moreover, obtaining support for military programs that would help democracies cope with the new threats emanating from the adversaries' revisionist designs becomes more challenging until the threat is blatantly obvious to the general public. At that point, precious time and attention that could be used to prepare to counter adversaries are then lost.

This chapter refutes the notion, often put forth during the Senate advice and consent process, that opponents will not risk the potential cost of non-compliance, and that violations can be easily alleviated or corrected by consultations or via some form of compellence, if necessary. Such a view appears to follow from the enduring U.S. mirror imaging of opponents' goals and intentions. In fact, the U.S. track record in bringing hostile opponents into compliance is abysmal. Proponents of arms control assert

that opponents will be cautious with regard to violations, or disconnect violations from their hostile goals, and that good will consultations, or even public opinion pressure, will help ensure compliance. This typically is just not so.

Moreover, by focusing on technical issues of compliance, Washington often misses the more important question by far: whether the other party's political objectives are hostile to the United States and how its noncompliance is connected to those hostile objectives. This ultimately determines whether the United States needs to be concerned about the other party's actions. In a sense, given the pathologies affecting the U.S. approach to arms control, it does not matter whether weapons are regulated by a misguided arms control regime. If a nation with openly hostile intentions toward the United States builds up weapons in perfect compliance with poorly designed and executed arms control agreements, the United States should not be complacent just because said country is not violating its arms control obligations. The United States, then, should be planning against its opponent's capabilities and hostile agenda, particularly when history suggests that the opponent will freely disregard arms control limits when they become inconvenient.



## Chapter VII. How to Foolproof a U.S. Approach to Arms Control

*"Hope, danger's comforter, may be indulged in by those who have abundant resources, if not without loss at all events without ruin; but its nature is to be extravagant, and those who go so far as to put their all upon the venture see it in its true colours only when they are ruined."*<sup>240</sup>

This *Occasional Paper* showed that the most influential assumptions that have served as the basis for U.S. arms control initiatives are demonstrably fallacious and generate lasting unilateral disadvantages for the United States as it is working on defending the current world order. Notably, most of these assumptions are rooted in mirror imaging, an overarching sense shared across the U.S. Government, that others will prove rational, and therefore behave like Americans – if necessary, Washington can educate them to its more sophisticated mode of thinking.

Explaining how these influential ideas have proven to be misguided and harmful to U.S. and allied security establishes a reality-based framework for any future U.S. arms control initiatives undertaken by the Trump Administration and its successors. If U.S. policymakers fail to appreciate that other countries' leaderships calculate differently, and see their nuclear weapons as means to advance their political objectives, and that these objectives are at times fundamentally incompatible with U.S. objectives, Washington will continue to engage in

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<sup>240</sup> Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, quoted in Joel A. Schlosser, "'Hope, Danger's Comforter': Thucydides' History and the Politics of Hope," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (2013), p. 169, [https://repository.brynmawr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1022&context=polisci\\_pubs](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1022&context=polisci_pubs).

misguided arms control enthusiasms and be disadvantaged in assuring allies and deterring adversaries.

This study has illuminated why and how unfounded assumptions and myths have repeatedly proven to be wrong, including mirror-imaging-based claims that the liberal international order will lead to peace; U.S. self-restraint will inspire opponents to similar self-restraint; arms control will independently transform political relations; and, opponent noncompliance is unlikely, or can be rectified via a consultative processes. These enduring beliefs constitute the pathologies in Washington's arms control thinking. Such expectations lead to agreements that often harm U.S. and allied security and undermine the very skills and capabilities the United States needs to sustain a vibrant, flexible, and resilient nuclear weapons program and complex, a bedrock of its deterrence and extended deterrence.

### **On the Dangers of Mirror Imaging and Other Misconceptions**

Mirror imaging was the key misconception behind the optimism following the breakup of the Soviet Union that economic and political liberalization will automatically go hand in hand. The Americans assumed that "these truths"<sup>241</sup> that we hold "self-evident"<sup>242</sup> are as self-evident (and desirable) in Beijing and Moscow as they are in the United States, particularly if we explain them well to others. U.S. political representatives ignored centuries of human experience and in the "new world order" euphoria failed to appreciate that the (relative) ensuing peace was temporary at best. In their zeal to pocket the defense spending

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<sup>241</sup> *Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776,

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

reductions and increase the spending on domestic programs, policymakers failed to comprehend that revisionist states' economic liberalization would only provide resources to advance anti-status quo policies and that these countries at a basic level remained hostile to the United States and its allies.

Mirror imaging is a driving force behind another fallacy that has pathologically impacted U.S. arms control efforts. The United States has historically believed that the arms control process can independently improve political relations with other states regardless (or despite) of their fundamentally hostile political goals, because adversaries will think about weapons and agreements to control them exactly like policymakers in Washington. This notion made the United States place more value on the process rather than substance when the two are at odds, particularly in conjunction with Washington's other arms control pathologies, resulting in misguided arms control agreements that place the United States and its allies at a disadvantage relative to their revisionist adversaries.

Mirror imaging is also a driving cause behind the "action-reaction" fallacy, or the notion that adversaries' military programs are driven by U.S. military programs, and its corollary that adversaries will stop them only if the United States does so first. This arms control pathology has contributed to constraining U.S. nuclear modernization and missile defense programs at times when U.S. adversaries are becoming increasingly revisionist, belligerent, and more capable. Despite decades of experience and evidence to the contrary, U.S. arms control proponents continue to assume that adversaries will act mechanistically based on U.S. programs and policies and that if the United States restrains itself, others will follow suit.

Arms control advocates often oppose U.S. modernization programs based on this mirror-imaging logic, with no comparable success in slowing down

authoritarian countries' modernization programs through advocacy. This dynamic results in an asymmetric weakening of U.S. military capabilities, including nuclear forces and the complex that produces and maintains them. Moreover, taking advantage of U.S. "mirror-imaging" misconceptions, revisionist adversaries have traditionally used the arms control process and jargon to restrain U.S. programs by co-opting, or sometimes originating, disarmament rhetoric that appeals to American pathologies but has no comparable impact on adversaries' nuclear programs—particularly due to their tightly controlled and restricted access to the public policy sphere.

Continuing the thread of mirror imaging in the U.S. arms control process, Washington and its allies assume that adversaries will adhere to treaties and agreements and will not violate them, because they share an understanding of the purpose of those agreements and their obligations stemming from signing onto them. Washington also typically expects that it can bring violators back into compliance with their arms control obligations via sweet reason and consultations. The record of the United States actually doing so is abysmal. When the United States successfully challenged the Soviet Union's Krasnoyarsk radar violation under the ABM Treaty, it was a consequence of a change in political relations between countries that preceded the violator returning to compliance with its arms control obligations.

In fact, the precedent of other parties ignoring arms control obligations and the U.S. failure to do much about it is so solid—with Russia violating virtually all arms control agreements it has ever signed with the United States—that it is safe to assume that hostile authoritarian states will violate agreements the United States concludes with them, and that it will be impossible to bring them back into compliance with their obligations. In other words, unless the United States escapes its arms control pathologies,

Washington should not consider arms control agreements with hostile authoritarian states to be a practicable option.

### **Implementing Long-Overdue Corrections**

The United States ought to take the following steps to correct the pathologies in its arms control thinking. Should the United States fail to do so, the nation and its allies would be better off without arms control. If the arms control process and resulting treaties and agreements do not correct for these long-standing pathologies, Washington would be left disadvantaged vis-à-vis revisionist, autocratic adversaries who are willing to disregard their arms control obligations and use weapons to advance their goals in opposition to U.S. and allied interests.

#### ***Red Team the Arms Control Process***

In arms control endeavors, the United States must devise a mechanism to guard against unwarranted idealism, mirror imaging and the related foolish expectations of “action-reaction” and opponents’ arms control compliance, and against a political investment in the process that inhibits calling out arms control failures. These misconceptions lead to misguided and harmful arms control practices and are the major driver behind the continued failure of arms control to meet its proponents’ expectations and promises. The pathologies must be consciously guarded against, or the United States and its allies will find themselves consistently disadvantaged against revisionist, hostile, and better-armed adversaries.

At a minimum, every U.S. arms control negotiation should be advised by a red team specifically designed to watch for the pathologies analyzed in this *Occasional Paper*. Arms control negotiations ought to start with a solid analysis of the other states’ political objectives and due

consideration of the connection between weapons to be subjected to arms control and the political objectives they are meant to advance. The connections between arms and opponents' political objectives are vastly more important in an arms control process than the technical characteristics of weapons. While the arms control process traditionally tends to dwell on the latter, the former are much more analytically demanding.<sup>243</sup>

### ***Tailored Arms Control***

Realistic analyses of the connection between arms and other parties' strategic goals, and the priority opponents place on compliance, should inform U.S. arms control goals and practices. U.S. arms control goals and practices must be "tailored" to the character of opponents no less than must deterrence be tailored, and for the same reasons.<sup>244</sup> Opponents will differ in material ways, and an approach to arms control predicated on the usual mirror-imaging pathologies will likely doom the outcome of the process.

In the absence of such an informed practice, it is misguided to measure the success of arms control negotiations by the achievement of an agreement. Setting the conclusion of an agreement as the standard of success essentially denies the significance of the opponent's character and the specific content of the agreement. It also creates an environment in which continued quietude regarding noncompliance is prized above seriously

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<sup>243</sup> Payne, *Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult*, op. cit.

<sup>244</sup> Faris, "Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?," op. cit.; and, Keith B. Payne, "Nuclear Deterrence In a New Era: Applying 'Tailored Deterrence,'" *Information Series*, No. 431 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 21, 2018), [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/payne-keith-b-nuclear-deterrence-in-a-new-era-applying-tailored-deterrence-information-series-no-431/](https://nipp.org/information_series/payne-keith-b-nuclear-deterrence-in-a-new-era-applying-tailored-deterrence-information-series-no-431/).

exploring all options to adjust for the other party's noncompliance.

Countries hostile to U.S. interests will not concur with agreements that meaningfully limit their capabilities if these capabilities are needed to advance their priority interests. That is why eminent strategist Gray observed that arms control is either impossible, or unimportant: "The political antagonism that generates the objective need for alleviation via arms control—always assuming, again fallaciously, that arms control could control—is the very reason why arms control must fail..."<sup>245</sup>

U.S. arms control goals and practice should be informed by an acute understanding of the other party's priority goals and hostility toward the United States, and how misinformed U.S. arms control enthusiasms can advance those goals. Arms control, as typically practiced by Washington, will be misguided and unable to achieve anything fundamentally helpful with countries that are openly hostile to U.S. interests. This, of course, is why U.S. arms control must be tailored to an unvarnished understanding of opponents, untainted by the pathologies discussed here, and rank idealism.

### ***Realize that Arms Control Disproportionately Impacts Democracies***

Arms control impacts democracies differently than it does authoritarian regimes, because democracies will reliably abide by arms control treaties while autocracies often will not, leaving compliance asymmetry that often disadvantages democracies. The United States should refrain from investing significant political capital in the arms control process and in welcoming a signature of arms control agreements with unwarranted visibility and

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<sup>245</sup> Gray, *Weapons Don't Make War*, op. cit., p. 174.

expectations. Both of these dynamics work against a prompt publication of concerns with another party's compliance and violations, particularly if they happen on the watch of a government that concluded agreements with violators in the first place. Giving less prominence to the process would make it easier to discuss compliance concerns and violations earlier on.

Congress should also demand a detailed analysis of most likely compliance issues and violations, and require that the administration articulates concrete consequences for detecting compliance issues and violations. While such a document cannot be binding on future Congresses and administrations, ideally, it would serve as a natural follow-up point for a discussion about their consequences after detecting noncompliance and violations. The goal would be that the government exercises more effort imposing consequences for noncompliance and violations than debating whether they happened in the first place.

Compliance asymmetry is evident with regard to the U.S. cessation of all nuclear warhead testing and yield-producing experiments in the 1990s, following President Clinton's signature of the CTBT, a multilateral treaty which the Senate rejected after a full floor debate. Since then, the United States has lost much of its warhead development and production skills and capabilities.<sup>246</sup> Russia and China did not bind themselves by similar restrictions, despite signing the CTBT and, as a result, their respective nuclear warhead production complexes are much more capable of producing new nuclear warheads than is the U.S. nuclear warhead complex.

The United States must reconstitute flexibility and resilience within its nuclear weapons complex so as to ensure timely response options to arms control violations. Washington should proceed with greater urgency to

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<sup>246</sup> Schneider, "The Enormous Costs of 'Science Based Stockpile Stewardship' for Nuclear Weapons," *op. cit.*

reconstitute its ability to produce more plutonium pits (substantially more than the current program of 80 per year). The United States should be able to conduct a fully-instrumented nuclear test within the next two years.<sup>247</sup> It also ought to expand the Stockpile Responsiveness Program to help reconstitute skills necessary for developing nuclear warheads with new military capabilities should the United States decide such capabilities are necessary to strengthen deterrence.

## **Conclusion**

Arms control will continue to be a part of national security discussions for years to come. In the future, the United States must not repeat mistakes of the past, chiefly among them approaching arms control with the same vapid misconceptions and pathologies that have historically proven wrong. The 1990s were supposed to bring the new era of globalization and interconnectedness which were to lead to the “end of history,” an era of international cooperation that transcends national interests and obviates the need for arms – a new world order. This was an illusion.

Yet, the United States continued the arms control process based on fallacies that predate the end of the Cold War and, in some cases, predate the Cold War by decades. As a consequence, America today is less equipped to counter its revisionist adversaries and uphold its extended deterrence commitments. If the United States will not correct the flawed misconceptions that have gained prominence within the arms control discourse over the past several decades—its arms control pathologies—U.S. negotiations will be doomed to the same misguided

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<sup>247</sup> Recommendations taken from Scheber, *A Responsive Nuclear Warhead Infrastructure: What Still Needs to Be Done? Why Is A Responsive Infrastructure More Urgent Now Than in the Past?*, op. cit.

approaches that have created or magnified U.S. national security problems both recently and in decades past.

While there are no easy institutional solutions to overcome established arms control misconceptions, a broader awareness of these enduring problems is a necessary first step to avoid falling into the same trap. As typically practiced to date, the United States is likely to be more secure without arms control treaties: they do not fundamentally alter the challenges it faces from revisionist powers bent on changing the status quo, and they disproportionately restrain law-abiding democracies. Absent fundamental change in typical U.S. practice, there should be no rush to negotiate another arms control agreement.

To paraphrase Senator Ben Sasse, arms control treaties will not bring about heaven, and their lack will not cause hell.<sup>248</sup> In fact, avoiding an investment in misguided arms control would remove an institutional obstacle to calling out adversaries for what they are, and could contribute to strengthening the case for necessary U.S. nuclear and conventional weapons modernization and missile defense programs. Without these, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to keep peace in the future.

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<sup>248</sup> Ross Douthat, "How Ben Sasse Is Living Now That He Is Dying," *op. cit.*

## *About the Author*

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Dr. Dodge received her Ph.D. from George Mason University, and earned a Master of Science in Defense and Strategic Studies from Missouri State University. At Missouri State, she was awarded the Ulrike Schumacher Memorial Scholarship for two years. She received a bachelor's degree in international relations and defense and strategic studies from Masaryk University, the Czech Republic.



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