

What Has Happened to Arms Control?¹

Introduction

While the major military powers of the world may not currently be in a state of systemic conflict, this does not mean that the most influential powers are not rivals or that their strategic interests do not collide occasionally. This is also true of the OSCE participating States. Furthermore, nowadays, Europe is at the centre neither of global power nor of global conflict. In this sense, the old continent has broken with five centuries of tradition. These two factors define the contours of military security in Europe at present.

Policy Challenges

Systemic Challenges and the System of International Security

Since the end of the Cold War, power asymmetries have increased in the international system. This has gone so far that the current system of international relations is commonly described as unipolar, particularly as far as international security is concerned. This unprecedented international environment has created a great need for arms control to adapt.

Interest in arms control has fallen as a result, particularly on the part of the country that has achieved such a concentration of military power and such a broad array of means of influencing international security. An essential precondition for strategically meaningful arms control is that the superior military power is committed to adopting it. This does not mean that unipolarity cannot emerge in a form that recognizes the role of arms control.

In a world in which there is no conflict between systems, there is also no strong inducement to put particular interests on the back-burner and unite large groups of countries around security measures such as arms control.

In a world that is largely globalized in terms of technology, economics, and culture, an international security system that carries an overwhelmingly regional legacy (except for non-proliferation measures such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, NPT; the Biological Weapons Convention, BWC; the Chemical Weapons Convention, CWC; supplier groups; and the Prolifer-

¹ This paper is based on the author's presentation on "Parameters for Future Security Cooperation Taking into Account the Existing Arms Control Obligations and Commitments in the OSCE Area" delivered at the Special FSC Meeting on Existing and Future Arms Control and Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in the OSCE Area, held in Vienna on 24 October 2007.

ation Security Initiative, PSI) leaves a lot to be desired. Measures to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and their delivery vehicles are essential, as they address a major global threat. It seems, however, that countering the proliferation of WMDs has become increasingly detached from other arms control measures. This has certainly been the view of some members of the current Republican administration in the US. Other arms control measures, most of which were developed in Europe, have the potential to be applied or imitated elsewhere. The introduction of parallel measures on other continents may result in some similarity (parallelism) among the world's various arms control regimes, but would not amount to globalization.

Currently, non-state actors have gained centre-stage in international security as terrorism has emerged as the main threat. To change the security situation it would be necessary to influence this type of actor. However, it is impossible to imagine agreeing upon arms control measures with terrorist groups. Arms control measures, therefore, which work at the level of inter-state relations, cannot currently address the world's most important security concern.²

Respect for international law has definitely increased overall since the end of the Cold War with the elimination of political regimes in the CSCE/OSCE area that often took legally nihilist positions. More recently, however, scepticism concerning the enforceability of legally binding documents has been growing in some circles. This is not to the advantage of arms control either.

The Geographical Shift in International Security and the Decline of Arms Control

Since the end of the Cold War, Europe has ceased to be at the centre of a global military confrontation and has gradually become a continent of peace, where the political agenda is dominated by matters other than security. During the Cold War, the Euro-Atlantic area was not only a locus of military confrontation, but also of arms control efforts. The shift away from Europe is thus also a shift away from the region with the richest arms control *acquis*. It was in this sense that arms control was conditional upon a conflict that, while global, was centred upon Europe. Although the East-West conflict of the Cold War era was not an armed conflict *per se*, it often gave the impression that it was.

In regions outside the Euro-Atlantic area, arms control has been largely confined to participation in global arms control measures. Although some re-

2 The organization "Geneva Call" aims to bring insurgent groups under the edifice of the anti-personnel landmine ban. The record of this initiative has demonstrated how difficult it is to attempt to address non-state actors on arms control matters.

gional arms control measures have emerged (such as confidence building in the border zones of Central Asia), they are still rudimentary and of marginal importance. There is thus no reason to expect that arms control in other regions will provide inertia for a general arms control “renaissance”.

Responses

When the Cold War ended, it left in place in Europe certain arms control arrangements and several formal institutions dealing with arms control. It was necessary to review the arrangements to decide if they should be scrapped, upheld, or adapted to fundamentally changed conditions. At the same time, the institutions created a body of people with a vested interest in the process.

The arguments put forward since the end of the Cold War can be grouped as follows:

1. The process of arms control did not end with the signing of instruments but also includes their implementation, verification, and the operation of the various forums that were established in relation to them (e.g. review conferences, various discussion and decision-making forums related to the START and INF agreements, the CFE and Open Skies Treaties and the Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures).
2. Negotiations that aimed to establish new arms control agreements continued regardless of the fundamental changes to underlying strategic relations. Several European arms control agreements were being negotiated or needed to be reviewed at the end of the Cold War. This included the discussions on limiting personnel strength under the CFE regime, the Open Skies Treaty, and a new package of CSBMs.
3. Partly as a result of objective necessity, partly as a result of a perceived need, there was movement to expand existing commitments to countries that were not parties to them. This was the case with regard to the CFE Treaty, for instance, which was originally confined to the members of the Cold War alliances, one of which was already moribund at the time of signing the treaty. The desire to do this took the form of calls for “harmonization” of arms control commitments in the CSCE/OSCE context. Although it was regarded as important to codify the harmonized commitments in the form of a treaty, little to nothing was done to put these commitments into practice. The bringing into force of the Adapted CFE Treaty may take care of a good part of this matter, as does expanding the circle of parties to the Open Skies Treaty.
4. Since the early 1990s, the adoption of arms control measures has frequently been considered as part of broad settlements to conclude major conflicts. The model for this is the 1995 Dayton agreement, which covers both confidence building and arms limitations. Although there

are not enough cases to substantiate whether this is the right venue for the future of arms control, it is certainly something that should be considered in relation to conflicts that might be “ripe for resolution”. As long as there remain some unresolved “frozen conflicts” in the Euro-Atlantic area, we will be unable to judge whether this area of arms control can prosper. The idea of post-conflict arms control has been mentioned most frequently in conjunction with the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a conflict apparently not “ripe for resolution”.

5. Measures have been considered that would have a direct bearing upon the security of people rather than exclusively that of governments. The limitation of man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS) is one relevant instance currently under consideration, and some legally non-binding documents have already been agreed upon within the OSCE framework. The OSCE participating States have recognized the responsibility of the Euro-Atlantic area in the production and spread of small arms and light weapons and agreed upon two documents.
6. Several measures have been introduced concerning the safeguarding and destruction of ammunition and stockpiles of small arms in a number of OSCE participating States. These are designed specifically for the countries in question and are often integrated in the activities of OSCE missions in the host countries. Although they represent extremely useful contributions to the security of some countries, they may not have acquired the symbolic importance that would be sufficient to recognize them as important prospective avenues of European arms control. This may also apply to the disposal of liquid rocket fuel.

The Arms Control Dilemma

In attempting to retain its relevance in international relations over the last decade and a half, arms control has been facing a dilemma. This stems from the fact that the underlying conflict that arms control aims to address has changed in terms of both its content and its geographic scope. Although the current conflict situation includes inter-state elements, its core is a conflict between states and non-state actors. This cannot be dealt with directly by means of arms control. It can, however, be influenced by inter-state measures, if states make a commitment not to assist any such non-state actors on their territory.

The first measures taken in response to the dilemma contributed to the survival of arms control in the 1990s and resulted in a larger number of arms control agreements being passed in that decade than in any other of the second half of the 20th century. It seems that the arms control agenda we knew, a set of legally or politically binding norms based on negotiations (they were

seldom unilateral or reciprocated unilaterally), has been largely exhausted. The fact that the area that has flourished best since the end of the Cold War – non-proliferation – gained autonomy and is generally regarded as only loosely associated with other bodies of arms control contributes to this.

The reaction of the arms control establishment was to seek to broaden the scope of arms control. The prime areas that they have attempted to develop have been co-operative measures on armaments such as the agreements on small arms and light weapons or on stockpiles of ammunition, defence sector reforms, and modernization “fostered” by leading democracies and their allies in various parts of the world. No doubt, they all have some relevance to arms control, but none of them fully resembles what is traditionally thought of under that name.

A further problem is that “soft” measures addressing small arms, light weapons, MANPADS, stockpiles of ammunition, and liquid rocket fuel are not considered by some states to be at the core of arms control. There appear to be two reasons for this: First, they do not have the symbolism that attaches to the limitation and reduction of heavy weapons. Second, in most cases, the measures are tailor-made and include an element of West-East assistance, and a transfer of knowledge and resources from the former to the latter. This is resented by Russia in particular. It would prefer a new European Monroe Doctrine that would forbid external interference in its traditional sphere of influence. It is clear, however that states favouring a full round of formal arms control negotiations want, in some sense, to turn the clock back. They identify arms control with negotiations on the reduction of large pieces of military hardware. By seeking to harmonize arms control commitments, some states give the impression that the security needs of each and every participating State are largely identical. This assumption is fundamentally unfounded.

The broadening of the scope of arms control has undermined its cohesion as far as both the methods applied and the desired outcomes are concerned. The shape of arms control has become unclear. This raises the question of whether it is only a linguistic convention to call some things and not others arms control – a habit born of the Cold War. The philosophical and historical questions of arms control remain: Either arms control is a wide-ranging, even all-embracing concept that can be filled with content as necessary, or it is a concept that belongs to a certain, specific historical constellation, namely the Cold War, in which case it has largely served its purpose.

This dilemma is exacerbated by new measures (both proposed and already agreed) that have made arms control a less autonomous component of international security. Arms control is increasingly brushing up against other issues of international politics, while security professionals working on arms control have to co-operate closely with other professional communities. Specifically, post-Cold War successes in the field of arms control have been linked to both humanitarian arms control and to export control, thereby in-

volving the humanitarian community³ and the business community, respectively. Purely military considerations are less prominent as a result. Not even broader security considerations could entirely free themselves of other influences.

European arms control has recently had to face a number of challenges. The history of arms control in Europe has been closely linked to the evolution of the CSCE/OSCE. It reached its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since then, the balance between the various dimensions of the OSCE has changed, and it is widely believed that the politico-military dimension has lost some of its relevance. However, this is not entirely justified. The more the activity of the OSCE is concentrated in missions, the more difficult it will become to separate activities that could be classified as belonging to different dimensions. With a greater focus on the multi-dimensional activities of the OSCE missions, the individual dimensions have become less important.

For the reasons given above, arms control in the OSCE has ceased to be about agreeing upon measures applicable to all 56 participating States that aim to reducing the numbers of large pieces of military hardware. This has given way to measures that aim to help some participating States to solve their security problems, focusing on specific practical matters. Irrespective of their actual importance, such measures are regarded by some as not being of sufficient symbolic importance to compensate for the shrinking significance of the politico-military dimension. This ignores the fact that, for instance, the sub-regional and bilateral measures agreed on the basis of the Vienna Document 1999 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures have certainly affected security relations in the Western Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean.

There has been a remarkable tendency for items on the arms control agenda to “change hands”, i.e. to pass from the OSCE’s sphere of competence to other organizations, whenever they gained significance, while issues that were not regarded as sufficiently important have remained within the politico-military dimension of the OSCE. This creates certain problems for relations between various institutions in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Current debates on European arms control are intrinsically linked to the future of the CFE process. It is understandable that some state parties to the CFE Treaty would like to end the current stalemate while at the same time using CFE to rebalance at least two dimensions of the OSCE (the politico-military and the human). Whether or not the best way forward is to dismantle the achievements of the past is open to question. It is certain, however, that breaking the stalemate would have some positive effects. It could also contribute to retaining military transparency and addressing sub-regional imbalances at a time when co-operation is giving way to a more complex set of

3 This could be perceived clearly in the negotiation of the anti-personnel land-mine convention. Humanitarian considerations prevailed over security concerns in a number of instances.

relationships that even includes elements of limited inter-state confrontation within the OSCE area.

The major reasons that underline the need to move forwards and bring closer the entry into force of the Adapted CFE Treaty do not mean that such a symbolic step should be considered the only prospect for European arms control. This is so obvious that even countries that have advocated bringing the treaty into force would like to follow it up with a new round of negotiations on conventional arms control. It seems that issues such as harmonization of arms control commitments, naval arms control, and rapid reaction forces could appear on the agenda of such talks. Whether there will be sufficient collective determination to move beyond the bringing into force of the Adapted CFE Treaty is a matter of speculation. The more it is emphasized that the CFE process is the cornerstone of European security, the more the importance and potential of other types of arms control measures are downplayed.

The post-Cold War evolution of arms control, and particularly the most recent developments, points to the importance of co-operative security relations in the Euro-Atlantic area. It seems that the spirit of co-operation has significantly weakened due to not always well-founded demands on the one hand and some stubborn positions on the other. It should be clear to each participating State that the OSCE, including its politico-military dimension, can function successfully only if the participating States are convinced that the Organization is there to help by fostering co-operation and promoting the co-operative spirit. This may require patience and empathy toward the positions of other participating States.

Conclusions

The prime conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that arms control is in a process of adjustment and relative decline. It has also become a largely professional matter that seldom finds its place at the top of the political agenda. If Europe, the region that has the richest arms control *acquis*, does not continue to develop this area, it will face difficulties in propagating its methods to apply *mutatis mutandis* elsewhere. This is a highly regrettable side-effect of the general decline of traditional (negotiated, inter-state) arms control.

It is a result of the rearrangement of international power relations that the conclusion of arms control agreements, which was a contributing factor to the international status quo, has vanished from the agenda. It would appear that symbolic arms control agreements would not affect the status of the leading global power. Others seem far more interested in them. This applies particularly to Russia, the largest successor state of the country whose status

and influence was traditionally associated with the initiation and conclusion of arms control agreements.

The lasting decline of arms control seems to be due to the coincidence of two sets of factors: the change in the security situation that resulted in the emergence of problems that could be affected only marginally by arms control measures, if at all, and the decline of other areas within which arms control played a relevant role. In the post-Cold War era, the world does not give arms control a position of prominence among the solutions to security problems. The decline of arms control has thus been primarily a result of objective factors.

In some cases, it has been aggravated by the reaction of the arms control establishment. It is not only generals who tend to fight the last war and prepare their plans accordingly. Those involved in arms control also tend to seek to avert the last conflict by means of measures already agreed rather than focusing on new challenges. If arms control could be shaped to contribute to post-conflict settlement, or, even better, if it could play a role in the prevention of conflict, it would regain some of its lost relevance. The words of the expert who wrote at the start of the post-Cold War era that arms control “must necessarily remain meaningless in a high tension environment, whereas in a low tension environment, it becomes superfluous”⁴ proved accurate. Arms control, in the narrow Cold War sense, is doomed at least for some time to come. Either it adapts to contemporary security needs – and then its focus should be on human security, addressing small arms, light weapons, ammunition stockpiles, MANPADS, liquid rocket fuel, and the like – or it will continue to focus upon the remnants of the past.

Future Trajectories

There is good reason to keep the objective, subjective, and incidental factors apart when analysing the prospects of arms control. There is no reason to assume that the objective factors will change any time soon. In other words, the dominant players and conflict types are likely to remain the same. With regard to subjective factors, however, change cannot be ruled out. Although new governments in major capitals of the OSCE area who are taking a fresh look at arms control are unlikely to bring about revolutionary changes or attribute a pivotal role to arms control, they may well feel less prejudice towards negotiated, legally binding security measures.

Europe may continue to explore the idea of “exporting” its arms control *acquis*, while dealing simultaneously with a number of ongoing issues with its own arms control agenda. It is unlikely that the inclusion of arms control within conflict resolution activities or its export to other continents will com-

4 James Ferguson, The Changing Arms Control Agenda: New Meanings, New Players, in: *Arms Control*, September 1991, p. 197.

compensate for the loss of political attention in the Euro-Atlantic area in the foreseeable future.

In the regional context, there is some hope that several sub-regions could gradually develop a security *acquis* with arms control as an integral component. This may be true of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf region. In South Asia, negotiations on a broad range of confidence-building measures may well be necessary. The regionalization of security in the Asia-Pacific area may also foster soft arms control processes. It is not certain, however, whether it will be possible to move the focus of arms control from the sub-regional to the regional context in the foreseeable future.

Overall, there is no reason to assume that the current role of arms control will change fundamentally in a lasting manner.