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U.S. Priorities for “Next- Generation Arms Control”

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U.S. Priorities for “Next-Generation Arms Control”

by Christopher A. Ford¹

This first of a new series of papers offers thoughts on U.S. priorities for “next-generation arms control” involving both Moscow and Beijing, which we hope will be able to forestall the global nuclear arms race that may otherwise be sparked by the ongoing nuclear build-ups by both Russia and the PRC.

I have certainly not been shy about giving astringent critiques — as I did [in London in February 2020](#) — of those parts of the arms control and disarmament community that seem to have allowed themselves to become so caught up in ideological identity politics that they lose sight of what should be the common policy objective of real-world security. Nor is it any secret that I sometimes disagree with even the most reasonable members of that community about arms control and disarmament.

Nevertheless, there *are* many serious people out there in the arms control and disarmament community — even where we disagree, which of course we often do — and it is vital to remain thoughtfully engaged with all who return that courtesy. As I hope we are demonstrating at the State Department by modelling and encouraging such behavior in our “[Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament](#)” (CEND) initiative, there is no substitute for good faith dialogue with those who are willing to engage in it.

In that spirit, this paper offers some thoughts — from my current perspective exercising the responsibilities of the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security — about how we in the U.S. Government view the challenges facing us in the arms control environment, and how we see its future.

I. The Sino-Russian Challenge

Let me start by outlining the challenges that face “next generation arms control.” The primary challenge facing the arms control community today is the pressing need to rein in the Russian and Chinese nuclear build-ups that are currently underway.

I’ve spoken about this challenge repeatedly, but let me emphasize the sharp contrast that exists between the nuclear build-ups currently underway in Russia and China and the behavior of the other three members of the P5 — or [more appropriately, “N5”](#) — powers. Neither the United States *nor* Britain *nor* France is building up its nuclear arsenal.

For our part in the United States, we are modernizing our nuclear “Triad” to keep it relevant and effective in deterring aggression, but so far — despite the challenges that will be presented if Russian and PRC activities continue unabated — we are not increasing our stockpile size. Our program of record is based upon New START numbers, and it focuses upon replacing legacy systems on a more or less one-for-one basis before existing systems age out of service.

U.S. program parameters and budgets have been clear and in the public record for some time. Even where we have decided that we need supplemental tools to provide tailored deterrence options for the diverse range of capabilities being developed and

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fielded by our competitors, we are doing so with restraint. The lower-yield submarine-launched ballistic missile warhead that has just entered into service is accountable under the New START Treaty limits and does not increase the number of strategic nuclear weapons in our deployed force. The nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile we are developing will also be fully-compliant with our arms control obligations.

We are not building up our arsenal, and indeed under current programming our number of operational delivery systems may slightly decline as we eventually transition to the missile submarine that is slated to replace today’s *Ohio*-class boats. All in all, the United States is thus doing three critical things that all responsible nuclear weapons stewards *should* do: (1) we are exercising responsible nuclear restraint; (2) we are pursuing negotiations in good faith on effective measures to prevent an arms race in line with Article VI of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT); and (3) we are modeling exemplary practices of programmatic and doctrinal transparency that contribute to confidence-building, strategic predictability, and stability.

Russia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are an entirely different story: they are doing none of these three things. Indeed, even leaving aside Russia’s ongoing aggression in invading and occupying portions of its neighbors since 2008, and the PRC’s huge conventional military build-up and moves to occupy and militarize areas of the Southeast Asian littoral claimed by its neighbors — provocative choices that increase the risk of conflict and escalation, worsen tensions, and increase regional proliferation pressures — Moscow and Beijing are in the process of catalyzing a new nuclear arms race by expanding their arsenals in destabilizing ways.

No reader needs reminding that Russia is building a new generation of “exotic” strategic nuclear delivery systems that include a new super-heavy intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), a hypersonic delivery system carried by an ICBM booster, an air-launched ballistic missile (ALBM), a nuclear-powered underwater drone, and what I have termed the “[madly reckless ‘flying Chernobyl’](#)” of Russia’s accident-prone cruise missile powered by an unshielded nuclear reactor. Significantly, only two of these new systems will potentially be accountable under the New START agreement, whereas the others, dangerous new technological fronts the Kremlin is trying to open in a strategic arms race, plainly fall outside the agreement altogether.

It is also important to remember that the problem is much greater than just these new strategic systems. Moscow also possesses a huge stockpile of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) with which it threatens both NATO and the PRC. Russia has up to 2,000 such systems at present — including the SSC-8/9M729 system it built and deployed in violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, thus destroying that treaty — and it is likely to expand this non-strategic arsenal considerably in the coming years. Ever since ratification of New START in 2010, the United States has put a priority on including Russia’s NSNW holdings in the next arms control framework, but the Kremlin is making the problem worse by building more and more of them. Why does Russia need so many nonstrategic nuclear weapons when it already possesses strategic forces comparable to those of the United States? Is Russia seeking such arms with the purpose of using them on a battlefield? Is it looking for some limited way to gain an advantage or to stave off a loss? This is a challenge that U.S. arms control and deterrence policies must address.

As for the PRC, it currently has a smaller nuclear arsenal than either the United States or Russia, but both qualitatively and quantitatively it is expanding this arsenal rapidly — being likely to at least double its size in the years ahead, along the road to what Xi Jinping has described as his “Strong Military Dream” in which Beijing intends to develop the most advanced military capabilities by 2049. The PRC is building a vast new range of both strategic and non-strategic delivery systems, including new heavy ICBMs, hypersonic delivery vehicles, a new ballistic missile submarine, an air-launched ballistic missile, and a whole quiver full of missiles that can interchangeably carry either nuclear or conventional warheads.

Beijing’s build-up is occurring even as the PRC recycles unbelievable talking points about how China “will never join any form of arms race,” and while continuing to resist calls to behave as a responsible major military power and engage on trilateral arms control. Indeed, for the past four months, we have been awaiting a formal response from the PRC on the U.S. invitation to begin a bilateral strategic security dialogue on nuclear risk reduction and arms control, and their future.

The United States is not building up its nuclear capabilities, though Russia and the PRC are. But President Trump *has* made clear that the United States will not allow ourselves to fall behind. If forced to do so by developments in our competitors’ threat systems and their numerical build-ups, we will re-examine our

force posture planning and make any changes needed to prevent overmatch. It is our hope at the Department of State, however, that we can meet these threats through diplomacy: by engaging Russia and the PRC in a trilateral arms control framework that will forestall the costly arms race that choices in both Moscow and Beijing presently threaten to create.

II. A New Arms Control Discourse

The problems faced in finding a future for arms control in this challenging environment aren't limited merely to the concrete threats increasingly presented by Moscow and Beijing. Finding a future for arms control also means building a constituency for serious arms limitation efforts in the policy community, so that high standards will be expected from agreements negotiated, so that treaties that meet these standards will be swiftly ratified, and so that the U.S. Government can keep a strong and consistent focus upon verifying and enforcing compliance and otherwise ensuring that arms control meets U.S. and Allied security needs in the years ahead.

Some worry today about the supposed “dismantling” of arms control — a phenomenon blamed by Russian and Chinese propagandists upon the United States for having the temerity to insist upon Russia's compliance with agreements. To find a genuinely constructive way forward to prevent the arms race that would otherwise be sparked by ongoing nuclear build-ups in Russia and China, we need to do more to build support in the broader policy community for effective approaches.

Some of this constituency-building will require re-learning old lessons about arms control, and countering bad ideas seemingly inherited from an earlier era. In this respect, it may be that the initial post-Cold War environment of United States geopolitical power encouraged bad habits of thinking about arms control and disarmament issues, on both the Left and the Right, that were untethered from any perceived need to accommodate challenging geopolitical realities.

That post-Cold War “singularity” — in which it may briefly have seemed that the United States could make policy choices entirely in a vacuum, seeking and actually having a chance to achieve all of what one's heart most desired — encouraged on the Left the idea that disarmament hopes could safely be indulged without reference to things such as security. This led both to unfulfillable expectations, and to a sort of

amnesia about the role arms control can play in reducing risks and helping manage the most dangerous aspects of competitive behavior even where actual disarmament progress is impeded by worsening strategic circumstances. In its more extreme forms, this led to the pathology described in my remarks in February: the degeneration of what should have been a security-focused disarmament policy discourse into moralistic, identity-political policy focus.

At the same time, some on the opposite side of the community turned against arms control entirely, apparently seeing no reason to accept constraints at all in an early post-Cold War environment in which the United States' competitive potential seemed unlimited against any conceivable adversary. In this conceptualization, too, arms control and disarmament policy wasn't really about complex balances and negotiated answers in search of security: it was just a tool with which Lilliputians sought to tie down our Gulliver, and was thus generally to be distrusted and avoided.

Both of these polar viewpoints were thus, in some sense, *imperial* perspectives. During the post-Cold War singularity, it almost seemed that nuclear weapons and arms control issues could be decided in a vacuum, while the difficult *choice-within-constraint* dynamics of real policymaking were only needed with matters around the figurative periphery of the strategic environment (*e.g.*, terrorism, human rights abuses in far-flung countries, and rogue state proliferation). All in all, therefore, for too many people at the nuclear policy community asymptotes, Aristotelean virtue went out of fashion and the effort became one simply of enthusiastic maximization.

Both of those extremes are wrong, or at the very least, both conceptions are highly maladaptive in modern circumstances. It's now part of our job to transcend both of these mirror-image pathologies by building a solid consensus in favor of the sort of security-focused program that the world actually needs right now.

Under President Trump's leadership, we are making great progress on the Right, which is again interested in arms control thanks to the steps this Administration has been taking. We have, for instance, made it clear:

- a) that the United States has reawakened to the need for competitive strategy against our great-power challengers;

- b) that we don’t want agreements simply for the sake of *having* them, but rather to advance U.S. and Allied interests and promote international peace and security;
- c) that we take arms control verification and compliance enforcement seriously enough that we will not play a game of make-believe, pretending that treaties remain relevant that the other side flagrantly violates;
- d) that we are working to restructure global disarmament discourse in a more constructive, security-informed direction with our CEND Initiative, in order to help disarmament policy break out of the sterile eddies created by a conventional wisdom that is at least a generation out of date, as well as to bring to a close a sometimes uncritical acceptance of hypocritical Russian and PRC propaganda narratives and disingenuous proposals in the arms control arena;
- e) that we are genuinely focused upon finding diplomatic solutions to the threats presented by our competitors, as illustrated by the President’s call for trilateral arms control to constrain Russian and Chinese arms racing; and
- f) that we are giving Moscow and Beijing incentives to negotiate seriously with us by being prepared to compete ruthlessly and effectively with them — and to win that competition — if they will not talk.

More work is needed on the Left, though only a minority there is pursuing ideological disarmament goals without concern for the complexities of security, thinks one should remain bound by treaties that the other side violates, feels disarmament only counts if it actually *harms* security, thinks that a disarmament agenda item that makes sense in one geopolitical context will necessarily make sense in very different future circumstances, and doesn’t care if civil-society advocacy tends to encourage free sovereign democracies to disarm themselves in the face of authoritarian predation.

I have faith that most arms control thinkers on the Left don’t hold such views. I hope that they will rally to support the United States’ nuclear arms limitation efforts as we focus upon heading off the arms race that might otherwise result from the ongoing Russian and Chinese nuclear build-ups. I hope, for instance, that the arms control and disarmament community will join us with one voice in demanding that the PRC live up to

its NPT Article VI obligation to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures on nuclear disarmament, and as a minimal prerequisite to avoid an arms race. There is much we can do together.

III. Getting There From Here

So what do we need arms control to try to do? In our engagements with Russian counterparts as part of our ongoing Strategic Security Dialogue (SSD) — which in January 2020 included a new agenda item on the future of arms control — we’ve made it quite clear that we hope that the next generation of arms control will answer four key challenges.

- First, some answer will need to be found for controlling the types of Russian systems presently accountable under New START limits — that is, the traditional sorts of ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and strategic bombers. This is an imperative irrespective of what decision is made about New START extension, since New START by its terms can only be extended by up to a total of five additional years. So whether it is a problem for next year or six years from now, “next generation arms control” needs to cover these types of delivery systems.
- Second, a future arms control framework will need to address the challenge presented by Russia’s large — and growing — arsenal of non-strategic weapons.
- Third, an answer needs to be found to address the sorts of “exotic” new strategic delivery systems being developed by Russia that fall outside traditional New START-style accountability.
- Fourth, arms control needs to rein in the destabilizing nuclear build-up in which the PRC is currently engaged as it expands its arsenal and develops an ever-broader range of nuclear and dual-capable weapons systems.

I am sure that our Russian colleagues have their own list of things that “next-gen” arms control needs to do, and I expect that comparing these objectives — and exploring how the range of potential arms control “tools,” including transparency and confidence-building measures (TCBMs), might be able to help achieve them without imperiling the security of either party — will be a critical piece of our future SSD engagements. And if and when Beijing decides to choose nuclear

dialogue over nuclear build-up, we look forward to having such discussions with Chinese counterparts too.

As President Trump has made clear, it is imperative that both Russia *and* the PRC engage with us on such topics: this is the central thrust of his trilateral arms control initiative. We hope that this engagement will soon begin, and that it will lead to a path-breaking new arms control agreement. We look forward to making the President’s vision into a reality.

IV. Conclusion

I hope readers will agree upon the importance of this endeavor. If so, I very much hope we can work together with the broader arms control and disarmament community in ensuring that *all* the U.S. policy community pulls together to make this work.

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