

US-Soviet Arms Control During Détente: Lessons for the Present

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Introduction

Arms control during the years of détente (loosely defined as the decade between the end of 1960s and the end of 1970s, although the United States officially stopped using the term in 1976) remains almost a legend: it was born in the middle of a dangerous stand-off between two implacable rivals and achieved reasonable successes in substance (important agreements) and the overall atmosphere of cooperation. As the world has entered an unstable and dangerous phase in 2010s, we look back to the 1970s in search of lessons to be drawn and examples to follow. Can that experience be replicated? How can we launch a new arms control effort at the time of worsening and increasingly dangerous geopolitical competition? If two rival superpowers could engage in a cooperative endeavour in the midst of a geopolitical conflict, perhaps we could repeat the experience today and mitigate the more dangerous aspects of the conflict that will likely continue for an extended period of time.

I

The inception of arms control is closely associated with détente - a period of more cooperative relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union as well as, more generally, between the West and the East. Arms control was an essential, and the most lasting, element of détente, which continued long after it ended.

Arms control is often perceived as a product of détente. This is far from obvious, however. There were a number of initiatives, which could have resulted in détente, including in the 1950s (the “spirit of Geneva”) or the John F. Kennedy’s speech at the American University in 1963, but none of them had a lasting impact. Détente began in 1969 in response to the changing balance of power in the world – not only between the West and the East, but also within the West. More specifically, it was a response to the following broad trends:

- The increasingly obvious overextension of the United States, which was most visibly demonstrated by the war in Vietnam but was not limited to it. It is hardly coincidental, for example, that in parallel to the US-Soviet détente the West developed new coordination mechanisms, such as the G-7 and that new policy making bodies were created within NATO. The old patterns of interaction within the Western alliance were no longer sufficient: allies had to be given a greater voice and role in common policy.
- A desire to balance the German *Ostpolitik*, which threatened a rift within the Euro-Atlantic community. Détente gave the United States a solid position to lead the process it could not prevent and incorporate *Ostpolitik* into a broader Western framework of policy toward the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc.
- A shift in US thinking from strictly bilateral to a triangular relationship that included China. For a certain period of time, the United States switched to a Realist balance of power “game,” which helped reduce Soviet pressure.

Contributing to a major shift in foreign policy was continuing domestic instability, growing dissatisfaction with the government and old-style politics; a new global paradigm to fit the often-unspoken preferences of a significant part of the politically active electorate.

In a way, détente was unavoidable. Election of Robert Kennedy as president could have perhaps resulted in a faster pace and more comprehensive nature of détente than was the case under the Nixon; the China policy was probably unique to the latter and would not have been practiced by a Democratic administration (or would have been markedly different).

For the Soviet Union, détente was a crowning achievement of economic and social development in the 1950s and 1960s and, in the eyes of Soviet leadership, amounted to formal recognition of its superpower status by the main rival. Détente was also a personal project of Leonid Brezhnev, who shepherded it through the Soviet Politburo and multiple crises (one is tempted to recall his confrontation with the military during the Vladivostok summit in 1974 over the SALT II framework). Détente included a range of other important elements, such as the Helsinki Final Act, which, from the perspective of the Soviet leadership, codified Soviet positions in Europe and created a stable, if still competitive, international system.

Obviously, détente did not end global competition. Instead, it switched its focus to the “third world”; that shift was advocated and strongly pursued by the Soviet Union under the theory that détente was just another form of class struggle on the global scale and that the retrenchment of the United States gave the Soviet Union an opportunity to expand both its political and ideological influence. The “shift in the correlation of forces” eventually doomed détente as too many in the United States were not prepared to accept that transfer of the competition; return from retrenchment took about a decade, but in the 1980s the United States went on the offensive.

Conclusion I. Détente was made possible by a rather specific alignment of domestic political processes in the superpowers: the United States was retrenching while the Soviet Union wanted to consolidate its progress. It was intended, whether explicitly or implicitly, to modify the Cold War conflict by adjusting it to the perceived new balance of power. The fragility of détente demonstrated the relative uniqueness of that alignment: as soon as the trends reversed

in both countries, détente ended. In fact, the West was more powerful and resilient than many believed in the late 1960s while the Soviet Union was not as powerful as it perceived.

On the surface, the present situation may be a reminder of the one that brought about détente. The relative power of the United States and its allies continues to decline after the post-Cold War surge of the 1990s (thanks to a large degree to the overextension caused by several local wars launched after 2000), but few are prepared to accept it. Rather, American problems are routinely written off to Donald Trump's mistakes.

In fact, Trump's policy represents a haphazard and inefficient response to the unfavorable trends in the international position of the United States. The underlying impulses may seem logical – a rapprochement with Russia to reduce the costs of competition and draw it back to the side of the West vis-à-vis China (Nixon's China gambit reversed); cost-cutting and rearrangement within the Western community; protectionist impulses to protect US industry, etc. The turn appears excessively sharp for the American elite, however, and has been implemented in a suboptimal fashion; the likely outcome is a failure.

Things are different on the other side as well – Russia is not a superpower and does not even try to be one. It has been undergoing a resurgence and seeks to expand its influence, but its ambitions are far more limited than those of the United States. As with the Soviet Union in the early 1970s, Russia feels a resurgence and seeks to expand its influence, but it is much more cautious and less ambitious than its predecessor. Deep down, Russia is a systemic power that is fighting for what it perceives is its rightful place in the international system; even more, it is a conservative power that advocates a “classic”, traditionalist interpretation of international law.

Thus, any similarity to the late 1960s is superficial. It may seem that there exist prerequisites for a new edition of détente, but in fact the world is still very far from it. Détente may happen, but only in a relatively distant future. This, however, should not discourage attempts to revive arms control.

II

Although arms control has always been associated with détente, in fact it began much earlier and developed in a more sustainable fashion; certain progress in arms control took place even when repeated attempts at détente failed. This is because the conceptual underpinnings and the purpose of arms control were very different from those that caused détente.

The concept dated back to the Schelling-Halperin criteria (1961), which emphasised enhancement of strategic stability: reduction of threat without reduction of means to cope with. In other words, stability was understood as inability to “win” nuclear war in the first strike; that criterion has remained the underlying principle of arms control until the present day. There were several important developments prior to the inauguration of détente. At the bilateral level one can recall the 1967 Glassboro meeting, which discussed missile defense. In the multilateral realm, the United States and the Soviet Union established strong cooperation during NPT negotiations.

In a broader scheme of things, arms control was a response to the dangers of an unregulated arms race. Unrestricted growth of nuclear arsenals was clearly leading nowhere, but also risked creating a perception that successful use of force was possible and thus could provoke either nuclear blackmail or preemptive strike. As such, arms control was from its inception intended to *regulate* the strategic relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union rather than resolve it or eliminate nuclear weapons.

At an even higher level of aggregation, arms control was a logical product of the bipolar international system, which had emerged during the previous decade. A series of crises around West Berlin and Cuba clearly demonstrated the dangers of attempts to upset the deadlock. To avoid similar crises in the future, the superpowers tacitly agreed to adjust their behaviour. Instead of seeking an early victory, they began to proceed from the perspective of a long-term coexistence and competition, which, out of necessity, had to be peaceful. Arms control was not designed to end the Cold War or usher in conditions of lasting peace. Rather, the opposite is true: it was intended to regulate continuing competition and make it safer for the superpowers and the rest of the world, but, in contrast to *détente*, was not a tool for changing or even adjusting the Cold War conflict.

*Conclusion II. Arms control in the 1970s was not designed to change the fundamentals of the Cold War international system; it was only supposed to make it safer and was spurred by the realisation that attempts to redraw the balance of power through military means were mortally dangerous. The limited nature of arms control made it more lasting than *détente*: once it began, it did not stop. In principle, this means that today arms control can be launched independently of all other conflicts between the West and Russia: new negotiations only need a political decision.*

The norm of arms control is sufficiently established that resumption of negotiations no longer needs the right political environment. It is useful to recall that the Reagan Administration's attempt to pause arms control talks in the early 1980s encountered strong opposition and talks resumed – not very successfully at first, but nonetheless the dialogue continued even during the time of very acute conflict, which many rightfully characterised as the Second Cold War. The chief impediment to arms control today is, rather, the propensity to link it to the overall political conflict and the low ability to delink the two.

The real challenge for resumption of arms control is the systemic transition.

Conclusion III. The concept of arms control as it emerged in the 1960s was designed to sustain the existing Cold War international system. It can even be said that it was a new stage of development of that system and a sign of its maturity. The current situation is fundamentally different: the international system is in a state of flux, the balance of power is shifting simultaneously in multiple directions and the shape of the future system is uncertain. Whether arms control can be reshaped to ensure safer transition is still unclear: the uncertainty can be seen as opportunity, which by definition is the opposite of stability.

The Western perspective is still informed primarily by hopes that the post-Cold War system – unipolar or built around domination of the West – will return. China and increasingly Russia see it as an emerging multipolarity; both are angling for a place of authority and

influence in that system, but their underlying preferences seem different with the Russian interests objectively more compatible with those of the West (given the inherent and irreparable Russian weakness vis-a-vis both the West and China).

The resumption of arms control is further complicated by the simple fact that the main fault lines no longer coincide. During the Cold War the political, economic, and military stand-offs were the same – between the United States and the Soviet Union. Now the economic fault line is between the United States and China while the military one is between the United States and Russia.

The most likely scenario for resumption of arms control is thus the pessimistic one. As in the 1960s, it would take a shock similar in intensity to the Cuban Missile Crisis to realise that stability of military (first of all nuclear) balance is a *sine qua non*. That is, if the world once again survives such a crisis.

III

The arms control agenda in the 1970s consisted of three major parts, about which the United States and the Soviet Union were in basic agreement.

The first was operationalisation of nuclear balance as the inability to launch a successful first strike while maintaining credible ability to respond to the first strike of the other. In addition to the notion of rough equality, this paradigm resulted in the development of a theory of stabilising vs. destabilising weapons, and other similar concepts, which determined the parameters of future agreements. Among the more significant underlying concepts was the understanding of the relationship between offensive and defensive weapons developed by Robert McNamara.

The second important innovation of the 1960s was the idea of nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, which began with the Irish resolution (1961). The “romantic” period, when states pursued everything nuclear, including weapons, was over. The interests of NWS and NNWS coincided: the former wanted to limit the number of countries that possessed nuclear weapons while the majority of states wanted to make sure that proliferation would not force them into the “nuclear path.” Although the NPT included Article VI with (rather vague) nuclear disarmament language, at that stage the “third pillar” was universally understood to be something relating to a distant future; the main thrust of the NPT was regulation defined as an effort to freeze the situation as it existed by the mid-1960s. In this sense, the exercise was a success. Furthermore, nonproliferation became a major area of US-Soviet cooperation, which contributed to the cooperative atmosphere in the bilateral relationship.

Finally, the Warsaw Pact and NATO began negotiations on reduction of conventional forces in Central Europe (MBFR). The underlying logic was two-pronged. The most obvious purpose was to regulate the military balance to prevent conventional war (the same principles that informed strategic arms control). A somewhat less obvious rationale was an attempt to regulate the relationship between nuclear and conventional forces: Soviet conventional superiority was the main rationale for NATO’s reliance on early use of nuclear weapons and a more equitable conventional balance in the region could help reduce the role

of tactical nuclear capability. Although the effort did not succeed, it represented an important conceptual breakthrough (and, in hindsight, there existed a reasonable chance of success).

Conclusion IV. Arms control in the 1970s sought to achieve a rather limited goal – to minimise even theoretical probability of winning nuclear war. Against the background of an unrestricted arms race, that goal enjoyed widespread support. It remains unclear whether such a limited-scope goal will receive the same degree of support in the current environment.

The need for regulation of nuclear balance today is perhaps greater than at any time since the height of the Cold War. Yet, limited-scope action is no longer sufficiently appealing to the international community. Following major arms control successes in the late 1980s-early 1990s, there is strong pressure for more radical action as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) attests. “Classic” arms control remains desirable and possible but will be considerably more controversial than 50 years ago. While the above-referenced scenario of a major crisis could help resume arms control negotiations, with equal if not greater probability it could further reinvigorate anti-nuclear movement, which nuclear weapon states will oppose. As a result, we might face a situation when arms control does not resume while the international community is irreparably split.

IV

Limitation and reduction of offensive weapons has faced three main challenges.

First, it is widely recognised that the second-strike posture, which allows for each party to absorb the first strike of the other and retain enough weapons to respond, is most conducive for stability. Unfortunately, this is also the most expensive and technologically challenging posture. So far, neither side has fully achieved it, although the United States has been able to come closer to the ideal than the Soviet Union or Russia even have. Consequently, both sides have to rely on strike on warning, which is inherently less stable and is fraught with mistakes, as a number of false warnings have demonstrated through decades.

Second, it is difficult to model with sufficient accuracy – and especially difficult to make sure that both sides obtain the same results – the outcome of a theoretical nuclear exchange in the presence of defense. Namely, to agree on the structure of offensive forces that would rule out successful first strike. The widespread concept of stabilising vs. destabilising weapons was developed in the United States and accounted primarily for American conditions (including the categorisation of submarines as the ultimate stabilising system). In the Soviet Union and in Russia with their limited access to oceans (only the base on the tip of Kamchatka – which is also most expensive to maintain – allows reasonably unrestricted access to blue water) this is not necessarily the case, at least not to the same extent. There have also been multiple disagreements about the impact of certain weapons systems (such as air-launched cruise missiles and others) on strategic stability.

The growing complexity of nuclear balance has always hampered arms control negotiations. The proliferation of classes of long-range weapons, especially characteristic for Russia at

the present day, further complicates such modeling and will make negotiations a serious challenge.

Third, the stalemate at the strategic level has consistently caused concern on both sides about the theoretical possibility of war at the sub-strategic level. The advent of long- (even strategic) range precision-guided conventional weapons has radically amplified this concern: it may now be possible, theoretically, to wage war without crossing the nuclear threshold. During the 25-year period of US and NATO dominance in that category of weapons, the response of Russia was greater reliance on nuclear weapons and, arguably, the lower nuclear threshold (at least at the rhetorical level). Now that Russia is rapidly acquiring a similar capability, the United States seems to pay more attention to limited-use nuclear options (that trend may not survive beyond the Trump Administration, though). In any event, the complexity of the military, including nuclear, balance continues to grow with potentially adverse impact on arms control.

Conclusion V. Since 1969, US-Soviet arms control negotiations have been waged in the absence of a common theory of strategic stability beyond rather general and vague ideas. As a result, negotiations over strategic postures each time were ad hoc, fitting each individual treaty and sometimes not fully optimal. The outcomes should be recognised as an overall positive but demanded too much time and effort slowing down progress at negotiations.

It may make sense to include into any future arms control negotiations, as a separate track, consultations on strategic stability (similar, if rather rudimentary, consultations accompanied START I negotiations in the late 1980s). Although full agreement on criteria of stability are unlikely, such consultations could at least help achieve greater clarity and thus accelerate negotiations.

V

In hindsight, a major condition that made possible arms control effort in the 1970s was recognition of the relationship between offensive and defensive weapons. It took some time to convince the Soviets that the perspective offered by Robert McNamara was valid. Once they were convinced, however, they never veered from it; the same is true for their successors. United States' shift to defense dominance in 1983 did not undermine arms control but slowed it down as all negotiations and even informal consultations bogged down in Soviet – later Russian – insistence that missile defense should be limited, too. Reliable missile defense has remained elusive and its most prominent result so far has been negative impact on arms control. It can be said that progress on arms control has been made possible by the very slow and largely unsuccessful development of missile defense capability in the United States. This was particularly true in the 1980s, when the de facto failure of SDI led the Soviets to conclude that START I treaty would not undermine mutual deterrence. In one case (START III consultations in 1998-2000) missile defense contributed to the failure of a possible new treaty.

A close look would suggest, however, that the 1972 ABM Treaty has been often misperceived. It did not ban missile defense – only limited it – and did not ban research and development on missile defense (in fact, the Soviet Union continued to engage in it on a significant

scale). Conceptually, the ABM Treaty was not different from other arms control achievements of the 1970s – it was centered on regulation and as such could be adjusted in subsequent decades, which never happened until the United States abrogated it in 2002.

As with any international regime, including and especially arms control ones, their main value and rationale is predictability. The same limitations, however, could not continue indefinitely because new technologies were too tempting. There was a chance to maintain predictability if new programs could be somehow incorporated into the same framework; this would have entailed a time lag needed to ascertain that new technologies were incapable of achieving perfect defense, but adjustments were possible, at least in theory.

Conclusion VI. Treaties of unlimited duration are counterproductive in the long term: conditions change, and the original provisions may be deemed outdated. (The fate of the INF treaty is similar, but the topic is outside the purview of this brief.) Regimes have greater chance of survival if they need to be extended (offering an opportunity for modifications) or replaced with new ones.

The 1972 ABM Treaty was expected to provide a long-term foundation for efforts at limiting and reducing offensive weapons: as long as one of the two variables remains under control, cooperation on the other variable is by default easier. It turned out, however, that politically and psychologically the United States has been unable to resist the temptation of technological solutions to the dream of perfect or near-perfect defense.

Conclusion VII. Control of missile defense is bound to remain a condition for successful arms control efforts. Given the fragility of support for arms control nowadays, a repetition of the 1980s scenario (delay instead of breakdown) appears unlikely. The 1970s experience cannot be repeated in full, but its conceptual foundations remain valid: namely, efforts today need to concentrate on ensuring predictability of defensive capabilities rather than on strict limitations and partial bans; they can provide a significant degree of flexibility and still serve as a reliable foundation for reduction of offensive weapons.

A close look at Russian policy with regard to US missile defense efforts beginning with the 1997 New York Protocols (which attempted to draw a clearer line between the systems allowed and limited under the ABM Treaty) clearly suggests that Russia has been primarily interested in predictability rather than in restoration of the original ABM Treaty. For example, it clearly communicated its readiness to accept deployment of US defenses in Europe planned by George W. Bush's administration as long as capability of that system remained limited. A similar attitude could be detected in its approach to the Obama administration's Phased Adaptive Approach. So far, regulation of missile defense has been primarily prevented by domestic political alignments in the United States.

In any event, resolution of the thorny missile defense issue is not impossible. Unfortunately, it seems that resolution may have to wait until rapidly progressing Russian programs in that area mature sufficiently to make the United States start worrying about their potential destabilising effect for American deterrence capability. Once political conditions are ripe, a solution may be found in a reasonably short time.

VI

Concentration of arms control efforts on limiting first strike capability determined the main focus of arms control agreements: they concentrated exclusively on limitation of deployed strategic weapons – ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers (the latter were not covered by SALT I, though). Accordingly, all strategic weapons were considered nuclear and calculation was based on the maximum number of weapons that could be launched. Anything that could not be used in the first strike remained outside that framework, including nuclear weapons stockpiles, stored missiles (except that the number of missiles stored at bases, which could be loaded into silos), etc. Tactical nuclear weapons also remained outside – on the one hand, NATO relied on them to balance Soviet conventional forces while on the other, it was impossible to accurately count which dual-capable systems carried nuclear weapons.

This approach has remained dominant for the next 50 year, albeit in a modified form:

- SALT I limited deployed delivery vehicles.
- SALT II limited delivery vehicles with a breakdown (separate limits) into single-warhead and MIRVed ones.
- START I limited both delivery vehicles (aggregate number) and the maximum number of warheads that could be put on them.
- START II, SORT, and New START limited the number of warheads actually deployed on strategic delivery vehicles, i.e., those that could be used in first strike (under the assumption that uploading additional warheads would take time and could be detected by the other side).
- Almost the same principle was used for the only treaty that addressed nonstrategic weapons – INF. It concentrated on delivery vehicles whereas the parties were allowed to repurpose nuclear warheads.

Conclusion VI: Arms control during détente, which became the model for all subsequent arms control efforts, did not even indirectly imply nuclear disarmament, contrary to traditional references to Article VI of the NPT. It was – and remains – a tool to regulate mutual deterrence and make it safer.

Without doubt, arms control efforts of the 1970s and subsequent years were necessary and beneficial for global peace. It would be desirable to renew at least these efforts. It is vital, on the other hand, to clearly understand its purpose and inherent limitations. Furthermore, attempts to switch gears from arms control to disarmament will likely not result in the latter, but may significantly complicate the former by making political conditions less conducive for arms control.

VI

From the very inception, arms control was lagging behind modernisation of delivery vehicles. SALT I did not account for the emergence of MIRVed missiles, which changed the number of nuclear warheads deliverable in first strike. At that time, only the United States had them and it took a Soviet concession to overlook the existence of these weapons (in 1973, the Soviet Union successfully tested its own MIRVed ICBM and eventually overtook

the United States in the concentration of warheads on delivery vehicles triggering American concerns about that capability). SALT II negotiations were stuck for years over the accounting of ALCMs – the air-launched cruise missiles, – which at that time only the United States possessed (the Soviet Union began to acquire them in the early 1980s).

Conclusion VIII: The lag between arms control and modernisation seriously undercut the overall goal of arms control defined as management of the strategic balance. Beneath the overarching principle, both parties retained freedom to manipulate balance through qualitative improvements, which made that management suboptimal and, in the best case, prolonged negotiations on new treaties.

The same situation exists now, but roles are reversed: Russia pursues a number of modernisation programs, which, while not violating the letter of New START, enhances its capabilities, including the capability available for first strike. That specific deficiency of the 1970s arms control framework has not been fixed 50 years later.

Conclusion

Arms control has always been closely associated with détente, but the causality of this relationship has been overestimated. The détente environment probably helped initiate bilateral arms control negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union on their nuclear weapons (cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation preceded détente by many years) and maybe facilitated these talks, but overall, they represented rather separate tracks. In any event, arms control survived détente.

In theory, this means that arms control can be restarted even if political conflicts and disagreements between Russia and the West remain unresolved. In fact, these conflicts make arms control more desirable and needed. It would only take a political decision to restart it. Unfortunately, this is not as easy as it may sound. There are two principal challenges to renewed arms control.

First, political decision is not easy to obtain. The West especially has apparently lost capacity to separate arms control from other issue-areas; domestically, many see progress on political conflicts as a precondition for arms control interaction.

Second, limited goals of arms control may no longer be seen by the international community as sufficient. There is strong push for more far-reaching action up to complete nuclear disarmament. While the wisdom of such an approach may be debated, it might politically discourage the United States and Russia from engaging in arms control because too many in these countries may see further reductions as a step toward elimination of nuclear weapons, which few are prepared to seriously entertain. Russia especially is likely to cling to its nuclear weapons more than the United States because these represent the ultimate security guarantee for a country that is destined to remain inferior in its conventional capability.

An analysis of détente clearly demonstrates that resumption of serious arms control is possible. Whether that possibility becomes reality unfortunately remains an open question.

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