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A WORLD WITHOUT NUCLEAR ARMS...CONTROL

Thomas M. Countryman

WITHIN two years, we may face a complete lack of constraint on Russian and American nuclear arsenals. What can be done to avert that situation, and how can we manage to preserve strategic stability in the absence of arms control agreements?

What a difference a decade makes. Ten years ago, the prospects looked positive for reducing the existential risk nuclear weapons pose to the human species. President Barack Obama's Prague speech of April 2009 laid out a vision of a world without nuclear weapons, conceding that it would require decades, and proposed first steps in that direction. His series of Nuclear Security Summits lowered the risk that terrorists, or other non-state actors, could ever acquire sufficient fissile material to make a nuclear weapon. The Russian Federation and the United States concluded the New START treaty in 2010, lowering the total size of their

nuclear arsenals to a level not seen since the 1950s, and both sides continue to implement the agreement faithfully. And also in 2010, 180 countries that gathered to review the operation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) reached an unprecedented level of consensus on additional steps in that direction.

Today, a fifty-year trend of reducing the size, diversity, role (and risk) of nuclear arsenals has been reversed. Political paralysis and re-ignited great power competition has created the likelihood that, by 2021, there will be no bilateral restraints on Moscow and Washington's arsenals, which still comprise well over 90 percent of the world's 14,000 nuclear weapons.

Nor is the problem limited to expensive new nuclear programs in Russia and the United States. India and Pakistan continue to grow their more limited

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Mikhail Gorbachev (left) and Ronald Reagan (right) sign the INF Treaty in 1987

arsenals, devising new—and destabilizing—delivery systems that the Americans and Soviets had long ago abandoned.

In addition, North Korea has shot its way into the exclusive nuclear weapons club, and spoken more loudly than others about its readiness to use its newly-established nuclear capability.

Moreover, China has shown greater responsibility in its nuclear policy than either America or Russia, maintaining a credible second strike capability, but refusing to grow its arsenal to the point that it could pose a serious first strike

capability threat to other nuclear powers. Still, Beijing—flush with both cash and hubris—will be tempted to be less restrained in response to new weapons being built by the other great powers.

Even with those developments elsewhere, the real threat to nuclear restraint lies with Moscow and Washington. Those who have advocated for their own nations' security—and for global security—from use of nuclear weapons have long recognized that the United States and Russia must lead the way and demonstrate the sense of responsibility that should accompany a claim to great power status.

The readiness of presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin to walk away from mutually beneficial agreements is likely to lead—within the next two years—to a situation in which the last remaining international restraints on building nuclear weapons are applied only to those countries that have long rejected the nuclear option.

CONCEPTS

Even 60 years after American academics first developed the concept and basic principles of strategic arms control, many of its key terms are argued over among practitioners. Worse, some of them have been deliberately misused in an effort to push a certain position. Here-with, a few brief comments on their meaning and significance.

First, *Arms Control*. Advocates of more robust nuclear doctrines today often deride ‘arms control’ as an end in itself, an unrealistic and idealistic non-answer to genuine security threats. But that is the opposite of how successive American and Soviet/Russian leaders have viewed arms control: as an essential national security tool, one that reduces the threat to their own nation by limiting a potential adversary’s options.

Arms control also embraces far more than only formal agreements. As applied between the United States and Russia, it includes a network of information exchange, consultations, and specific channels to prevent escalation of inevitable incidents.

The practice of arms control is not meant to justify a reality that humans viscerally judge to be insane and unacceptable. Arms control is a means to reduce the probability that a cycle of mutual destruction will begin.

Second, *Mutual Assured Destruction*. MAD is often described as a *policy*. In fact, it is a *reality*. Since the time Moscow achieved reliable intercontinental missiles in the 1960s, neither the United States nor Russia can launch a nuclear attack on each other’s homeland without the near-certain destruction of its own homeland.

The practice of arms control is not meant to *justify* a reality that humans viscerally judge to be insane (befitting the acronym) and unacceptable. Arms control is a means to *reduce* the probability that a cycle of mutual destruction will begin.

Third, *Strategic stability*. Cold War analysts developed the concept of strategic stability in recognition of the fact that preventing nuclear war was in the common interest of both the United States and the Soviet Union. Bilateral agreements and cooperative procedures—including information

exchange, ‘hot lines,’ and regular consultation—could provide each side with an assurance that the other side was not capable of a decapitating first strike, and so would avoid first use of nuclear weapons.

At a time when conflict between America and the Soviet Union was a real possibility, this concept posited three types of stability: crisis stability—removing the incentive to be the first to use military force; first strike stability—removing the incentive to be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict; and arms race stability—negating the belief that one side could gain a strategic advantage by building more weapons. Although both capitals still see the concept of strategic stability as valid, recent developments have undermined all three of its aspects.

Fourth, *Deterrence*. The deterrent value of nuclear weapons is currently being debated more intensively than ever before. Near the end of the Obama Administration, the White House considered a ‘no first use’ (NFU) policy, explicitly affirming that the *primary* purpose of nuclear weapons—detering a nuclear attack by other nations—was the *only* justifiable purpose. It chose not to, and the Trump Administration’s Nuclear Posture

Review (NPR) has slightly expanded the range of scenarios under which the United States would even consider using nuclear weapons. The NPR also advocated development of new ‘low-yield’ nuclear warheads as a means to deter first use, in a conventional conflict, of

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Russia’s extensive arsenal of about 2000 ‘low-yield’ tactical nuclear weapons. Still, the U.S. Congress is expected to question this new warhead, and to debate legislation declaring NFU to be American policy.

A broader challenge to the very concept of nuclear deterrence has been raised by advocates of a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons, questioning the danger of a circular logic in which nuclear weapons are needed only because other nations possess nuclear weapons.

Fifth, *Parity*. Although the threat perceptions—and the military doctrine—of Washington and Moscow differ greatly, bilateral arms control treaties have been structured in a symmetrical manner that imposes near-identical limits and obligations on the two parties. This is in part due to Senate ratification, the political process required in the United States; identical limits have been an easier concept to sell to skeptical Senators. The New START treaty departed a little from

this paradigm, taking into account the greater Russian reliance on ballistic missiles, and the greater American reliance on heavy bombers.

It is possible to maintain strategic stability with an asymmetrical pair of arsenals, but that stability becomes more challenging as each side engages in 'vertical proliferation,' with the introduction of new warheads and delivery systems. This is particularly true of Russian plans to reintroduce multiple warheads (MIRVs) on its new missile systems.

Reconciling oneself to being vulnerable has always been more difficult for the American psyche than it has for the Russian.

SLIDING TOWARD THE DEMISE OF BILATERAL ARMS TREATIES

The very concept of strategic stability has been under siege from massive spending on new forms of weapons, violations of existing treaties, and growing suspicion between the two major nuclear powers of each other's intentions.

On the American side, no matter how much President Trump may wish to improve relations with Moscow, he faces an obstacle partly of his own making: deep anger and suspicion—in the Congress and among the public—over Moscow's blatant interference in the American political system. The combination of this suspicion, and the President's desire to

constantly expand the defense budget (with no apparent concern over the irony of borrowing from Chinese banks to fund the expansion), has led to a situation in which the U.S. Congress gives little scrutiny to increased spending on the military, including on nuclear weapons. Whether this trend will be reversed now that the opposition Democrats control the House of Representatives remains to be seen.

But a deeper psychological issue is also at work. Reconciling oneself to being vulnerable, the inescapable reality

of Mutual Assured Destruction, has always been more difficult for the American psyche than it has for the Russian. Repeated references to 'dominance in space,' 'outspending' all others on nuclear weapons, and making the United States 'invulnerable to missile attack,' have become an essential staple of the rhetoric employed by the President and his party. America's words and actions have reinforced a growing suspicion in Russia that the United States does not accept mutual vulnerability as the basis of strategic stability.

President Trump's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review reflects both of these factors. It recognizes the political obstacles to reaching any new arms agreements with Moscow, and so—for

the first time in 60 years—states explicitly that the United States has no new proposals in arms control, abandoning the leading role Washington had played for decades, under presidents from both parties, in reducing nuclear dangers. (This stems also from methods the President imported from his business practices to his political and diplomatic approach: a preference for coercion over win-win solutions, and a habit of blame-shifting).

The NPR consciously omits a statement made by previous Administrations—that the United States did not seek to undermine the credibility of Russia's deterrent force. As if to underline the point, this year's Missile Defense Review, for the first time, set as a goal the interception of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), the heart of Russia's strategic deterrent.

Crisis stability has also been undermined by the near complete cessation of military-to-military dialogue between Russia and the United States—a 'no contact' policy dating back to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. The justifiable desire to show Russia there can be no 'business as usual' is now working against American security interests, as it prevents the kind of information

exchange and relationships that could help prevent an incident from becoming a conflict.

More broadly speaking, the current White House and Senate are skeptical of the value of any international treaty. National Security Adviser John Bolton and a number of Republican Senators espouse the view that any treaty that limits the absolute sovereignty of the United States provides less benefit than harm.

To put it crudely, they believe that American freedom of action

must be absolutely unhindered, so that America's military and economic power can be used to hinder other nations' freedom of action. And they apply to the New START treaty with Russia the same questionable logic the President applied in breaching the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA): the agreement is flawed, because it addressed only one of the issues we have with Iran, and not every issue we have with that country. More than one of the senators and staff involved with the ratification of New START in 2010 have commented that it may well have been the last significant treaty the United States will ever ratify.

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In turning to Russia, one must begin by understanding that much of President Putin's foreign policy has been driven by the desire to restore the world's recognition of his country as a 'Great Power.' With an economy the size of Spain's, and with its only allies being Belarus and Syria, Russia's claim to super-power status rests primarily on its nuclear arsenal and its creative computer skills. Still, Mr. Putin has played these two cards shrewdly.

The Russian government is still smarting from what it sees as two decades of condescending behavior by the West, particularly the United States. Some have identified the turning point for Putin as being America's decision to withdraw from the bilateral AMB Treaty in 2002 (a decision personally notified to Moscow by its architect, John Bolton). Coming at a moment when Russia was in a weaker position, economically and politically, Putin saw this not only as American high-handedness, but as a major crack in the edifice of strategic stability upon which Russia's own security had rested.

In turn, this fed a state of paranoia that, under Putin, has come to infect nearly all of Russia's dealings with the rest of the world. If the United

States sought to protect itself from the likes of Iran and North Korea (neither of which then possessed ICBMs), couldn't superior American technology eventually lead to the negation of Russia's strategic deterrent?

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The same line of thinking has revived the traditional Russian obsession that—if Washington felt so invulnerable—it could launch (or threaten to launch) a decapitating first strike against Moscow. The Russian insistence that

the missile defense issue be settled on its terms before there could be further talk of reducing nuclear weapons scuttled the 2014 U.S. overture to resume strategic stability discussions.

In response, Moscow has devoted a growing share of its defense budget (which is only one-tenth the size of the U.S. Department of Defense budget) to new weapons capable of overwhelming any future American missile shield, precisely the kind of asymmetry that is NOT stabilizing. Though Putin's nuclear rhetoric has been similar to Trump's, he has emphasized parity and mutual vulnerability, rather than dominance.

Meanwhile, the Russian military—which had never been happy about

Gorbachev's 'surrender' in signing the INF Treaty—developed a cruise missile in violation of the range prescribed by the Treaty. From my own conversations with Russians, I conclude that the Ministry of Defense never informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the new system or inquired about its compatibility with the treaty.

The Russian deployment of a new cruise missile system that violates the INF Treaty's range limits has proven to be of double benefit to Russia. Freed from Gorbachev's

'unreasonable' constraint, the Russian military is free to plan new generations of missiles aimed at NATO territory, while plausibly blaming the United States for the treaty's demise.

Moscow is pleased to continue a long-running debate about the actual range of the 9M729, because it distracts from a less comfortable topic: the several dozen European cities and sites now within range of the new system. Russia hopes that NATO's European states will focus on dissuading Washington from over-reacting, rather than on criticizing a new Russian offensive threat to their homelands.

Sadly, the American decision to withdraw from the INF treaty—while justifiable as a response to Russia's violation—was an unwise step that played to Russia's public relations advantage. The American decision was

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taken without any clear plan for a military and diplomatic strategy to counter the new Russian threat to NATO Allies. As a result, we risk drifting into a repeat of the 1980s, when U.S. deployment of missiles to Europe (at Allies' request) raised Cold War tensions to a peak and threatened to split the Alliance.

The collapse of the INF treaty has also played into the hands of those in the White House and Senate looking to bring about the demise of New START. Although the rigorous verification protocols of New START have demonstrated that both sides are abiding by its terms, arms control skeptics can now argue that no arms control agreement can be of value if Moscow has cheated on other agreements.

New Start will expire in February 2021, but can be extended by the simple signature of the two presidents, without any need for re-approval by the Senate or the Duma. Given the political issues between Moscow and Washington,

this extension is the *only* major step that President Trump can take with Russia that would draw bipartisan (if not unanimous) approval. However, suspicion is widespread in Washington that Bolton will drag out the consideration of extension until the very end of Trump's term.

MULTILATERAL TREATIES

The collapse of U.S.-Russian agreements does not mean that there will be no international agreements. The NPT is alive, but ailing.

The five-year NPT review cycle is likely to conclude in May 2020 with a strong case that Washington and Moscow have failed in the obligation they took on under the NPT, to participate in good-faith negotiations to reduce and ultimately eliminate their nuclear arsenals.

In years past, both the United States and the Russian Federation had a plausible argument to make: that they were trying, and gradually succeeding, to reduce their arsenals; at the present time, they can no longer make this argument with a straight face. The NPT has done more for the security of every country in the world than any other treaty, and the fear expressed by some

that a contentious 2020 Review Conference will cause the treaty to collapse is clearly overstated.

Still, the weakening of the most effective constraint against new entrants

to the nuclear weapons club will be worrisome, and a failure to renew New START, or even to announce a bilateral determination to do so, would be the single most negative factor at the Review Conference.

In July 2017, 150 countries joined forces to draft a new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), seeking to replicate the largely successful international bans on biological and chemical weapons. It may enter into force as early as 2021, but without the participation of the nuclear-armed states, will have little immediate effect.

As with many multilateral treaties, TPNW is a flawed instrument; compromises in drafting have left it at less than true to its ideals. Its goal of 'stigmatizing' possession of nuclear weapons is unlikely to gain traction in the near term in the United States, the UK, and France, let alone in the tightly controlled societies of Russia, China, and North Korea.

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A WORLD WITHOUT NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL

If New START is not extended, and in 2021, we find ourselves for the first time in nearly 50 years with no legal restraints on the American and Russian arsenals, what will that world look like? Can a semblance of strategic stability be maintained, one that minimizes the risk of nuclear war?

Not least, the absence of bilateral treaties will be a sobering political signal. If the two main nuclear powers cannot even agree on the urgency of reducing the nuclear threat hanging over them both, what chance will there be for reducing other areas of tension?

The loss of New START would also greatly reduce the ability of both Moscow and Washington to have certainty regarding the size and state of each other's nuclear arsenal. While national technical means (e.g. satellite collection) are impressive on both sides, they cannot fully substitute for the detailed system of notifications and on-site inspections built into the New START treaty. Both civilian and military leaders have long seen the important relationship between data exchanges, predictability and stability.

Both this lack of information and the announced plans of both sides to modernize delivery systems and develop new ones will increase the incentive for each side to engage in a nuclear weapons race that will be both qualitative

and quantitative. Without confidence about the size of the adversary's arsenal, each side will prepare for the "worst-case" scenario, and proceed to expand its own arsenal.

This arms race is likely to proceed even though—as in the 1960s and 1970s—neither side has the capacity to

change the strategic balance between them. At a price tag of \$1.7 trillion over the next 30 years, the American modernization program will be hard to afford, even without the additional expenditures desired by the Trump Administration. This will also give China an incentive to expand its own definition of the minimal second-strike capability it needs to deter U.S. (or Russian) attack on China, as it will have less certainty regarding the true size of American and Russian arsenals.

Other technological developments will contribute to the erosion of crisis stability. In yet another case of technologies running faster than the

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development of doctrine and policy, the United States, Russia, and China are each rushing ahead with the development of hyper-sonic, precision-strike weapons.

Because of their speed and maneuverability—even if not nuclear-armed—these systems will greatly reduce the decision time available to national leaders who must choose whether to unleash nuclear forces in response to an incoming attack, a risk only partly mitigated by their distinctive launch ‘signature.’ Offensive cyber capabilities being developed by all three nations, as well as anti-satellite weapons, are likely to be employed in crisis situations in an effort to impede an adversary’s command and control.

All this could easily lead to a situation in which a cyber-attack is seen as a prelude to a nuclear attack, prompting a nuclear response from the attacked nation.

IS IT INEVITABLE?

There are few experts beyond the military—and few experts *within* the military—who believe that the loss of bilateral treaties will not erode the stability of U.S.-Russia relations. Concerted action by the United States and/or its European allies in the following

areas could avert this loss, or at least minimize the risk of a new, costly and destabilizing arms race.

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What follows are three not unrelated ways forward.

First, *a stable post-INF environment.*

While it may already be too late to save the INF Treaty, Europe—as the target of the new Russian system—has the most at stake in devising a prudent NATO military response.

Beyond steps such as enhanced missile defense and permanent deployment of sea-based cruise missiles to Europe, this can include European Allies suggesting (to both Moscow and Washington) confidence-building measures, such as affirmations that neither will deploy nuclear-armed missiles west of the Urals. Some of the transparency measures that made the INF Treaty a success are worth preserving.

Second, *rescuing New START.* The suspicion that Bolton wishes to delay indefinitely—or sabotage—an extension of New START is not proven. It is important that President Trump hear directly (not through the filter of others) how much Al-

lied leaders care about preserving the Treaty. The U.S. Congress should add to this message by expressing strong support for extension and—if necessary—linking extension to the funding of the American nuclear modernization program (a linkage originally made in a deal between Obama and Senate Republicans in 2010). Finally, if Trump is not re-elected, a new president would have a narrow window (between January 20 and February 5, 2021) in which the treaty could be extended before its expiration.

Third, *strategic stability discussions.*

As a matter of urgency, U.S.-Russian military-to-military contacts should return to their pre-2014 level, or even go higher. This channel should be decoupled from strong antipathy among American political leaders aroused by Russian actions. Mil-to-mil consultations do not require that the American side acquiesce to aggressive Russian actions, but they do require a mindset of respect, and a recognition that the same danger threatens both of our societies.

The immediate task would be to re-establish the deescalation channels that could help prevent an incident from escalating into a military conflict and then into a nuclear conflict. Beyond that, there should be an open-ended and regular strategic stability dialogue between Moscow and Washington,

involving both diplomatic and military officials. The last such meeting, nearly two years ago, was not even able to determine an agenda for future discussions.

This will require both sides explicitly go beyond the concept of ‘arms control’ as simply a collection of treaties. Both sides must be ready for a wider-ranging discussion of topics than ever before, including missile defense, new nuclear systems, potential conflict in space and cyber-interference in military systems. If this process resumes too late to prevent the expiration of New START, the same topics must still be addressed, but the discussion would have to begin with two additional questions: what consequences each side foresees for a bilateral relationship without nuclear constraints; and whether weapons limitations and reporting requirements could be continued voluntarily by both sides.

If all of this is too much for the limited capacity of the Trump Administration, European voices and the American public can at least demand that Trump and Putin recognize their awesome responsibility as stewards of potentially civilization-ending arsenals, and reaffirm the statement that their predecessors, Reagan and Gorbachev, made their common guiding principle: “A nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought.” ●