



Feature

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

2015, Vol. 71(3) 30–37

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DOI: 10.1177/0096340215581362

<http://thebulletin.sagepub.com>



The more the merrier: Time for a multilateral turn in nuclear disarmament

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Abstract

At three minutes to midnight on the *Bulletin's* Doomsday Clock, the time has come to consider constructive steps on the multilateralization of nuclear arms control negotiations that lead toward disarmament. After explaining the context of and existing obstacles to such a multilateral turn, the authors propose constructive but realistic steps: first, initiating a debate on a reduction-cum-freeze deal that would include unilaterally declared moratoria on new nuclear weapons by lesser nuclear-armed states alongside further arsenal reductions by the United States and Russia; and second, preparing the institutional ground by moving forward with debates over arms control terminology, trust-building, and development of verification measures, not only by the nuclear weapon states but by non-nuclear weapon states and civil society organizations as well.

Keywords

arms control, NPT, nuclear disarmament, Prague Agenda, START, verification

Two years ago at Berlin's famous Brandenburg Gate, President Obama proposed another round of cuts in US and Russian nuclear arsenals, including bold reductions in both strategic and tactical stockpiles (White House, 2013). Moscow's response to the proposal, however, could not have been less enthusiastic. In an interview on the Russia-1 TV channel, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov once again reiterated the government's position that there is currently no need to move beyond the provisions agreed to in 2010's New START and that all future nuclear disarmament talks should be pursued in a multilateral format (RIA Novosti, 2013).

While Washington and Moscow differ on the appropriate timing for including other nuclear-armed states in formal nuclear weapon limitation and reduction agreements (Horner and Kimball, 2014), the road to "global zero"—that is, a world without nuclear weapons—by necessity requires the engagement of *all* nuclear powers. The direct participation of multiple states in a START-like regime may be unfeasible at the moment. But there are certain steps that could—and indeed, should—be taken in this direction at this stage.

First and foremost, the nuclear powers could pursue the idea of "freeze" declarations that would cap the weapons

production in nuclear states outside the United States and Russia, as the two nuclear superpowers themselves make further cuts in their stockpiles. Furthermore, these steps should be accompanied by the substantive dialogue over practical issues connected with future multilateral reductions. This debate should include not only the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, or P-5, but also other nuclear and non-nuclear countries and civil society groups. Acrimony related to the Ukraine situation has frozen bilateral nuclear arms control talks between the United States and Russia. A multilateral turn could unstick them and set the stage for a truly worldwide regime of nuclear arms reductions.

The time has come

On the face of it, the stage for new arms control talks could not have been more poorly set. The war in Ukraine introduced Washington and Moscow to an era of a cold peace full of hostile rhetoric, saber-rattling, and an increased risk of inadvertent escalation. While New START—including the treaty’s inspection regime—continues to be implemented, so far actual arms reductions have been rather slow to develop, with both powers recently even *increasing* the number of their deployed strategic weapons (Kristensen, 2014). Furthermore, Pakistan, India, and China appear to be increasing their arsenals (SIPRI, 2014) and the former two states have been contemplating more “operational” doctrines for their nuclear forces (Blair, 2014). All the members of the nuclear club are also in the process of modernizing their respective arsenals and delivery systems (Kristensen and Norris, 2014).

That said, there are a number of sound and practical reasons to revive nuclear

arms control negotiations and place them in a multilateral context. First is the widespread perception that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime is undergoing an existential crisis. One of the main causes of this crisis is a persistent conflict based on the nuclear weapon states’ insufficient moves toward disarmament that the treaty requires in parallel with the non-nuclear weapons states’ agreement not to seek the Bomb. In this context, a shift toward multilateral nuclear arms limitations has long been sought by the majority of countries without nuclear weapons. Tangible steps in this direction would undoubtedly bolster the NPT regime as a whole (Müller, 2010).

Second, the uncontrolled nuclear buildup in the second-generation nuclear states increases the risk that terror groups will secretly acquire fissile material or even assembled weapons. Conversely, if this nuclear arms race can be slowed or halted the resulting savings could allow states such as Pakistan to invest more resources in the security and safety of their nuclear weapons stockpile.

Third, in the current volatile international security environment, the revival of arms control talks may also prove politically beneficial. During the Cold War, arms control talks between Washington and Moscow enabled unprecedented strategic dialogue between the two superpowers that led to the development of mutual trust and better understanding of each other’s intentions. Today, maintaining diplomatic communication channels is similarly profitable despite (*and* because of) the current crises, in particular the one over Ukraine. Framing the purpose of a turn toward multilateralism in arms control effort as *working together* to reduce deterrence

costs could only reinforce diplomatic rewards from such cooperation. From this point of view, multilateral arms control negotiations could be seen not only as a challenge but also as a significant political opportunity. Indeed, President Putin has recently expressed renewed interest in substantial nuclear disarmament talks, provided that future reductions do not lead to strategic instability due to unequal distribution of modern, high-precision conventional capacities (Putin, 2014).

Fourth, from the strategic perspective China's unbridled nuclear buildup is a source of serious concern for both the United States and Russia. It is primarily so because of the absence of transparency or substantial strategic dialogue on nuclear issues. Consultations, declarations and announcements, and other confidence-building measures that would accompany arms-limitation talks that include China could significantly enhance trust among all the parties and pave the way for a more stable strategic relationship.

The challenges remain

Attempts to translate the basic principles of US-Russian nuclear arms control into a multilateral context will undoubtedly prove to be extremely challenging. Among other things, lesser nuclear powers may lack a common language for discussing arms limitations. Some of those countries will also have a limited interest in the transparency that is required for arms control efforts to succeed. And, of course, there is the issue of disparity of arsenals—together, the United States and Russia possess more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear warheads.

Traditional classifications such as "strategic weapons" were born strictly out of the bilateral competition between

the two superpowers. When these concepts are applied in the specific regional contexts—for example in South Asia—suddenly the artificial "strategic" range of 5,500 kilometers (the shortest distance between the northeastern border of the United States and the northwestern border of Russia) does not make much sense. In other words, much shorter ranges would be sufficient to produce a "strategic" effect of nuclear weapons deployment in many areas of the world.

Similarly, while the enhancement of transparency within the nuclear club may be welcomed in both Washington and Moscow, at least for Beijing and Islamabad there is a distinct strategic benefit in maintaining a level of ambiguity in relation to their arsenals (Klotz and Bloom, 2013). The insistence on any kind of intrusive verification mechanisms would certainly prove to be a large obstacle in negotiations with Pakistan and China. It took decades for Washington and Moscow to build enough mutual trust and to move beyond the national technical means of verification (i.e., satellite photography) to actual on-site inspections. China, in particular, is extremely sensitive to proposals that would require such measures.

Another obvious obstacle is the large disparity between the stockpiles of the United States and Russia and the rest of the nuclear group. While the United Kingdom has expressed its prospective interest in jumping on the disarmament bandwagon (Brown, 2009), France and China maintain the position that before they would commit, formally at least, to cuts in their arsenals the United States and Russia should first significantly reduce their stockpiles (Pifer, 2010). On the other hand, most analysts agree that the two major players would not be

willing to descend near the current levels of other nuclear states if those countries were not somehow engaged in the process (Arbatov et al., 2014).

Taking all these obstacles into account, it would be unrealistic to expect that the other nuclear states could simply be included in whatever negotiations follow on New START. Also, the prospects for globalizing the INF treaty—jointly proposed by the United States and Russia in 2007—are dim. To move beyond the obstacles outlined here and make progress toward multilateral arms control, new creative measures will be necessary.

Squaring the circle: Reduction-cum-freeze

The history of nuclear arms control offers several examples of initiatives that did not involve formal commitment by the parties involved yet turned out to be powerful and efficient instruments nonetheless. For instance, in the early 1990s both the Soviet Union and the United States declared moratoria on nuclear testing that have not yet been breached even though the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty failed to be ratified in the US Senate. In the same period, the United States launched unilateral presidential nuclear initiatives that, reciprocated by Russia, led to withdrawal and also to an extent to the irreversible dismantling of a large number of tactical nuclear weapons.

In the same vein, the other three countries of the P-5—the United Kingdom, France, and China—could be persuaded to respond to further cuts in US and Russian stockpiles (along the lines of Obama's Berlin proposal) by declaring unilateral moratoria on the production of new

warheads and fissile material. Such “freeze” declarations would not limit these states' attempts to modernize their remaining nuclear stockpiles and delivery systems. Moreover, the states would reserve the right to reverse a freeze decision in response to a changed security environment. This may be a crucial prerequisite, particularly for China, which has so far been unwilling to commit to any nuclear arms control measures, in no small part due to its security concerns vis-à-vis the United States and India.

Outside the P-5, India and Pakistan should be encouraged to join the initiative through their own “no increase” declarations. While we believe that their participation should not be a necessary condition in the first phase, it would indeed be a desirable outcome; because it is an emerging power, India's arsenal has both global and regional implications, and the rationale for Pakistani's arsenal is directly linked to India's military capabilities. The participation of the two South Asian states in the process may be linked to the deepening of civilian nuclear cooperation with the P-5.

While the infamous US-Indian nuclear deal in 2006 was criticized within the NPT context, the criticism largely focused on India's lack of commitment to any concrete disarmament steps. The link between a freeze as a step toward nuclear disarmament and enhanced civilian nuclear cooperation would not only be an acceptable trade-off from the NPT perspective but also a powerful incentive for the two states to engage in the process.

It would be neither feasible nor desirable to directly engage Israel and North Korea along the “P-5+2” lines that might work for India and Pakistan. As noted by Norwegian political scientist Sverre

Lodgaard (2009: 145), the solution to Israel's nuclear puzzle lies in the success of the broader Middle East peace process, which is hardly something to be expected in tomorrow's news. In the case of North Korea, the direct negotiation of a freeze would set an unwanted precedent by implicitly legitimizing nuclear proliferation of a state that withdrew from the NPT and defied numerous UN Security Council resolutions by overt development and testing of its nascent arsenal. Instead, there should be maintained a sustained effort toward the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, perhaps including the promise of economic assistance and normalization of diplomatic relations with Pyongyang.

While the idea of further US-Russia reductions alongside freeze declarations by other nuclear powers is currently not an official policy of the United States, the notion certainly does not contradict the US approach. As Rose Gottemoeller, the US undersecretary for arms control and international security, noted in a private interview, declared moratoria can be a practical means to achieving broader disarmament goals and something that the United States could support in principle (Gottemoeller, 2014a). For Russia, the multilateral freeze alongside bilateral reductions would represent a realistic compromise that would reflect its previous suggestions for the multilateralization of the nuclear disarmament process.

Today's work for tomorrow's goals

The idea of reduction-cum-freeze somehow mirrors the basic NPT bargain, though of course on much less ambitious terms. In this case, the superpowers pledge to reduce their arsenals rather

than fully disarm, and the others do not commit to not arm but to not arm *more*. This bargain should however be seen merely as a first step in an overall multilateral disarmament process. Reductions below 1,000 warheads each by the United States and Russia would most likely have to be followed by actual cuts on the side of other nuclear-armed states. Since this still implies a relatively large quantitative inequality, applying strictly equal limits as in all bilateral nuclear arms control agreements since SALT II would not be a feasible option. Instead, there have been proposals to engage other states in reductions on the basis of a proportionate system (for example, 50 percent reductions in all stockpiles; see Blair et al., 2010) or to start coordinated arms control negotiations in strategic pairings that include United States-China, Russia-China, United Kingdom/France-Russia, China-India, and India-Pakistan (Arbatov et al., 2014).

To make a shift toward a genuine multilateral nuclear reductions process in the foreseeable future, serious discussion on practical issues—such as common arms control terminology, trust-building measures, and verification procedures—will be needed. Efforts in this direction have already been launched within the P-5 format, with annual conferences being organized since 2009. One of the important achievements of this initiative is the preparation of the “Glossary of Key Nuclear Terms,” which should be published before the 2015 NPT Review Conference. But that is still only the first step on a thorny road to a fully shared understanding of arms control terminology.

To further the agenda of future monitoring and verification measures, Gottemoeller announced a new US-backed

initiative, the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification, at the 2014 Prague Agenda conference in December (Gottemoeller, 2014b). The main goal of this ambitious project is to overcome serious verification challenges and, indeed, future nuclear arms control should include a system for counting individual warheads (including the non-deployed ones in storage) and accounting for fissile material. So far not even the United States and Russia have any relevant experience with such a system. Needless to say, the importance of developing reliable tools to verify compliance with arms control agreements will be even more pressing with decreasing numbers of nuclear weapons.

To a certain extent, the new US proposal builds on the work done within the UK-Norway Initiative, a collaborative project that aimed to deal with some of the issues related to the verification of future disarmament regime (US Department of State, 2014). Conceptually, both initiatives move beyond the current P-5 cooperation on nuclear affairs in two important dimensions. First, from the very beginning it is expected that the non-nuclear weapon states will be actively involved in the deliberations. Not only is this approach desirable from the perspective of getting additional technical and intellectual stimulus from actors beyond the handful of nuclear-armed countries. It also reflects the idea promoted by Stanford University's Scott Sagan that while nuclear disarmament presupposes a qualitatively different effort by countries with nuclear weapons, disarmament is still a responsibility to be shared by countries with and without nuclear weapons as they work to fulfill the NPT's Article VI (Sagan, 2009).

The second novel feature of both the US and UK-Norway initiatives is a public-private sector link and the involvement of civil society organizations in the disarmament talks. The UK-Norway Initiative was based on deep cooperation with UK-based think tank VERTIC. The new initiative proposed by Gottemoeller foresees a close partnership with the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), a nonprofit organization that has recently produced a series of reports dealing with new approaches to verification (see NTI, 2014). A closer cooperation with civil society will not only bring fresh ideas to the table. It also reflects the notion of societal verification, a concept that envisages an active role of nongovernmental actors in assessing compliance of individual states in the disarmament process (see, for example, Ibrahim et al., 2013).

The International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification is a unique cooperative framework that brings together nuclear and non-nuclear weapon countries and civil society groups to find creative solutions to some of the complex issues that lie on the path to "global zero." So far, however, it has received less attention from the arms control community than it deserves.

The *Bulletin* recently reset its Doomsday Clock to three minutes to midnight, which we consider to be a propitious time to revive arms control negotiations that have been comatose. Counterintuitive as the argument may appear, we believe that the current crisis in US-Russia relations is an opportune moment to consider a multilateral turn in negotiations that would reduce the risk of a nuclear apocalypse by limiting current and future nuclear armaments, not just in the United States and Russia

but in all nuclear weapon countries. Numerous challenges notwithstanding, the future of nuclear disarmament inevitably lies in its multilateralization, and such a path offers both substantive and political advantages to nuclear and non-nuclear weapon countries alike. The time has come to take creative steps—including some combination of US-Russia negotiations and a weapons freeze in other nuclear countries—that make tangible progress toward lower nuclear weapons levels around the world.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants of the Prague Agenda 2014 conference for their comments on an earlier version of our paper which was presented at one of the main conference workshops. Notable participants included, inter alia, Rose Gottemoeller, T. V. Paul, William Potter, Mark Hibbs, Angela Kane, Steven Pifer, Tom Sauer, Nikolai Sokov, Maria Rublee, Nik Hynek, Bernd Kubbig, Christian Weidlich, Jenny Nielsen, Nick Ritchie, Hui Zhang, Tariq Rauf, Jacek Bylica, and Carmen Wunderlich.

Funding

The research was conducted at the Institute of Political Studies of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague, with financial support by the Charles University Research Development Schemes (PRVOUK P17) and the Charles University Grant Agency (GAUK grant no. 734214).

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