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Controlling the Next Arms Race?

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Are Russia and the United States embroiled in a new arms race? Vladimir Putin clearly thinks so. In his annual address to the Russian parliament on 1 March he spoke of 'those who over the past fifteen years have tried to fan the flames of an arms race' and boasted that Russia has tested new weapons capable of carrying nuclear warheads. Donald Trump clearly demonstrates reluctance to shy away from a nuclear arms build-up, recently asserting that the United States is 'going to be so far ahead of everybody else in nuclear [*sic*] like you've never seen before.' The US recently completed a nuclear posture review and, while Putin's interpretation of that document as lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons looks questionable, it nonetheless focuses much attention on Russia. Moreover, Trump has requested a large 2019 defence budget which includes the cost of continued modernisation of the nuclear arsenal.

Given that a new arms race may well be underway, some analysts have suggested that the time is ripe for a new arms limitation agreement similar to those concluded by the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. Such calls demand careful consideration. Besides the effects of tensions between Russia and NATO, which were most patently aggravated by events in Ukraine, the gradual unpicking of the Cold War era nuclear arms control agreements contributes to the present situation.

> Regrettably many difficulties stand in the way of new agreements, which would be concluded in a very different geopolitical context to the bipolar one of past treaties, but their absence would have profound implications for Europe more generally.

The collapse of the ABM Treaty

The last nuclear arms agreement was the New START Treaty signed by Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama in 2010. However, it's easy to overlook the fact that Cold War era agreements dealing with nuclear weapons were already beginning to unravel. Russia loudly and repeatedly expressed its grievances about US withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002. The ABM Treaty, which limited both sides from deploying more than a small missile defence capability, was tied up with the logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD). So long as either side could overwhelm the other's missile defences and possessed invulnerable second-strike capability, then destruction was mutually assured.

On the one hand, little has changed in the Moscow-Washington dynamic. Russian officials' bluster that their missiles can penetrate NATO missile defences only serve to make their objections to NATO's missile shield unfathomable to many outside Russia. One can see that – in theory at least – invulnerable defences would undermine MAD and hence deterrence, but both sides concur that the shield could not intercept Russian intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) which fly too high and too fast. On the other hand, the broader context has changed significantly. In the post-Cold War era both Russia and the United States have their eyes on many prospective nuclear-armed adversaries. Russia may not care to admit it, but there are sound reasons to believe NATO officials' arguments about the purpose of the missile shield.

The INF Treaty on shaky ground

From the United States' perspective, Russia's purported violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty undermines the nuclear balance. Negotiated by Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in the late 1980s, the treaty achieved something remarkable in banning an entire class of nuclear weapon. There have been repeated allegations by the US of Russian violations, first made publicly in 2014, and which cover both testing and development. To give one illustration of an alleged violation, Russia has started production of the *RS-26 Rubezh* ballistic missile. Russia insists that the *Rubezh* should be classified as an ICBM rather than intermediate-range one, although its range overlaps with the latter banned missiles. In Western eyes, Russia deliberately blurs the boundaries.

As with the ABM Treaty, impartial analysis needs to take into account the changed geopolitical context. Other nuclear states, not being signatories of the INF Treaty, can develop intermediate-range missiles. Russia may have legitimate concerns about non-NATO states and the United States should be sensitive to those. However, Russia also

withdrew from the Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement with the US. Moreover, although not related to nuclear weapons, Russia's withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty – a history that can be traced back to 1999 efforts to adapt the treaty – is also relevant.

Implications and priorities for Europe

Both Russia and the United States seek to modernise their nuclear deterrent. Of itself this should not cause alarm to those who can see beyond scaremongering newspaper headlines. At the same time, both sides inevitably watch each other closely, nervous that modernisation disguises advances that alter the strategic balance. Modernisation occurs with fewer warheads, missiles and launchers deployed than there were at the height of the Cold War. The present arms race – if that's what it is – can be partly attributed to the unwinding of agreements from that era. The ABM Treaty collapsed and the INF Treaty rests on shaky ground. The renewal of the New START Treaty when it expires in 2021 looks tenuous, with Russia strongly hinting that it will insist on linking any renewed agreement to the missile defence issue; a massive concession the United States would be unlikely to make.

> European states between Russia and the United States may not be signatories to the nuclear control agreements, but the implications of any future missile deployments on the continent will worry them deeply.

The renewal of the START Treaty and survival of the INF Treaty should therefore be priorities for everyone in Europe, regardless of political or military alignment. New or revised treaties face several challenges and cannot simply adapt earlier versions as templates.

With the end of bipolarity Russia and the United States find themselves in security environments increasingly different from each other. This determines which kinds of nuclear weapon have priority in each side's arsenal, which may differ from the Cold War era. There are also permanent differences of geography which, for instance, leads Russia to rely more heavily on silo-based missiles than the United States. This raises the usual problem of how to count or measure capabilities in any new arms control treaty. Beyond that lie the perennial challenges of verification and enforcement.

Arms control treaties cannot stop an arms race, but they can influence its development in respect of specified classes of armament. It's in Europe's interest to encourage such agreements.

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