Commentary
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Arms Control: Declaration of Death?

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Summary

Recent decisions by a number of countries to withdraw from or suspend the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) have brought to mind one of the most dangerous manifestations of the crisis in international relations. The arms control system built over decades is collapsing before our eyes.

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This process started in the early 2000s. Today, when military conflicts flare up in various parts of the world, and the main geopolitical competitors cannot find a common language even on the most basic issues, the process is coming to its logical conclusion.

Why do we need arms control?

The idea of arms control arose in the second half of the XXth century. It is believed that its theoretical founders are Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin, who formulated and substantiated the concept in the book *Strategy and Arms Control* in 1961. By arms control they understood any form of military cooperation between potential enemies with the aim of reducing the likelihood of war or minimizing its devastating consequences if war did break out. They also wrote about the importance of reducing political and economic costs in preparation for war.

Subsequently, the idea began to be used in a narrower sense. Arms control has come to refer to agreements through which states commit to limiting their military activity, the number of weapons and soldiers, and agree on credible mechanisms to monitor compliance with such commitments. Similar agreements appeared in relation to both

conventional and nuclear weapons and ensured the impossibility of a rapid increase in their number and sudden use. As a result, the likelihood of hostilities breaking out and, accordingly, the need to actively prepare for them was reduced.

The flourishing and significant successes in the practical implementation of arms control occurred at the peak of the Cold War, when the capitalist and socialist blocs came to understand that it was impossible to win a new world war. And when such an understanding, along with the relative balance of the military potentials of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, ensured relative stability of the entire system of international relations. Arms control instruments helped to minimize mutual misunderstandings and the likelihood of various types of incidents, which was in the interests of both sides. In some periods, they partially reduced the intensity of the arms race. The main region to which their action extended was, for obvious reasons, Europe, but strategic agreements between the USA and the USSR, also for obvious reasons, affected the interests of the entire planet.

The heyday of arms control

One of the catalysts for arms control agreements was the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962: it showed how quickly great powers could come to the brink of nuclear conflict. Already in 1963, the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, in Outer Space and Under Water was signed, and in 1968, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was concluded.

> The history of agreements that have become most associated with the arms control system began in the 1970s.

In 1972, the USSR and the USA signed the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems (ABM Treaty). At the same time, negotiations were underway on the limitation of strategic offensive weapons. As a result, the first temporary treaty, SALT I, appeared in 1972, which was replaced in 1979 by SALT II. However, it never came into force because the US administration withdrew it from the Senate, which stopped the ratification procedure. In 1987, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) appeared. By mid-1991, all its provisions were implemented.

After prolonged diplomatic efforts, in July 1991, Washington and Moscow were able to conclude the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), considered one of the most successful documents in the field of arms control, especially nuclear ones. However, it has only come into effect three years later, that is, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1993, the United States and now Russia signed START II, but it also did not come into

force due to failed ratification by the American side and Moscow's refusal to implement its provisions unilaterally, starting in June 2002. And only in April 2010, Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama signed a new version – the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START III).

In the field of conventional weapons, the CFE Treaty has long been considered the main example of success for disarmament negotiators. After its conclusion in 1990, more than 72 thousand pieces of equipment were destroyed: tanks, armoured combat vehicles, artillery, as well as combat aircraft and helicopters. Military transparency and verification mechanisms, including data exchanges and on-site inspections, were active and effective. Additionally, in 1992, the signatory states agreed on individual limits on the number of armed forces personnel for each country. Moreover, by equalizing the conventional capabilities of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the treaty helped reduce the importance of the nuclear umbrella for the Western bloc.

Prominent advances in arms control continued after the end of the Cold War. In addition to the already mentioned agreements of a strategic nature, we can highlight the Open Skies Treaty signed in early 1992, which came into force only in 2002. The document established a regime of unarmed observation flights over the territories of the participating states. In September 1996, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was opened for signature. Another example of success is the Vienna Document on Confidence and Security Building Measures. It was first adopted in 1990 and then updated several times. The current version of the document appeared in 2011.

Gradual collapse of the system

It is perhaps fair to say that the "golden age" of arms control occurred in the second half of the 1980s and in the 1990s. Until then, progress in the negotiation process between the USSR and the United States had been driven by a shared sense of vulnerability due to mutually assured destruction in the nuclear age. As the Soviet Union weakened, this circumstance was compounded by the de facto détente in international relations. It reached its heyday in the early 1990s, institutionally reflected in the Charter of Paris for a New Europe and the transformation of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe into an organization – the OSCE. A striking symbol of that short time was Boris Yeltsin's address to the US Congress on 17 June 1992, which was interrupted by ovations thirteen times.

Against such a political background, it was much easier to agree on arms reductions and confidence-building measures than before; European security received an institutionalized form and entered one of the most peaceful periods in its history. At the

same time, in retrospect it cannot be said that the window of opportunity that opened was used to the fullest. Already by the beginning of the 2000s, disagreements between Moscow and Western capitals regarding various issues of European and global security had become increasingly visible. One of their first public manifestations was the debate "in a good offensive tone" at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit.

> The situation in the field of arms control and disarmament directly depended on the general political climate and the level of conflict in the system of international relations.

Although, interestingly, the process of formation and then destruction of the system of arms control agreements did not develop in a strict linear fashion. While diplomats and military officers raised glasses of champagne in honour of reaching some agreements, others had already stopped working. For example, almost simultaneously with the ratification of the Open Skies Treaty and the adoption of subsequent editions of the Vienna Document, the United States unilaterally announced its withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. In November 1999, the adapted CFE Treaty was signed, but in the end, only three states – Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan – carried out all the ratification procedures, which is why the adapted treaty actually turned out to be stillborn.

However, in the second half of the 2010s, the trend had already acquired a clear direction – towards the destruction of the arms control system, which reflected the generally rapidly degrading geopolitical atmosphere, especially in relations between the United States and Russia. At first, Russia and NATO countries suspended implementation of the original version of the CFE Treaty in relation to each other. In 2019, the Donald Trump administration withdrew from the INF Treaty, in response to which Russia suspended it. Some other signatories announced that they would still continue to implement the provisions of the document, but without Washington and Moscow this no longer had the original meaning. Similarly, in 2020-2021, the United States and then Russia withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty.

After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the collapse of the system of agreements in the field of arms control acquired an almost total character. Today we can state the final death of the CFE Treaty. In the most explosive areas, the Vienna Document, including the additional regional confidence and security measures provided for in Chapter X, does not work. Due to the lack of ratification by Washington and de-ratification by Moscow, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty faces the same fate.

Finally, the most symbolic situation is with START III. On 21 February 2023, Vladimir Putin, in his Address to the Federal Assembly, announced the suspension of Russia's participation in this agreement. The reason is the intention of the United States and NATO to "inflict a strategic defeat on Russia" and the development of new types of nuclear weapons by the United States. At the same time, Moscow expresses its intention to comply with the treaty's restrictions on the number of nuclear warheads until the end of its life cycle. However, the very fact of the suspension of Russian participation means that the last bilateral arms control treaty between the major nuclear powers is no longer working.

Arms control gone for good?

> Thus, for the first time in many decades, the world finds itself in a situation where the arms balances between the main nuclear giants – Russia and the United States – are not regulated by any agreements and, moreover, their diplomats are not negotiating new relevant agreements.

Let us emphasize once again that such a status quo directly reflects the state of affairs in the entire system of international relations and is therefore natural. But this naturalness does not make the situation any less dangerous.

Even before 2022, the prospects for preserving the arms control instruments that were still in force at that time, and even more so for concluding new ones (for example, the next version of START), looked bleak. Russia and the United States plunged into mutual accusations over failure to fulfil their obligations, which was the result of total mutual distrust. And without trust, it is difficult to agree on anything, let alone in the area of national security. Moreover, specific insoluble contradictions also stood in the way of negotiations. For example, long-standing American intentions to deploy a European missile defence system to protect against possible Iranian ballistic missiles, which were perceived in Moscow as a direct threat to Russia. Or the controversy surrounding Russian tactical nuclear weapons: when ratifying START III, American legislators documented the requirement to take this class of weapon into account in future negotiations.

Right now, that is, at least until the situation around Ukraine is clarified, there are absolutely no prospects for returning to arms control diplomacy.

> Due to numerous asymmetries in power potential with NATO, Russia refuses to compartmentalize the dialogue with Western states, which would put issues of strategic stability outside the brackets of the current confrontation.

This approach will not change until the United States finds ways to convince Moscow that it is not seeking to inflict a strategic defeat on it.

In addition, the prospects for concluding new arms control agreements will be complicated by fundamentally new technical realities. New developments, including in the field of artificial intelligence, are permanently changing many characteristics of ammunition and their delivery systems, as well as the features of the functioning of the armed forces. And as the centre of geopolitical gravity shifts to the Asia-Pacific region, the potential geography of arms control negotiations also becomes more complex.

Nevertheless, as in the middle of the last century, arms control can and should make a positive contribution to reducing military risks and tensions. As then, it can suit the interests of even the most irreconcilable antagonists. Therefore, as then, politicians should give space to diplomats to do what they exist for: to look for opportunities to agree on the most difficult and important things.

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