

Lessons Learned and Not Learned from Cold War Arms Control Negotiations

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Arms control is in crisis: the last remaining arms control treaty, the 2010 US-Russian New START, expires in February 2026 while substantive negotiations on a new treaty have not been held since 2011 except for two short-lived and inconclusive attempts. Lately, however, both Washington and Moscow have sent vague signals that new negotiations are possible. Whether they begin and whether they can yield results is highly uncertain, but the prospects seem a little less hopeless than half a year ago.

At this juncture, it may be advisable to recall some of the lessons learned during the Cold War, especially its second half, which, in hindsight, was the high point of arms control, as well as lessons that were not learned, but should have been.

Lessons Learned about Arms Control

Lesson No. 1

The first condition for successful negotiations is that negotiations must be pursued; if parties do not negotiate, nothing will be achieved. This may sound obvious, but it is not: in more than 20 years of Cold War negotiations (1969-1991), the United States and Russia spent only about five years NOT negotiating; yet in the three decades since the end of the Cold War, (1992-2025), there have only been about five years altogether OF negotiations.

The US-Russian Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) launched after the signing of New START in 2010 cannot count as negotiations: it involved rare (usually twice a year) one- or two-day high-level meetings – enough to exchange formal statements, but not for anything more. Negotiations should involve delegations meeting daily for weeks or months, as was the case during the Cold War, giving diplomats and military officials an opportunity to ask questions, provide clarifications, and eventually identify solutions. There have been two cases of such engagements in the last 15 years – the two countries created working groups for in-depth discussions first in the summer and early fall of 2020 and then in December 2021 – January 2022. The first came close to success, the other was promising but did not resume.

Negotiations are important for several reasons:

First, they create a better understanding of the other side's positions. No statement is ever enough – you need to ask questions and receive answers; you need to keep probing.

Second, they allow better understanding of the motivations behind a position. There may be cases – this happened more than once during START I talks – when a proposal was deemed unacceptable simply because the party making it did not quite understand the concerns of the other side; in-depth discussion helped reformulate the proposal in a mutually acceptable way.

Third, negotiations help develop personal relationships between negotiators that facilitate trust between them even when there is no trust between the countries.

Lesson No. 2

Negotiations should continue even when they do not move forward for an extended period: the political atmosphere may change for the better, and at such a time progress suddenly becomes possible. A good example is the test ban negotiations begun in the late 1950s: delegations continued to meet, even though there was no prospect for progress. Yet, after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis the deadlocked negotiations presented a welcome opportunity to engage in a much-needed cooperative endeavor resulting in a matter of months in the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty, the first substantive arms control treaty.

Lesson No. 3

When negotiations are deadlocked, it might be advisable to contemplate a new mandate to shed the burden of disagreements and conflicts. The Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) negotiations, which began in 1974, remained in a deadlock for a long time. To overcome it, in the middle of 1980s, parties negotiated a new mandate for what became Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) talks, which successfully concluded with a treaty in 1990.

Lesson No. 4

At a certain point negotiations tend to acquire their own dynamic. Like climbing a hill, the first stage is always difficult and slow, and compromises take time and effort. Once the top of the hill is reached, talks accelerate; the desire for a successful conclusion begins to overtake caution; and interagency decisions are made faster and usually in favor of compromises. This is one more reason why it is important to keep negotiations going and delegations meeting.

Lesson No. 5

Contrary to a widely held opinion, trust is not needed to launch or even conclude negotiations. In fact, the absence of trust is the reason to engage in arms control and to conclude legally binding verifiable treaties. Negotiators may build a degree of mutual trust between them, but this is not the same as trust between countries.

In this sense, negotiations in the time of crisis are not impossible, only somewhat more difficult to launch or conclude. In the end, their success or failure depends on the leaders' decisions, which may be made regardless of the political atmosphere. Paradoxically, the time right after a serious crisis may be particularly favorable for arms control as happened in 1963 or in the middle of the 1980s—adversaries seek to quickly stabilize the relationship by engaging in a constructive endeavor. One wonders whether the recent American and Russian hints at the intention to discuss arms control represent the same phenomenon. The two countries do not and will not trust each other in the foreseeable future, but this should not prevent them from engagement.

Lesson No. 6

Implementation of treaties – any treaty – is never smooth. There will be questions, doubts, concerns, suspicions; there may be real or suspected violations that need to be resolved. To address these, arms control treaties usually establish special bodies. These bodies are essential and must be used to the fullest. One of the reasons for the collapse of the INF Treaty was the failure of the United States and Russia to utilize the Special Verification Commission (SVC), which had been established to facilitate the implementation of that Treaty. Instead, they primarily resorted to episodic meetings and public statements. One cannot say whether the INF Treaty could have been saved in the end; we only know that one channel, specifically created for that purpose, was not utilized.

Lessons not Learned about Arms Control

Some important conditions for successful arms control were not learned during Cold War negotiations simply because certain things were taken for granted and did not know there was something useful to learn.

Lesson Not Learned No. 1

The greatest virtue in negotiations is patience. This should be obvious from lessons 1 and 2 above but often remains underappreciated – politicians and the public usually want to see results, and when negotiations drag on without agreement, pressure to end them begins to grow. Clarification of positions and identification of possible deals take time; patience is eventually rewarded.

Lesson Not Learned No. 2

In the past, shared interest was seen as the necessary and sufficient condition for arms control, but in fact arms control also requires political will and political decisions. Commitment to arms control used to be taken almost for granted and in the rare cases, when one or the other side sought to avoid negotiations, both domestic and international pressure was applied to change that stance. Only after the end of the Cold War did we come to realize commitment to arms control is far from guaranteed. The United States and Russia – as well as NATO and Russia – have had shared interest in arms control over the

past decade and a half, but negotiations have not even begun. Instead, we keep seeing gradual dismantlement of legacy arms control and confidence building regimes. The last treaty, New START, may expire as early as next February, and the last confidence building regime, the Vienna Document, is practically inoperative. There has been no political will on either side to do anything about this sorry state of affairs, and all we hear is complaints that the other side is uncooperative.

Lesson Not Learned No. 3

Many believe that arms control can and should be isolated (compartmentalized) from the broader political relationship so that it could be pursued irrespective of various crises and tensions. This is hardly feasible unless parties involved in negotiations decide to continue them despite the crisis. At least, the history of the Cold War arms control shows that the ups and downs of arms control could be directly traced to the ups and downs in the US-Soviet and NATO-Soviet relations.

The SALT I-ABM negotiations, which were pursued and successfully concluded during the war in Vietnam despite Soviet involvement on the side of North Vietnam (that involvement was greater than the US/NATO involvement on the side of Ukraine today) might seem an exception, but they were not. The Nixon Administration did not isolate arms control from the broader political context; rather, it limited the political impact of the war in Vietnam so that it could pursue détente, which included arms control talks.

An opposite example was the US decision, in the spring of 2022, not to resume meetings of working groups on arms control because of the Russian attack on Ukraine even though these working groups had demonstrated modest promise in December 2021 and January 2022 and Russia said it was ready to continue. The United States changed its attitude in 2023, but it was now Russia that refused to engage.

Just as arms control cannot be fully isolated from the broader relationship, it cannot mend relations. One only needs to recall how the United States reacted to the Soviet Union sending troops to Afghanistan in 1979 – the recently concluded SALT II Treaty did not prevent or even mitigate a major crisis in the bilateral relationship; instead, the Carter Administration withdrew the treaty from ratification in the US Senate. Similarly, the launching of INF and START I talks in 1981 and 1982, respectively, did not prevent what came to be known as the “second edition of the Cold War,” which included multiple crises, among them the war scare in the fall of 1983, when Moscow apparently took NATO’s Able Archer exercises as preparation for an impending attack. Instead, the Soviet Union “discontinued” negotiations and decided to resume them in 1985, after the most acute phase of the crisis was over. While arms control is essential for stability and may even be pursued in times of tension, its political impact will always be limited.

Lesson Not Learned No. 4

After the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union as well as NATO and the Warsaw Pact carefully avoided even a very limited direct armed confrontation fearing it could quickly escalate to global nuclear war; this caution considerably facilitated arms

control. Today, that fear is much weaker. Instead, one can detect widespread belief that conventional conflict between great powers will remain conventional and limited while escalation to nuclear use is not feasible. Where this belief comes from, is difficult to understand – it rather seems wishful thinking, but the propensity to risk direct conflict and downgrade threats of nuclear use continues to inform policy decisions in some quarters (or capitals).

Risk acceptance has arguably returned to the level characteristic for the 1950s, when the world found itself on the brink of a direct war between the East and the West several times. Nowadays, such risk is even more dangerous because escalation may be more difficult to control than was the case many decades ago. If caution and avoidance of direct armed confrontation is not restored to its past role in decision-making, it would be difficult to seriously contemplate arms control. Instead, we will likely see the propensity to threaten the use of force in a hope that the adversary retreats instead of escalating. Risky behavior is not safe and certainly is not conducive for arms control.

Lesson Not Learned No. 5

During the Cold War, commitment to arms control was informed to a large extent by the perception that geopolitical conflict is a normal state of affairs and will continue for many decades. Accordingly, key players sought to stabilize and regulate that conflict and ensure that it remained peaceful. Arms control was regarded as one of the key tools for achieving that. Today, the attitude is fundamentally different: both Russia and the West believe their conflict can and should be won in the near future and/or perceive the other side as seeking early victory. This means that the political and the psychological environment will not be conducive for arms control until all interested parties accept that the geopolitical conflict, which has revived in a new shape, will continue for a long time and requires concerted and cooperative efforts to stabilize it.

Lessons that we have not learned from the Cold War lead to an important – and troubling – conclusion. Namely, we seem to have entered a period similar to the early part of the Cold War, the late 1940s -1950s, when war was seen as nearly inevitable. If we do not quickly learn lessons that we have failed to learn, we are destined to repeat the same sequence – at least one confrontation bordering on the verge of nuclear war, then (if we manage to avoid it) realization of what could have happened, and after that, an understanding that the continuing conflict must be stabilized, arms race regulated, and war – even very limited – avoided.. Arms control was originally conceived of as a tool for stabilizing mutual deterrence; we need to return to that understanding. One can only hope that we are able to avoid the first stage, a crisis similar in intensity and danger to 1962, and instead are able to proceed directly to the arms control process that began in 1969.