Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament: Obstacles and Ways to Tackle Them

Nuclear risks and the proliferation landscape

1. Over the last 25 years, three major factors have led to growing nuclear risks:

- **The multipolarity of the nuclear order**: There exist 70 years of experience in managing the bilateral nuclear relationship between Russia and the United States but little experience with managing triangular deterrence relationships.

- **Technological trends**: The overlap between conventional and information technologies is growing. New technologies tend to shorten reaction times and decrease transparency on capabilities and doctrines. This negatively affects crisis stability.

- **Populism and nuclear weapons**: The line between responsible and irresponsible nuclear weapon states has been shattered, if it ever existed. Leadership in some nuclear weapon states, including in the United States and Russia, are ignorant of nuclear dangers and talk about these weapons irresponsibly, also with a view to increasing domestic support. This is dangerous because of the highly centralized decision-making on nuclear weapons use. It is also dangerous because in the nuclear world, as Alexei Arbatov has said: “Words are deeds.”

2. The crisis in the nuclear order is not triggered mainly by proliferation pressures. Over the last 30 years such pressures have actually reduced. The number of nuclear weapons possessors in the world is the same as in the 1980s. For the first time since the early days of the nuclear age, no state is suspected of having a clandestine nuclear weapons programme. The last two suspects, Iran and North Korea, have left the “grey zone” in different directions: North Korea for all practical purposes is a disarmament problem, Iran has accepted unprecedented nuclear checks when it accepted the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015. This is remarkable progress, keeping in mind that in the 1980s

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2 North Korea has since acquired nuclear weapons but South Africa has given up its nuclear weapons. Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine for a few years in the early 1990s had nuclear weapons on their territory after having gained independence through the collapse of the Soviet Union but subsequently gave these weapons up. In 1998, India and Pakistan declared themselves nuclear weapon states after having conducted nuclear tests. Both, however, had a nuclear weapons capability in the 1980s.
we had more countries with clandestine nuclear weapons programmes than nuclear possessor states.

3. To be sure, the situation is fragile. Keeping in mind that all nuclear newcomers (with the exception of Israel) initiated their weapons programme in response to an (anticipated) threat from another nuclear weapon state, there are risks that increased reliance on nuclear weapons by possessor states could also add to proliferation pressures. In addition, regional tensions in the Middle East and in Asia fuel regional nuclear dynamics.

4. While things are - by historical standards - quiet on horizontal proliferation, the nuclear weapons possessors are investing heavily in modernizing their nuclear weapons. Russia is diversifying its nuclear arsenal. The Trump administration’s February 2018 Nuclear Post changes the trajectory of U.S. nuclear weapons policies by introducing two new types of nuclear weapons, widening the scenarios under which nuclear weapons might be used, and lowering the threshold for nuclear weapons use. In Asia, nuclear arsenals are also growing quantitatively. The global nuclear dynamic thus is one fuelled primarily by the nuclear weapons possessors themselves. Vertical, not horizontal proliferation is mainly responsible for the growing importance of role nuclear weapons in international security.

5. Nato’s nuclear policies influence the global nuclear order. Nato is the world’s strongest conventional alliance and also sees itself as a “nuclear alliance”. As such, it has a unique role to play. Three of the five NPT nuclear weapon states and eight of the 14 states with nuclear weapons on their territory are alliance members. Whatever importance Nato ascribes to nuclear weapons will have a bearing on the global nuclear discourse.

Preserving elements of the nuclear order: arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament

6. In this situation, it is of paramount importance to defend key elements of the nuclear order against those who believe in unrestrained great power competition and see nuclear weapons as means to ensure their influence. There are three paradigmatic reasons for pursuing a world free of nuclear weapons:

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- In the long-run, nuclear deterrence is likely to fail and that is an unacceptable risk.
- As long as nuclear weapons exist, there is a risk that these weapons fall into the wrong hands.
- In a nuclear order based on two classes of states (nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states), there will be not be sufficient international unity to isolate rule-breakers.

7. The United Kingdom is the Nato nuclear weapon state closest to German positions on arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. Like Germany, the United Kingdom has a long tradition of multilateral engagement. Britain’s expertise and experience on weapons of mass destruction control would be greatly missed should the United Kingdom leave the European Union. Both countries have been successful bridge builders. Berlin and London should continue to partner to jointly take on arms control and non-proliferation challenges. In the NPT context, closer British-German cooperation can help to facilitate agreement at the 2020 NPT review conference.

8. Since the 1990s, many hoped that nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament would progressively move the world towards less militarized international relations.\(^5\) The assumption of a cumulative, step-by-step arms control process no longer holds true. Arms control aims at reducing the likelihood of war, limiting the use of force in war, and curtailing military expenditures in times of peace. We are currently moving away from all three goals, as crises between nuclear weapon possessors are becoming more dangerous, the role of nuclear weapons in military postures are becoming more nuclear weapons are on the rise.

9. The imminent collapse of the INF treaty and the uncertain future of the New START treaty are clear indications of the lack of willingness of the great powers to restrict their military potentials. If New START is not extended beyond 2021 or terminated prematurely, this is problematic for at least two reasons:
- There will be no limits for expanding nuclear capabilities, taking us back to the early 1970s.
- For the first time since 1988, there will be no agreed transparency and verification measures between the United States and Russia. This is bound to lead to dangerous misperceptions.

What can Europeans do?

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\(^5\) To be sure, there were setbacks during the GW Bush administration but the Barack Obama administration reversed course again.
10. Europe has limited leverage over Moscow’s and Washington’s arms control policies. Russia prefers discussing nuclear issues with the United States. Nuclear arms control is one of few areas where the Kremlin can talk to the White House eye-to-eye. The Trump administration has demonstrated a limited degree of willingness to take European interests into account before taking major policy decisions. The fact that Allies were informed on very short notice about President Trump’s announcement to terminate the INF treaty demonstrates this point.

11. Against this background, Europe should take the following action on nuclear arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation:

**First, Europeans should insist that maintaining existing treaties is the best basis for making “better deals”**. To be sure, the context of the INF treaty has changed since 1987, when the INF treaty was agreed. Today, ten states operate INF-range systems. As Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists has written, the nuclear weapons possessors (with the notable exception of the United Kingdom) currently operate some 61 different types of INF-range systems. 41 of these systems are ground-based and would be covered by INF, were the treaty extended to cover all nine nuclear possessor states.6

12. But leaving the INF treaty will make it less likely that other states will join INF (or agree to multilateral arms control agreements in other areas). China (and other smaller nuclear powers) have pointed out that they will only join a possible multilateral nuclear arms control process if and when the two largest nuclear powers further reduce their nuclear arsenals.

13. **Second, Europe should resist the temptation to use old patterns to react to the current crisis.** Nato’s 1979 double track decision is often used as a blueprint when discussing military and diplomatic reactions to the INF treaty’s demise. When Helmut Schmidt spoke at International Institute for Strategic Studies in 1977 on the threat posed by the SS-20 deployed in the Soviet Union, the concept of parity in conventional and nuclear forces was important.7 But the circumstances are different today. Balances, in the traditional sense, are harder to calculate. The need to counter the Russian deployments of the SSC-8/9M729 by new ground-based intermediate-range systems is not obvious because both sides deploy a range of sea- and air-based intermediate-range cruise missiles. Russia operates nine such systems (and the SSC-8), the United States seven. Both sides are investing heavily in such systems.8

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8 Kristensen, op.cit.
14. 40 years ago, one reasons for Germans to advocate the double-track decision was to increase the credibility of extended deterrence. But today, no additional deployment of INF-range systems in Europe is likely to close the huge gaps in the deterrence fabric created by Donald Trump.

15. The nature of political leaderships in Moscow and Washington generally is different from the leaderships in the 1980s. It is hard to see Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin (or their successors) concluding the kind mutually beneficial arms control agreement agreed with INF. There is little hope that a dual-track decision would again pave the way for arms control.

16. **Third, Europe should be an advocate for new arms control agreements.** There are three directions in which to build on the INF treaty or to think about a new accord. A *new geographic coverage* of the INF treaty could mean bringing in additional states, particularly China. Advocates of this approach, however, fail to describe incentives for Beijing to bring its (comparatively small) new arsenal or the growing arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles into the arms control fold.

17. Others advocate a regional non-deployment zone for intermediate range systems in Europe. While such a zone could help to ease tensions in Europe in the short-term, it is problematic in the longer term for at least two reasons:
   - A regional ban would likely shift the problem of intermediate-range systems to Asia. In the 1980s, a proposal for a regional ban on intermediate systems was rejected after Japan strongly objected. It must be assumed that Asian Nato partners, including Japan and South Korea, today would similarly oppose a regional approach that only regulates deployments in Europe.
   - Short- and intermediate-range systems are often mobile, making it difficult to verify compliance with a regional ban. Movements of such systems in a crisis situation can be destabilizing.

These and other reasons led INF-negotiators to reject a treaty with a regional approach. The same factors are still relevant today.

18. A second way to improve on the existing INF treaty is to *broaden treaty prohibitions*. This could include a ban on nuclear-armed cruise missiles. Such a ban would be meaningful because it would reduce the risk of misperceiving use of conventional cruise missiles as a nuclear attack.⁹

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19. **Addressing new technologies** is important from the viewpoint of strategic stability. The blurring of the lines between conventional, novel and nuclear technologies decreases crisis stability. Providing transparency and agreeing measures to restrict the military misuse of these technologies is difficult because they have civilian and military applications (“dual use”). In some cases, their military potential is large.

20. **Fourth, Europeans should take up the US State Department initiative on a “Creating the Conditions Working Group” (CCWG)” to explore how to ameliorate the conditions impeding [nuclear] disarmament” but change its direction.** 10 Substantively, the CCWG needs to move beyond the conditions-based narrative. 11 This perceived by many as conservative and unimaginative because it highlights the barriers to disarmament rather than opportunities for progress. Thus, the CCWG should specifically address the responsibility of nuclear weapon states, including the United States, for the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament. A comprehensive, balanced CCWG programme of work should tackle a range of issues including the disarmament-deterrence conundrum, ways to uphold the existing treaty architecture, the influence of nuclear weapon states policies on regional tensions, and the lack of transparency by nuclear weapon states and nuclear alliances.

21. Procedurally, the process should be inclusive and the United States must not have undue control over the proceedings and the working group’s outcomes. Membership of the group must not be by (American) invitation only and participants should reflect the spectrum of global views on nuclear disarmament, ranging from proponents of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons to nuclear deterrence advocates. Thematic subgroups should be co-chaired by representatives of nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states. Daily implementation and financing should be shared among as many participants as possible.

22. The CCWG’s relation to the NPT will be another important sticking point. It is important that the CCWG builds on the common sense understanding that non-proliferation and disarmament are deeply interrelated, a view enshrined in the NPT and supported by the vast majority of states parties. The CCWG could be aimed at creating “deliverables” for meetings of NPT states parties and attempt to suggest policy recommendations for the 2020 NPT Review Conference, for example on how to further develop the 2010 Action Plan. However, the initiative should not be limited to producing input for NPT meetings. Nuclear disarmament is a topic important in and of itself.

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11 These thoughts on the CCWG are based on a collaboration with Lyndon Burford, King’s College London and Nick Ritchie, York University.
relationship with the NPT could also facilitate participation of India, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan.

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