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Arms Control in a Time of Mistrust: Unilateral Initiatives

SARAH BIDGOOD · JAMES REVILL

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Notes

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Cover photo: President Reagan and Vice-President Bush of the United States meet with Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev on Governor's Island, New York, 7 December 1988. Public domain.

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Executive Summary

Arms control and disarmament measures are increasingly under strain in a tense geopolitical climate, characterized by the collapse of key agreements and the stagnation of existing processes across multiple domains. Reversing this downward spiral will require bold leadership and innovative approaches.

Unilateral initiatives—measures undertaken by a single State, or a collective of States, to reduce or eliminate weapons arsenals without necessarily demanding reciprocal action—could offer a viable path to reinvigorating multilateral arms control and disarmament efforts. These initiatives can take diverse forms and serve a broad range of objectives. While often met with scepticism and typically lacking cooperative monitoring mechanisms, unilateral measures nonetheless offer distinct advantages. They are typically more flexible than treaties or other agreements, can be implemented swiftly, and may serve as catalytic tools to overcome the stagnation in current processes and begin to rebuild trust and habits of cooperation.

This study examines the potential of unilateral initiatives to reinvigorate arms control and disarmament efforts in a time of mistrust. It draws on three historical case studies—Mikhail Gorbachev's 1985 unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, the 1991 Presidential nuclear initiatives, and the 1969 renunciation of biological weapons by the United States—to identify key factors that influenced the success or failure of these efforts.

While analyzing just three examples of US and Soviet unilateral initiatives limits the generalizability of findings, it does enable the development of some general hypotheses about when States pursue such initiatives and to what ends. The analysis suggest that States often initiate unilateral measures not just to accelerate formal arms control processes but also in response to challenges that require immediate solutions or where joint action is, for the moment, infeasible—for example specific security concerns that must be addressed quickly, leaving no time for drawn out negotiations, or where domestic pressure to take action is particularly high. Unilateral initiatives may also be necessary in scenarios where the trust deficit between adversaries is so significant that collaboration even in areas of shared interest is out of reach. Even when this is the case, however, these measures can still elicit reciprocation or form the basis for formal agreements—although these outcomes may be delayed or non-linear.

The degree to which unilateral initiatives succeed in the above is strongly influenced by a number of interrelated factors, including whether the initiating State is perceived to have a genuine interest in arms control or disarmament; the state of weapons development at the time; the extent of domestic public or political pressure (or support for an initiative); the domestic economic context; and the nature of the broader geopolitical environment. These findings suggest that States which are considering unilateral arms control measures today should think carefully about how they signal these initiatives and when to do so. As the historical record shows, these considerations are likely to have an outsized bearing on the effect of any unilateral initiative.

More recent efforts, such as the Russian Federation's declared 2019 moratorium on deploying intermediate-range missiles, show that unilateral disarmament initiatives are hardly a thing of the past. Yet in the current geopolitical environment, at least in the nuclear domain, they may be less likely to be reciprocated in part given that nuclear armed States are modernizing—and in some cases growing—their strategic arsenals. In the medium term, however, there will come a point where financial and political support for such processes plateau. When this occurs, new opportunities may arise for States to redress the erosion of arms control and disarmament measures. In this context, unilateral nuclear initiatives could prove valuable for beginning to reestablish mutual confidence and trust, laying the groundwork for subsequent substantive activities and kickstarting the reconstruction of nuclear arms control and disarmament initiatives.

Some such windows may already be open in other domains, such as space or biological weapons, where there is currently interest in developing new measures to prevent arms racing and enhance compliance and verification respectively. For States that may seek to pursue their own unilateral disarmament initiatives in these other domains, either now or in the future, the historical cases examined here point to several 'good practices' that may increase their chances of success, depending on what they hope to achieve.

- To **rebuild confidence and trust among rivals**
    - Signal or discuss unilateral initiatives privately with relevant interlocutors before announcing them publicly to reduce the risk that they will be disregarded as propaganda stunts.
    - Pursue multiple pathways for trust-building simultaneously and, potentially, time unilateral measures for a moment when they can have the maximum impact and resonance among adversarial interlocutors.
- To **increase the likelihood of reciprocation**
    - Initiate unilateral measures when the initiating State and its target audience are at similar stages of military modernization.
    - Undertake unilateral measures that are difficult to reverse and sufficiently costly to demonstrate genuine interest in disarmament/arms control.
    - Build on existing arms control successes with new unilateral initiatives for 'quick wins'.
- To **facilitate achieving new agreements**
    - Provide detail and clarity on the scope and limits of any unilateral initiative.
    - Publicly demonstrate the subsequent fulfilment of a unilateral initiative irrespective of whether or not it is reciprocated (or believed).
    - Link any such unilateral initiative with wider arms control and disarmament negotiations under discussion through outlining future negotiating positions and encouraging other States to follow suit.
    - Subsequently ensure advanced preparations for possible future negotiations.

There is a range of potential unilateral initiatives that could be undertaken, some of which may not require major changes to existing practices. Participants in a recent UNIDIR workshop on unilateral initiatives linked with this paper provided a number of examples in their individual capacities, which are outlined in greater depth in the annex to this study and summarized below.

One example, elaborated by Sarah Erickson, highlights how voluntary national commitments not to conduct destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite tests can serve as a form of unilateral restraint and provide a foundation for renewed cooperation. Erickson further argues that such an initiative can be reinforced through a combination of further United Nations resolutions, regular reporting, sor voluntary information-exchange in order to "strengthen perceptions of permanence and transparency, transforming isolated acts of restraint into enduring components of multilateral practice".

In another example, Dmitry Stefanovich suggests that even those unilateral measures that eventually fail, mostly because of lack of reciprocity, still can have stabilizing, positive effects for a certain period. One example is the so-called Russian 'Post-INF Moratorium' on deployment of ground-launched missiles of the relevant ranges, which is already history as of the time of writing. Nevertheless, he argues that it did contribute to a somewhat slowed down pace of the arms race on the European continent. Stefanovich further notes that at the time of writing in March 2026, the Russian "Post-New START initiative" not to exceed the ceilings on strategic weapons numbers as defined by the Treaty for at least one year beyond its expiration in February 2026 still appears to be observed to some extent despite the expiration of the treaty.

In her contribution, Rabia Akhtar highlights that the reality of unilateral initiatives reveals both the possibilities and the limits of unilateralism beyond the Cold War superpower context. Drawing on the India–Pakistan experience, she argues that unilateral steps might not always serve as bridges toward negotiated arrangements. Instead, their stabilizing value lies in buying time, creating pockets of predictability, and signaling non-escalatory intent during periods of heightened uncertainty.

Tong Zhao's contribution on Making Unilateral Arms Control Measures Matter suggests that the opportunity costs of accelerating military competition will only become clear when the international community forces itself to imagine alternatives—and holds leading powers accountable for their visions of international security. Zhao also calls for more meaningful engagement, urging policymakers to ask the right questions and seek clarification. In this regard, he proposes that "rather than brushing aside China's no-first-use (NFU) of nuclear weapons proposal, it would be more productive to engage Beijing on the core questions that determine NFU credibility".

Chris Park discusses how unilateral initiatives that enable, among other things, greater transparency around biodefence and classified life science research and development could potentially reduce levels of concern related to the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention and the wider biosecurity regime. Such steps would be low risk and need not be negotiated, although their value would increase if similar measures were taken by a group of countries.

Introduction

Arms control and disarmament measures are increasingly under strain in a tense geopolitical climate marked by the collapse of key agreements. This erosion is occurring at a time when the risk posed by weapons of mass destruction is higher than at any point since the cold war.—and continues to grow. The risk of escalation is being exacerbated by rapid technological advances and a breakdown in dialogue and mutual understanding, particularly between nuclear-armed adversaries.

This is not the first time the world has faced such turmoil. Periods during the cold war also witnessed rapid technological change, rising tensions, and a breakdown in dialogue. However, over the course of the conflict—as well as during the ensuing post–cold war peace of the early 1990s—there was a recognition of the role that arms control and disarmament measures could play in regulating or proscribing strategic weapons (i.e., biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons) and managing adversarial strategic relations.

The arms control and disarmament measures that facilitated the management of these relationships do not simply grow on trees; they require someone to show leadership and unilaterally take the initiative in addressing an issue area. To be sure, however, there is no guarantee that such results will elicit a reciprocal response. Whether this occurs or not depends on several factors, including geopolitical and domestic contexts—such as bureaucratic structures and political dynamics—the nature of the unilateral proposal, and the signaling process through which it is communicated.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of unilateral measures in advancing arms control and disarmament. The study begins with an overview of the concept of unilateral initiatives before proceeding to demonstrate the potential and limitations of such initiatives through three case studies:

1. Gorbachev's 1985 unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing;
2. The 1991 Presidential nuclear initiatives;
3. The 1969 renunciation of biological weapons by the United States.

The study then reflects on both the potential and limitations of unilateral initiatives in stimulating arms control and disarmament efforts in the current climate, before concluding with some food for thought among those seeking to revitalize arms control and disarmament and begin to rebuild trust between States in the future.

Defining Unilateral Initiatives

Unilateral initiatives, in the context of this study, refer to measures undertaken by a single State—or a collective of States—to reduce or eliminate weapons arsenals without necessarily demanding reciprocal action from other States. These initiatives can take various forms—declaratory or operational, temporary or enduring, promissory or renunciatory.[1] They may serve a wide range of objectives: alleviating domestic or international pressure, exerting pressure on adversaries, reducing defence expenditures, building domestic political legacies, facilitating stability, creating a "legally binding and international fait accompli",[2] preserving existing arms control or disarmament achievements absent formal treaties and agreements, or laying the groundwork for broader structural changes in bilateral, plurilateral, or multilateral relations.

Indeed, unilateral initiatives have played an important role in several past arms control and disarmament agreements covering nuclear, biological, and space systems. As much is reflected in the Final Document of the first special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament, which recognizes that "Unilateral measures of arms limitation or reduction could also contribute to the attainment of … favourable conditions for success in the disarmament process".[3]

There are several advantages and disadvantages to unilateral initiatives. On the one hand, such initiatives can offer a shortcut to what is often a lengthy and tedious negotiation process. They provide speed in both decision-making and implementation,[4] and offer flexibility that can, "spur on the course of negotiations by attempts to solve the problems and remove the obstacles lying in their way".[5] In particular, parallel unilateral initiatives can enable States with dissimilar capabilities or practices to cooperate on disarmament, as each State can tailor the measures they pursue to their specific circumstances.[6] Indeed, even when initiatives are undertaken entirely on the basis of self-interest, they can still positively affect relations among States.[7]

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1 Ednan Agaev, "Unilateral Disarmament and International Security", in *Disarmament and Limitation of Armaments: Unilateral Measures and Policies*, ed. Serge Sur (UNIDIR, 1992), https://unidir.org/files/publication/pdfs/disarmament-and-limitation-of-armaments-en-425.pdf

2 Adam Daniel Rotfeld, "Communication", in *Disarmament and Limitation of Armaments: Unilateral Measures and Policies*, ed. Serge Sur (UNIDIR, 1992), 73, https://unidir.org/files/publication/pdfs/disarmament-and-limitation-of-armaments-en-425.pdf

3 General Assembly, "Final Document of the Tenth Special Session of the General Assembly", A/RES/S-10/2,30 June 1978. https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/S-10/2

4 Amy F. Woolf, *Arms Control and Strategic Nuclear Weapons: Unilateral vs. Bilateral Reductions* (US Congressional Research Service, 2001).

5 Serge Sur, "Introduction", in *Disarmament and Limitation of Armaments: Unilateral Measures and Policies*, ed. Serge Sur (UNIDIR, 1992), 18, https://unidir.org/files/publication/pdfs/disarmament-and-limitation-of-armaments-en-425.pdf

6 Sarah Bidgood, "Just GRIT and Bear It: A Cold War Approach to Future US-Russia Arms Control", *The International Spectator*, 56, no. 1 (2021): 11–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1861723

7 Franklin A. Long, "Unilateral Initiatives and Reciprocal Responses for Arms Control and Disarmament", in *Coexistence, Cooperation and Common Security: Annals of Pugwash 1986*, eds. Joseph Rotblat and Laszlo Valki (Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 71–78.

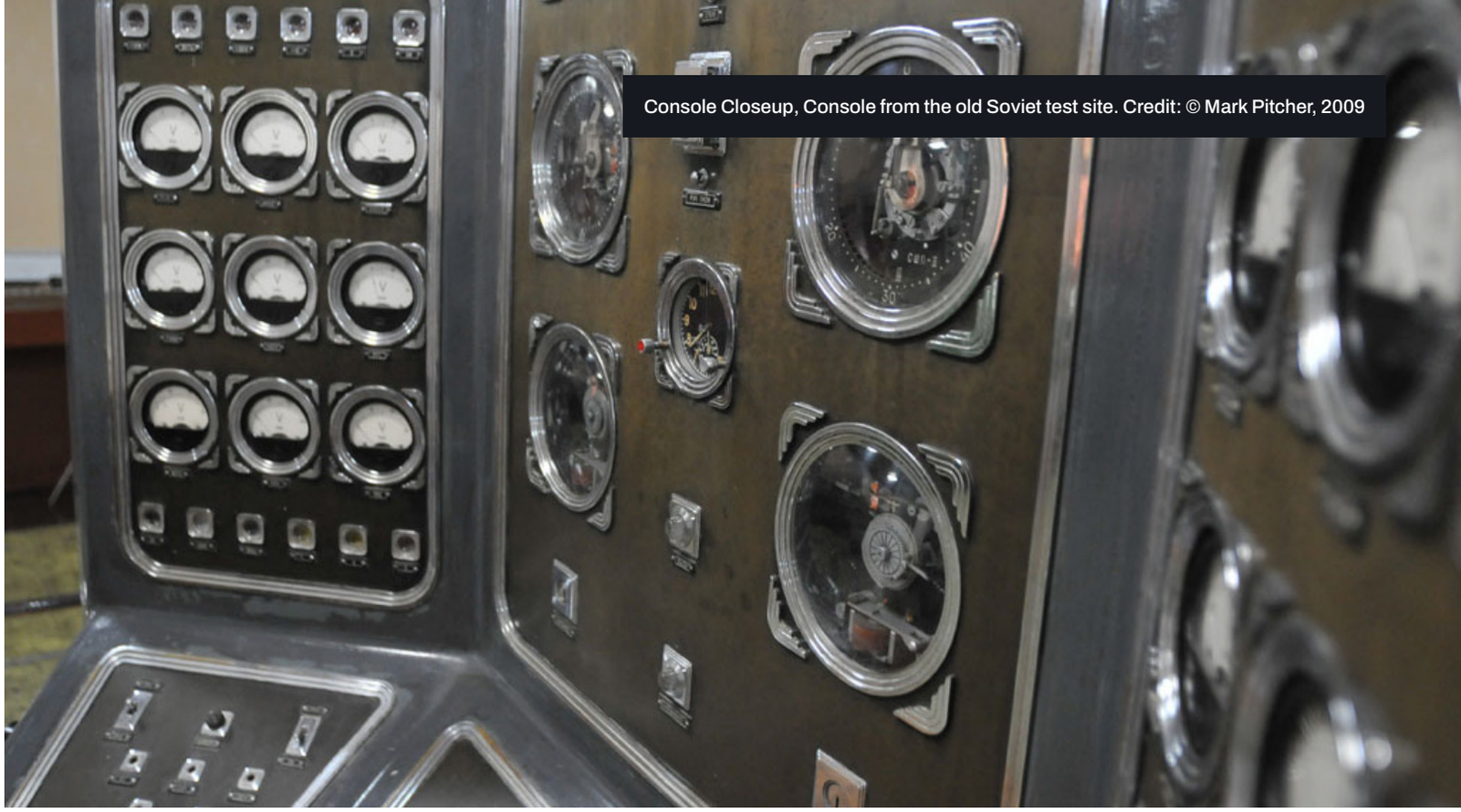
On the other hand, unilateral measures also come with notable drawbacks and can be met with a "mixture of disdain and distrust".[8] First, there is no guarantee of reciprocity on the part of adversarial States if this is indeed the goal; historically, several proposals have been dismissed as propagandistic efforts to "delude world public opinion".[9] Second, such measures typically lack agreed verification mechanisms or cooperative monitoring arrangements, relying instead on national technical means employed by other States—though this does not preclude the possibility of 'demonstrative verification' by the initiating party.[10] Finally, the very flexibility that makes unilateral measures attractive can also be a liability, as it introduces the risk of a destabilizing reversal in policy.

Yet despite their limitations, in situations where traditional approaches to arms control and disarmament—typically involving the negotiation of legally binding treaties—are stalled, alternative methods to reinvigorate progress in this domain merit further consideration.

8 Serge Sur, "Introduction", in *Disarmament and Limitation of Armaments: Unilateral Measures and Policies*, ed. Serge Sur (UNIDIR, 1992), 1, https://unidir.org/files/publication/pdfs/disarmament-and-limitation-of-armaments-en-425.pdf

9 Agaev, "Unilateral Disarmament and International Security", 23.

10 Tamara Patton and Pavel Podvig, *Verification Without a Treaty: Demonstrative Verification in Arms Control, Disarmament, and Space Security* (UNIDIR, 2025), https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/25/NDV/01



Console Closeup, Console from the old Soviet test site. Credit: © Mark Pitcher, 2009

Case 1: 1985 Unilateral Moratorium on Nuclear Testing

The Measure

On 10 June 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev wrote a letter to US President Ronald Reagan in which he highlighted the importance of ceasing all nuclear weapons tests and proposed adopting a moratorium on any nuclear detonations "as soon as possible."[11] The following month, on 28 July, the Soviet leader declared a unilateral moratorium on testing that would extend from 6 August through 1 January 1986—and "even longer if the United States, on its part, refrains from conducting nuclear explosions".[12] While not the only such moratorium in the history of US–Soviet relations, Gorbachev's was the first in

11 "Letter From Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev to President Reagan", 10 June 1985, attached to "Memorandum From Secretary of State Shultz to President Reagan", 12 June 1985, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 41, 145, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d41

12 "Action Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs (Ridgway) to Secretary of State Shultz", Undated, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 68, 257, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d68

the more than two decades since the conclusion of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963.[13] The Soviet leader subsequently renewed this moratorium several more times[14]—in January 1986 in the context of a sweeping proposal for the elimination of nuclear weapons by the year 2000,[15] in May 1986[16], in August 1986,[17] and once again in January 1987[18]—upholding it until the United States tested in February of that year.[19]

The Response

The Reagan administration did not reciprocate Gorbachev's unilateral moratorium. During the 19-month period in which the Soviet Union abstained from nuclear testing, the United States conducted more than 20 nuclear tests.[20] The United States did, however, issue a counteroffer: for "a Soviet team to observe and measure a nuclear test at our Nevada test site".[21] Yet, while the two sides did ultimately conduct reciprocal test site visits in January 1988, followed by the first Joint Verification Experiment later that year, these developments occurred after the Soviet test moratorium had ended.[22]

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13 Arms Control Association, "Nuclear Testing and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) Timeline", Arms Control Association, April 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-testing-and-comprehensive-test-ban-treaty-ctbt-timeline

14 Timothy Pounds, "A Chronology of Comprehensive Test Ban Proposals, Negotiations, and Debates: 1945-1993" (SAIC, January 1994), https://www.osti.gov/servlets/purl/10121895

15 "Letter From Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev to President Reagan", 14 January 1985, attached to "Memorandum From Secretary of State Shultz to President Reagan", January 15, 1986, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 177, 772-776, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d177

16 "Excerpts From Gorbachev's Speech on Chernobyl Accident", *New York Times* (1986), https://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/15/world/excerpts-from-gorbachev-s-speech-on-chernobyl-accident.html. Note that, although some sources do count this specific extension of the moratorium in discussions of Gorbachev's unilateral testing initiatives during this period, others do not. For examples, see Timothy Pounds, "A Chronology of Comprehensive Test Ban Proposals, Negotiations, and Debates: 1945-1993" (SAIC, January 1994), 25, https://www.osti.gov/servlets/purl/10121895 and Alan Collins, "GRIT, Gorbachev, and the End of the Cold War", *Review of International Studies*, 24, no. 2 (1998): 204.

17 US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *Documents on Disarmament 1986* (US Government Printing Office, 1991), 500, https://unoda-web.s3-accelerate.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/assets/publications/documents_on_disarmament/1986/DoD_1986.pdf

18 "Message Dated 8 January 1987 from Mr. Mikhail Gorbachev, Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, to Mr. Javier Perez de Cuellar, Secretary-General of the United Nations", IAEA INFCIRC/388, 23 January 1987, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/infcirc338.pdf

19 Alan Collins, "GRIT, Gorbachev, and the End of the Cold War", *Review of International Studies*, 24, no. 2 (1998): 204.

20 US Department of Energy Nevada Operations Office, *United States Nuclear Tests July 1945 through September 1992*, DOE/NV-209 Rev 15 (U.S. Department of Energy, 2000), 82, https://www.osti.gov/opennet/manhattan-project-history/publications/DOENuclearTests.pdf

21 This invitation followed from a proposal President Reagan had issued in his September 1984 address to the United Nations General Assembly for reciprocal test site visits; see *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald W. Reagan, 1984, Book II* (US Government Printing Office, 1987), 953.

22 Siegfried Hecker, *Doomed to Cooperate*, Vol. 1 (Bathtub Row Press, 2016), 91, 102.

Explanatory Factors and Conditions

Geostrategic Context

What was the broader context in which Gorbachev first announced his unilateral test moratorium, and what internal and external factors may have informed both it and the Reagan administration's response?

US–Soviet Relations

The broad geostrategic backdrop to both the announcement and the response was the slow warming of US–Soviet cold war Relations after a period of deep crisis. The latter half of 1983 had been dominated by heightened tensions and bellicose rhetoric from both sides, an increased fear of nuclear war, and the breakdown of bilateral negotiations on both intermediate-range nuclear forces[23] and strategic arms.[24] Beginning in the latter half of 1984, however, a series of modest efforts to restore relations and engage in arms control—including a meeting between Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko and Reagan in September—had brought new opportunities to enumerate and discuss perceived threats.[25] Although the cold war was very far from over, superpower relations appeared to be on an upward trajectory—a process that would accelerate under Gorbachev and his 'new thinking' about Soviet foreign policy.

Arms Control

With this turn in relations had also come the resumption of strategic arms control negotiations between the two sides. Following an exchange of letters between Reagan and Gorbachev's predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko,[26] the Nuclear and Space Talks officially opened in Geneva on 12 March 1985.[27] Yet although both Gorbachev[28] and Reagan[29] expressed their personal commitment

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23 Ronald Reagan, "Statement on Soviet Union Withdrawal From the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Negotiations", 23 November 1983, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/statement-soviet-union-withdrawal-intermediate-range-nuclear-force-negotiations

24 William Drozdiak, "Soviets Halt Strategic Arms Talks", *Washington Post*, 8 December 1983, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/12/09/soviets-halt-strategic-arms-talks/5ec90e4c-8b95-4be0-9265-1e622f706176

25 Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to Six Cold War Presidents* (University of Washington Press, 2001), 556; Douglas Brinkley, ed. The Reagan Diaries (Harper Perennial, 2009), 270.

26 "Letter from President Reagan to Soviet General Konstantin Chernenko", 16 November 1984, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume IV, Soviet Union, January 1983–March 1985*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2021), Document 308, 1109, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v04/d308; "Memorandum From Secretary of State Shultz to President Reagan," Undated, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume IV, Soviet Union, January 1983–March 1985*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2021), Document 310, 1117, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v04/d310

27 "Telegram From the Delegation at the Nuclear and Space Talks to the Department of State", 12 March 1985, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 4, 7, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d4

28 "Telegram From the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State", 14 March 1985, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 5, 12, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d5

29 "Letter From President Reagan to Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev", 11 March 1985, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 1, 2, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d1

to making the negotiations a success, progress towards reaching an agreement remained halting. Gorbachev's objective both in proposing a joint halt to testing and in announcing his subsequent unilateral moratorium, he explained in a September 1985 interview with *Time* magazine, was "to break the vicious circle and bring the process of arms limitation out of the dead end".[30]

Domestic Bureaucratic Factors

Soviet Domestic and Bureaucratic Factors

At the time that Gorbachev issued his proposals, he was also instituting significant bureaucratic changes at home that affected his ability to pursue his foreign and arms control policies. After taking office on 11 March 1985, he had introduced what Aleksander Savel'ev and Nikolai Detinov describe as significant improvements to the arms control decision-making process relating to both the specific individuals and agencies involved.[31] As part of this effort, Gorbachev increased the role of the so-called 'Big Five'—a commission composed of representatives from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, the Committee for State Security (KGB), and the Military Industrial Commission— in Soviet arms control policymaking.[32] He also replaced seasoned foreign policy officials with others whose vision more closely aligned with his own.[33]

One of the core elements of this new vision—which Gorbachev outlined in April 1985—was that "Confrontation is not an inherent defect in our relations [with the United States]". As he explained, "We regard the improvement of Soviet-American relations not only as extremely necessary but also as possible".[34] Another core element, as articulated in March 1985 by Anatoly Chernyaev, Deputy Director of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party and Gorbachev's close advisor, was that "Revolutionary approaches to [arms control] talks are needed".[35] By consolidating power through personnel changes and bureaucratic practices, Gorbachev ensured that he had the latitude to pursue new unilateral strategies to this end—whether or not the United States chose to reciprocate.

US Domestic and Bureaucratic Factors

Within the United States, meanwhile, no such radical bureaucratic changes were in the offing. On the contrary, Reagan was halfway through the first year of his second term when Gorbachev announced his moratorium. While there had been changes to his Cabinet when he began his second term,

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30 "An Interview with Mikhail Gorbachev: Candid Views about U.S.-Soviet Relations and His Goals for His People", *Time*, 9 September 1985, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,959753-2,00.html

31 Alexander Salav'ev and Nikolai Detinov, *The Big Five: Arms Control Decision-Making in the Soviet Union* (Praeger, 1995), 111.

32 Ibid., 20, 113.

33 A significant example is Andrey Gromyko's replacement with Eduard Shevardnadze. For a first-hand account, see Svetlana Savranskaya, ed., *The Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, 1985*, trans. Anna Melyakova (The National Security Archive, 2006), 67, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB192/Chernyaev_Diary_translation_1985.pdf

34 US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *Documents on Disarmament 1985* (US Government Printing Office, 1989), 246, https://unoda-web.s3-accelerate.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/assets/publications/documents_on_disarmament/1985/DoD_1985.pdf

35 Savranskaya, ed. *Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev*, 56.

most of the key defence, national security, and foreign policy personnel carried over.[36] Among these individuals, however, opinions varied over whether and how to engage with the Soviet Union on arms control, which Reagan's response to Gorbachev's moratorium announcement appears to reflect.[37]

Indeed, as Former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack Matlock recounts in his memoirs, many within the Reagan administration were sceptical of nuclear test moratoria that did not come with verification provisions—an attitude informed by their past experiences. Recalling that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had initiated one such moratorium in 1958 before abruptly returning to testing three years later, they were determined "never to be taken in again".[38] Reagan, for his part, appears to have perceived Gorbachev's moratorium to be largely a propaganda exercise,[39] but nevertheless sanctioned internal exploration of "other actions which the U.S. could propose to improve the nuclear testing limitations regime" in August 1985.[40] He ultimately concluded in December of that year, however, that "as long as the United States and its allies must rely on the vital contributions of nuclear weapons to underwrite security and deter aggression, we will have to conduct nuclear tests".[41] The focus of the administration would thus remain on seeking Soviet agreement in developing effective verification measures for the Threshold Test Ban Treaty and Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty, which had been concluded under Richard Nixon but had yet to be ratified. To this end, Reagan indicated that the administration's response to Gorbachev's moratorium should reiterate the United States' willingness to host Soviet experts at the Nevada test site and for bilateral discussions on verification issues.[42]

The State of Weapons Development

When Reagan reached this decision, the United States was in the midst of a nuclear modernization programme that had begun in 1981. In October of that year, the president announced the revival of the B-1 strategic bomber programme, which had been halted under Jimmy Carter, the planned deployment of the MX missile in existing silos, and the strengthening of the sea-based leg of the

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36 See, for instance, "White House Staff, 1981, 1989", Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/reagan-administration/white-house-staff-1981-1989

37 For examples see, "Talking Points for Secretary of State Shultz Prepared in the Department of State", Undated, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 2, 3, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d2; Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era* (Touchstone Books, 1992), 98–99; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, Kindle ed. (Simon & Schuster, 2011), location 9329.

38 Jack Matlock, Jr., *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (Random House, 2004), 157.

39 See Brinkley, ed. *The Reagan Diaries*, 320, 361–362; "USSR: Gorbachev's New Style on Arms Control", in Jack Matlock Files, Arms Control—USSR, Box 20, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, 1, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/digitallibrary/smof/nsc-europeanandsovietaffairs/matlock/box-020/40-351-7452065-020-014-2018.pdf

40 "Memorandum From President Reagan to Secretary of Defense Weinberger and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Vessey)", 14 August 1985, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 77, 310, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d77

41 *National Security Decision Directive 203, Nuclear Testing Limitation: Responding to the Soviet Proposal of December 5*, 23 December 1985, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd203.pdf

42 *National Security Decision Directive 203, Nuclear Testing Limitation: Responding to the Soviet Proposal of December 5*, 23 December 1985, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd203.pdf

nuclear triad to include the deployment of submarine-launched nuclear cruise missiles.[43] The Soviet Union, meanwhile, was continuing a strategic modernization programme of its own that had begun in the late 1970s. But by the time of Gorbachev's unilateral moratorium, this process had slowed significantly. Per Pavel Podvig, the Soviet Union initiated only one new programme during the 1980s: the R-36M2, or SS-18, missile.[44]

The staggered timing of these two modernization programmes appears to have influenced Reagan's interpretation of, and response to, Gorbachev's test moratorium proposal. As Nicholas Wheeler observes, against the backdrop of ongoing US efforts to develop a "new generation of highly accurate nuclear forces that could hold Soviet strategic weapons at risk",[45] this gesture was seen as a "cynical attempt to blunt US nuclear plans".[46] So, too, was the perception among some US policymakers that the Soviet Union had conducted an abnormally large number of nuclear tests just before the moratorium took effect, which seemed to suggest that Moscow would have less to lose in maintaining a test moratorium than Washington.[47] As Reagan informed reporters in August 1985, for instance, the Soviet Union had "finished their tests; they don't have any more to do [thus] asking us to make it mutual meant that we would then not be able to catch up to them".[48]

A related consideration that may also have influenced Reagan's response to Gorbachev's unilateral moratorium was the perception among some administration officials that it was intended to constrain the pursuit of the Strategic Defense Initiative.[49] For Reagan, this would have been unacceptable having established by September 1985 that he would not "trade [the Strategic Defense Initiative] off for some Soviet offer of weapons reduction".[50] While archival material outlining the genesis of Gorbachev's moratorium is slimmer, there are some indications that this was indeed part of Moscow's calculus. For instance, a document entitled 'Material on Nuclear-Space Arms in Preparation for the Meeting with R. Reagan' produced in anticipation of the 1986 Reykjavik summit, outlines how limits on nuclear testing could constrain US military advantages in areas such as directed energy weapons and so-called space-based strike systems.[51]

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43 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks and Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on the Announcement of the United States Strategic Weapons Program", Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Museum, 2 October 1981, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-and-question-and-answer-session-reporters-announcement-united-states. See also Pavel Podvig, *Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces* (MIT Press, 2001), 18.

44 Pavel Podvig, *Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces* (MIT Press, 2001), 18.

45 Nicholas Wheeler, *Trusting Enemies: Interpersonal Relationships in International Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 145.

46 Ibid., 146

47 "Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev Today Announced a Five-Month Moratorium…", *UPI, 29 July 1985:* https://www.upi.com/Archives/1985/07/29/Soviet-leader-Mikhail-Gorbachev-today-announced-a-five-month-moratorium/3654491457600/

48 US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *Documents on Disarmament 1985*, 468.

49 See, for example, "Memorandum From William Stearman of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (McFarlane)", 10 September 1985, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 81, 317–318, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d81

50 Brinkley, ed. *The Reagan Diaries*, 353.

51 David Holloway, "The Soviet Preparations for Reykjavik: Four Documents", in *Implications of the Reykjavik Summit on Its Twentieth Anniversary*, ed. Sidney D. Drell and George P. Shultz (Hoover Institution Press, 2007), 50, https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/0817948429_45.pdf

The Nature of the Signalling Process

The available evidence also suggests, however, that Reagan's response to Gorbachev's unilateral moratorium announcement may have been coloured by the way in which it was issued. The Soviet leader first alerted his American counterpart to the initiative through a private letter on 28 July 1985[52] before announcing it publicly the following day via a statement published by the news agency TASS and a broadcast on national television.[53] Within the US administration, the documentary record shows that this sequencing contributed to a widespread perception that Gorbachev's initiative was little more than a "grandstand call".[54] As Matlock later explained, this perception was because "it was announced to the public at the same time it was conveyed officially—typical Soviet procedure when no agreement is expected".[55]

In Moscow, meanwhile, the timing of Reagan's response seems to have created a similar perception. After receiving Gorbachev's letter but before the public announcement, the US administration mobilized to "get our proposal [for a Soviet visit to the Nevada test site] out immediately so we can announce it as a counter to the Soviet ploy".[56] Reagan issued this invitation to Gorbachev privately, and Principal Deputy Press Secretary Larry Speakes then repeated it for reporters at the White House the following day—just prior to Gorbachev's public announcement.[57] In response, as the *New York Times* reported, TASS dismissed the invitation as a deliberate distraction "from the United States' 'reluctance to reach agreement on the question of limiting testing and banning nuclear weapon tests'".[58]

The Impact of the Measure

Ultimately, Gorbachev's initiative did not result in a joint moratorium on nuclear testing, nor did it lead to any new legally binding limits on nuclear testing while it remained in place. It does appear, however, to have contributed to reviving the topic of testing limits between the United States and Soviet Union which, in turn, laid the groundwork for the Joint Verification Experiment in 1988 and the ultimate ratification of the Threshold Test Ban Treaty and Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty in 1990. Indeed,

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52 "Action Memorandum to Shultz", '*Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 68.'

53 Gerald Boyd, "U.S. and Russians Make New Offers on Nuclear Tests", *New York Times*, 30 July 1985: https://www.nytimes.com/1985/07/30/world/us-and-russians-make-new-offers-on-nuclear-tests.html

54 "Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (McFarlane) to President Reagan", 13 August 1985, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Volume V, Soviet Union, March 1985–October 1986*, ed. Elizabeth Charles (US Government Printing Office, 2020), Document 76, 307, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v05/d76

55 Jack Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador's Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Random House, 1995), 90.

56 "Action Memorandum to Shultz", Doc. 68.

57 Boyd, "U.S. and Russians Make New Offers on Nuclear Tests"; "Statement by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Speakes on Limiting Nuclear Weapons Testing", Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Museum, 29 July 1985, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/statement-principal-deputy-press-secretary-speakes-limiting-nuclear-weapons-testing

58 Boyd, "U.S. and Russians Make New Offers on Nuclear Tests", 1.

between July 1986 and July 1987, the two sides held six Nuclear Testing Expert Meetings in Geneva. They subsequently agreed in September 1987 to begin "full-scale, stage-by-stage negotiations on nuclear testing" that December.[59]

Additionally, scholarly analyses of Gorbachev's initial moratorium and subsequent renewals conclude that they likely helped to improve US–Soviet relations and the atmosphere for arms control negotiations in the long run. Alan Collins has argued, for example, that "The willingness of the Soviet Union to persist with the ban in the face of US resistance did begin to dismantle Western suspicion and distrust of Soviet motives".[60] Joshua Goldstein and John Freeman make a similar claim, observing that "Gorbachev's initiative did succeed in promoting a peaceful image of the Soviet Union among the American public and among US allies, as well as among a few Reagan administration officials".[61] More generally, as Raymond Garthoff observes, "both sides gained from Gorbachev's determination to turn around the confrontation and resume dialogue, reducing greatly the tensions and dangers of the years [1981–1983]. The foundation had been laid for later summits", he writes, along with "the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty], and a new détente (though not so labeled.)".[62]

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59 "Nuclear Testing Limitations", *US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Issue Brief*, 3 (1987): 3, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/2023-09/40-219-6927378-004-001-2023.pdf

60 Collins, "GRIT, Gorbachev, and the End of the Cold War", 204.

61 Joshua Goldstein and John Freeman, *Three-Way Street: Strategic Reciprocity in World Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1990), 121; also cited in Collins, "GRIT, Gorbachev, and the End of the Cold War", 205.

62 Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations at the End of the Cold War* (The Brookings Institution, 1994), 239.

A Minuteman II missile sitting in its silo being inspected and worked on. Credit: © TSGT Bob Wickley, 1980

Case 2: 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives

The Measure

On the evening of 27 September 1991, US President George H.W. Bush announced on live television a "series of sweeping initiatives affecting every aspect of our nuclear forces on land, on ships, and on aircraft".[63] Perceiving "an unparalleled opportunity to change the nuclear posture of both the United States and the Soviet Union", he pledged—on a unilateral basis—to:

- eliminate all US ground-launched theatre nuclear weapons;
- withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons from surface ships and attack submarines, plus nuclear weapons associated with land-based naval aircraft (many of which would be dismantled and destroyed with those remaining to be secured in central storage);
- take all strategic bombers, as well as ICBMs scheduled for deactivation under START, off of alert and to accelerate the process of eliminating these systems upon treaty ratification;
- terminate the mobile Peacekeeper and mobile small ICBM programmes;

63 "President Bush on Nuclear Forces Reduction", C-SPAN, 27 September 1991, https://www.c-span.org/clip/white-house-event/president-bush-on-nuclear-forces-reduction/4837519

- cancel efforts to replace the nuclear short-range attack missile (SRAM II) and to modernize its theater tactical derivative (SRAM-T, or TASM)[64]; and
- streamline command and control of US strategic forces by consolidating "operational command … into a U.S. strategic command under one commander with participation from both" the Air Force and Navy.[65]

Although Bush made it clear in his announcement that he planned to implement these measures whether or not the Soviet Union reciprocated, he nevertheless invited the Soviet Union to take a series of parallel measures, including to:

- destroy its stockpile of ground-launched theatre weapons;
- remove its tactical nuclear weapons from ships and attack submarines, withdraw nuclear weapons for land-based naval aircraft, destroy many of these, and place the remainder in central storage;
- garrison its mobile missiles;
- stand down its strategic missiles scheduled for elimination under START and accelerate this process upon treaty ratification;
- cancel efforts to develop ICBMs with multiple warheads; and
- limit ICBM modernization to one single-warhead missile type.

Bush concluded the announcement by outlining a series of possible cooperative measures the two sides might take together—reaching agreements to modify or eliminate all ICBMs with multiple warheads and on the "limited deployment of non-nuclear defenses to protect against limited ballistic missile strikes"; and exploring cooperation on the "safe and environmentally responsible storage, transportation, dismantling, and destruction of nuclear warheads", as well as the "physical safety security of warheads" and nuclear command and control.[66]

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64 Although Bush indicated in his September 27th announcement only that he was canceling efforts to "build a replacement for the nuclear short-range attack missile for our strategic bombers," Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell subsequently clarified that both the SRAM-II and SRAM-T would be cancelled as a result. See Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell, press briefing, 28 September 1991, 7 (of PDF), https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/09-F-0134_Dick_Cheney_Press_Briefing.pdf.

65 "President Bush on Nuclear Forces Reduction". For a transcript of Bush's address enumerating his unilateral measures, see in Susan Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992* (National Defense University Press, 2012), Appendix A, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd_casestudy-5.pdf

66 Ibid, 27.

The Response

The following week on 5 October, Gorbachev responded with his own televised address. Praising Bush's initiative, he outlined the measures the Soviet Union would take in response, including to:

- eliminate nuclear artillery munitions and warheads for tactical missiles;
- withdraw nuclear warheads for air defence missiles, store them in central bases, and eliminate some of them;
- eliminate all nuclear mines;
- remove tactical nuclear weapons from surface ships and multipurpose submarines, place these weapons and nuclear weapons from land-based naval aircraft in central storage, and eliminate some of them;
- take heavy bombers off alert and store their nuclear weapons in military depots;
- halt efforts to develop a modified nuclear short-range missile for Soviet heavy bombers and the small mobile ICBM;
- cap the number of rail-mobile ICBM launchers at current levels, halt their modernization, and keep rail-mobile ICBMs in their permanent basing areas;
- de-alert 503 ICBMs, 134 of which are equipped with multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles;
- decommission an additional three ballistic missile submarines (with a total of 48 launchers) on top of those that were already decommissioned; and
- place all strategic forces under a single operational command.[67]

Gorbachev further proposed that the Soviet Union and United States, on a reciprocal basis, eliminate all tactical naval nuclear weapons and withdraw and place in central storage all gravity bombs and air-launched missiles from frontal (tactical) aviation combat units. He also committed to reduce the Soviet strategic arsenal below the limits specified by START—with a call to the United States to reciprocate—and to uphold a one-year unilateral test moratorium. In addition to expressing his willingness to "discuss the U.S. proposal on non-nuclear ABM systems", Gorbachev proposed a number of additional cooperative efforts the two sides should pursue together. These included agreeing to further significant reductions to their strategic arsenals following the ratification of START, halting the production of fissile material, developing joint early warning systems, and enhancing nuclear security.[68]

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67 Ibid, Appendix A.

68 Expressing hope that other nuclear powers would ultimately join in these initiatives, as well, Gorbachev also proposed that they jointly issue a "no first use" declaration. Ibid., Appendix A.

Bush responded with another round of unilateral reciprocal measures which he outlined in an address to the US Congress on 28 January 1992. Russian president Boris Yeltsin followed suit the next day.[69]

Explanatory Factors and Conditions

Geostrategic Context

What was the context in which Bush initially proposed these unilateral nuclear measures, and what factors may account for the Soviet Union's positive response?

The broader geostrategic backdrop to this initiative was one of rapid change. The Berlin Wall had fallen in 1989, paving the way for the reunification of Germany, and that same year the Soviet Union had completed its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan after more than a decade of war.[70] In 1990, the Baltic States had begun to declare their independence from the Soviet Union.[71] The Warsaw Pact was formally abolished in July 1991—a significant milestone that heralded the end of the cold war.[72]

US–Soviet Relations

Against this backdrop, relations between Moscow and Washington, which had grown closer under Gorbachev and Reagan, continued to warm. Although this was not a foregone conclusion under the new Bush administration,[73] indications had emerged by late 1990 of what the US President would later call "the hopeful new spirit which had developed between the United States and the Soviet Union".[74] Perhaps the most significant of these was US–Soviet cooperation in responding to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and their "unusual step of jointly calling upon the rest of the international community to join with us in an international cutoff of all arms supplies to Iraq" in August 1990.[75] By early the following year, Gorbachev and Bush were both "firmly committed" to cooperating with one another.[76]

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69 For a summary of the measures to which both sides committed and which they proposed, see ibid., Appendix B.

70 Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, eds., "Afghanistan and the Soviet Withdrawal 1989: 20 Years Later", *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book*, No. 272 (2009): https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB272/

71 Lewis Siegelbaum, "Baltic Independence", *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1991/baltic-independence/

72 Simon Miles, "We All Fall Down: The Dismantling of the Warsaw Pact and the End of the Cold War in Eastern Europe", *International Security*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2023/24): 81, https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/48/3/51/119980/We-All-Fall-Down-The-Dismantling-of-the-Warsaw

73 Odd Arne Westad, The Cold War: A World History, Kindle ed. (Basic Books, 2017), 581; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (Penguin Books, 2005), 281; "Memorandum of Conversation, President's Telephone Conversation with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev", 23 January 1989, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/428079781

74 George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, Kindle ed. (Vintage Books, 1998), 493.

75 Bill Keller, "The Iraqi Invasion; Moscow Joins U.S. In Criticizing Iraq", *New York Times* (1990): https://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/04/world/the-iraqi-invasion-moscow-joins-us-in-criticizing-iraq.html

76 "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Telcon with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union on May 11, 1991", 11 May 1991, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/428081665

Arms Control

Progress on arms control further evidenced and solidified this upward trajectory of US–Soviet relations beginning with the conclusion of the multilateral Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in November 1990. The following month, the Threshold Test Ban and Peaceful Nuclear Explosions treaties finally entered into force—more than a decade after they were first signed. Perhaps most significantly, the two sides signed the bilateral Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) on 31 July 1991—more than a decade after negotiations first began and just months before Bush launched his unilateral initiative. Buoyed by this success and, almost certainly, the completion of the elimination phase of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in May 1991, the two leaders outlined an ambitious series of next steps for arms control, including the resumption of Defense and Space Talks, the conclusion of the Chemical Weapons Convention and the negotiation of the Open Skies Treaty.[77]

Domestic Bureaucratic Factors

Soviet Domestic and Bureaucratic Factors

Before these efforts could get underway, however, a major domestic crisis erupted in the Soviet Union that played a central role in motivating Bush to take action unilaterally.[78] In early August 1991—and with the impending replacement of the Soviet Union with a new Union of Sovereign States on the horizon[79] —a self-declared State Committee on Emergency Rule detained Gorbachev in Crimea and attempted to seize power using military force.[80] The coup ultimately failed, and the Soviet leader was able to return to Moscow after 72 hours.[81] Nevertheless, it did result in what Mikhail Tsypkin has called a "loss of civilian control over the Soviet nuclear arsenal".[82]

Numerous accounts indicate that Bush and his principals had become deeply concerned about the state of Soviet command and control as this event was unfolding.[83] Correspondingly, as Robert Gates—who served as Deputy National Security Advisor and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency—later observed, the US president decided in the aftermath "to propose a whole new series of initiatives to reduce arms further".[84] As Bush himself explained when announcing the initiatives,

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77 "Three-on-Three Meeting with President Mikhail Gorbachev", National Archives Catalog, 31 July 1991 (1 of 2) https://catalog.archives.gov/id/428081803; "Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces [INF] Chronology", Federation of American Scientists, https://nuke.fas.org/control/inf/inf-chron.htm

78 Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, 3.

79 William Taubman, Gorbachev: *His Life and Times* (W. W. Norton, 2018), 609.

80 Ibid, 608-609

81 "Gorbachev Returns to Power", *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1991/the-august-coup/the-august-coup-texts/gorbachev-returns-to-power/

82 Mikhail Tsypkin, "Adventures of the 'Nuclear Briefcase': A Russian Document Analysis", *Strategic Insights*, 3, no. 9 (2004): https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/si/si_3_9/si_3_9_tsm01.pdf

83 See, for example, Susan Koch, "The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992", Toda Peace Institute, Policy Brief No. 23, October 2018, 2, https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-23_susan-koch_presidential-nuclear-initiatives-1991-92.pdf; and Siegfried Hecker, "George H. W. Bush Worked toward a Soft Landing for the Dissolving Soviet Union", *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 14 December 2018, https://thebulletin.org/2018/12/george-h-w-bush-worked-toward-a-soft-nuclear-landing-for-the-dissolving-soviet-union/

84 Robert Gates, *From the Shadows* (Simon & Schuster, 2007), 530, as cited in Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, 4.

"many Americans asked me if I thought Soviet nuclear weapons were under control" during the coup attempt.[85] While he indicated that he did not "believe that America was at increased risk of nuclear attack during those tense days", Bush nevertheless perceived that "more [could] be done to ensure the safe handling and dismantling of Soviet nuclear weapons".[86]

While it is not clear if similar concerns about nuclear command and control influenced the Soviet response to the US initiatives, it is evident from archival sources that domestic bureaucratic factors more generally shaped the reaction in Moscow. Anatoly Chernyaev—who was by this time Gorbachev's foreign policy advisor—reports that many senior political and military officials doubted that the US proposal was genuine and had to be convinced to respond positively.[87] One argument that some may have found compelling was the potential cost savings that reciprocal unilateral cuts could afford the Soviet Union amid a deepening economic crisis. An analysis from 16 October 1991 drafted by deputy head of the Defence Industry Department of the Soviet Central Committee Vitaly Kataev estimated, for example, that the measures Gorbachev announced on 5 October would save the Soviet Union 11,033 million roubles (estimated at $262.7 million USD in 1991 or around $625 million USD today) —a significant portion of the military budget.[88] Still, some of the more drastic unilateral options that could have allowed for even greater savings were ultimately not taken up. Chernyaev reports, for example, that serious consideration was given to eliminating the entire air-based leg of the Soviet triad, but that this proposal was rejected by Minister of Defence Yevgeny Shaposhnikov—himself a former air force officer.[89]

US Domestic and Bureaucratic Factors

As Susan Koch has observed, economic considerations also played a role in motivating Bush's unilateral initiatives. He had run for office promising to cut spending without raising taxes,[90] but by 1990 the federal deficit was at $200 billion (estimated as between $496 billion to $500 billion in 2026) and growing.[91] Gates recalls that, in developing the US nuclear initiatives, Bush wondered if "there was anything we could do militarily to save money and to signal that we recognized there was a new world out there".[92] Tellingly, he was prepared to undertake these unilateral cuts with no expectation of the Soviet Union responding.[93]

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85 Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, 27.

86 Ibid.

87 Svetlana Savranskaya, ed. *The Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, 1991*, trans. Anna Melyakova (The National Security Archive, 2011), 123, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB345/The%20Diary%20of%20Anatoly%20Chernyaev,%201991.pdf

88 Vitaly Katayev, memorandum, "Reference on expected reductions of defense allocations as a result of the implementation of the new Soviet initiative announced by M.S. Gorbachev on October 5, 1991, as well as allocations for measures for its implementation", Hoover Institution Archive, Vitaly Katayev collection, Box 11, Folder 33, 16 October 1991, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/22058-document-13-vitaly-katayev-memo-reference

89 Savranskaya, ed. *Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev*, 129.

90 Lily Rothman, "The Story Behind George H.W. Bush's Famous 'Read My Lips, No New Taxes' Promise", *Time*, (2018): https://time.com/3649511/george-hw-bush-quote-read-my-lips/

91 "George H. W. Bush", John F. Kenney Profile in Courage Award, https://www.jfklibrary.org/events-and-awards/profile-in-courage-award/award-recipients/george-hw-bush-2014

92 Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, 4; emphasis added.

93 Ibid, 8.

But—much as was the case on the Soviet side—determining precisely what budget items to cut was influenced to some degree by bureaucratic factors. In Bush's case, however, and in contrast with what Gorbachev experienced, the White House and the armed services were largely aligned with his desire to cut US non-strategic nuclear forces. Within the US Navy, for instance, there was already interest in eliminating nuclear-armed Tomahawk missiles from surface ships.[94] Likewise, as National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft informed NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner when he alerted him to plans to cancel the TASM, he himself believed that this was "a terrible program".[95]

However, US Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney was less enthusiastic about some of the proposed presidential initiatives. He and his staff perceived that forward-deployed ground- and sea-launched tactical nuclear weapons were "essential for extended deterrence and allied reassurance".[96] Still, pressure was already building within NATO itself to withdraw these capabilities.[97] And while there was some initial scepticism about the unilateral initiative as a whole,[98] Koch notes, saying "'No' was not an option" as it was obvious that Bush intended to proceed with his plans.[99]

The State of Weapons Development

The extent to which the state of weapons systems influenced the presidential nuclear initiatives remains unclear. Nonetheless, a brief summary is included to provide background information and ensure consistency across the cases.

Soviet Weapons Development

At the time that Bush announced the unilateral initiatives, the Soviet Union had completed its ongoing military modernization programme. Correspondingly, as of 1991, the available evidence suggests that the Soviet Union had no new strategic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, or strategic bombers under development.[100] Additionally, in 1989, Gorbachev had announced plans to reduce the production of weapons and materiel by nearly 20 per cent.[101] According to the US Department of Defense in 1991, "the largest cuts" to Soviet materiel "continue to be in theater weaponry with reductions near 30 percent".[102]

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94 Ibid, 5-6; see also Joseph Fitchett, "Quite Key Point in Bush Plan: The Naval Weapons", *New York Times* 4, October 1991, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/04/IHT-quiet-key-point-in-bushplan-the-naval-weapons.html

95 "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Telcon with Secretary General of NATO, Manfred Woerner", 27 September 1991, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/428081957

96 Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, 6.

97 Ibid.

98 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 274.

99 Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives*, 5.

100 Podvig, *Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces*, 124, 241, 343.

101 Bill Keller, "Gorbachev Promises Big Cut in Military Spending", *New York Times*, (1990): https://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/19/world/gorbachev-promises-big-cut-in-military-spending.html

102 US Department of Defense, *Military Forces in Transition 1991* (US Government Printing Office, 1991), 21, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA243946.pdf

US Weapons Development

By this time, the United States had largely finished the military build-up initiated under the Reagan administration. Already in March 1990, the only remaining strategic modernization programmes underway were the B-2 bomber, the D-5 submarine-launched ballistic missile, and the rail-mobile Peacekeeper and small ICBMs.[103] It had also developed a range of high-precision conventional weapons, the effectiveness of which had been demonstrated decisively during the first Gulf War.[104] This enhanced conventional warfighting capability may have reduced the perceived need for significant numbers of non-strategic nuclear weapons both in Washington and among European allies. Indeed, while the US National Security Strategy of 1990 did indicate that, "for the foreseeable future … we will need to retain modern nuclear forces in-theater", it also noted that NATO had "unilaterally reduced its theater nuclear weapons by over one-third during the past decade".[105] Correspondingly, by the time Bush began developing his unilateral initiative in August 1991, the United Sates had already foregone plans to modernize its tactical ballistic missiles and nuclear artillery shells.[106]

Nature of the Signalling Process

While it is the case that the basic process by which Bush announced the US initiative mirrored that which Gorbachev had used in 1985, he added certain elaborations and was more personally involved, which may have influenced the outcome it elicited. On 27 September 1991, for instance, James Collins—then chargé d'affaires at the US embassy in Moscow—contacted Chernyaev to alert him that Bush wished to speak to Gorbachev.[107] Gorbachev received Collins later that morning, who briefed him on the initiative and, seemingly, provided him with a written summary.[108] Later that day, Bush spoke with Gorbachev by telephone to discuss these efforts further and gauge his reaction.[109]

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103 The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States", 24 March 1990, https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1990.pdf

104 Rebecca Friedman Lissner, "The Long Shadow of the Gulf War", *War on the Rocks* (2016): https://warontherocks.com/2016/02/the-long-shadow-of-the-gulf-war/

105 "National Security Strategy of the United States", March 1990, 25.

106 The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States", 1 August 1991, https://www.bush41library.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-01/national-security-strategy-report-1991.pdf

107 Savranskaya, ed. *Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, 1991*, 122.

108 Ibid, 123; "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Telcon with Gorbachev", 27 September 1991, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/428081949; Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 546.

109 "Telcon with Gorbachev", 27 September 1991.

Separately, Bush sent letters to and spoke with NATO allies to inform them of his plans.[110] More unusually, however, and reflecting the period of transition in which the Soviet Union found itself, he also spoke with Boris Yeltsin. This marked the first time that Bush had discussed an arms control initiative with the Russian president.[111] Only then did Bush go on US television to announce theplanned unilateral measures.

For his part, Gorbachev followed similar steps in communicating the actions he would take in response to Bush's initiative. On 5 October, he called the Bush to provide "a brief summary of the primary points", which he also transmitted in writing.[112] In contrast to Bush, however, Chernyaev reports that Gorbachev did not brief Yeltsin on the measures he planned to announce.[113] Instead, an hour after his conversation with his counterpart, Gorbachev unveiled his planned reciprocal and unilateral measures on Russian television.

The Impact of the Measure

Although the presidential nuclear initiatives did not lead to legally binding restrictions on US or Soviet/Russian theatre nuclear forces—of which there are still none—nor did the Soviet Union, and subsequently the Russian Federation, take up all of the proposed measures that Bush suggested, they nevertheless had a positive influence on arms control. Indeed, beyond the reductions and other measures the two sides undertook as part of the initiatives themselves, they helped to pave the way for the START II treaty and subsequent U.S.-Russia cooperation on nuclear security.[114] In addition—and in contrast with Gorbachev's prior efforts in this regard—the initiatives may have helped to lay the groundwork for the moratorium on nuclear testing that Bush ultimately signed into law on 2 October 1992. As Frank von Hippel describes, Gorbachev's unilateral test moratorium (and Yeltsin's later extension of it), announced as part of the reciprocal initiatives in late 1991, prompted the introduction of bipartisan legislation in the US to halt nuclear testing for one year, which became law in October 1992.[115] This moratorium has been upheld ever since.[116]

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110 "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Telcon with Prime Minister John Major of the UK", 27 September 1991, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/428081953; "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Telcon with Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany", 27 September 1991, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/428081951; "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Telcon with Francois Mitterrand, President of France", 27 September 1991, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/428081955

111 Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 546.

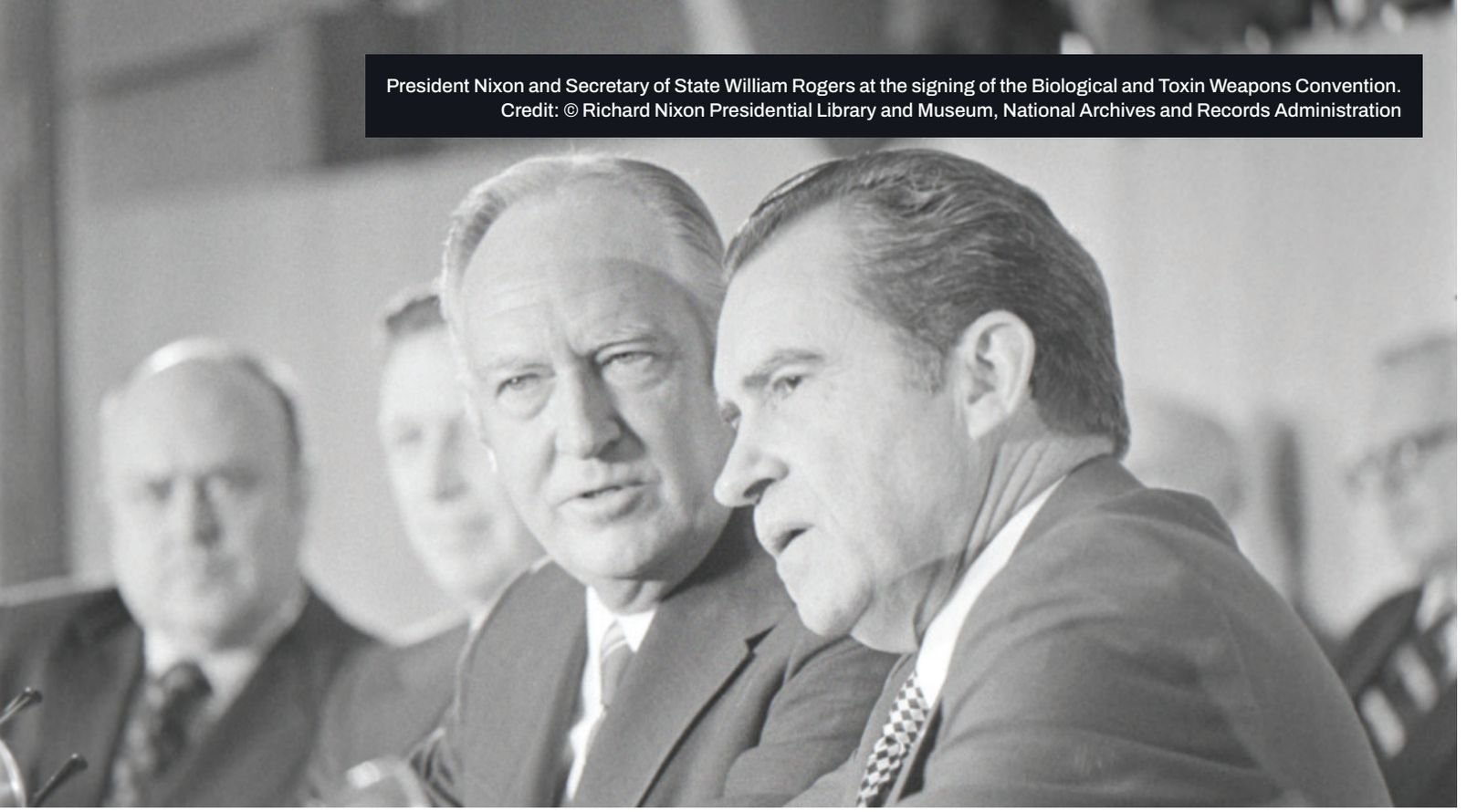
112 "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Telcon with Mikhail Gorbachev, President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics", 5 October 1991, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/428081967

113 Savranskaya, ed. *Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev*, 1991, 129.

114 Susan Koch, "The Busiest Months of My Life: The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives and Their Aftermath", Stanley Center for Peace and Security, 6 December 2023, https://riskreduction.stanleycenter.org/koch-russia-pni-ctr/

115 Frank von Hippel, "The Decision to End Nuclear Testing", *Arms Control Today*, (2019): 14, https://sgs.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2024-08/Decision-to-End-US-Nuclear-Testing-ACT-Dec%202019.pdf

116 Arms Control Association, "Nuclear Testing and CTBT Timeline".



President Nixon and Secretary of State William Rogers at the signing of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.
Credit: © Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Archives and Records Administration

Case 3: 1969 US Renunciation of Biological Weapons

The Measure

On 25 November 1969, US President Richard Nixon announced a series of decisions on the chemical and biological defence policies and programmes of the United States that were designed to "sharply reduce the chance that [chemical or bacteriological weapons], will ever be used by any nation". In his remarks, Nixon reaffirmed "that the United States will never be the first country to use chemical weapons to kill", further extending "this renunciation to chemical weapons which incapacitate". He proceeded to expedite the signing of the 1925 Geneva Protocol and stated that biological warfare:

> .... has massive, unpredictable, and potentially uncontrollable consequences. It may produce global epidemics and profoundly affect the health of future generations. Therefore, I have decided that the United States of America will renounce the use of any form of deadly biological weapons that either kill or incapacitate. Our bacteriological programs in the future will be confined to research in biological defense, on techniques of immunization, and on measures of controlling and preventing the spread of disease. I have ordered the Defense Department to make recommendations about the disposal of existing stocks of bacteriological weapons. ...

> The United States positively shall associate itself with the principles of the Draft Convention prohibiting the use of biological weapons of warfare presented by the United Kingdom and the U.N. Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Conference on August 26, 1969. … The United States, as of today, now indicates its support of this initiative and we hope that other nations will follow suit.[117]

In concluding, Nixon remarked that "Mankind already carries in its own hands too many of the seeds of its own destruction. By the examples that we set today, we hope to contribute to an atmosphere of peace and understanding between all nations".[118]

The Response

When Nixon unilaterally renounced biological weapons on 25 November 1969, there was no indication that the decision would lead to the signing of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention three years later. However, the initiative helped to generate momentum towards the completion of that landmark prohibition of an entire class of weapons. Indeed, Swedish Ambassador Alva Myrdal described the step of 1969 as the "only one item of true disarmament involving any elimination of weapons from arsenals" of the post-war period.[119]

Explanatory Factors and Conditions

Several factors likely influenced this unilateral initiative, including the limited US strategic rationale for biological weapons, concerns over the potential proliferation of such weapons to a wider range of States, and mounting domestic and international pressure related to the US biological and chemical weapons programmes—pressures that, "increased in parallel with general opposition to the war and increases in the US use of [chemical agents] in Vietnam".[120]

Geostrategic context

In terms of the geostrategic context, the US renunciation of biological weapons emerged amid considerable international pressure surrounding its chemical and biological weapons policy. By the time of Nixon's inauguration in January 1969, criticism had grown over the United States' use of chemical

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117 Richard Nixon, "Remarks Announcing Decisions on Chemical and Biological Defense Policies and Programs", *The American Presidency Project*, 25 November 1969, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-announcing-decisions-chemical-and-biological-defense-policies-and-programs

118 Ibid.

119 See Myrdal in: Alva Myrdal, remarks in *General Assembly Official Records, 25th Session: 1st Committee, Verbatim Record of the 1750th Meeting*, A/C.1/PV.1750, 4 November 1970 (United Nations); Julian Goldblatt, "CB Disarmament Negotiations 1920–1970", in *The Problems of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Vol. IV (Humanities Press, 1971), 280.

120 Milton Leitenberg and Raymond A. Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program: A History* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 525.

agents—specifically tear gasses and herbicides—in the war in Viet Nam,[121] with the Soviet Union denouncing their use in the Disarmament Commission as "a crime against humanity".[122] In tandem with pressure over the use of chemical weapons, concerns were also raised over the potential proliferation of biological weapons to other States. Certainly, a US Central Intelligence Agency report from 1964 suggests, for "any reasonably modernised [State], and even for many less developed nations, there are few obstacles in the way of acquiring at least some [biological and chemical weapons] capability".[123]

Diplomatic environment

The impact of this pressure was compounded by several broader multilateral developments. These included the issuing by a collective of non-aligned States of a draft resolution affirming an expansive interpretation of the Geneva Protocol that encompassed the use of tear gas and herbicides, a step that created diplomatic difficulties for the United States;[124] the publication of two influential studies in 1969 which underscored the dangers of biological warfare;[125] and the UK submission of a proposal to the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee for a treaty prohibiting biological weapons, on the grounds that "it may be easier first to tackle agents of biological warfare and seek to conclude an instrument on biological warfare."[126]

This proposal aimed to separate two categories of weapons that were often—though inaccurately—lumped together.[127] It may have also reflected a degree of deference to the United States, which was reportedly "apprehensive about opening up the U.S.-USSR debate on tear gas again".[128] Deference or not, it was clear that in late 1969 chemical and biological weapons were "the real center of interest", and there was concern among US diplomats that they would face "considerable difficulties" during the General Assembly First Committee should their position on such weapons remain "unsettled".[129]

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121 Jonathan B. Tucker and Erin R. Mahan, *President Nixon's Decision to Renounce the US Offensive Biological Weapons Program*, (National Defense University Press, 2009).

122 Goldblatt, "CB Disarmament Negotiations", 237.

123 Central Intelligence Agency, "Likelihood of a Proliferation of BW and CW Capabilities", 21 October 1964, CIA Case No: F-1991-00201, Declassified Documents, 1, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000255679.pdf

124 "Memorandum From Michael Guhin and Winston Lord of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)", 2 December 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 167, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d167

125 The latter notably concluded that "Once the door was opened to this kind of warfare, escalation would in all likelihood occur, and no one could say where the process would end"; Secretary General, "Extracts From the Report of the Secretary-General: Chemical and Bacteriological (Biological) Weapons and the Effects of Their Possible Use", S/9292, 1 July 1969, https://docs.un.org/S/9292

126 Conference of the Eighteen-Nation Committee on Disarmament, "Final verbatim record of the 381st meeting, held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, on Tuesday, 16 July 1968: Conference of the Eighteen-Nation Committee on Disarmament", ENDC/PV.381, 16 July 1968, https://docs.un.org/en/ENDC/PV.381

127 "Minutes of the Secretary of Defense's Staff Meeting", 4 August 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 142.

128 Central Intelligence Agency, "Intelligence Report – Disarmament: Chemical-Biological Warfare Controls and Pro" [sic], 1969, CIA Case No. EO-2001-00138, 14, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000579021.pdf

129 "Letter From the Representative to the United Nations (Yost) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)", 29 October 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 151, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d151

Domestic Bureaucratic Factors

By 1969, the US government was facing mounting domestic pressure over its chemical and biological weapons policies, including from petitions signed by scientists (one of which, having 5,000 signatures, called for a comprehensive review of US policy and demanded an end to the use of herbicides in Viet Nam). These concerns were further intensified by public controversies surrounding the open-air testing of the nerve agent VX and issues with chemical weapons dumped at sea.[130] Facing increased concern over the structure and national policy of US chemical and biological weapons programmes, as well as US "public posture vis a vis chemical and biological warfare activities", Nixon's national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, on 28 May 1969 launched a multi-agency review of the United States' chemical and biological weapons policy.[131]

This review process was informed by several, sometimes competing, assessments of biological weapons from different entities.[132] Of particular note was the report produced by the President's Science Advisory Committee, which concluded that while biological weapons could be potent and comparatively inexpensive to produce relative to chemical weapons, they suffered from a number of significant drawbacks. The Committee concluded: "biological pathogens were slower acting, less reliable in the field, and unpredictable in their effects, and had a shorter shelf life in storage … they had little utility on the battlefield … the effectiveness of [biological weapons] for strategic deterrence and retaliation was limited".[133] The Committee recommended halting the production and stockpiling of biological weapons, while maintaining a defensive biological capability.

After considerable debate and disagreement, a similar view was adopted at an inter-agency National Security Council meeting in 1969. The meeting concluded in favour of eliminating the offensive biological weapons programme—whose "military retaliatory value" was deemed "not great"—while retaining a robust chemical weapons capability, which was considered important, in part, for its deterrent effect.[134]

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130 Tucker and Mahan, *Nixon's Decision.*

131 "I am increasingly concerned about the structure of our chemical and biological warfare programs, our national policy relating to such programs, and our public posture vis a vis chemical and biological warfare activities"; see "Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)", 30 April 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 139, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d139

132 This includes: "Report Prepared by the Interdepartmental Political-Military Group", 10 November 1969 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 156, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d156; and "Analytical Summary Prepared by the National Security Council Staff", undated, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 152, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d152

133 Tucker and Mahan, *Nixon's Decision.*

134 "Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting", 18 November 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 161, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d161

The State of Weapons Development

By 1969, the United States had conducted extensive testing of biological weapons on land and at sea.[135] These tests had generated much greater confidence in the potential of such weapons and addressed some of the technical challenges associated with the intricate process of delivering and disseminating biological weapons to the extent that the US army had "met the challenge of large-scale attack, at least by its own calculations".[136]

However, the United States had only a 'limited' inventory of biological agents and means of their delivery[137] and the strategic rationale for US biological weapons remained contested, particularly given an extensive—and more reliable—nuclear stockpile.[138] This was exacerbated by two other factors. First, the value of a biological attack often depended on the level of an adversary's preparedness, which complicated the development of doctrine for the use of biological weapons; and second, "military men generally did not feel comfortable with these weapons".[139]

Leadership

The renunciation of biological weapons is absent from Nixon's memoirs.[140] Indeed, declassified documents suggest that in private he was dismissive of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.[141] Nonetheless, Nixon appears to have recognized the role of arms control measures in managing superpower relations and sought to "project an image of a peacemaker".[142] Accordingly, with little to lose in terms of strategic interests and considering biological weapons a military or political issue, rather than as an ethical matter,[143] Nixon accepted the conclusions of the National Security Council.

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135 John Ellis van Courtland Moon, "Chapter 2. The US Biological Weapons Program", in *Deadly Cultures: Biological Weapons Since 1945*, eds. Mark Wheelis, Lajos Rózsa, and Malcolm Dando (Harvard University Press, 2006), 26, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjghwwg

136 Jeanne Guillemin, *Biological Weapons: From the Invention of State-Sponsored Programs to Contemporary Bioterrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 111. See also Matthew Meselson, "The Problem of Biological Weapons", presentation at the 1818th Stated Meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 13 January 1999, https://meselsonarchive.hsites.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum7261/files/meselsonarchive/files/1999_problem_bw.pdf

137 Courtland Moon, "The US Biological Weapons Program".

138 National Nuclear Safety Administration, "Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile", US Department of Energy, 2024, https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/U.S.%20Nuclear%20Weapons%20Stockpile%20Transparency%207_22_24.pdf

139 Courtland Moon, "The US Biological Weapons Program", 45.

140 Courtland Moon remarked that it is puzzling this was not mentioned; Courtland Moon, "The US Biological Weapons Program", 36.

141 "Editorial Note", in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 256, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d256

142 April Carter, *Success and Failure in Arms Control Negotiations*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Oxford University Press, 1989), 280. See also Nixon's inaugural address which states "The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker"; Richard Nixon, "Inaugural Address", *The American Presidency Project*, 20 January 1969, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-1

143 Jonathan B. Tucker, "A Farewell to Germs: The U.S. Renunciation of Biological and Toxin Warfare, 1969–70", *International Security* 27, no. 1 (2002): 107–148, https://doi.org/10.1162/016228802320231244

The Nature of the Signalling Process

The unilateral renunciation of biological weapons by the Nixon administration does not appear to have been trailed by bilateral US–USSR signaling.[144] However, following Nixon's announcement, the United States sought to make good on the renunciation and initiated the development of plans to destroy stockpiles of biological agents and convert relevant facilities to other purposes. The process of destruction and conversion began in July 1971 and was reported on widely, leading Leitenberg and Zilinskas to remark that "all of the information … was unquestionably available to and monitored by Soviet diplomatic and intelligence personnel".[145]

These measures were augmented in the following years by the publication of additional material on chemical and biological research activities, as well as an invitation—that was accepted – to the Russian Minister of Health to visit a converted facility. It is unclear how the invitation was interpreted by the Soviet Union at the time. However, Russian scholars contend that US research into biological weapons continued after 1969[146] and later interviews by Western scholars with senior officials of the Russian Academy of Sciences suggest that "the Cold War mentality at the time was such as the Soviet military would not have believed the US assurances on this issue regardless of what the US did to 'prove it'".[147]

The Impact of the Measure

Irrespective of how the US renunciation was interpreted by the Soviet military, the situation appears to have facilitated a diplomatic shift in Soviet policy on biological weapons. Certainly, a diplomatic cable from US officials participating in the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament in August 1970 referred to "some significant indications of possible forthcoming shift in Soviet attitude toward negotiation of separate biological weapons prohibitions (as opposed to present insistence on one comprehensive treaty for chemical and biological weapons)".[148]

This perceived change in attitude was later followed by the submission of a Soviet draft convention on biological and toxin weapons, which the United States viewed as a "substantial shift toward our position that (1) [biological and chemical weapons] are separable problems and (2) we should move

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144 "Notes of Telephone Conversation Between the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and the British Ambassador (Tomkins)", 24 November 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 163, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d163

145 Leitenberg and Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program.*

146 M.A. Yudin et al., "Historical Aspects of Bioterrorism: Factors Determining the Possibility of Using Pathogenic Biological Agents as Biological Weapons", *Problems of Especially Dangerous Infections*, no. 4 (2023): 32–41, https://doi.org/10.21055/0370-1069-2023-4-32-41

147 Interview with Sergei Rogov, Director of the Institute of USA and Canada Studies of the Russian Academy of Science cited in Leitenberg and Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program*, 530.

148 "Telegram 129723 From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union", 11 August 1970, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 204, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d204

now toward a separate [biological weapons] ban such as the proposed UK draft convention".[149] While the negotiation of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention has been explored in greater depth by others, it is worth noting that the process became predominantly driven by bilateral US–Soviet talks. Through these talks, the aspirations of the original UK draft treaty were considerably watered down, as the draft was "rushed" and "gutted" by the United States and Soviet Union.[150] On 5 August 1971, both States released identical draft texts of what would become the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention—seemingly using these negotiations as a springboard for what the United States considered as more important negotiations on strategic nuclear issues, specifically SALT I and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.[151]

149 "Memorandum From Michael Guhin of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)", 30 March 1971, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E–2, Documents on Arms Control and Nonproliferation, 1969–1972*, Document 222, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve02/d222

150 Nicholas A. Sims, *The Evolution of Biological Disarmament*, SIPRI Chemical & Biological Warfare Studies, no. 19 (Oxford University Press, 2001).

151 Several scholars have suggested such nuclear negotiations were "far more important than the BWC": Leitenberg and Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program*, 537; see also Sims, *Evolution of Biological Disarmament*, 4.

Conclusions

A comparison of these three unilateral disarmament initiatives does not necessarily provide generalizable evidence but it does provide some insights and points to both commonalities and differences across the cases. Some insights pertain to the context in which they were developed and implemented, the objectives they were intended to serve, and their broader effects over time. Others, meanwhile, are more instructive, suggesting some general good practices with respect to how such measures are signalled and the conditions under which they are likely to be reciprocated or to lead to mutual agreement. In an environment where legally binding and even politically binding arms control is proving to be increasingly difficult, the insights these cases support may provide valuable food for thought for States that may wish to pursue arms control and disarmament measures in the future.

The first insight the three cases reveal is that States often pursue unilateral initiatives not only as a means of advancing disarmament per se but also in response to challenges that require immediate solutions or where joint action is, at least temporarily, out of reach. The US renunciation of biological weapons, for instance, emerged at a moment when the State had internally demonstrated the potential of such weapons yet lacked a compelling strategic rationale for their continued development—given its extensive nuclear arsenal—and faced growing concerns over the proliferation of such weapons. In this context, a unilateral renunciation was logical and presented the added benefit of a domestic and international public relations boost as well as opening the door for more pressing bilateral nuclear arms control measures. The Soviet nuclear test moratorium, meanwhile, was undergirded by Gorbachev's urgent desire to improve relations with the United States, in part to ensure that the Nuclear and Space Talks which had just begun would succeed.[152] Securing additional legally binding limits on nuclear testing specifically, while certainly a priority, was therefore not the only goal Gorbachev sought to advance with this unilateral measure. George H.W. Bush's nuclear initiatives, meanwhile, appear to have been intended primarily as a response to the potential for nuclear instability as the Soviet Union began to break apart. The initial list of unilateral initiatives Bush announced in September 1991 was thus tailored to this goal and included measures aimed at streamlining and strengthening command and control and consolidating and securing tactical nuclear weapons.

Perhaps because unilateral initiatives are so heavily influenced by a State's priorities and interests, the second insight to emerge from this cross-case comparison is that it can be challenging to convince adversaries of the **sincerity** of such initiatives. In the case of the renunciation biological weapons, the United States made a conscious effort to publicly demonstrate its steps to dispose of existing biological weapons stocks and dismantle or repurpose biological weapons facilities, even inviting Russian officials to visit sites as part of a 'demonstrative verification' process. Even if actors in some States did not—and perhaps would not—believe the US commitment to destroy and dismantle

152 US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, "Interview of Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev by Pravda, April 7, 1985", in *Documents on Disarmament 1985* (US Government Printing Office, 1989), Document 64, 246, https://unoda-web.s3-accelerate.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/assets/publications/documents_on_disarmament/1985/DoD_1985.pdf; "An Interview with Mikhail Gorbachev", *Time*.

biological weapons and infrastructure,[153] Nixon's statement nonetheless initiated events that helped to build momentum toward the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.[154] Similar doubts that Gorbachev's interest in arms control was genuine coloured the reception the Soviet unilateral test moratorium received in Washington, as well. The Reagan administration—already wary of unverifiable and easily reversible test moratoriums—interpreted the initiative as a propaganda exercise. Although Gorbachev attempted to signal his sincerity by extending the moratorium and combining it with other, more radical disarmament proposals as time went on, it is not clear to what extent he succeeded. Six years later, conversely, Bush appears to have had no difficulties convincing Gorbachev that he was genuinely interested in advancing disarmament with the presidential nuclear initiatives, although some Soviet advisors seem to have been more sceptical. Indeed, Gorbachev responded enthusiastically and immediately with his own list of initiatives—kicking off a process of 'reciprocal unilateral' disarmament that would continue through the end of Bush's term in office with Gorbachev's successor, Boris Yeltsin.

What explains why some of these initiatives were seen as indications of genuine interest in disarmament while others were not? There is some evidence to suggest that the **context and nature of the signalling process,** which serves as the third insight, can have a bearing on how unilateral measures are interpreted, albeit in ways that were determined by the state of US–Soviet/Russian relations more broadly. For example, the Reagan administration's interpretation of Gorbachev's moratorium as "grandstanding" was informed in part by the manner in which the Soviet leader announced it (first privately in writing, and then almost immediately via TASS) and by its timing, particularly against the backdrop of ongoing mistrust between Washington and Moscow. In this context, the perception that the Soviet Union had already completed its testing cycle prior to announcing the moratorium suggested to some in Washington that it was more "cheap talk" than costly signal.[155]

Perhaps for this reason, when it came time for Bush to announce the US initiatives, he first sent a representative to brief Gorbachev and then called him directly to discuss and explain them before enumerating them on national television. It is not clear, however, whether this more personal mode of signalling, the strong relationship Bush enjoyed with Gorbachev by this time, or the significant nature of the unilateral measures he proposed best explains why the US initiatives were not dismissed as propaganda. On some level, all three variables likely contributed to this outcome. In the case of the renunciation of biological weapons, the announcement was seemingly not preceded by any bilateral US–USSR discussion; however, it was followed by a considerable US effort to demonstrate the termination of the biological weapons programme and actively engage in subsequent negotiations in Geneva on what would become the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention.

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153 Interview with Sergei Rogov, Director of the Institute of USA and Canada Studies of the Russian Academy of Science; see: Leitenberg and Zilinskas, *The Soviet Biological Weapons Program*, 530.

154 Ibid.

155 For a discussion of these concepts in foreign policy and game theory, see for example James Fearon, "Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (1997): 68–90, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002797041001004; and Andrew Kydd, "Which Side Are You On? Bias, Credibility, and Mediation", *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no, 4 (2003): 597–611, https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5907.00042

A fourth insight from this analysis, however, is that even when unilateral initiatives successfully elicit reciprocal responses, these outcomes are often **delayed or nonlinear**. The Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention was signed nearly two and a half years after the US renunciation of biological weapons, and its final form diverged from the UK draft treaty that the United States tentatively supported in 1969. Gorbachev renewed the 1985 unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing multiple times without reciprocation, although his efforts did ultimately contribute to renewed discussions on nuclear testing and laid the groundwork for the Joint Verification Experiment and, subsequently, the ratification of the Threshold Test Ban Treaty and Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty. In contrast, Bush's 1991 announcement of the US nuclear initiatives was met with a response from Moscow within just seven days. And yet, although the measures Bush, Gorbachev, and later Yeltsin undertook on a reciprocal unilateral basis did contribute to the conclusion of START II, the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, and a moratorium on nuclear testing, the cuts to tactical nuclear weapons for which the presidential nuclear initiatives are best known were never codified in a legally binding agreement.

To some extent, these varied outcomes could be explained by the **state of weapons systems**, which is the fifth insight drawn from the three cases. Indeed, Gorbachev's 1985 moratorium coincided with the United States' development of a new generation of nuclear weapons—as well as the Strategic Defense Initiative—while the Soviet Union was concluding a limited modernization cycle. The 1991 presidential nuclear initiatives, conversely, were announced as both the Soviet Union and United States completed their strategic modernization efforts—and following Washington's demonstration of its high-precision conventional warfighting capabilities in the Gulf. The renunciation of biological weapons occurred after the United States internally demonstrated that biological weapons could be effective, but at a time when it retained only a limited arsenal of weapons and delivery systems amid persistent questions regarding their strategic value (although it did possess a more significant and important chemical capability that was effectively preserved through the renunciation until the emergence of the Chemical Weapons Convention decades later). These variations suggest that unilateral initiatives may be more viable in contexts where weapons development or production has already plateaued.

But the state of military innovation is not the only factor that influences the scope and context of unilateral initiatives or how they are received. **Domestic–bureaucratic factors** play an important if varied role in this process as well, which is the sixth insight that arises from a comparison of the cases above. For Nixon, three such factors are of relevance in the unilateral renunciation of biological weapons: first, mounting domestic opposition to the United States' chemical and biological weapons programmes;[156] second, an expensive arms race, which had increased domestic economic pressures in the United States (and the Soviet Union) by the late 1960s; and third, divergent inter-agency views on the strategic value of biological weapons.[157] For Bush, meanwhile, domestic–bureaucratic factors appear to have had little impact on the precise unilateral measures pursued through the presidential nuclear initiatives, but they do appear to have influenced his decision to pursue them in the first place. Indeed, by 1991, Bush was facing significant domestic pressure to make good on his campaign

156 Tucker and Mahan, *Nixon's Decision.*
157 Ibid.

promise to reduce the national deficit. Unilateral arms control may have afforded him a fast and easy means to cut spending. For Gorbachev, conversely, domestic factors appear primarily to have affected his reaction to Bush's unilateral cuts. Although a number of senior advisors strongly opposed responding to the US initiatives in kind, the Soviet Union's dire financial situation in the early 1990s—and the potential cost savings unilateral disarmament could afford—may have helped to convince them that reciprocal cuts were worth the risk.[158]

But domestic politics are not the only factors which determine how States respond to unilateral initiatives. On the contrary, **timing and geopolitical context** also have a major impact on outcomes, which is the seventh insight from this case analysis. With respect to the 1969 US renunciation of biological weapons, a deterioration in Chinese-Soviet relations combined with economic factors already mentioned may have made improved relations more appealing and paved the way for détente and subsequent negotiations on strategic nuclear issues. Gorbachev, meanwhile, announced the unilateral test moratorium at a time when mistrust and mutual suspicion still prevailed between Washington and Moscow. High politics at the time appears to have influenced how the Reagan administration interpreted the initiative, informing at least in part their assumption that Gorbachev was not speaking in good faith. The situation for Bush was quite different, however, as US–Soviet relations were overall very strong when he announced the first presidential nuclear initiatives, and had recently been further enhanced by close US–Soviet cooperation during the Gulf War. The fact that Gorbachev responded almost immediately to Bush's announcement with his own list of measures to undertake suggests that, while unilateral initiatives are often intended to signal good intentions, a fair amount of trust and mutual respect must already exist in order to ensure that these signals are interpreted correctly.

An eighth and final insight gleaned from these cases is that **leaders and leadership style** affect both how and why unilateral initiatives are developed and how they are interpreted. Nixon, for instance, appears to have had little to say on the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and saw biological weapons as a military matter. He did, however, want to appear as a man of peace. Gorbachev, meanwhile, had successfully consolidated power upon taking office, which afforded him considerable latitude to pursue his foreign policy agenda as he saw fit and without significant bureaucratic interference. Yet when he announced the unilateral test moratorium in 1985, he was just months into his tenure in office and almost a complete unknown to most in the Reagan administration—which may explain in part why the United States was reluctant to give the initiative the benefit of the doubt. This contrasts sharply with the situation that Bush faced 1991. Experienced in foreign policy and a popular president well into his first term, he had worked directly with Gorbachev since 1985 in the role of Vice President. Not only did these factors likely contribute to his ability to develop and announce the presidential nuclear initiatives with virtually no inter-agency input,[159] but they almost certainly impacted how Gorbachev interpreted them as well.

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158 Savranskaya, ed. *Diary of Anatoly Chernyaev, 1991*, 123.

159 This assertion is supported by Elizabeth Saunders' discussion of how Bush's foreign policy experience influenced his decision-making and leadership style in the context of the first Gulf War; in Elizabeth N. Saunders, "No Substitute for Experience: Presidents, Advisors, and Information in Group Decision Making", *International Organization* 71, Supplement S1 (2017): S238, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081831600045X

The cases here are focused on weapons of mass destruction, specifically nuclear and biological weapons. However, unilateral initiatives could be and have been applied to several other areas, most recently in the context of space security, wherein the Biden administration announced a unilateral ban on the testing of destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite weapons in 2022 (see annex for more on this topic). While today's geopolitical context is perhaps unsuited to nuclear-focused unilateral initiatives considering that nuclear armed States are modernizing—and in some cases growing—their strategic arsenals, in the medium term there will come a time when financial and political support for such processes plateaus. This could provide a window of opportunity for States to redress the erosion of arms control and disarmament measures. This objective is one that unilateral initiatives may well be required to achieve.

Annex. Unilateral Initiatives In Other Contexts: Five Examples

This short annex builds on a small virtual discussion organized by UNIDIR on the theme of unilateral arms control and disarmament initiatives. The contributions in this section are the sole responsibility of the individual authors.

The Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite Moratorium: From Unilateral Act to Multilateral Endeavour – *Sarah Erickson*

Amid renewed strategic competition and the erosion of arms control instruments, outer space has become both a domain of opportunity and risk. The lack of legal prohibitions on counterspace capabilities and the growing potential for debris-creating events have intensified calls for practical steps towards keeping outer space secure and peaceful. Against this backdrop, voluntary national commitments not to conduct destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) tests represent a contemporary example of how unilateral restraint can serve as a foundation for renewed cooperation. Announced initially by the United States in 2022, the moratorium mirrors earlier cases—such as the 1985 Soviet moratorium on nuclear testing—where individual leadership catalysed dialogue, showing that unilateral measures can emerge from strategic self-interest yet still yield collective benefits when embedded in broader processes of signalling and engagement.

Since its announcement, the commitment not to conduct direct-ascent ASAT testing has evolved from a national declaration into a subject of multilateral deliberation. In 2022, discussions in Geneva and New York culminating in General Assembly resolution 77/41 gave the measure a degree of shared authorship as other States provided input during drafting and debate.[160] By the 2025 First Committee, Italy had proposed consideration of the commitment in a legally binding form, underscoring that an initiative once originating with a single State is now being shaped through wider State engagement and discussion on how this political pledge might evolve. This pathway reflects earlier arms control history where independent initiatives gained legitimacy when multilateralized through institutional channels.

Continued reinforcement could further entrench this emerging norm. For example, the Russian Federation's no first placement of weapons in outer space initiative has been tabled annually since 2014 and thereby has sustained continuity and increase in collaboration, having received two more State pledges in 2025—whereas the US ASAT commitment has thus far only been endorsed through

160 General Assembly, "Destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing", A/RES/77/41, 12 December 2022, https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/77/41

a single resolution. Repetition of such resolutions, regular reporting, or voluntary information-exchange could strengthen perceptions of permanence and transparency, transforming isolated acts of restraint into enduring elements of multilateral practice.

A distinctive feature of this ASAT initiative lies in the participation of non-State actors. Civil-society engagement has been pivotal in socializing the initiative within the private sector, leading to endorsement by 54 companies across 17 countries through the Space Industry Statement in Support of International Commitments Not To Conduct Destructive Anti-Satellite Testing.[161] These companies have highlighted debris hazards and the potential economic impacts, seeking to reinforce the political commitment through advocacy and operational practice. This broader engagement enhances legitimacy in an era when commercial and governmental space activities are increasingly interdependent. Even without reciprocity yet from the major space-faring States, diffusion of this commitment through industry channels helps build global validity, create a more prepared environment for international adoption, as well as internalize a policy of restraint amongst space actors regarding ASAT activity.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate how a unilateral measure can gain strength through multilateral and societal reinforcement. The ASAT moratorium shows that unilateralism need not imply isolation when supported by openness and broad participation, allowing such individual initiatives to contribute nonetheless to collective security. The future impact of the moratorium will depend on continued reaffirmation, reciprocal engagement, and institutional follow-through that can hopefully embed this political commitment as a norm of space security practice.

Failed Initiatives as a Stepping Stone to Future Mechanisms: Missile Limitations During Confrontation – *Dmitry Stefanovich*

One of the more recent unilateral actions that could be interpreted as a form of arms control is the so-called ‘post-INF moratorium’ proposed by the Russian Federation. There is no need here to look at the specifics of mutual accusations from when the INF Treaty was still in place, but looking at the chronology of this episode, as well as the language used, can help to make sense of the treaty’s somewhat counterintuitive positive effects.

Originally proposed in February 2019, the day after the formal announcement of the United States’ withdrawal from the INF Treaty,[162] the Russian proposal was formulated as follows: “We proceed from

161 Secure World Foundation, "Space Industry Statement in Support of International Commitments to Not Conduct ASAT Tests," Secure World Foundation, 14 November 2023, https://www.swfound.org/publications-and-reports/space-industry-statement-in-support-of-international-commitments-to-not-conduct-asat-tests

162 “President Donald J. Trump to Withdraw the United States from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.” Trump White House Archives, February 1, 2019, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-withdraw-united-states-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty/.

the premise that Russia will not deploy intermediate-range or shorter-range weapons, if we develop weapons of this kind – neither in Europe nor anywhere else until US weapons of this kind are deployed to the corresponding regions of the world".[163] In September 2019, President Putin sent personal letters to the leaders of several dozen States, as well as to the heads of the European Union and NATO, explaining the Russian initiative and signaling openness to further discussion on verification measures to ensure the absence of such weapons in the selected regions.[164]

In October 2020 the initiative was updated to address the issue of certain ground-launched cruise missiles[165]—which, per the statement, had not been deployed in the European regions of the Russian Federation at that time. The 2020 update was issued with a reiteration of the Russian "commitment to the moratorium earlier declared by the Russian Federation on the deployment of ground-based intermediate- and shorter-range missiles until U.S.-manufactured missiles of similar classes appear in the respective regions" and including the affirmation of readiness for mutual verification and inspections. It is noteworthy that the statement specifically acknowledged challenges "in a post-INF world" regarding Asia and the Pacific.

Despite no expression of interest from the United States to discuss the moratorium until early 2022, the parallel development, testing and temporary deployments of the INF-range ground-launched weapons, as well as relevant organizational measures and the establishment of the US Army Multi-Domain Task Force, the moratorium stood until August 2025, when the Russian Federation officially announced its end.[166]

Despite continuous accusations that alleged Russian violations were a basis for the United State's withdrawal from the INF Treaty,[167] the reality is that Russian authorities tried to salvage the Treaty through several proactive initiatives.

First, there was readiness to work towards verification.[168] Indeed, even before the proposed moratorium, the Russian Federation arranged a unilateral exhibition of the missiles in question (the 9M729, or SSC-8) so that the representatives of the concerned States could have engaged in practical

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163 "Meeting with Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu." The Kremlin, February 2, 2019. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59763.

164 Елена Черненко, "Ракеты Средней и Меньшей Мирности", Коммерсантъ, 24 September 2019, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4103333

165 "Statement by Vladimir Putin on additional steps to de-escalate the situation in Europe after the termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty)", *The Kremlin,* 26 October 2020, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64270

166 "Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation on the Moratorium on the Deployment of Ground-Launched Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 4 August, 2025. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/2039749/?lang=en.

167 "Russia's Violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty", 4 December, 2018, https://2017-2021.state.gov/russias-violation-of-the-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty/; North Atlantic Council, "Statement on Russia's failure to comply with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty", 1 February, 2019, https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2019/02/01/statement-on-russias-failure-to-comply-with-the-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty

168 "Statement by Vladimir Putin on additional steps to de-escalate the situation in Europe after the termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty)", 26 October, 2020, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64270

interactions with the high-ranking officials of both Russian Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[169] However, Washington, as well as most NATO capitals, seemingly ignored the event.[170]

Second, there were no INF-range weapons deployments of any meaningful scale by the Russian Federation between 2019 and mid-2025. As of the time of writing, there are reports of possible Russian use of INF-range ground-launched cruise missiles to strike targets in Ukraine. However, this came after the announcement of the end of the proposed moratorium.[171] The Oreshnik intermediate-range ballistic missile test launch under battle conditions in November 2024 did not constitute a deployment, which happened only in December 2025 (In Belarus)[172].

Some might argue that the proposed moratorium was a failure, especially as Europe appeared to enter into the early stages of a multilateral "INF-ish" arms race (with both ground-launched cruise missiles and intermediate-range ballistic missile in development)[173] and a more advanced arms racing situation is apparent in Asia.[174] Proliferation and use of ad hoc deep-strike weapons, for example 'one-way' attack drones, also likely contributed to criticism of the Russian initiative. Finally, an argument can be made that the current absence of deployment of INF-range weapons by the Russian Federation is a demonstration not of a self-restraint, but of a lack of technological and industrial capacity to build such weapons.

Still, at least some positive actions of the Russian Federation in relation to the INF Treaty and the post-INF environment could be augmented and replicated. This is especially important given the global state of missile development and potential proliferation. Unilateral measures can be used to limit the scope of arms development and to offer verification mechanisms when such measures are not provided for in existing agreements.

The Russian Federation's offer from September 2025 to extend the New START limits for one year after the end of the treaty in February 2026[175] was a good opportunity to explore the possibility of making such unilateral—or rather reciprocal unilateral—measures more meaningful. So far both Moscow and Washington seem to be somewhat informally observing those limits despite the expiration of the treaty. This provides grounds for optimism. Now there is a chance to extend such

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169 Press release on Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's participation in the Defence Ministry's briefing on INF Treaty issues, 23 January, 2019, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1451839/

170 "Russia displays controversial missile in bid to save INF treaty", 23 January, 2019, https://www.euractiv.com/news/russia-displays-controversial-missile-in-bid-to-save-inf-treaty/

171 Tom Balmforth, "Russia Uses Missile in Ukraine That Led Trump to Quit Nuclear Treaty, Kyiv Says," Reuters, 31 October, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/russia-uses-missile-ukraine-that-led-trump-quit-nuclear-treaty-kyiv-says-2025-10-31/.

172 "Oreshnik missile system assumes combat duty in Belarus — Russia's top brass", TASS, 30 December, 2025, https://tass.com/defense/2066877

173 Douglas Barrie, Zuzanna Gwadera, and Fabian Hinz, *Deep Precision Strike: Europe's Quest for Long Range Missile Capabilities* (The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025), https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2025/11/pub25-124-deep-precision-strike-4.pdf.

174 Dmitry Stefanovich, "Proliferation of Missile Technologies in Asia-Pacific Region", in *Strategic Review 2024*, ed. Alexei Arbatov (MGIMO University, 2024), p. 301-319, https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/ru/publ/2024/StrategicReview-2024.pdf

175 Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council, September 22, 2025, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78051

commitments, despite numerous calls in Washington to reconsider arms limitations because of China's growing strategic military capabilities.[176]

We are unlikely to see 'hard' arms control efforts in any region anytime soon. Unilateral moratoriums, including verification provisions can provide a good transitional solution that can contribute to de-escalation and the scaling down of arms development and competition, as well as limiting pathways to direct armed conflict by reducing the number of tools for such conflict. Such effects can help to buy time to prepare for a new era of arms control. Otherwise, a new era of multilateral arms competition—and even arms racing—in the strategic and substrategic, nuclear and non-nuclear, and offensive and defensive domains will be the future of humankind.

Unilateral Initiatives to Create Pockets of Predictability – *Rabia Akhtar*

As demonstrated by this study, unilateral initiatives can function as catalytic tools in moments of geopolitical stagnation, opening space for dialogue, shaping reciprocal behaviour—even simply arresting dangerous momentum when formal arms control proves infeasible. Yet, when considered in regional contexts, such as South Asia, the possible generalizability of the findings presented in the study becomes more challenging. India and Pakistan offer a paradoxical but illuminating case. Their shared history includes gestures that fit well within the study's analysis of unilateral initiatives—the 1988 Agreement on the Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Facilities,[177] implemented without external verification (i.e. without any means of bilateral or third-party verification); and the post-1998 unilateral moratoriums on nuclear testing in the region, which endure despite repeated crises and the absence of a legally binding bilateral or multilateral testing regime. At the same time, these limited but durable acts of restraint coexist with intensifying doctrinal signaling, rapid conventional and nuclear modernization, and recurring crises marked by pressures to escalate rather than mutual stabilizing restraint. This layered reality shows us both the possibilities and limits of unilateralism outside the context of superpower competition.

As the study notes, unilateral initiatives can be valuable precisely when trust deficits are profound and formal negotiations are stalled—conditions that strongly resemble the South Asian context today. But the India–Pakistan experience also suggests that unilateral steps may not necessarily function as bridges toward negotiated arrangements; instead, their stabilizing value lies in buying time, creating pockets of predictability, and signalling non-escalatory intent during periods of heightened uncertainty. In this regard, that experience clearly supports the study's assertion that unilateral measures can be pursued for pragmatic and even self-interested reasons, yet still positively shape

176 Anya Fink, "Congressional Commission on the U.S. Strategic Posture", 12 October, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12621

177 Agreement between India and Pakistan on the Prohibition of Attack Against Nuclear Installations and Facilities (India-Pakistan Non-Attack Agreement), Dec. 31,1988, https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/india_pakistan_non_attack_agreement.pdf; see Rabia Akhtar and Ruhee Neog, "Through the Sands of Time: The Enduring Legacy of the India–Pakistan Non-Attack Agreement", *Analysis and New Insights series,* Stanley Center for Peace and Security (2024): https://stanleycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Through-the-Sands-of-Time-Non-Attack-Agreement.pdf

adversarial perceptions or lay groundwork for future engagement. Recognizing such contextual variation could enrich the study's broader analytical arc. Situating cold war precedents alongside post-cold war cases (such as South Africa, France, and the United Kingdom) and regional examples such as that of India and Pakistan, underscores that unilateralism is not a relic of a bygone era, but a flexible modality whose meaning shifts across strategic environments. Its contemporary value may therefore lie less in replicating past successes than in carving modest, incremental spaces for stability in multipolar, mistrust-driven settings where formal arms control is unlikely to emerge soon. Integrating this comparative insight would strengthen the study's relevance beyond the Euro–Atlantic experience and highlight the differentiated, context-dependent utility of unilateral initiatives in today's fractured security order.

Make Unilateral Arms Control Measures Matter Today – *Tong Zhao*

Sarah Bidgood and James Revill's excellent review of three unilateral arms control cases in history offers valuable lessons for today. One important insight from their research is that the rush to claim public credit often undermined otherwise promising initiatives. When the Soviet Union announced its 1985 unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, Moscow notified Washington only one day before going public—causing many American strategists to dismiss it as propaganda. Similarly, Washington's eagerness to publicly broadcast its own counterproposal before the Soviets had an opportunity to respond privately, fueled doubts about U.S. sincerity.

Today, the impulse to score diplomatic credit is a resurgent challenge, exacerbated by a strategic competition and distrust that rivals the Cold War. A common-sense arms control measure, if initiated by Washington, now risks stronger opposition from Moscow and Beijing than it would from a third party. The negative Russian and Chinese responses to the U.S. commitment not to conduct debris-generating direct-ascent anti-satellite tests are an instructive example. In this environment, proponents of unilateral arms-control measures must suppress the instinct to seek immediate recognition and instead accept the role of the 'unsung hero', advancing practical progress through low-profile means.

In practice, this requires a strategic transfer of ownership. To mitigate knee-jerk opposition, the authorship or leadership of new international norm-setting proposals should be assigned to states or coalitions not directly affiliated with the emerging bloc confrontation. For example, Washington could encourage like-minded partners, particularly in the Global South, to take the lead at the United Nations and other multilateral fora in championing future voluntary measures, such as a global ban on destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite tests, to make such proposals more politically palatable. At the same time, ignoring a rival's unilateral proposals is rarely constructive. Engagement, by asking the right questions and seeking clarification, is far more effective. The Reagan administration responded pragmatically to the Soviet testing moratorium—not by dismissing it, but by engaging Moscow on the technical obstacles that prevented U.S. acceptance. By proposing joint work on verifying nuclear test yields, Washington opened the door to the development of verification measures that ultimately enabled

the ratification of the Threshold Test Ban Treaty and the Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty, paving the ground for the U.S. test moratorium and the negotiation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Similarly, rather than brushing aside China's no-first-use (NFU) of nuclear weapons proposal,[178] it would be more productive to engage Beijing on the core questions that determine NFU credibility. How should threats of nuclear first use be prohibited? Where is the line between nuclear use, nuclear testing, and a nuclear demonstration shot in crisis? How can China address regional concerns that a U.S. NFU pledge might embolden China's conventional military aggression against U.S. allies? These are constructive entry points for dialogue. It is also worth remembering that unilateral measures can be powerful near-term measures leading to immediate policy change, but they can also function as long-term measures gradually shifting international norms. Efforts by many countries' long-standing promotion of missile pre-launch notification agreements helped socialize expert communities and civil society worldwide to the stabilizing benefits of greater transparency. In China's case, despite its resistance to a formal missile launch-notification agreement with the United States, it now provides such notifications on an ad hoc basis—clear evidence that long-term socialization can erode entrenched traditions of military secrecy.

At a time of intense geostrategic hostility, unilateral moves must prioritize such sustained investments in the socialization of ideas. Success ought to be measured not merely by instant policy wins, but by the gradual, yet fundamental, change in perspective that only the long game can truly deliver.

Finally, the success of unilateral arms-control initiatives depends as much on the wider international community as on major powers themselves. Today, Global South countries and other international actors rarely prioritize arms control when dealing with the major players, reducing incentives for Washington, Beijing, or Moscow to make unilateral moves. The global opportunity costs of accelerating military competition will become clear only when the international community forces itself to imagine the alternatives—and holds leading powers accountable for their visions of international security and their responsibility in shaping the security environment. Leadership in unilateral arms control will emerge only when the rest of the world demands it.

Can Unilateral Measures Build Confidence in the BWC? – *Christopher Park*

Historical examples suggest that unilateral measures can, at least under some circumstances, serve to build confidence, reduce tensions, or even pave the way for future multilateral action. Could this approach be effective today in the context of the Biological Weapons Convention? Transparency measures, unilaterally implemented, could in principle reduce levels of concern, build trust, and pilot approaches that might later be adapted for multilateral use. However, any such efforts will confront the same challenges that bedevil multilateral efforts to strengthen the BWC. Nevertheless, unilateral action may be able to successfully address some areas of potential concern.

178 Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, "No-first-use of Nuclear Weapons Initiative", MFA News, 23 July 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202407/t20240723_11458632.html

To be effective, transparency measures (whether unilateral or multilateral) must provide some degree of reassurance about the activities and intentions of a country. A key challenge in the BWC context is the ambiguity of biotechnology – the difficulty of differentiating prohibited from legitimate activity, combined with the ubiquity of the life sciences across economic sectors. Under these circumstances, greater transparency may not result in greater confidence about a country's activities and intentions. This problem is only exacerbated in situations of profound distrust – a situation that prevails today among key BWC members. States considering such approaches will contend with concerns not only about skeptical audiences, but about how such transparency might be deliberately distorted or exploited in today's disinformation environment.

This suggests that transparency measures cannot reasonably be expected to provide reassurance that a country does not possess *any* form of BW program, but they may be able to build confidence in more specific areas. For example:

Military doctrine and training: sharing doctrines and training related to biological weapons could promote confidence that a country has no plans or capabilities for large-scale battlefield use of BW. The logic is straightforward: a significant capability requires related doctrine, training, and exercises[179]. Absent these, the capability is unlikely to be used, and if it is, is unlikely to be used effectively. Information on how troops are trained can shed important light: does doctrine specifically address and prohibit use of biological weapons? Is relevant international law addressed in professional military education? What sorts of training and exercises are conducted related to BW? How do these questions apply to specialized CBRN troops?

Oversight of Biodefense and Classified Life Science Research and Development: Assuming a country is committed to not developing or possessing biological weapons, how does it ensure that nominally defensive work does not cross a line? What entities in government have visibility of such research, and of related review processes? A state might feel constrained in sharing details of its biodefense work – but transparency regarding oversight and review processes should be much more feasible and would have some value as both a confidence-building measure and a demonstration of best practices.

These actions are low-risk, with some potential for increasing assurance in specific areas of activity. They need not be negotiated, or predicated on reciprocity, though that value might be increased if the steps were taken by a group of countries, inviting others to follow suit. As the advertisements say, "just do it."

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179 Doctrinal documents of this sort should not be particularly sensitive, since a great many soldiers would need to be exposed to them – a "secret doctrine" will tend to defeat its own purpose. This does not preclude small scale BW use by, e.g., special forces or intelligence agencies, but doctrine and training that reject the possibility of offensive BW could be expected to make large-scale use more problematic.

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