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Arms control and the New Strategic Concept

JEFF McCAUSLAND outlines the need for continued arms control and reveals some of the obstacles in its way

Thucydides noted in his history of the Peloponnesian Wars that a primary motivator of Athenian foreign policy was “interests”. This remains as true today as it was in ancient Greece. Modern policymakers would all agree that strategy must be consistent with national interests and built on three variables. First, what are the ‘ends’ of a strategy that a nation seeks to accomplish alone or in concert with friends and allies? Second, what are the ‘ways’ or policies that are formulated to move the nation towards a better future? Finally, what are the ‘means’ available to any nation that can be devoted to securing these objectives?

Arms control is a ‘way’ or diplomatic tool to accomplish strategic ‘ends’ of reducing the possibility of war. Throughout history, leaders have sought to negotiate arms control agreements that placed limits on the size of respective arsenals, military activities, or an outright ban on

NATO and the Russian Federation no longer threaten each other, but do share common threats

US President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev sign the new START agreement at Prague Castle, April 2010



particular weapon systems. Thinking about arms control has continuously evolved, and several key points are clear.

First, arms control can never be an ‘end’ or objective of policy. Each treaty or agreement only has value as a policy ‘way’ when there are underlying security concerns that, if mitigated, might reduce the possibility of conflict. Second, at its very core, any arms control agreement depends upon a ‘harmony of interest’ among the signatories. This ‘harmony’ is based on a careful analysis by all parties that the benefits from entering an arms control regime outweigh the risks associated with reducing military forces and accepting an intrusive verification regime. Third, it is often easy to dismiss the success of arms control. A successful agreement contributes to the prevention of conflict and enhances stability, but it is hard to correlate the cause and effect of policies against something that didn’t happen.

As NATO leaders seek to agree upon a new Strategic Concept, there appear to be new opportunities and challenges in applying this tool of diplomacy. The Obama administration has clearly shown renewed interest in arms control as a tool of American foreign policy. This was plainly reflected in the President’s speech in Prague in 2009, when Obama stated his determination to improve relations with the Russian Federation that had been ‘frozen’ by the Russia-Georgia War and to seek the future elimination of nuclear weapons.

In the following year, the Obama administration pursued an expanded arms control agenda. The signing of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with the Russian Federation was particularly crucial, as it sets the stage to use arms control to confront emerging threats and new strategic realities. NATO and the Russian Federation no longer threaten each

other, but they do share common threats. First, all remain concerned by so-called ‘frozen conflicts’ in the Balkans and North Caucasus. Second, both North Korea and Iran’s efforts to acquire nuclear weapons could stimulate wider proliferation in Asia and the Middle East that would imperil stability. Third, there is the possibility of nuclear weapons being acquired by a terrorist group.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

But while a ‘harmony of interests’ may be emerging, many obstacles must be overcome. The NATO-Russia Charter and initial NATO Strategic Concept established a firm foundation for co-operation while underscoring the importance of arms control. The Charter affirmed that NATO and Russia were no longer adversaries, provided assurances and called for increased co-operation. The existing Concept reaffirmed these points, but also called for the Alliance to maintain an appropriate mix of modern nuclear and conventional forces based in Europe to maintain security.

It is this mix of weaponry and the role of nuclear weapons in Alliance strategic thinking that is central to the negotiations for a new Strategic Concept and, potentially, the role of arms control. The US, for example, must consider how conventional/nuclear forces, coupled with announced policies, continue to provide extended deterrence to its allies in Europe as well as Asia. The Federal Republic of Germany has announced its desire to seek the removal of all NATO tactical nuclear weapons from its soil, which has been echoed by other Alliance members. Finally, both the UK and France (as the two continental NATO members with nuclear weapons) are modernising their forces and reviewing their national strategies.

Consequently, many NATO leaders argue that the roughly 300 NATO tactical nuclear weapons present in Europe must be part of any future arms control negotiations with the Russian Federation. The New START agreement that reduces the permissible number of Russian and American deployed strategic warheads to 1,550 on strategic delivery systems could present an opportunity, as well as a requirement to do so. As both sides move to these new reduced levels, it is difficult to envision future negotiations that do not include tactical nuclear weapons. They are also part of the common threat as well as a potential harmony of interests, which has been recognised for a number of years.

In 1997, American President Clinton and Russian President Yeltsin signed a framework agreement that required both countries to include these weapons in any potential future

The objective of foreign policy must be defined in terms of national interests and supported by adequate power



Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. Unfortunately, this framework was never fully implemented. In the ensuing years, NATO leaders have repeatedly stated their concerns that Russia was unable to maintain an accurate inventory of these weapons at a number of locations and, as a consequence, these sites could be potential targets for a rogue state or terrorist group.

Unfortunately, Russia finds itself in a position not dissimilar to that of NATO in the early 1960s. Russian leaders speak frequently about their perceived conventional inferiority and, consequently, their need to retain tactical nuclear weapons. Clearly, these declarations reflect both Russian military thinking as well as deterrent strategy. It is also unclear how many of these



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weapons remain in the Russian arsenal. Some experts suggest that the Russian Federation may currently maintain 3,800 non-strategic nuclear weapons in operational units, with 5,100 either in reserve or awaiting dismantlement.

This nexus between conventional and nuclear weapons must also be part of any future Strategic Concept and associated arms control efforts. Throughout the Cold War, nuclear arms and conventional weapons were negotiated in separate forums that resulted in agreements focused solely on nuclear or conventional arsenals. Future negotiations must consider these weapons in a more holistic fashion. Consequently, the ongoing impasse over the largest conventional arms control agreement

Following the UK Strategic Defence and Security Review in October 2010, the UK will further reduce the number of warheads it maintains for its submarine-based nuclear deterrent

– the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, or CFE Treaty – must be resolved.

For more than two years, Russia has suspended its participation in the treaty and failed to provide data on its forces in accordance with treaty provisions. Moscow has taken this action in response to NATO's failure to ratify the Adapted CFE Treaty that was finalised in 1999. If a solution to this disagreement is not found soon, then the treaty could become moribund, which would be disastrous. This would imperil NATO-Russian relations, and reduce dramatically any possibility of using arms control to address emerging threats.

Clearly, arms control will be a critical factor in Alliance strategy and relations with the Russian Federation. In determining its proper role, a new paradigm may be in order. Traditional approaches that emphasise 'collective defence' or 'collective security' now appear to be inappropriate. Russian and NATO policymakers may need to adopt 'co-operative security' that seeks not only to reduce the risk of war, but is also focused on their shared threats of proliferation and the acquisition of nuclear weapons by a terrorist group.

Such an effort may also allow the US and its NATO allies to test two hypotheses through the 'means' of arms control. First, can Europe now assume a greater responsibility for its own security and reduce its reliance on the US? Second, can Russia establish a 'normal' relationship with the US and the other nations of Europe so that concerns about security are replaced by strategies of co-operation? This would, over time, make arms control less important between Russia and NATO, but could still retain arms control as an important instrument of alliance policy in areas threatened by instability (such as the Balkans and North Caucasus).

As we consider the way ahead, it may be useful to examine the thoughts of Hans Morgenthau, one of the most celebrated scholars of international relations in the 20th century. Morgenthau observed the following when considering diplomacy and state policy: diplomacy must be rescued from crusading spirits; it must look at the political scene from the point of view of other nations; and the objective of foreign policy must be defined in terms of national interests and supported by adequate power.

Morgenthau's words remind us of the essential fact that arms control remains a 'means' that nations or alliances employ to seek desired end states consistent with their respective national interests. This remains the central challenge the Alliance faces in considering the role for arms control in the formulation of the New Strategic Concept. ●