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COVID-19 and the Future of Arms Control

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Summary

At the end of March, Russia and the United States announced that they had temporarily halted inspections under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) due to the coronavirus pandemic. As well, the multilateral Non-Proliferation Treaty's five-year review conference was postponed 'until circumstances permit, but no later than April 2021.' With further meetings and activities likely to be affected in the coming weeks, what does the coronavirus pandemic mean for the arms control regime?

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Immediate consequences

The pandemic has been described as a 'dirty white swan' – a hugely disruptive event that could reasonably have been expected to occur at some point and for which many societies were poorly prepared. It has affected almost every aspect of social, economic and political life around the world. Pundits have advanced bold claims about the long-term implications for the global order, while giving relatively little attention to the effects on the everyday activities that contribute to the maintenance of that order.

In the security realm, the closure of borders, the involvement of militaries in civilian support tasks and the implementation of 'social distancing' policies have brought disruption to the arms control regime, which has been on shaky ground over recent years. At the end of March, Russia and the United States halted joint inspections under New START until 1 May. The treaty, which limits the number of nuclear missile launchers and deployed warheads possessed by each party, allows each side to conduct eighteen on-site inspections per year. According to the information on the US Department of State's website, the parties have carried out two inspections each this year.

The current situation with the pandemic means that the date for the resumption of inspections will almost certainly be pushed back. While there is no suggestion that either party is misusing the gap in inspections, the inability to undertake activities that contribute to confidence-building and transparency presents obvious worries.

> For 'realists' states can never be certain about each other's intentions, or that they won't 'cheat' on agreements the moment one's back is turned.

And militaries in all countries tend to be staffed by 'realists' – liberal visionaries tend to pick rather different careers – which means it is easy to foresee the growth of mutual suspicions and accusations.

The next casualty of the coronavirus was the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference, which was due to take place later this month. The decision to postpone the review conference is entirely appropriate, but it occurs at a time when the risk of nuclear war is perhaps greater than ever before. The last review conference took place in 2015 and since then the so-called Doomsday Clock has inched closer and closer to midnight, reflecting the dual threat of an eroding arms control infrastructure and climate change.

Longer-term consequences

> Stepping back and looking at the post-Cold War era as a whole, one sees a pendulum swinging back and forth between traditional and non-traditional security threats. Resources are limited and it is the most recent events that shape politicians' understandings about where to commit those resources.

To give one example, in the aftermath of 9/11, the US intelligence community was criticised for having been too focused on threats from state actors. With a certain inevitability resources shifted to give much greater emphasis to non-state actors (that is, terrorist groups). Yet when Gina Haspel took up her post as head of the CIA in 2018, she promised 'greater focus and effort on the strategic threats' facing the US and signalled a shift back towards state actors. Events over the preceding decade meant that Russia, Iran and North Korea now dominated US threat perceptions and the pendulum began to swing back.

The dirty white swan has turned heads. Increased state resources will rightly be committed to healthcare needs and long-term planning for future pandemics as politicians of all creeds pledge 'Never again!' It seems inevitable therefore that the pandemic will herald a recalibration of security priorities. In some regards this will be welcome because states have poorly addressed what the late UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once called 'problems without passports,' by which he meant security threats emanating from contagious disease and environmental degradation. It is not difficult to grasp that cuts to the billions of dollars spent on militaries could amply fund the needs of ventilators and face masks that states are currently wrangling over.

> With a deep global recession all but assured, economic security will also prevail over military security, particularly among smaller states.

Meanwhile, port quarantine measures have disrupted the free movement of food stocks and raised concerns about food security. Among developed countries, many of whom import much of their produce from global markets, the closure of borders prompts concerns about how secure food supply chains really are. All of these new foci risk drawing resources and commitments away from the arms control regime.

A New Start?

Those commitments were already waning. The dismantling of the arms control regime has been gathering pace over the past two decades and the current pandemic should not be allowed to hasten that process. Not least at a time when the arms race continues unabated: the United States tested a new hypersonic missile last month – attempting to close a perceived missile gap with Moscow.

New START's term expires on 5 February 2021 and its renewal has been in doubt for some time, leading many to expect it to have a similar fate to the ABM Treaty and the INF Treaty. The United States has said it would prefer to abandon New START in favour of a new arms control regime which would bring China into the fold. It's not clear that this has ever been a realistic prospect, not least because China has shown little appetite for limiting its nuclear development. In any case, the opportunities for negotiating a new treaty look especially slim in the current circumstances. Russia's president has said that Russia favours a straight extension to New START. At present, that may be the best option on the table.

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