

REVERSING THE SLIDE

Intensified Great Power Competition
and the Breakdown of the Arms
Control Endeavour



UNIDIR

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The United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters held its 71st session in Geneva from 29 January to 1 February 2019. Among its deliberations, the Board focused its attention on the role of the disarmament, arms control and the non-proliferation regime in managing strategic competition and building trust. At the invitation of the Board's Chair, one of its members, the author, was invited to inform those deliberations and to present ideas for possible consideration by the Board. This paper was the result, which UNIDIR is publishing in expanded form for a broader audience.

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE ARMS CONTROL ENDEAVOUR

ALMOST ONE YEAR AGO, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, in his *Securing our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament*, warned of “a new cold war”, “unrestrained arms competition,” and “the re-emergence of strategic tension between the major powers”.¹ Since that warning, the situation has worsened. The political–military–strategic relationship between the United States and the Russian Federation has continued to deteriorate. There is increasing military–strategic competition between the United States and China, now in the context of an economic trade war. Looking ahead, there is a significant risk of the collapse of over five decades of formal arms control efforts by Washington and Moscow to regulate cooperatively their strategic interaction. Much more nascent official and semi-official efforts to explore a process of informal mutual predictability, reassurance, and strategic restraint between Washington and Beijing have stalled and also risk being displaced by growing strategic competition. (Taken together this combination of formal bilateral US–Russian arms control and the nascent exploration of an informal process of US–China mutual predictability, reassurance, and restraint will be termed the arms control endeavour for the remainder of this paper.)

This ‘food for thought’ paper is not concerned with debating how today’s situation came about and who bears more or less responsibility for it. Even though written from an American perspective, it seeks to take a broader view. In so doing, this paper first addresses what is at stake for the principal protagonists—the United States, the Russian Federation, and China. It then sets out possible pathways to reverse today’s slide to intensified great power strategic competition and the breakdown of the arms control endeavour. If successfully pursued, these pathways forward also could help to enable the reinvigorated twenty-first century pursuit of disarmament sought by Secretary-General Guterres. In taking this focus, the paper acknowledges, but sets aside, other important challenges to global, regional, and intra-State peace and security given the focus of the specific meeting of the Advisory Board for Disarmament Matters for which this paper was prepared.

¹ See Office for Disarmament Affairs, *Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament*, 2018, p. 3.

WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR GREAT POWER INTERESTS?

Intensified great power strategic competition and the collapse of the arms control endeavour— formal and informal—as a means to regulate great powers’ strategic relationships will impact all States’ peace and security. But first and most it will adversely impact the interests of the three great power protagonists.

For Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, that outcome would further increase mutual suspicions and uncertainties. The result would be more corrosion of already difficult political–military relationships and added momentum towards ever-greater competition as competitive actions and resulting responses feed on themselves.

The likelihood also would be significantly increased of misperception and miscalculation of each other’s respective military plans, programmes, intentions, and activities in peacetime, crisis, or conflict. In part, worst case analysis in an increasingly competitive environment would make misperception and miscalculation more likely. Perhaps more so in the US–Russia bilateral strategic relationship with its arms control-derived windows into each other’s activities, lessened predictability also would play an important part. But even in the US–China strategic relationship a narrowing of windows of strategic dialogue at the official and semi-official level—but much more so the failure to put in place a process of mutual predictability, reassurance, and restraint—also would increase the risk of misperception and miscalculation.²

At the least, heightened misperception and miscalculation would drive intensified pursuit of competitive military–strategic advantage. For all three States, that outcome would be economically costly, diverting resources that could be better used to meet pressing domestic problems. More ominously, the likelihood of misperception and miscalculation would heighten the danger of a crisis or the outbreak of conflict, whether involving the United States and the Russian Federation or the United States and China. Any such crisis or conflict, moreover, would occur under the nuclear shadow, with a risk of mutually destructive escalation to or across the nuclear threshold.

Finally, intensified great power competition and the breakdown specifically of five decades of bilateral US–Russia arms control would seriously erode the legitimacy, effectiveness, and support for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Almost certainly, it would be very widely seen to validate the argument that the NPT is not fit for its disarmament purpose. This

² For views on today’s strategic situation between the United States and Russia and the United States and China, see, for example, T. Graham Jr., “U.S.-Russian Relations in a New Era,” *The National Interest*, January 6, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/us-russian-relations-new-era-40637>; V. Dvorkin, “Preserving Strategic Stability Amid U.S.-Russian Confrontation,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, February 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/2019/02/08/preserving-strategic-stability-amid-u.s.-russian-confrontation-pub-78319>; M. Nacht, S. Laderman, and J. Beeston, *Strategic Competition in China-US Relations*, Livermore Papers on Global Security No. 5, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Center for Global Security Research, October 2018.

corrosive impact on the NPT would be intensified by the oft-expressed judgment of many nonnuclear-weapon States (NNWS), particularly from developing countries, that the Treaty's success in fostering non-proliferation greatly exceeds its achievements in bringing about nuclear disarmament. For all of the great powers, but equally others, this erosion would come at a time of global and regional uncertainty during which the stabilizing contributions of a robust NPT are all the more necessary.

SOME POSSIBLE PATHWAYS FORWARD

Despite these stakes, there is no clear and easy way to reverse today's slide. Nonetheless, there are some potentially promising pathways forward. Some of these pathways would pave the way for others; not all of them would or could be pursued at once. Most of them involve actions by Washington and Moscow or Washington and Beijing, or by all three States along with the other NPT nuclear-weapon States (NWS); some of them also involve actions by allies, friends, and concerned States.

Encourage the protagonists to think through the stakes

An initial step would be to encourage the United States, the Russian Federation, and China to step back and to assess whether their own security and economic interests are served by the intensified competition that they increasingly view as unavoidable³—and for Moscow and Washington by the collapse of formal arms control and for Washington and Beijing a lack of more informal measures of mutual strategic predictability, reassurance, and restraint. Each government would need to decide on its own to do such an assessment. Until Washington, Moscow, and Beijing decide that their interests will not be served by continuing the current slide, other proposals will gain only limited traction, if any.

Friendly States, allies, and other concerned States, as well as the Secretary-General and leaders of other global and regional organizations, however, can encourage the protagonists to undertake such an assessment. Outsiders also can highlight dangers posed by growing great power competition and a breakdown of the arms control endeavour, particularly for the legitimacy, effectiveness, and support for the NPT. The April–May 2019 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting provides an opportunity to do so.

Signal a commitment to reverse the slide

Assuming that Washington, Moscow, and Beijing recognize that their respective security and economic interests would not be served by intensified great power competition and the collapse of the arms control endeavour, the three States' leaders need to find ways to signal their shared commitment to reversing today's

³ For an American perspective, see remarks by C.A. Ford, "Re-learning a Competitive Mindset in Great-Power Competition", 14 March 2019, <https://www.state.gov/t/isn/rls/rm/2019/290438.htm>.

slide toward that outcome. Historically, summit meetings as well as meetings on the margins of other great power gatherings have provided a venue for joint statements of this sort. If it proves possible to arrange another Trump–Putin summit, one purpose should be for both leaders to affirm that commitment—and to initiate actions toward that goal. While a next Trump–Xi summit is likely to focus heavily on economic issues, it, too, should be used to signal both leaders’ recognition that a more competitive political–military relationship would serve neither State’s interests. There are other less prominent venues that would provide a means to reinforce such leadership messages, from statements in the Security Council to those at upcoming international meetings, including the upcoming 2019 Preparatory Committee meeting for the NPT Review Conference.

An announcement by Washington and Moscow of their intention to extend the New START Treaty when it otherwise would expire in 2021 would be another—and more powerful—way to signal. It also would send an important message to the many NPT NNWS that are increasingly concerned about the breakdown of bilateral arms control. However, given the current state of US–Russian strategic relations, at best it might be possible for the two States to affirm their intention to start consultations with the goal of extending the Treaty.

Create senior arms control advisory boards

The arms control endeavour, as already noted, varies greatly between the United States and the Russian Federation and the United States and China. Taking that difference into account, Presidents Trump and Putin could agree to establish a bilateral US–Russia Senior Advisory Group on Reassessing US–Russia Arms Control. In parallel, Presidents Trump and Xi could agree to establish a comparable US–China Senior Advisory Group on Mutual Predictability, Reassurance, and Restraint. In each case, the Advisory Board would be made up of a mix of very senior retired military and civilian defence officials from, respectively, the United States and Russia and the United States and China. Though a semi-official Track 1 ½ undertaking, these Boards could be explicitly linked to the more official bilateral strategic stability dialogues, for example, by providing for them to report their results to the official dialogues.

The mandates of the two Boards would be tailored to each bilateral relationship and the different role of arms control. To transcend today’s controversies, the US–Russia Board would be given the task of looking at the full range of strategic issues dividing Washington and Moscow—strategic offences and defences, intermediate-range systems, next generation strategic systems, conventional strike systems, nuclear testing, space and cyber capabilities—and to explore what a new mutually beneficial comprehensive arms control approach to replace

the existing fabric of treaties could entail.⁴⁵ Thinking through such a comprehensive approach would be a daunting task. But it is essential for regulating more traditional strategic interactions (including now not only nuclear-related offence and defence capabilities but also exotic nuclear systems and non-nuclear strike capabilities) even if it proves possible to achieve some separate progress on newer space and cyber issues. The US–China Board would have the more limited objective of exploring more informal predictability, reassurance, and restraint measures to reduce each State’s uncertainties and misperceptions regarding the strategic intentions, plans, and programmes of the other. Over the past decade, many such measures have been proposed both by US and Chinese experts. A next step would be to implement one or more proposals as a pilot project to test out the concept of mutual predictability, reassurance, and restraint.⁶

Decisions by Washington and Moscow and Washington and Beijing, respectively, to create such Senior Arms Control Advisory Boards would be another signal of the judgment of each State’s leaders that its security and economic interests would be ill-served by ever more intense if not unfettered strategic competition. The very process of dialogue within the Boards would help to clarify each State’s respective strategic concerns and increase mutual predictability, thereby potentially lessening the likelihood of costly strategic missteps. At best, the discussions would identify pathways forward, in the US–Russia relationship for a mutually beneficial new treaties/agreements regime, and in the US–China relationship for more limited predictability, reassurance, and restraint steps.

Restore US–Russia and strengthen US–China defence and military engagement

Strengthened engagement among defence officials and militaries can reduce uncertainty, increase predictability, and most generally, provide windows into military plans and programmes. Lack of such windows already is an important driver of intensified strategic competition. Its impact will increase at a time of major strategic modernization on the part of all three protagonists and to the extent that other formal or informal mechanisms for exchanges of information are not functioning well, no longer exist, or have not been created.

At the same time, defence and military engagement can help to lessen the risk of crisis or confrontation due to a faulty understanding of how given military

⁴ For an overall discussion of the state of US–Russian arms control from US and Russian perspectives, see, for example, F. Klotz, “Extending New START Is in America’s National Security Interest”, *Arms Control Today*, January/February

⁵, pp. 6–12; Dvorkin, *op.cit.*, and A. Arbatov, “The Hidden Side of the U.S.-Russian Strategic Confrontation”, *Arms Control Today*, September 2016, https://www.armscontrol.org/ACT/2016_09/Features/The-Hidden-Side-of-the-US-Russian-Strategic-Confrontation.

⁶ On past efforts to foster a US–China strategic dialogue, see B. Roberts, “On Creating the Conditions for Nuclear Disarmament: Past Lessons, Future Prospects”, *Washington Quarterly*, forthcoming.

actions may be perceived by others or miscalculation of how another State may respond to such actions. The possibility of such misperception and miscalculation may be especially serious in new realms of competition (e.g., space, cyber, and other new technologies⁷), in situations in which military forces lack a long experience of operating in close proximity to each other (e.g., as with the US and Chinese militaries in the South China Sea), or in otherwise 'gray areas' (e.g., in northern Europe). Most broadly, military-to-military engagement can open up channels of senior-level communication that would be useful in a crisis and, over time, help build trust.

Such defence and military-to-military engagement can take place at multiple levels, ranging from that of the respective defence and military leaderships through planning staffs to operational commands and in-theater operators. Strengthening defence and military-to-military engagement, however, will be difficult in the US–Russian bilateral relationship.⁸ It will require a US readiness to ease restriction on extensive military-to-military cooperation that were put in place by the National Defense Authorization Act after the Russian annexation of Crimea. Easing those restrictions proved possible to allow senior-level military contacts to manage and reduce the risks of both States' respective engagement in the Syrian Arab Republic. In turn, most recently in March 2019, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford met with Russian Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov not only to discuss deconfliction of military operations in the Syrian Arab Republic but also the broader state of US–Russian military relations.⁹ Both States' interest in lessening the risk of misperception and miscalculation argue for following that precedent to restore wider defence and military contacts to help avoid unintended military competition, confrontation, or even escalation in a crisis or conflict. By contrast, there are ongoing contacts between the US and Chinese defence establishments and militaries to reduce the risk of misunderstandings and provide a basis for communication, particularly in crisis. Here, opportunities should be sought to broaden the agenda and deepen those contacts.

⁷ For instance, see J. Borrie, T. Caughley and W. Wan (eds), *Understanding Nuclear Weapon Risks*, UNIDIR, 2017. See also UNODA and UNIDIR, *Hypersonic Weapons: A Challenge and Opportunity for Strategic Arms Control*, 2019.

⁸ On the current state of play (and constraints) on US–Russian and US–Chinese defence/military engagement, see S.R. Anderson, S.T. Chambers and M.E. Reynolds, "What's in the New NDAA", LAWFARE, 14 August 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/whats-new-ndaa>; US Department of State, "U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue", press release, 9 November 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/11/287282.htm>; J. Yuan, "Dragon and Eagle Entangled: Sino-US Military Exchanges, 2001-2016", *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 31 January 2017.

⁹ See US Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Public Affairs, "Announcement of Meeting between Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr. and Russian Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov", 3 March 2019, <https://www.jcs.mil/Media/News/News-Display/Article/1773429/announcement-ofmeeting-between-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-josep/>.

Reaffirm, update, or strengthen crisis-conflict avoidance/management mechanisms

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union negotiated several crisis-conflict avoidance agreements. The 1971 Agreement on Measures to Reduce the Risk of Outbreak of Nuclear War Between the United States of America and The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Accidents Measures Agreement) committed each State to measures to “guard against the accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons”.¹⁰ The 1972 Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas provided measures to “assure the safety of navigation of the ships of their respective armed forces on the high seas and flight of their military aircraft over the high seas”.¹¹ The 1973 Agreement Between The United States of America and The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Nuclear War committed the two States to act to “remove the danger of nuclear war” and to “prevent the development of situations capable of causing a dangerous exacerbation of their relations, as to avoid military confrontations, and to exclude the outbreak of nuclear war between them”.¹²

These agreements all were crafted in a different time. Nonetheless, in a period of increased tension and competition, both Washington and Moscow would gain from updating, revising, and reaffirming the basic commitments of these earlier Cold War agreements, especially the two dealing with reducing the risk of a nuclear crisis, confrontation, or conflict. That reaffirmation would be an important signal in itself just as it was at the height of the Cold War. In addition, the process of updating them for a very different geopolitical and technological environment would be valuable in itself as a means to identify potential misperceptions and miscalculations concerning each other’s nuclear-related doctrines, plans, and programmes. Closely related, any such reaffirmation of these agreements also could be accompanied by a reaffirmation by Presidents Trump and Putin of the earlier US–Soviet declaration that a “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”¹³.

For their part, the United States and China signed a 2017 military-to-military agreement aimed at improving communications to reduce the risk of miscalculation as well as an earlier 2014 bilateral framework for “Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism”.¹⁴ Within

¹⁰ See <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/4692.htm#text>.

¹¹ See <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/4791.htm#treaty>.

¹² See <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/5186.htm#treaty>.

¹³ “Joint Soviet-United States Statement on the Summit Meeting in Geneva”, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, November 21, 1985, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/112185a>.

¹⁴ See J. Garamone, “U.S., Chinese Military Leaders Sign Agreement to Increase Communication”, US Department of Defense, 15 August 2017, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1278684/us-chinese->

the framework of this latter agreement, military crisis communications would make use of the Defense Telephone Link between the two States established in 2008.¹⁵ Along with 19 Western Pacific States, they both also have signed the 2014 non-legally binding Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, aimed at increasing maritime safety and avoiding escalation of an incident at sea.¹⁶ Most recently, the two States also affirmed in 2018 their commitment to developing a military-to-military “Crisis Deconfliction and Communication Framework”.¹⁷ Continued efforts to implement effectively these existing agreements, make use of them more routinely, and to carry them forward also would contribute to managing competition and helping to build the trust needed to alleviate it.

Broaden and strengthen the discussions within the “P5 process”

The most recent P5 meeting took place in Beijing in January 2019. This process stands out as one forum in which the five NPT nuclear-weapon States—United States, Russian Federation, China, France, and the United Kingdom—continue to have a sustained and for the most part productive dialogue. Several possibilities could be explored for using the P5 process to help manage and then alleviate growing great power competition.

Plans already exist to continue the dialogue on nuclear doctrine among the five NPT NWS.¹⁸ That dialogue offers a means to reduce uncertainties that are contributing to US–Russia and US–China strategic competition. In addition, this dialogue could be extended to include joint exploration within the P5 process of each State’s perceptions of stabilizing and destabilizing military activities more generally. Such exchanges could help each of the participants better understand how given actions on their part might be misperceived in peacetime, crisis, or confrontation. That understanding could shape national decision-making, whether providing logic for unilateral restraint or encouraging thinking about how to use formal or informal arms control means to cooperatively regulate strategic interactions.

[military-leaders-signagreement-to-increase-communication/](#); “Memorandum of Understanding Between the United States of American Department of Defense and the People’s Republic of China Ministry of Defense on Notification of Major Military Activities Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism”, 31 October and 4 November 2014, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=759701>.

¹⁵ US Department of Defense, “Military Crisis Notification Mechanism for Use of the Defense Telephone Link,” 24 September 2015, <https://china.usc.edu/departement-defense-military-crisis-notification-mechanism-use-defensetelephone-link-september-24>.

¹⁶ See B. Glaser, “A Step Forward in US-China Military Ties: Two CBM Agreements”, 11 November 2014, <https://amti.csis.org/us-china-cbms-stability-maritime-asia/>.

¹⁷ See US Department of State, “U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue”, press release, 9 November 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/11/287282.htm>.

¹⁸ On the most recent P5 meeting in January 2019 in Beijing and plans for the future, see Amb. Li Song, “Briefing on P5 Beijing Conference”, presented to Conference on Disarmament, 5 February 2019, [https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/\(httpAssets\)/2A29BA6AFFA30F6CC125839B0051305C/\\$file/China_for+weBSITE.pdf](https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/(httpAssets)/2A29BA6AFFA30F6CC125839B0051305C/$file/China_for+weBSITE.pdf).

Building on these more focused discussions, the P5 process could be broadened and strengthened by in-depth discussions of nuclear risk reduction. In particular, the NPT NWS could exchange views on how the use of nuclear weapons could come about by accident, miscalculation, or intention, and on actions that they could take unilaterally, bilaterally, and jointly to prevent any such use of a nuclear weapon. Despite past reluctance to address this topic, there appears greater readiness to do so now.¹⁹ The interests of the NWS would be served by addressing risk reduction. Any use of nuclear weapons would directly and indirectly impact the NWS. In addition, by addressing this issue, the P5 would respond to the strong concern among NNWS about the increasing risk of use of nuclear weapons. That concern provided momentum to negotiation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and amplifies uneasiness that the NPT cannot deliver on its nuclear disarmament promise.²⁰

In turn, the NPT NWS could explore the elements of a 'code of nuclear responsibilities'.²¹ In doing so, it would be important to find ways also to seek out the views of NNWS on those responsibilities perhaps in the context of the 2020 NPT Review Conference. Though many NNWS view possession of nuclear weapons as inherently irresponsible, they too have an important stake in the NWS acting as prudent caretakers of the most destructive weapons yet invented pending their ultimate elimination.

A first step within the P5 process and in parallel between NWS and NNWS would be to explore possible principles that should govern the behaviour and responsibilities of NWS. Any such discussion would need to take place within the context of reaffirming their commitment to revitalizing the nuclear disarmament process and sustaining robust non-proliferation practices and institutions, including the NPT. Principles could deal respectively with nuclear

¹⁹ This judgment reflects statements made by P5 representatives in recent NPT-related workshops.

²⁰ On these concerns about nuclear risk, frustration at the lack of nuclear disarmament progress, and creating the environment that contributed to negotiation of the TPNW, see A. Kmentt, "The Development of the International Initiative on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons and Its Effect on the Nuclear Weapons Debate", *International Review of the Red Cross*, no. 899; Statement by Amb. A. Marschik of Austria at the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, 27 March 2017, <http://statements.unmeetings.org/media2/14683246/austria.pdf>.

²¹ Variants of this idea have increasingly been put forward in recent years. For an earlier discussion on my part, see L.A. Dunn "After the Prohibition Treaty: A Practical Agenda to Reduce Nuclear Dangers", *Arms Control Today*, vol. 47, no. 6, 2017, p. 1. See also S. Brixey-Williams and P. Ingram, *Responsible Nuclear Sovereignty and the Future of the Global Nuclear Order*, 2017, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/governmentsociety/iccs/research/2017/brixey-williams-ingram-responsible-nuclear-sovereignty-report.pdf>; P. Schulte, "The UK, France and the Nuclear Ban Treaty", in S. Shetty and D. Raynova (eds), *Breakthrough or Breakpoint? Global Perspectives on the Nuclear Ban Treaty*, pp. 23–24, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/12/ELN-Global-Perspectives-on-the-Nuclear-Ban-Treaty-December-2017.pdf>; and J. Gower, "Improving Nuclear Strategic Stability Through a Responsibility-Based Approach", Council on Strategic Risks, 7 January 2019, <https://councilonstrategicrisk.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/improving-nuclear-strategic-stability-through-a-responsibility-based-approach-briefer-1-2019-01-7.pdf>. I am indebted to Paul Ingram for emphasizing to me the importance of couching any such discussion in terms of the 'responsibilities' of the NWS.

postures and deployments; operational practices; nuclear doctrine and declaratory policy; strategic dialogue and strengthening mutual understanding; crisis and conflict avoidance; avoiding destabilizing actions and exercising strategic and operational restraint; lessening the risk of strategic competition, miscalculation, and escalation; and ensuring the safety and security of nuclear weapon materials and weapons. The next step would be to identify specific undertakings, behaviours, and approaches consistent with those principles, and to commit to them. Here, too, the very engagement among the P5 on the elements of a code of nuclear responsibilities would be valuable for insights into each other's policies, postures, and behaviour.

Both of the preceding initiatives, moreover, could provide a way for the NPT NWS to pursue a broader dialogue with non-NPT NWS. Though controversial, such a dialogue will be necessary at some point to reduce global nuclear dangers.

Take advantage of the just-proposed “Creating the Environment Working Group”

At the 2018 Preparatory Committee Meeting for the 2020 NPT Review Conference, the United States proposed establishment of what it then termed a multilateral ‘Creating the Conditions Working Group’ for nuclear disarmament. In March 2019, Christopher Ford, Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, provided some additional thinking on this US initiative. Responding to concerns from NNWS that an emphasis on ‘creating conditions’ could be seen as requiring that a full set of conditions had to be in place before there could be further disarmament progress, the United States renamed the initiative the ‘Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament’ (CEND). It also emphasized that the purpose of the initiative is “bringing [States] together in a constructive dialogue exploring ways in which it might be possible to ameliorate conditions in the global security environment so as to make that environment more conducive to further progress toward—and indeed, ultimately to achieve—nuclear disarmament”. A “geographically and politically diverse group of participants” is being sought. As envisaged, the CEND Working Group would include subgroups to address particular topics from diverse perspectives.²²

In an earlier address on the importance of focusing on the conditions for nuclear disarmament, Ford had pointed to the language of the preamble of the NPT which highlights the importance of “the easing of international tension and the strengthening of trust between States” as an enabler of nuclear disarmament.²³ There can be no doubt that one of the conditions for nuclear disarmament

²² See C.A. Ford, “Our Vision for a Constructive, Collaborative Disarmament Discourse”, remarks at the Conference on Disarmament, 26 March 2019, <https://www.state.gov/t/isn/rls/rm/2019/290676.htm>.

²³ See C.A. Ford, “Creating the Conditions for Nuclear Disarmament: A New Approach”, remarks at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies Nonproliferation Workshop, Annecy, France, 17 March 2018, <https://www.state.gov/t/isn/rls/rm/2018/279386.htm>.

progress today is to find ways to ease the international tensions and lack of trust that exists between Washington and Moscow and Washington and Beijing. For that reason, it would be very appropriate that participants in this Working Group decide that one focus of it should be how to address that central problem. Specific approaches to consider could include any of the ideas put forward in this paper. Ways to alleviate the more fundamental political clashes of interest also would need to be considered. At the same time, the readiness of all five of the NPT NWS to participate in this new Working Group would again help to signal their commitment to alleviating great power competition as a stepping stone toward nuclear disarmament.²⁴

Use the NPT Review Process to pursue great power transparency and confidence-building measures

Action 5(g) of the 2010 Action Plan calls on the NWS to “[f]urther enhance transparency and increase mutual confidence”.²⁵ Action 19 includes reference to “increasing confidence, improving transparency.”²⁶ In each case, no specifics are provided. Carrying forward this call, the Review Process could be used to foster agreement on a set of focused NWS transparency and confidence-building measures to lessen competitive pressures and reduce associated risks.²⁷

At the upcoming April–May 2019 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, concerned States could highlight the importance of identifying specific transparency and confidence-building measures to implement the Action Plan call and propose that doing so should be a priority for discussion at the 2020 Review Conference. To facilitate that discussion, the Parties also could consider setting aside time dedicated to debating this topic as well as other agreed high-priority issues—in effect, creating a new form of so-called Specific Time at the Review Conference. A decision to do so would follow and extend the precedent of Specific Time in the Preparatory Committee meetings.

At the Review Conference, the Parties then could explore baskets of possible NWS transparency and confidence-building measures that would contribute to reducing competitive pressures. One such basket could be transparency and predictability measures that could help lessen existing uncertainties about the characteristics and scope of NWS strategic modernization programmes. Another

²⁴ For a more skeptical view of the CEND initiative, see P. Meyer, “Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament: Striding Forward or Stepping Back?”, *Arms Control Today*, April 2019, pp. 6–11.

²⁵ See 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Final Document, NPT/CONF.2010/50 (Vol 1), p. 21, [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2010/50%20\(VOL.I\)](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=NPT/CONF.2010/50%20(VOL.I)).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁷ For an earlier UNIDIR report on how the reporting provisions in New START could be used in support of a more comprehensive transparency regime encompassing more than the United States and Russia, see T. Patton, P. Podvig, and P. Schell, *A New START Model for Transparency in Nuclear Disarmament*, UNIDIR, 2013. This type of ‘informal’ regime also could take on increased importance for regulating US–Russia bilateral strategic relations if New START is not extended.

basket could be agreed rules of the road on potentially destabilizing military activities in peacetime, crisis, or conflict, including cyber and space activities. Still another basket could comprise political statements.

Across the baskets, there are many possible ideas for transparency and confidence-building measures. Some examples would be annual exchanges of data on plans and programmes, notifications of deployments, and declared unilateral ceilings on deployments of certain systems (basket 1—transparency and predictability); no peacetime cyber probing of nuclear command and control/warning infrastructure, no proximate manoeuvres near space-based satellites, and no first attacks on strategic assets (basket 2—rules of the road); and reaffirmations of the principle of non-interference in the political affairs of other States, the principle that international legally recognized borders are not to be changed by force, and that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought (basket 3—political statements).

At best, the goal would be to identify at the Review Conference a menu of more specific, focused measures that the NPT NWS would be encouraged to explore further, reach agreement on the most practical of them, and then implement. The NWS also could be called on to report what measures they had agreed to implement to the 2022 Preparatory Committee meeting for the 2025 Review Conference as well as to report on their implementation at successive Preparatory Committee meetings and at the 2025 Review Conference. At the least, this type of discussion would focus attention on the concept of great power transparency- and confidence-building measures and provide a push for bilateral exchanges or discussions with the P5 process.

Give diplomacy yet another chance

Virtually all of the preceding actions, however, do not address the underlying political tensions, fears, and clashing ambitions and interests in which today's intensified great power competition involving Washington, Moscow, and Beijing ultimately is rooted. Instead, these actions seek to signal intentions; lessen competitive pressures by reducing uncertainties and misperceptions as well as by sustaining or pursuing more cooperative ways of regulating military plans, programmes, deployments and activities; and avoid miscalculation, especially in crisis or confrontation. They all are very important; but they also only can contribute at the margins to alleviating the more fundamental drivers by beginning to rebuild a modicum of trust and habits of cooperation. This limitation needs to be acknowledged. More importantly, it points to the importance of giving diplomacy yet another chance.

The more specific axes of regional and global confrontation that renewed diplomatic efforts would seek to alleviate, if not resolve, in the US–Russia and the US–China relationships are well known. Taken together, however, they now comprise a larger and even more complex web of geopolitical/ economic;

historical, psychological, and personal; and internal political interactions that will be very difficult to unravel. In addition, renewing such diplomatic efforts is likely to be impeded by calculations of payoffs and risks on the part of each of the three protagonists as well as, in differing degrees, by internal political constraints. Nonetheless, as with the pathways already discussed, the argument for giving diplomacy yet another chance is that for Washington, Moscow, and Beijing a failure to do so will be increasingly dangerous. It will bring with it steadily growing risks of confrontation, crisis, and even conflict, all under the nuclear shadow.

Use the Secretary-General's authorities and good offices

Confronting today's slide towards intensified great power competition and the end of the arms control endeavour—and the obstacles to renewed diplomacy to attempt to address that slide's underlying roots—the Secretary-General could exercise his authority under article 99 of the Charter of the United Nations to “bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security”.²⁸ Given the stakes described at the beginning of this paper, a strong case can be made that if there is not today an imminent threat to the maintenance of international peace and security there could well be one if the current slide is not reversed.

On several occasions over the past two decades, the Security Council has met to discuss nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament. The most recent session was convened by the then Security Council President Christoph Heusgen (Germany) and took place on 2 April 2019.²⁹ This meeting included briefings by Izumi Nakamitsu, the Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, and by Yukia Amano, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, as well as a general exchange of views among Security Council members. Following it, the Council President issued a statement that reaffirmed the members “commitment to advance the goals of the NPT” and “expressed their readiness to work together and to join efforts to achieve a successful outcome at the 2020 NPT Review Conference”.²⁹

A session convened by the Secretary-General, however, would be different. It would be based on his authorities under article 99 of the Charter of the United Nations. It would be explicitly linked to the threat to international peace and security inherent in today's slide to intensified great power competition and the breakdown of the arms control endeavour. It would focus explicitly on how to

²⁸ See Charter of the United Nations, art. 99, <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-xv/index.html>.

²⁹ See “New Approach Crucial for Eliminating Atomic Bombs, Speakers Tell Security Council, Warning Dangerous Rhetoric about Nuclear Weapons Use Is Eroding Disarmament Gains”, United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, UN document SC/13761, 2 April 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13761.doc.htm>.²⁹ “Security Council Press Statement in Support of Non-Proliferation Treaty”, UN document SC/13762-DC/3799, 2 April 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13762.doc.htm>.

reverse that slide. Its impact on the three protagonists, as explored below, could be considerably greater.

Historically, the Secretary-General has explicitly invoked article 99 on only three occasions: during the chaos in the Congo in 1960, in 1979 during the hostage crisis in Tehran, and in 1989 during the civil war in Lebanon.³⁰ Implicit references by the Secretary-General to article 99 have been relatively rare. More frequently, the Secretary-General has used informal means to bring an issue of great concern to the attention of the Security Council. Bringing the matter of great power competition and the end of the arms control endeavour to the Council's attention—whether by invoking article 99, with implied reference to it, or more informally—could have symbolic, political, and substantive payoffs, notwithstanding the fact that the principal protagonists are Permanent Members of the Council.

Symbolically, long historic experience repeatedly demonstrates that it often takes some type of shock to focus the great powers' attention on a serious problem and to induce them to cooperate to address it. A decision by the Secretary-General to invoke article 99 or perhaps even a strong reference to it would be such a shock. Politically, there are reasons to believe that it could be easier for Washington, Moscow, and Beijing to step back, look at the paths that they each are on, and begin to pursue bilateral efforts to reduce competitive pressures if triggered by such action by the Secretary-General. Substantively, the prospect of Security Council deliberation focused directly on the dangers of ever-more intense great power competition and a breakdown of the arms control endeavour would force the respective leaders (and their governments) to address the question with which this paper began—will their State's respective interests truly be served by that future. This more focused Council deliberation also would provide a forcing event for their respective bureaucracies to think about ways to reverse that slide. In turn, the outcome from a Council meeting could be an agreed statement that would signal the protagonists' commitment to achieve a different outcome as well as to identify and implement transparency and confidence-building action to begin the process of doing so.

Granted that invoking or referencing article 99 may be set aside as 'too unprecedented'. Nonetheless, there are other ways that the Secretary-General could continue to use his good offices and authorities. With support from the Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, the Secretary-General could convene a series of focused meetings of experts to

³⁰ See "Repertory of Practice of United Nations Organs", updated 23 August 2016, <http://legal.un.org/repertory/art99.shtml>; M. Roberts, "Could the Rohingya Crisis be a Turning Point for Guterres?", Council on Foreign Relations, 26 September 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/could-rohingya-crisis-be-turning-pointguterres>; A.W. Dorn, "Early and Late Warning by the UN Secretary-General of Threats to the Peace: Article 99 Revisited", 2000, http://www.ismor.com/cornwallis/cornwallis_2000/CV_30_Dorn.pdf.

develop great power confidence- and trust-building measures. These meetings' purpose would be to move thinking forward in this area. The results could be introduced into specific bilateral and multilateral conversations, including those suggested above, as well as the 2020 NPT Review Conference.

A more targeted approach would bring together respectively only US and Russian and US and Chinese senior-level retired officials, military, and experts. In the US–Russian context, the purpose would be to carry out the type of senior assessments of what could comprise a comprehensive bilateral US–Russian arms control regime, or even to consider 'last chance' options to resolve today's INF dispute. For the US–China context, participants would explore less formal US–China mutual strategic predictability, reassurance, and restraint measures. Convening such groups under the auspices of the Secretary-General would avoid the need for one or another of the protagonists to take the initiative (and risk rejection or seeming weakness). It also could help the protagonists to overcome the political resistance that undoubtedly would impede bilateral engagement of this sort, not least in the United States.

CONCLUSION

The slide already is well underway toward intensified great power competition as well as on the one hand, the breakdown of over five decades of US–Soviet/Russian arms control, and on the other hand, the end of efforts to put in place a more informal process of US–China strategic predictability, reassurance, and restraint. There are many reasons to judge that such an outcome will undermine, not advance, the security interests of Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. It also is not in the interests of their allies, friends, and concerned States, of a robust NPT, and of international peace and security most broadly.

Faced with this danger, Washington, Moscow, and Beijing need individually and together to step back to ask if that increasingly competitive and dangerous future is the outcome they want—and if not, to begin to explore and pursue pathways that could help them achieve a different, more cooperative future. Different possible pathways have been sketched in this food-for-thought paper. Readers may suggest still other possibilities. All of these pathways cannot be pursued at once and some of them undoubtedly will prove more attractive than others to the three protagonists. What counts most is to begin talking about and then taking actions to reverse today's slide. Success will in turn reopen other possibilities to revitalize pursuit of a longer-term vision of nuclear disarmament.



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