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# Lessons from the past: Arms control in uncooperative times

Global Security Policy Brief

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# Executive summary

Since the end of the Cold War, arms control has often been perceived as a cooperative endeavour. Particularly in Europe, the assumption was that states would pursue disarmament, confidence- and security building, and risk reduction measures to further improve political relations and eventually create a security community. While the global arms control regime has been deteriorating for some time, Russia's war in Ukraine has altered this paradigm irrevocably. In combination with a more assertive China, the evolving multipolar strategic rivalry puts arms control back in a competitive context—one that has defined Euro-Atlantic and global politics during and prior to the Cold War.

This paper looks at what kind of arms control might be feasible in this new environment. Drawing on lessons from the past, it argues that arms control is possible under conditions of strategic rivalry and can become part of a **comprehensive strategy** that builds upon **policy linkages**. It can **alter the costs of escalation**, increase **confidence in military stability**, **buttress post conflict situations**, and help **manage the ongoing global power transition**.

Even under conditions of multipolar rivalry, the United States and NATO allies should pursue limited yet necessary arms control measures that enhance their security. They should focus on:

1. **Extending New START provisions;**
2. **Facilitating possible Chinese participation in multilateral arms control processes;**
3. **Improving the safety of navigation and communication in the Indo-Pacific;**
4. **Ensuring the resilience of C3 systems;**
5. **Specifying the role of conventional precision-strike weapons in their military postures.**

Together, these measures can provide clear advantages to states because they help clarify the rules by which they compete with each other.

# Introduction

**Now that great powers in the West and Eurasia find themselves in an environment of multipolar strategic rivalry, it is time to reevaluate the preconditions and purposes of arms control for the coming years.**

The global arms control regime has been deteriorating for some time, but Russia's war in Ukraine seems to have led to its virtual collapse. Washington and Moscow almost immediately suspended their dialogue on issues of strategic stability. In August 2022, Russia rejected the resumption of on-site inspections under New START by pointing to the impact of sanctions.<sup>1</sup> The review conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) ended without adopting an outcome document after Russia decided to block consensus due to wording concerning the war in Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

In Europe too, arms control is in jeopardy. Since 2007, Russia has not participated in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE);<sup>3</sup> in 2019, Russia and the United States dissolved the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF),<sup>4</sup> and in 2020 and 2021, respectively, both states withdrew from the Treaty on Open Skies.<sup>5</sup> Just before the beginning of the war, Russia also suspended on-site inspection and evaluation visits under the Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security Building Measures of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).<sup>6</sup>

Against this backdrop, experts are at odds about the future of arms control. Some argue that the growing danger of nuclear escalation, as illustrated by the war in Ukraine, makes risk reduction efforts all the more important.<sup>7</sup> Others want to throw out the baby with the bathwater altogether. They believe that arms control and disarmament cannot occur with a 'partner' that is "unscrupulous, aggressive, and prone to use violence."<sup>8</sup>

Faced with a more assertive China and the looming expiration of New START in 2026,<sup>9</sup> some even advocate ramping up nuclear forces in terms of deployed warheads and their destructive power in order to bolster deterrence.<sup>10</sup> As Frank Miller, the former special assistant to US President George W. Bush for defence policy and arms control, puts it, "prospects for arms control in the near future are dim."<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, now that great powers in the West and Eurasia find themselves in an environment of multipolar strategic rivalry, it is time to reevaluate the preconditions and purposes of arms control for the coming years. Fortunately, history provides some basic but essential insights that can help to put arms control back on its feet. The following six points might help to shed new light on future possibilities and help to pursue limited yet necessary arms control measures that serve the security interests of states in the Euro-Atlantic area.

# Six lessons from the past

**Strategic rivalry, is no obstacle to arms control per se; it only sets the parameters for what kind of arms control might be feasible.**

## 1. Arms control remains possible even under conditions of strategic rivalry

During the Cold War, arms control was possible despite deeply adversarial East-West relations. Both sides repeatedly sought to gain competitive advantages vis-à-vis the other.<sup>12</sup> Strategic rivalry, then, is no obstacle to arms control per se; it only sets the parameters for what kind of arms control might be feasible. Being an instrument of foreign and security policy, the purpose and character of arms control depend on the concrete political context and prevailing national interests.

The start of bilateral US-Soviet nuclear arms control in the late 1960s, for example, rested, inter alia, on a US desire to slow down Soviet missile production while pursuing qualitative superiority for America. For the Kremlin, the negotiations functioned as a marker of political status. The common goal of preventing all-out nuclear war led to bilateral risk reduction agreements that would improve crisis communication and reduce misunderstandings, like the 1963 Hotline Agreement and the 1972 Incidents at Sea Agreement (INCSEA).

Common interests also enabled nuclear non-proliferation agreements. The Soviet Union and the US wanted to secure and legitimise their status as nuclear powers, but they had no interest in more states joining the club.<sup>13</sup> Both NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement – initially aimed at preventing allies from pursuing national nuclear programs – and the 1968 NPT are examples of this approach.

During the Cold War, arms control succeeded only when the respective interests of the two superpowers in restricting and managing military competition sufficiently overlapped. By contrast, meaningful disarmament remained a distant vision as long as the strategic conflict between the two geopolitical blocs endured. This constellation changed only in the late 1980s when the Soviet political elite decided to “accept the rules and norms of the dominant international system” led by the US.<sup>14</sup>

The following golden age of arms control, which lasted until 2002, was an exception rather than the rule. For the first time, the INF and the START Treaty actually reduced the number of delivery vehicles and deployed warheads. Through the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNI), the US and the Soviet Union (and later the Russian Federation) unilaterally committed to reducing their non-strategic nuclear arsenals as well. NATO and Warsaw Pact members also agreed to unprecedented demilitarisation in the 1990 CFE Treaty and, in parallel, enacted a series of militarily significant confidence- and security-building measures.

Three decades later, the favourable political climate underpinning most of these agreements no longer exists. The era of cooperative arms control is over, at least for the time being. Under conditions of multipolar strategic rivalry, the main purposes of (strategic) arms control will shift back to the Cold War minimum: preventing all-out nuclear war through risk reduction and establishing rules of the road for the evolving military competition.

**Establishing linkages between different issues, which can go beyond arms control, will become more important in the future as multipolar strategic rivalry increases the complexity of policy-making.**

## **2. Arms control is rarely a stand-alone tool but part of a comprehensive strategy**

Previous arms control negotiations have often been part of more comprehensive policy strategies. In the early 1970s, for example, US President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger pursued a deliberate linkage strategy. They intended to turn nuclear arms control talks with the Soviet Union (SALT I) into an integral part of détente and connect them to the resolution of other political problems. This included conflicts in the Middle East and Vietnam, even though they ultimately failed to achieve direct concessions.<sup>15</sup>

The start of the mutual and balanced force reduction (MBFR) talks, which took place between 1973 and 1989 in Europe, provide a valuable lesson, too. The negotiations on conventional reductions only took place because both sides had other goals in mind. The Soviet Union grudgingly agreed to MBFR and, in return, gained Western support for its pet project of a pan-European security conference—which would become the Conference on Security and Co-operation (CSCE) in Europe, and later the OSCE. Meanwhile, negotiating conventional reductions helped to keep NATO together and to defeat popular unilateral disarmament proposals in US Congress.

The effects of political linkages can be ambiguous, though, as tensions in other fields can also spill over.<sup>16</sup> The adaptation of the CFE Treaty, for example, failed because NATO did not accept Russian troop deployments in former Soviet states. In light of these experiences, some have argued that arms control works best when isolated from broader political relations.<sup>17</sup> They hold that this approach has helped continue US-Soviet strategic arms control talks despite a general climate of competition.<sup>18</sup>

However, a too-narrow focus on military issues underestimates the importance of political factors for negotiating sustainable agreements. Frustration with the broader security landscape has often led signatory states to violate, terminate or undermine specific agreements of limited scope.<sup>19</sup> Establishing linkages between different issues, which can go beyond arms control, will arguably become more important in the future as multipolar strategic rivalry increases the complexity of policy-making. In this case, broadening options can help negotiators to invent creative solutions for mutual gain.

## **3. Arms control cannot prevent deliberate escalation but can alter its costs**

Even though arms control measures are inadequate to prevent intentional military escalation, they can play a role in providing signals about war preparation and, through this, affect the military objectives and the warfighting capability of would-be aggressors. Consider the now largely defunct CFE Treaty, whose implementation led to the destruction of tens of thousands of pieces of heavy military equipment and provided detailed information exchange about military holdings, subject to verification.

Russia suspended its participation in the CFE Treaty in December 2007, but the treaty-based force reductions nonetheless left their mark on its military. In the 1990s, Russia destroyed and converted much of its inherited Soviet equipment or moved it beyond the Ural mountains – outside the treaty’s zone of application. The restructuring of the Russian armed forces is one reason, among others, why the war in Ukraine looks different from previous Cold War escalation scenarios. In the 1970s they were based on the assumption of a surprise Warsaw Pact ground force attack on NATO, assembling more than 85 divisions at five different fronts within a couple of days.<sup>20</sup> Today, Russia lacks the infantry, military equipment, and logistics to practice similar large-scale offensive operations on several fronts.

Even non-engagement with confidence- and security-building measures under the Vienna Document served as an additional early-warning mechanism before the Russian invasion. In late January 2022, with more than 150,000 troops near Ukraine, Russia refused to allow inspections of relevant military bases with flimsy excuses related to Covid-19.<sup>21</sup> In mid-February 2022, when Ukraine triggered the Document’s risk reduction mechanisms and requested explanations of Russia’s unusual military activities, Moscow likewise declined to cooperate.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Arms control helps to increase confidence, not trust

Arms control helps to increase confidence about present and future behaviour of adversaries. While trust is an important factor in negotiations, they do not require particularly friendly political relations from the start.<sup>23</sup> Cold War arms control between the Soviet Union and the US is a case in point. The Russian proverb ‘trust but verify’, popularised by US President Ronald Reagan, aptly describes the situation when both states needed more reliable information about each other to confirm the absence of misconduct and bad intentions.<sup>24</sup>

The US, in particular, has consistently taken the position that arms control provisions require verification in order to prevent cheating.<sup>25</sup> Sure enough, if verification is to serve any confidence-building purpose, some initial degree of trust needs to be present. But beyond that, too much interpersonal trust – for example, between inspectors on the ground – might even obstruct implementing arms control agreements. On-site inspections cannot rely on trust if their goal is to detect possible cheating.

Overall, arms control can increase certainty about an opponent’s capabilities and dispositions, which helps to calibrate an optimal deterrence posture. Information gained through arms control measures can strengthen security in two ways: First, it contributes to reducing incentives for surprise attacks and second, it provides tangible reference points for force planning. Verifiable, reciprocal measures either need to confirm intelligence gathered through national technical means or should provide data that is not available otherwise.

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## 5. Arms control can buttress post-conflict stabilisation

Arms control has often played a role in stabilising post-conflict situations. For example, the 1995 Dayton peace accords mandated confidence-building measures and an arms control process for the rivaling parties in the former Yugoslavia. Akin to the CFE Treaty, the resulting agreement on sub-regional arms control sought to establish military stability through asymmetric limits on the parties' holdings of different types of armament.<sup>26</sup> Notably, it required some parties to reduce certain holdings while allowing others to build up their forces.

Today, any end to the fighting in Ukraine, even if only temporary, would also include elements of arms control to stabilise the military relationship between Russia, Ukraine, and possibly NATO allies. The Dayton agreement also mandated a NATO- and later EU-led peace-keeping force licensed to use military force to ensure compliance with the agreement's provisions. While the situation in Ukraine is somewhat different due to the roles played by Russia and NATO, monitoring a possible ceasefire agreement would still require international oversight, similar to the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) before the war.

Additional confidence- and security-building measures – for example, under Chapter X on regional measures of the OSCE's Vienna Document – could become part of a more comprehensive settlement. This could include security guarantees from NATO member states and be aimed at enabling Ukraine to defend itself through joint exercises and manoeuvres with Western partners. In such a scenario, arms control would contribute to stabilising the enduring political conflict between Russia and the West and function as an additional early-warning signal in case of renewed aggression.

If, on the other hand, Russia as a consequence of the war ends up significantly weakened or even in political turmoil, Moscow might choose to cut its losses, acquiesce to Western demands, and accept negotiated disarmament provisions from an inferior strategic position.

## 6. Arms control can help manage global power transition

In the past, arms control measures have been applied to manage global power transitions in an effort to prevent unchecked arms races, save costs, and reduce the risk of military escalation. Before the First World War, for example, the dramatic growth in German naval power challenged British maritime power in Europe, particularly in the North Sea. While the United Kingdom sought to maintain its superiority, it also wanted to reduce defence costs. To the German government, an agreement would have legitimised its status as a leading naval power and curbed British armament programs.

Even though negotiation efforts ultimately remained unsuccessful, they still attest to the important role that both the UK and Germany assigned to arms control in this period of strategic rivalry.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in the interwar period, the United Kingdom (this time



successfully) pursued naval arms control agreements precisely because it recognised that in the absence of an agreement, it would be unable to outspend the US and retain global maritime supremacy. This naval parity also allowed the US, as the rising power, to secure symbolic profits and ease domestic pressure on budget cuts.

Today, China and the US find themselves in a similar situation in East Asia. Debates about US strategy have alternated between ensuring superiority in the regional theatre, encouraging allies to pursue balancing strategies, and accommodating Chinese interests. Economic, political, and military rationales continue to compete with each other. Arms control measures could become an important instrument to address and harmonise this diverse set of priorities.

# Conclusion and policy recommendations

**A mere return to the tools and methods of the Cold War era is inadequate. In the new environment an integrated approach to arms control needs to be sufficiently comprehensive and flexible.**

The new era of multipolar strategic rivalry does not mean the end of arms control. On the contrary, it merely puts arms control back in a competitive context—one that has defined Euro-Atlantic and global politics during and prior to the Cold War. In the evolving competition between the great powers in the West and Eurasia, arms control measures can improve confidence in military stability. In the face of deteriorating political relations, this would be valuable in itself, but ultimately, successful arms control could also lead to a better political climate. Acknowledging the six points above can help to steer things in this direction.

But a mere return to the tools and methods of the Cold War era is inadequate. Advances in missile guidance and navigation systems increasingly blur the line between the conventional and nuclear domains. Novel delivery vehicles, such as hypersonic weapons, might exacerbate misperceptions. The rise of China tends to undermine the rationale for bilateral negotiations. Cyber capabilities defy traditional verification procedures. To address these issues, an integrated approach to arms control needs to be sufficiently comprehensive and flexible. States should focus on the following five areas to stabilise the evolving military competition.

## Policy recommendations

1. The US and Russia should work on extending New START provisions on limits, inspections, and data exchanges beyond 2026. Given the time pressure and the complexity of the issues involved, both parties could also consider a limited, preliminary agreement instead of an all-or-nothing approach.<sup>28</sup> Similar to the 2002 Moscow Treaty, which established rough limits for warhead numbers without further specification or verification measures in place, such an agreement could provide a diplomatic bridge until more comprehensive outcomes become possible.
2. Future Chinese participation in multilateral arms control processes will be key for ensuring both regional and global military stability. China remains cautious of intrusive verification measures, but using emerging technologies for more tailored and limited on-site inspections might help to mitigate opposition.<sup>29</sup> Establishing ratios with an adequate expiration date that impose asymmetric but acceptable limits on the parties' arsenals (similar to the provisions in the interwar naval treaties) could also address Chinese fears of perpetuating military disadvantages and thereby prevent an unregulated arms race.
3. China, the US, and its allies should also continue to improve the safety of navigation and communication in the Indo-Pacific region. In developing risk-reduction measures, they can build upon existing best practices such as the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and various bilateral Incidents at Sea agreements (INCSEAS) between NATO member states and Russia.
4. Nuclear weapon states need to ensure the resilience of command, control and communication systems against sabotage and offensive cyber operations. Mutual assurances

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to abstain from conducting cyber operations against these systems could help to diffuse first-strike pressures. The availability of time-proven, secure communication channels and comprehensive internal risk assessments remains relevant to ensure crisis stability and dissuade thinking in worst-case scenarios.<sup>30</sup>

5. States should more clearly define the role of conventional precision-strike weapons in their military postures to avoid dangerous misperceptions. This is especially important for hypersonic missiles, which are detectable but unpredictable in their flight path. Their launch might thus lead to escalatory responses. Structured discussions, including within track-two-level formats, can improve mutual understanding of the capabilities and purposes of these novel delivery vehicles.

Overall, risk-reduction and confidence-building measures, as well as unilateral steps to strengthen resilience, can provide clear advantages to states because they help clarify the rules by which they compete. Ensuring military stability in times of multipolar strategic rivalry is no easy task, but as the history of arms control shows, it is both necessary and achievable.

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