



## NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL: A GAME-CHANGER FOR THE ASIA-PACIFIC?

BY RALPH A. COSSA

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I was recently asked at an international conference to address the question, “Is nuclear arms control a game-changer for the Asia-Pacific?” My simple answer is that nuclear arms control COULD be a game-changer for the Asia-Pacific but probably WON’T be, simply because not all of the nuclear actors in the region are likely to want to play the game.

Please note I use the term nuclear actors, by which I mean nuclear-armed states rather than nuclear weapon states (NWS) *per se* since the nuclear community still pretends there are only five states with nuclear weapons, as described in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Don’t get me wrong: I fully understand the political implications of acknowledging other nuclear-armed states as NWS, but when it comes to arms control, we can no longer pretend they don’t exist. If a country has declared itself a nuclear-armed state and has in fact demonstrated that capability to the world, then it needs to be part of the nuclear arms control dialogue, regardless of whether or not it has official NWS status.

The great irony, as I talk to representatives of the nuclear-armed states, is that the only state that seems eager to join a multilateral dialogue on arms control is the one country no one wants to invite to the discussion, namely the DPRK. Pyongyang sees participation in the global debate as a means of legitimizing its self-proclaimed status as a nuclear power, which rightfully the rest of the world will not (and should not) accept.

Beyond that, everyone seems to be a fan of multilateral arms control, as long as it involves everyone else but not their country. I recently attended a multilateral meeting which discussed the question of what’s next, following the demise of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Our Indian colleagues saw the need for China to be involved in any follow-on to the INF Treaty while seeing no reason for India to be involved. The Chinese, however, saw India’s participation as vital, but not China’s, due to Beijing’s no first use policy . . . despite China having the world’s largest inventory of intermediate range missiles (as defined by the INF Treaty).

I bring up the INF example because it was the US decision to withdraw from this bilateral US-Russia (then-USSR) agreement that has prompted what some have called “the most severe crisis in nuclear arms control in the post-Cold War era.” I’m not sure this is true, but even if it is, it would only be true until 2021 when New START comes up for renewal. It’s breakdown – and there is a real possibility, especially if the current US administration remains in power in 2021 – would in my view be a more legitimate cause for concern.

The US withdrawal from the INF, on the other hand, while unfortunate, seemed inevitable, not because the Trump administration was looking for an excuse to withdraw, but because Russian cheating, which started and was called out during the Obama administration, made withdrawal necessary. It’s somewhat ironic – although some would call it poetic justice – that the US has managed to get the lion’s share of the blame for the INF’s demise, even though it was Russian cheating, and its refusal to acknowledge and address US concerns, that was the real cause.

Let’s be honest here: the Russians did the United States, and themselves, a huge favor by causing the Treaty to collapse. While the US has now pointed to China’s growing intermediate-range ballistic missile capabilities as a contributing factor, the US remained willing to stay in the Treaty since the benefits derived from halting Russian’s development of INF missiles exceeded the costs of having China’s missile build-up

go unchecked. But Russia's failure to honor the Treaty removed the benefit, making the cost unacceptable.

It's useful to note that, prior to the Treaty's demise, the loudest complaints about China's INF capabilities emanated not from Washington but from Moscow, China's strategic partner. That's why I said Russia was doing itself, as well as Washington a favor by withdrawing. Both have now made it very clear that the Treaty will not be revived unless China and potentially others join. China of course prefers a situation where Russia and the US both tie one hand behind their backs while Beijing has both hands free.

Let me interject here that the term "INF" is itself a misnomer. The textbook definition of an intermediate-range missile is one with a range of 3,000 - 5,500 kilometers (approximately 1,860-3,410 miles). The INF Treaty goes beyond this, prohibiting ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers (310 and 3,410 miles), their launchers, and associated support structures and equipment. The "N" was also a misnomer since the Treaty banned all missiles, regardless of their nuclear status or capabilities. If a new multilateral treaty is negotiated, this definition could, and likely would, change.

Creating a new INF Treaty would require more than a redefinition of the parameters, however. It really requires a different mindset regarding arms control in general. When treaties like INF, START, New START, etc. were promulgated, it was a bipolar world. There were the two superpowers that individually as well as collectively could destroy the world multiple times over, and then there was the rest of the world, and the rest of the world didn't matter much. This is clearly changing. Even though the US and Russia together still possess over 90% of the world's nuclear stockpile, others (like China, India, Pakistan, and the DPRK) are continuing to build their stockpiles even as the two superpowers' inventories were being reduced and both Washington and Moscow now talk about concerns of a Chinese "sprint to parity" if each were to go below current New START ceilings of 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear warheads.

Any new treaty should also be looked at as a means through which nuclear-armed states can honor their

commitment to work toward the global elimination of nuclear weapons. I have a tough time imagining a world without any nuclear weapons. Or, more accurately, I have a hard time imagining how we get there from here. But, we should not let the difficulty (if not impossibility) of getting to zero prevent us from working toward zero, which is the professed goal of all nuclear-armed states (and the legal as well as moral obligation of the five NPT-recognized nuclear powers.

So what's next? One approach would be for all states that possess nuclear weapons to agree to a production and deployment freeze, since the first step in making things better is to stop making them worse. Then they should be discussing proportional reductions; let's say an initial 10% reduction across the board: Russia and the US would cut 155 weapons, China roughly 30, North Korea perhaps 3, etc., based on verifiable numbers of course.

There is another, perhaps more doable approach, and that is one aimed at banning certain more narrowly-defined categories of weapons. With the landmine and cluster munitions bans as well as the INF Treaty in mind, the international community needs to focus on identifying weapons which can and should be reduced or eliminated in the interest of greater stability (not to mention significant defense expenditure savings).

When I have shared these ideas out to others, I hear two complaints.

First, I'm told that China would never accept any type of multilateral arms restrictions. But Chinese experts are quick to point out that Beijing signed the CTBT, the CWC, BWC, and the Outer Space Treaty and actually proposed, with Russia, a new multilateral treaty to ban the weaponization of outer space. China, like all other nations, will do what it believes is in its own national interests. Surely there are other types of agreements that serve China's interest as well as ours and others.

Second, I am reminded that, even with John Bolton's departure, there are still people in the Trump administration who never saw an international treaty they didn't immediately want to kill. Perhaps, but the president himself takes a transactional approach to foreign policy in general and seems to be interested

first and foremost in what various initiatives cost or how much they can save. Think how much could be saved by agreeing to a global ban on hypersonic weapons for example. They cost of developing them and the cost of trying to develop defenses against them are staggering.

Finally, as the world struggles to develop rules of the road for cyber and other emerging technologies, the implications for strategic stability must be addressed. As David Santoro has noted, “this wouldn’t be arms control as we know it, but it could be arms control as we need it.”

I’m not suggesting for a minute that reaching future arms control agreements will be easy, especially given the current lack of appetite for such agreements in any of the relevant capitals. But past efforts have been successful when they serve the national interests of all the parties concerned and are abandoned when they no longer do so. Future efforts to identify new methods of serving individual national interests, and through them the greater good, should at least be tried. Perhaps seeking a global ban on hypersonic weapons is the place to start.

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