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## The Rise and Fall of Arms Control



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For most of human history people and peoples cheerily have gone to war grabbing whatever weapons were to hand and inventing horrible new ones. The horribler the weapons the better: if you have to fight, make sure you WIN. That means killing your enemies, if scaring them into flight or submission has failed.

Then a radical idea emerged: it might be right to *limit* the sort of weapons you use or how you use them. Back in 1139 the Second Lateran Council convened by Pope Innocent II prohibited the use of crossbows by Christians against Christians. Impaling non-Christians remained more than acceptable.

Along came gunpowder and options for killing adversaries from far further away. In 1675 France and the Holy Roman Empire agreed not to use poisoned bullets. This is perhaps the earliest international expression of a curious idea: that whereas stabbing, shooting, immolating, exploding or crushing enemies are all acceptable, some forms of killing (especially those involving *chemicals*) are just too sneaky or unpleasant to be tolerated.

The staggering destructiveness of two World Wars and ever more elaborate modern weaponry created a new global willingness to consider international arms control initiatives. In recent decades these have taken many different forms.

There are now limits on *why* weapons might be used (self-defence is OK, but no 'acts of aggression'); *where* weapons or specific categories of weapons might be used (ie not in the Antarctic or on the Moon; some nuclear weapon-free zones); *what* weapons might be used (no to chemical or biological weapons; no to anti-personnel mines); *how* weapons might be used (principles of proportionality, no attacks on civilian targets); and *who* can use which weapons (most states have renounced nuclear weapons). Anyone up to and including a national leader deliberately breaching such provisions risks being formally accused of committing war crimes.

The Cold War saw giddy growth in states' spending on weapons and new weapons technology. It's hard to grasp now, but back in the early 1960s the five nuclear powers (USA, USSR, China,

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France and UK) were setting off atomic explosions in the air, on the sea or underground at the rate of *some three tests per fortnight*. Soviet Union's *Tsar Bomba* detonated in October 1961 in the far north of Russia, the biggest-ever human-made explosion. BOOM. It broke windows 900 km away. Take a deep breath now. Enjoy some radioactive fallout from that and all the other 1960s' nuclear tests as it floats around now.

Even the military leaders of the states pursuing this race to develop more and more ever-bigger nuclear weapons came to see it as perhaps ... unwise? Thus began painstaking negotiations aimed at setting limits on testing such weapons and on their numbers, categories and range. Back in the 1980s Foreign Office in London some of the sharpest minds pondered the arms control alphabet soup: ABM, SALT 1, SALT II, SORT, START, NPT, ICBM, INF, MIRV, CFE and so on.

The Cold War ended. For some years a completely new international mood prevailed. Agreements were reached on nuclear weapons and nuclear testing, chemical weapons, landmines, conventional weapons, ballistic missiles, 'open skies' and so on.

Many of these agreements focused on reducing tensions between Washington and Moscow and on scaling back the huge Cold War military deployments across Europe. Expensive new programmes were set up to cooperate in destroying chemical and nuclear weapons. Great progress was made. Lots of work went into drafting possible agreements for limiting the sale of 'small arms' that insurgents, gangsters and terrorists could easily acquire in many parts of the world to destabilising effect.

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Modern international arms control agreements typically have two broad features.

First, they are necessarily complex and technically intricate. Political leaders, military planners and weapons manufacturers (and the wider public) want to know what exactly is covered or not. National security needs to be secure.

Take chemical weapons, a whole category of weapons formally prohibited under international law. How to define for legal and practical purposes a 'chemical weapon' (or even a 'chemical') when so many natural and man-made substances capable of doing harm are used in normal civilian manufacturing processes, and so many otherwise harmless chemicals might be used in making eg poisonous gases? The 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention has long intricate schedules that categorise chemicals accordingly.

Second, the dry text of the agreements reflects deep human psychological concerns and motivations:

*"Yes, it's good that the nasty other side is says it commits to limiting its weaponry. But what if they cheat? Or develop brand new weapons not covered by the deal, and get a decisive advantage over*

*us that way? How can we trust them? If we suspect they're cheating, how to check? What if they think we're cheating when we're not (and when we are!)?"*

Such crude questions have brought states to accept that there are no serious arms control agreements without serious transparency and verification. Clever ways of achieving this have been devised. Independent agencies (eg the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna) have been set up to deploy teams of inspectors who regularly check on member states' factories and weapons facilities. Likewise states might allow other states to conduct surprise checks at secret facilities on their territory, or permit special overflights that monitor what is going on.

Hence the intense wangling over Iran and its nuclear programmes. Right at the heart of the deal negotiated by the Obama Administration was verification by IAEA experts: in return for IAEA confirming that Iran was not pursuing any illicit nuclear weapons programmes, sanctions on Iran would be lifted. But, said US and other opponents of the deal, IAEA inspections can verify only what they are allowed by Iran to verify. Yes, it may be harder for Iran to cheat, but cheat it surely will! Worse, we're rewarding Iran's cheating by lifting sanctions, and then what? The Trump Administration has pulled away from the deal. It's all now a mess.

Note too the even bigger point that under international law only those states signing and ratifying an arms control agreement are bound by it. The key Non-Proliferation Treaty under which most states agree not to develop or use nuclear weapons has attracted more signatories than any other arms control treaty. But it was never signed by India, Pakistan, Israel or Sudan. And in 1993 North Korea announced that it was withdrawing from the NPT framework. Long years of bad-tempered sanctions and Pyongyang defiance.

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The Big Picture now?

After the high tide of arms control enthusiasm in the 1990s, that optimism has ebbed. Neither Washington nor Moscow (albeit for different reasons) like their former bilateral nuclear and other arms controls deals (although both sides might agree that any such deal that does not include China is not much use these days). One by one they are falling away. Moscow has pulled back from the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty. Washington has voiced its intention to leave the multilateral Open Skies Treaty which allows 34 states to conduct inspection flights over the others' territory to maintain confidence/transparency.

Meanwhile the independent OPCW is facing Russian anger over its findings over alleged chemical weapons use in Syria and the 2018 poisoning of Sergei Skripal in England.

How much does all this matter? Is the world reverting to new versions of scary MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) doctrines of deterrence? Renewed dangerous arms races everywhere?

Or maybe we can stay fairly relaxed. In our hi-tech interconnected globalised world don't we all grasp the need to cooperate (enough) rather than fight? Do we need all those formal clunky treaty verification regimes, when the planet's satellite and computer networks allow states and social media to keep a beady eye on what allies and potential enemies alike are up to?

Or perhaps, whether we like it or not, the issues are quite different. Don't we face quite new 'asymmetric' security threats that are too fast-moving or indirect to be dealt with by multi-year intergovernmental negotiations? Cyber warfare? Election e-manipulation?

An unarmed robot drone buzzing to and fro as it tracks down and blasts known terrorists is one thing. But what about 100 or 1,000 or 10,000 drones 'autonomously' coordinating among themselves what to attack? What's the *exact* difference between that coordinated drone-swarm and a 'weapon of mass destruction'? Oh - and who decides?

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