

Post-Cold War Security: The Lost Opportunities

Rebecca JOHNSON

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union dominated security considerations from the end of the Second World War in 1945 until 1989. As countries of the Eastern Bloc emerged to claim independence and democracy, a new post-Cold War era was heralded. It was a heady time, full of optimism and possibility. George Bush spoke of a “new world order”. Some analysts wrote of the “end of history”; others claimed the triumph of democracy over totalitarianism. It was hoped that with removal of the paranoia and waste of the bipolar stand-off, it might be possible to implement collective security initiatives, such as those identified in the Brandt and Brundtland Commissions of the 1980s. Although the Soviet Union and Warsaw Treaty Organization (or Warsaw Pact) dissolved, the feared division into several new nuclear-weapon states was averted.¹ Whole classes of nuclear weapons were removed and others taken off alert. The decades of East-West nuclear confrontation appeared to give way to East-West cooperation, exemplified by arms control treaties and the Russian Federation’s participation in new security arrangements such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the economic consultations exemplified by the G-8.

In less than a decade, however, much of the optimism has been lost. The Russian Federation and some of its former Soviet neighbours are in economic and political turmoil. Asian tiger economies are collapsing, causing political upheavals across the region and threatening the assumptions and even stability of western financial institutions. The ‘grand coalition’ of forces against Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, of which George Bush was so proud, has given way to the long, drawn out war of nerves and attrition between UNSCOM and Saddam Hussein, fragmenting the early post-Cold War Security Council partnership and casting a long shadow over western security thinking throughout the 1990s. The implementation of some arms control agreements has been paralysed by ratification delays and disputes over resources, while further opportunities to reduce and control arms have been squandered. The achievement after so many years of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) was widely viewed as a success, thereby strengthening the international norm against nuclear proliferation; but barely eighteen months after it was signed, India and then Pakistan conducted several nuclear explosions, giving rise to serious concerns about the overall health and credibility of the non-proliferation regime.

Descriptively we are still in the first decade of the post-Cold War era, but conceptually the security preoccupations are already very different from the possibilities envisaged in the first few years after the Berlin Wall was brought down. In analysing what went wrong, I give priority to the implications for arms control policy debates and the choices for the United States, which, as the post-Cold War hegemonic power, had the greatest resources and opportunities to influence the future.

¹ Rebecca Johnson is Executive Director of the Acronym Institute and has published widely on the NPT, the CTBT and British nuclear policy.

The Cold War

The Cold War was characterized by East-West ideological and military rivalry, epitomised by the United States on one side and a Russian-dominated Soviet Union on the other. The United States spoke of liberty and democracy; the Soviet Union proclaimed peace and freedom. Both built up vast quantities of weapons, conventional and nuclear, in an extended arms race that caused economic hardship and environmental harm to sections of their own citizenry and allies. Through arms “aid”, covert intelligence activities and the bolstering of local (and often corrupt) elites, they fostered proxy wars in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Between them they sought to divide the world and portion out influence in international institutions, including the United Nations and the Conference on Disarmament. They invariably behaved as suspicious, almost paranoid, opponents: what one supported, the other would reject, with positions sometimes reversed at the next encounter. If the United States was prepared to offer a test ban or fissile material cut-off, the Soviet Union was suspicious that it would freeze a situation of Soviet inferiority; if the Soviets were ready to offer such measures, the United States was convinced that they had clandestine plans up their sleeves. Whenever the United States talked about verification, the Soviets feared that detailed and intrusive American proposals were a cover for spying; Soviet resistance to such intrusion was inevitably interpreted as protecting an intention to cheat. Within the United Nations Security Council, the United States had its close ally, Britain. France also was a member of NATO, although not militarily integrated and with its own strategic interests in Africa and Asia, which sometimes ran counter to Anglo-American positions. The Soviet Union and China had a complicated relationship, at times communist allies against the capitalist West, but also with their own territorial, political and ideological rivalries. The bipolar rivalry rendered the Security Council impotent and made arms control extremely difficult. Each of the superpowers had its own sphere of influence, which tended to distort political relations throughout the world.

Squandering the Post-Cold War Opportunities

At first, the post-Cold War era was perceived by many as a chance to dissolve or transform the military alliances representing the East-West Blocs, namely the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Certainly the Warsaw Pact disintegrated. But instead of NATO also giving way to an alternative structure for European or North Atlantic security, the Alliance sought to reconfigure its role and function. Retention of NATO as a nuclear or military alliance was not inevitable and may prove to be a costly mistake. The former Eastern Bloc states wanted acceptance into Europe and identification with the West primarily for the economic benefits, to help stabilize their fledgling democracies and to distance themselves from Russia. For many, joining the European Union was more attractive than NATO, which they hoped would be replaced by a new pan-European security architecture. Poland and the Czech Republic led the push to expand NATO only after the dithering of the European Union and the under-resourcing and marginalization of the OSCE’s forerunner, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, made clear that alternatives were not on offer.

The drive to tie NATO expansion to building up its military capabilities was spearheaded by a consortium of American arms manufacturers.² With its declared operational shift towards fulfilling the Petersberg humanitarian, conflict management and peace-making tasks identified by the Western European Union Council in 1992, NATO is increasingly presented in the garb of a humanitarian service. This helps with public relations and the maintenance of larger budgets than would otherwise be considered acceptable.³ The continued peacetime siting of nuclear weapons in seven European countries as part of nuclear sharing arrangements, as well as the reliance on potential first use (albeit as

a last resort), may be coming under pressure. Nevertheless, despite having no comparable adversary, NATO is still being built up and modernized as a pre-eminently military and nuclear alliance. With its nose rubbed daily in the inadequacies of its own conventional forces, Moscow's response to NATO expansion and its perception of increased instability and threat on its southern flank has been to reassert the importance of its nuclear forces (as a force equalizer rather than power projection) and drag its feet on arms control.

The period from 1987 to 1995 was immensely important for arms control. Following the 1987 Treaty on Intermediate Nuclear Forces in Europe (INF), came START I and II and the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. The Chemical Weapons Convention was concluded and signed, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was indefinitely extended, and negotiations on the CTBT were put underway. In these negotiations, the American-Russian bilateral relationship was key. Many problems were discussed in high-level summits and ongoing bilateral negotiations in order to clear the way for presenting a common front. With regard to the NPT, there was a joint four-power position in 1995, as exemplified by collectively stated policies on security assurances to non-nuclear-weapon states and a united front in favour of indefinite extension of the NPT. China was a little off to one side. Having joined the NPT in 1992, and after participating in P-5 talks in the margins of the CTBT, China was more integrated into the discussions than ever before, but still with important differences on issues such as no first use, unconditional security assurances and "peaceful" nuclear explosions.

By 1995, many positive aspects of American-Russian post-Cold War cooperation were unravelling. There appear to be several reasons for this. Focusing for the purposes of this paper on those related to security and arms control, the most important were: NATO expansion, American ambitions to deploy theatre and strategic missile defence systems, and the Russian Federation's apparent lack of cash and resources for dismantling weapons and facilities and for rendering its crumbling nuclear infrastructure less vulnerable to accident, theft or terrorism. The Clinton Administration's early enthusiasm for arms control and bipartisan assistance programmes such as Nunn-Lugar came to be stymied after 1994, when the Republicans won a majority in Congress. With the Senate Foreign Relations Committee now chaired by a long-time opponent of arms control, Jesse Helms, the Republicans began to hold up ratifications and funding and to bargain for *quid pro quo* financing of military programmes. Their projects included ambitious plans for missile defence and stockpile stewardship, holding open the option of the continued (and destabilizing) modernization of nuclear weapons systems.

Russian negotiators in Geneva and New York at times complained of being taken for granted by the United States, a consequence of their "policy partnership" that they had not expected. They were angry not to have been properly consulted over key decisions during the CTBT that disrupted or pre-empted the P-5 talks, most particularly the August 1995 decision on zero yield.⁴ The Russians were very sensitive about losing their position as a main player and considered that the United States was overlooking their interests because of their declining economic and military clout. At the same time, the United States appeared to be looking more towards China, perceiving it both as a principal player and (at least in some quarters) as a growing potential threat.

Soon after the euphoria of "winning the Cold War", military planners were under pressure to produce a peace dividend by cutting back on forces, arms and expenditure. There were calls for the money so released to be directed into providing better resources for health, education, inner-city poverty and environmental clean-up. The 1992 Rio Conference and growing international concerns about climate change and environmental degradation gave greater prominence to analyses that considered security in a wider context, where cooperation rather than confrontation would provide more appropriate responses.⁵ It might have been hoped that such thinking would percolate into security planning, prompting a reassessment of priorities and resource allocation. But no: in place of the Soviet threat, the Pentagon planners discovered the pernicious threats of "uncertainty", including "asymmetric warfare and smaller scale contingencies".⁶

Old Answers to New Security Challenges

The commonly identified “new security challenges” include the “proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the growth of ethnic nationalism and extremism, international terrorism, and crime and drug trafficking.”⁷ On the one hand, such reassessments provided arguments for a more flexible force structure, as expressed in the 1997 United States Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR), and in the United Kingdom Strategic Defence Review, Chinese Defence White Paper and French restructuring decisions, all of which were issued in mid-1998. Under the rubric of “uncertainty” calculations, however, Pentagon planners seem to have elevated worst-case scenarios and hypothetical risk assessments to the basis for planning without adequately distinguishing between assumptions of technical access or feasibility and any actual likelihood of operational acquisition, including motivation, intention, funding, infrastructure and so on. Having emerged pre-eminent from the long Cold War, American planners seem fixated by their military vulnerability against much weaker foes. The QDR requires that American forces should alone be able to fight and win two major theatre wars “nearly simultaneously”, never mind the implausibility of such a scenario in the post-Cold War geo-strategic context. As a result, military expenditure and force structures are to be maintained at levels equivalent to 77% of the average at the height of the Cold War (1976–1990). The resulting dynamic is a “continuous, solitary arms race in which the United States labours to outdistance its own shadow.”⁸

It may well be that access to weapons of mass destruction is greater now than during the Cold War. Some analysts make a strong case for an increased post-Cold War terrorist threat, classifying groups with ethnic, religious or millennium (apocalyptic) motivations for seeking to acquire and use chemical, biological, radiological or possibly nuclear weapons to inflict mass casualties and disruption. It would no doubt be prudent for the United States, as a potential prime target of such attacks (though as likely to originate domestically as internationally), to devote research, policy planning and resources for limiting or mitigating the risks and consequences. What the uncertainty hawks have failed to demonstrate, however, is a plausible scenario in which modernized nuclear forces, theatre and ballistic missile defence, or a heavily armed and enlarged NATO contribute towards deterring or dealing with international terrorism, drug trafficking, crime and extremism. Yet it is in such Cold War military programmes that most of the money and planning are going. And this build-up of American forces is contributing to Russian and Chinese threat perceptions, which are, in turn, influencing their defence planning.⁹ A plausible danger on which the hawks appear to be silent is that of fulfilling their own expectations. Programmes to insure the United States against implausible but possible worst-case scenarios, combined often with hostile rhetoric as part of America’s highly public and partisan competition for votes and funding, may be viewed as very real security threats to defence planners in the Russian Federation or China, acutely aware of their relative military vulnerability.

Recent statements or reviews from all the nuclear powers testify to the operational assumption that nuclear weapons will continue to underpin defence and deterrence for the foreseeable future. In keeping with uncertainty planning, American targeting policies are apparently being redefined and made adaptive, incorporating threats from biological and chemical weapons (or at very least, a “policy of ambiguity” about such non-nuclear threats). From dealing with the weapon-rich environment of Cold War threats, American nuclear forces are apparently being reconfigured to respond to the multipolar, post-Cold War’s target-rich environment.¹⁰ The Russian Federation, now faced with

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demoralized and ill-equipped military forces and inadequate conventional weapons, has turned completely away from Gorbachev's vision of a nuclear-weapon-free world by the year 2000, to assert the necessity of nuclear weapons. China's White Paper is more ambiguous. China continues to set forth its reliance on nuclear weapons for defensive purposes, while calling for negotiations on a nuclear weapon convention and promoting unconditional prohibition of the first use of nuclear weapons. As the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in May 1998 showed, nuclear weapons are still perceived as the pre-eminent currency of power and prestige.

Arming Uncertainty

Where the Cold War rested on East-West military and ideological rivalry, the initial post-Cold War optimism posited more collective and cooperative security arrangements and an opportunity for new security thinking. This positive concept turned out to be very short lived, and by 1995 the dominant policy imperative had already shifted towards new threat assessments, targeting strategies and justifications for high levels of military readiness. The multipolar world is now portrayed not as an opportunity for collective security, but as a dangerously unstable mix of disintegrating economies and over-armed ethnic and regional warlords with ambitions, grudges or religious delusions of divine dominance. Neither hot nor cold, the post-Cold War era seems to have left the pre-eminent military power, the United States, hedging its bets against any and all wild card and worst-case scenarios involving sub-national or state actors.

Pentagon planners have manoeuvred the United States into "tepid war" readiness for a resurgent Russian threat if the Russian Federation disintegrates into anarchy or lurches into Zyuganov-type communist reversion or Zhirinovskiy-type nationalism. At the same time, China's growing confidence and Islamic fundamentalism are being assessed as future military threats. The experience with Saddam Hussein has fuelled a security approach in which rogue states are very high on the agenda, with North Korea, Iraq, Iran and Libya all viewed as potential proliferators or supporters of terrorism. It is, of course, important to be prepared for the worst, but the proposed defences and responses should be appropriate in approach and magnitude to the risks and threats. Instead, domestic, partisan and financial interests have abetted the modernization of nuclear and military forces and missile defences demanded by a faction within the Pentagon and the Republican Party, allied to the powerful arms lobby.

Nuclear and conventional doctrines and forces in the West (with the inclusion of a first wave of former Eastern Bloc states) are being reconfigured, ostensibly to meet threat assessments that prioritize terrorism and fundamentalism or respond to humanitarian crises, but still with heavy emphasis on throwing resources into traditional attempts to achieve military supremacy. Over-reliance on military perceptions has already resulted in the triumph of short-term interests over long-term understandings. Military expenditure has been reduced, but not by very much. As the end of the Cold War resulted in pressure to cut domestic defence requirements, the requirement for applicant states to NATO to build compatible military forces has been one area for expansion by western (especially American) defence industries. Even as key Islamic states are demonized in defence analyses, western arms manufacturers have continued to target countries in the Middle East for lucrative arms sales, often using taxpayers' money as sweeteners for further deals. Concerns about the destabilizing effects of military sales, especially in vulnerable regions, have yet to be translated into effective policies to curb the powerful arms manufacturers in the dominant countries. In 1996, for example, the United States dominated the global arms market with a 55.2% share, followed by France and Britain, each with over 12%, and with the Russian Federation and China further behind, yet not insignificant.¹¹ In the wake of the successful campaign to put landmines on the arms control agenda, international concerns about small arms and

small wars are growing, but not enough yet to translate into policy that would make a dent in the profits of the main weapons producers.

Conclusion

The United States and some of its G-7 allies, including Britain, France and Germany, must bear a large share of responsibility for policies that have squandered the post-Cold War opportunities and reinvigorated narrowly military and nationalistic dominated concepts of security. Domestic problems in the United States (not least the Republican majority in the Senate) caused a failure to offer constructive leadership and adequate financial partnership to assist in dismantling and disposing of the legacy of the Cold War nuclear and chemical arms races. Though the Clinton Administration's instincts on arms control were laudable, the President has proved too weak or distracted to push his declared foreign policy objectives through a Congress that has veered schizophrenically between isolationism and domestic self-obsession. Nor has the Administration coordinated its own plethora of security experts to offer an alternative to the paranoid vision promoted by the uncertainty hawks.

Although the American Right clearly viewed the collapse of the Soviet Union as a product of the "negotiating from strength" posture of the United States, future security thinking should have muted the response of "triumphalism" and promoted policies of partnership and mutual security. The reification of a Fortress Europe mentality, with enlargement of the European Union and NATO, has reinforced barriers not only against the Russian Federation but also against poorer regions to the south and east of Europe, which will prove to be counterproductive in the long term.

To pull back from the insecurities of tepid but debilitating and destabilizing conflicts, it will be necessary to reorient defence and foreign policies to address the causes more effectively. The overriding priorities of the new security debate should be dealing with the causes and consequences of war, including international poverty and inequity, environmental degradation and climate change, over-population, resource allocation and the global challenges of famine, food shortages, and scarce resources of water and energy. These are all security threats in their own right. They also contribute to some of the most intractable political and regional conflicts. It is likely that if environmental conditions and global poverty worsen in the next two to five decades, they may precipitate acute shortages, civil unrest and various small "regional" wars, with a risk of international escalation. New threat assessments that highlight the rise of nationalism and religious and ethnic intolerance and conflict may be correct, but it also has to be recognized that territorial claims, unemployment and the fight for scarce resources are generally linked with such "identity" conflicts. Regional problems, if left unmanaged and unresolved, could pose serious security risks, with political chaos, migration, refugees, economic disruption and the risk of the conflict spreading. Globalization and the fragmentation of cultural and group identities are interlinked aspects of the same security threat, in which economic inequity is both a cause and effect.

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In terms of arms control, the non-proliferation regime needs to be reinforced, which will require: the reinvigoration of the START process; immediate steps, such as taking nuclear forces off alert; and more emphasis on disarmament by all the nuclear weapon possessors, including the safe and permanent dismantlement and destruction of weapons of mass destruction and the manufacturing

capabilities associated with them. The 1997 Ottawa Convention banning landmines offers a positive example of how alliances of citizens, NGOs and smaller nations acting collectively could accomplish a great deal against the wishes of the larger states, but there is still a long way to go before the big producers get the message. Global arms production and sales are still dominated by a handful of countries. Unless these are drastically reduced by international agreement and by heavy financial penalties on the manufacturers, it is likely that domestic defence industries will be fuelling the conflicts and war-fighting capacities that national defence policies present as future threats and dangers.

The opportunities of the post-Cold War era have been squandered and already there is little room left for new security thinking to take root in policy and planning. The persistence of the Cold War mentality and the unenlightened self-interests of arms manufacturers that had grown fat on the Cold War arms race have ensured that the security focus has remained dominated by the military mindset, with new and diverse threats wheeled in. By failing to design and build a more cooperative post-Cold War architecture to benefit global security, the United States and its allies may not only be squandering the post-Cold War opportunities but also may end up creating the future adversaries and risks they seek to defend against.

Notes

- ¹ Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine were persuaded to transfer the considerable nuclear arsenals on their territory to the Russian Federation and to join the NPT as non-nuclear-weapon states.
- ² Joanna Spear, *Bigger NATO, Bigger Sales*, *The World Today*, November 1997. The author would like to thank Lorna Richardson for her help in researching arms sales and the development of the arms trade during the post-Cold War period.
- ³ See, for example, the sections devoted to NATO in United Kingdom, *Strategic Defence Review*, London: HMSO, 1998.
- ⁴ During 1994 and 1995, the nuclear-weapon states conducted high level talks on the CTBT's scope, in which the Russian Federation hoped for agreement on a low yield threshold. With the French resumption of nuclear testing, the political climate changed and the United States decided to bypass the threshold negotiations and support a "true zero yield" test ban. Clinton's announcement of the zero yield decision on 11 August 1995 looked as if it had been coordinated with France, but came as an unpleasant surprise to Moscow, which complained that it had not been consulted.
- ⁵ Another example of the United States unwillingness to understand the new threats and change its economic mindset and security thinking was painfully illustrated at the Kyoto Climate Conference in 1997, in which its approach contrasted badly with their approach in Rio in 1992.
- ⁶ National Defence Panel (United States), *Assessment of the May 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review*, 15 May 1997.
- ⁷ *New Labour: Because Britain Deserves Better*, The Labour Party Manifesto, London, 1997.
- ⁸ Carl Conetta and Charles Knight, *Inventing Threats*, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March/April 1998.
- ⁹ In identifying the factors of global and regional instability, China's 1998 White Paper refers to "local conflicts caused by ethnic, religious, territorial, natural resources and other factors" but considers the "main source of threats" to be "hegemonism and power politics", including the enlargement of military blocs and a residual "Cold War mentality". *China's National Defence*, published by the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Beijing, July 1998, extracts reprinted in *Disarmament Diplomacy* 29, August/September 1998.
- ¹⁰ Hans Kristensen, *Targets of Opportunity*, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September/October 1997.
- ¹¹ SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 200.