Multilateralism and Bilateralism in Controlling Nuclear Weapons

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Arms control and nonproliferation are frequently treated as bilateral and multilateral issues, respectively. However, such categorizations mask not only the frequent impacts multilateral and bilateral agreements have on one another, but also the numerous bilateral consultations that support multilateral outcomes and vice-versa. With both the multilateral nuclear nonproliferation regime and the bilateral US-Russia arms control regime facing serious setbacks in the past six months, better understanding the linkages between different agreement modalities may provide policymakers with a richer understanding of how to harness success—or failure—in one arena to improve prospects in others. The future of arms control may look very different from its legacy forms, but its success will still depend on how well policymakers can act on the lessons learned from its past. This report summarizes a workshop held in February 2023 by Stanford University’s Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) to examine these issues.

The history of bilateral and multilateral efforts to control nuclear weapons provides several key lessons: the importance of personal relationships between negotiators, the impact of iterative virtuous cycles of negotiations, the multilateral implications of bilateral negotiations, the role of bilateral relationships within multilateral negotiations, and the need for a robust, longstanding platform from which topical issues can be assessed and addressed.

Personal Relationships

Personal relationships between negotiators can decisively shape negotiation outcomes, for example, by finding areas of flexibility in each side’s position and identifying areas of potential cooperation for future rounds of negotiation. Indeed, some of the earliest successes in controlling nuclear weapons were born of strong personal relationships between U.S. and Soviet counterparts; George Bunn and Roland Timerbaev famously brokered a solution to a disagreement on inspection authority under the NPT while on a hike together above Lac Léman, breaching orders from both capitals instructing the negotiators not to compromise their initial positions.

The development of these relationships between negotiation counterparts is greatly streamlined in bilateral negotiations, given the number of repeat interactions between participants across the negotiating table. However, building interpersonal relationships can be more challenging in a multilateral context, as there are more actors involved and thus more relationships to develop.

Furthermore, personal relationships between negotiators can help keep the negotiation process going, even amidst a decline in the broader political relationship between adversaries. Even in cases when rapid deteriorations in ties between states has led to guillotining prominent

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communication channels, sustained lower-level communication may keep negotiations moving forward even in times of political turmoil. These relationships may also be topical, where states decide to suspend cooperation on all but the most vital issues, as was the case following the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014; the United States decided there would be no more “business as usual” with the Russians save for sustained cooperation on arms control, which was deemed too important to sacrifice in the name of political signaling.

**Virtuous Cycles**

These personal relationships can continue beyond individual negotiations and can have spillover effects into other bilateral or multilateral streams of effort. Regular contact between delegations fleshes out areas of potential cooperation as negotiators identify areas in which both sides may have a common interest, leading to waves of rapid successive treaty conclusions. Examples of these waves include the period of 1963-1968, which saw the conclusion of the Hotline Agreement, the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT), the Outer Space Treaty, and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). A second wave crested in the 1970’s, with the signature of the Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT) and the two documents born of the SALT I negotiations: The Interim Agreement and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM). Critically, these cycles produced successful outcomes in both multilateral and bilateral fora, reflecting the inherent linkage between arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament codified in the NPT. In the post-Cold War period, the United States and Russia had enjoyed a positive feedback loop encompassing both multilateral and bilateral agreements, with the successive signatures of START I, SORT, and New START bilateral agreements accompanying deep cooperation on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the P5+1. More broadly, repeated interactions across different efforts to control nuclear weapons can create a positive feedback loop in terms of atmosphere, and a willingness to be problem-solving instead of polemical.

The Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 effectively ended this cycle, which has proven immensely difficult to repair as numerous agreements have fallen victim to deteriorating ties between Russia and the United States. Despite limited accomplishments in controlling nuclear weapons since 2014—including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—US-Russian cooperation in this area has deteriorated. When efforts to control nuclear weapons are held hostage to geopolitical conflict, both bilateral and multilateral virtuous cycles become broken and any breakthrough on a given issue do not tend to restart a virtuous cycle.

**Multilateral Implications of Bilateral Agreements, Bilateral Aspects of Multilateral Agreements**

Beyond bilateral arms control, the U.S.-Russia relationship is also central to multilateral agreements. Successful multilateral negotiations have been facilitated by constructive working bilateral relationships of involved states, exemplified by Russia’s role in securing the survival of the JCPOA between the P5+1 and Iran. Between the Biden administration taking office in January 2021 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia played a constructive role in trying to repair the JCPOA. Although such cooperation has largely vanished,
it shows how patterns of bilateral interaction can create new possibilities in multilateral contexts, even if progress on a new bilateral agreement is not immanent.

Multilateral consensus is often achieved through an amalgamation of bilateral discussions---both between superpowers and with NNWS. The NPT’s history is replete with examples of US-Russian/Soviet bilateral coordination, from the co-chairs’ meetings during the treaty’s initial negotiations to instances of informal understanding that the superpowers would avoid polemics in review conferences. In addition, bilateral consultations with NNWS in anticipation of multilateral fora can give US negotiators a broad understanding of what commitments would or would not be acceptable to different states, providing negotiators greater flexibility in the actual negotiations. US bilateral consultations with NNWS in preparation for NPT review conferences have helped promote greater understanding of US goals and US flexibility among NNWS.

At the same time, bilateral arms control agreements can also be important evidence of movement towards shared multilateral goals. For example, U.S.-Russia bilateral arms control has served as the main barometer for major power adherence to the global disarmament goals established by Article 6 of the NPT. The achievement of New START helped facilitate a successful outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

However, the outcomes of multilateral agreements do not have clear implications for bilateral arms control. Although failure between counterparts in multilateral fora has not historically led to breakdowns in bilateral negotiations, success and progress in the context of multilateral NPT Review Conferences has not catalyzed greater US-Russia cooperation on bilateral arms control. The indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995 significantly limited non-nuclear states leverage to press the United States and Russia regarding their Article 6 commitments.

One Without the Other: Unraveling the NPT and Bilateral Arms Control

The NPT has served as the foundation for the control of nuclear weapons, linking disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation since its inception. Furthermore, the NPT codified nuclear pessimism as the established outlook of the nuclear order, implying that without substantial rules, the spread of nuclear weapons was likely, if not inevitable. At the same time, it did not prevent states that decided to go beyond its requirements to further control nuclear weapons—for example by negotiating nuclear weapons-free zones. These provisions combined with its near-universal acceptance allow the NPT to serve as a strong foundation for additional efforts in controlling global nuclear forces.

However, cracks in this foundation are deepening. The NPT has failed to reach consensus in two consecutive review conferences and U.S.-Russia bilateral arms control has rapidly and seriously deteriorated. There has never been an NPT review process without US-Russian/Soviet bilateral arms control talks also working towards the development of new limits and reductions. At the same time, a lack of leverage for non-nuclear weapons states (NNWS), combined with perceptions that the nuclear-haves are abandoning their Article 6 disarmament obligations raise questions as to how the NPT will cope with an increasingly fractured security environment.
While utmost effort should be placed behind finding new arms control options and maintaining collective global faith in the NPT, policymakers should consider why the NPT has served as such an effective and valuable platform for the control of nuclear weapons and whether it can survive without bilateral arms control efforts between the United States and Russia. Policymakers should also consider what kind of future platform would best serve the flexible arms control initiatives of the future. The existing system provides a number of key insights into what aspects should be preserved for the future. Specifically, it is important to have a cumulative, coherent architecture to avoid having a plethora of initiatives that compete with one another or duplicate efforts. The NPT has provided such a foundation thus far. Future efforts to control nuclear weapons should bear in mind how they relate to and coordinate with existing efforts.

**Lessons Learned**

A deepened appreciation for the linkages between the bilateral and multilateral efforts to control nuclear weapons in the last 70 years reveals a number of key lessons policymakers should act on in the near future, including the importance of personal relationship building, the need to engage parties beyond the P5, and the need to consider which pieces of legacy arms control and nonproliferation should be re-employed in future negotiations.

1. **Relationship building, especially at the lower levels of government and amongst rising professionals, is key to success.**

   Relationship building between negotiators is critical and serves a myriad of purposes, from insulating negotiations against downturns in diplomatic relationships, to providing ample flexibility for creative thinking and problem solving, and improving prospects for future negotiations. While maintaining existing relationships between high-level diplomats is important in the short- and medium-term, investment in relationship building across all levels of government, as well as amongst young professionals who will constitute the negotiating teams of tomorrow, will be critical for future success. The dearth of channels for dialogue between the United States and Russia and the United States and China will make future arms control even more challenging. Finding opportunities for lower-level diplomats to talk with their counterparts in other countries is crucial to necessary to create possibilities for future arms control and risk reduction. In this regard, multilateral fora can help maintaining such contact during downturns in bilateral engagement.

2. **Parties beyond the P5 should be engaged as partners and leaders in arms control and nonproliferation pursuits.**

   Although the US-Russian relationship has traditionally been central to both arms control and nonproliferation, NNWS can be partners in both. Particularly given Russia’s rejection of efforts to control nuclear weapons, encouraging NNWS’ leadership in such efforts can help bolster norms related to nonproliferation and risk reduction. The value NNWS place on New START can be an important source to build pressure on Russia to come back to the negotiating table, particularly if Russia ever wants to be accepted as a normal state again: Russia’s noncompliance
with and suspension of New START is a challenge not just bilaterally but for the global community. Promoting partnerships with and leadership from NNWS, however, requires sustained US engagement with both allies and non-allies to identify areas of common interest and support their leadership.

In addition, as U.S.-Russia bilateral arms control faces enormous challenges, the risk emerges that NNWS may perceive the NPT as no longer an acceptable bargain. This perception could motivate a wide spectrum of behavior, from states deciding to proliferate themselves as a hedge against future regional uncertainty to embracing other treaties, such as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) as the NPT’s successor. To avoid these future scenarios, NNWS should be engaged now as partners in risk reduction and when designing future agreements.

3. **Through flexibility and innovation, existing frameworks can address new challenges**

While strong frameworks like the NPT can provide long-lasting foundations and facilitate continued buy-in from states parties, flexibility in those frameworks is necessary to address nuclear threats in the face of external shocks like geopolitical shifts and new, disruptive technologies. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), for example, has been able to make progress even in the face of Russian obstruction by shifting to utilizing voting procedures more often. Although a shift from consensus decision-making to consensus-minus-one or supermajority voting procedures may not be possible or desirable in all multilateral fora, it may be necessary in many cases to produce concrete outcomes. Conversely, building multilateral norms around issues can help prevent erosion of existing bilateral commitments, even when bilateral processes cannot make further progress.

Existing bilateral and multilateral frameworks can be used creatively to address unprecedented threats. In the case of the 2013 destruction of declared Syrian chemical weapons stockpile, this was achieved through the use of underappreciated legal modalities in the CWC, combined with a new political agreement reached between the United States, Russia, and Syria through an ad-hoc process. Future frameworks might take lessons from existing flexible models to prepare the groundwork for future agreements not possible under contemporary circumstances, such as the CTBTO’s development of monitoring capabilities before a treaty was agreed and before it has entered into force. The CTBTO is also an exemplar in its ability to incorporate more advanced monitoring technologies as they become available, to enhance transparency.

Overall, bilateral and multilateral efforts to control nuclear weapons have been linked since their inception. Understanding the ways in which they shape one another is essential to effectively controlling nuclear weapons today and in the future.

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