

Arms control: forever Cinderella?

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The resemblance between the fate of arms control and disarmament (as distinct from non-proliferation) in recent years, and Cinderella in the fairy tale, is at least threefold. Though undoubtedly virtuous and attractive when looked at in a good light, arms control has been pushed aside, and sometimes openly insulted and bullied, by more than one important country acting in the style of the “ugly sisters”. Second, just as Cinderella was forced to wear dusty rags, arms control has been starved of resources and attention (and too often, of the best human capital) within the overall spectrum of security action. Third, such consolation and progress as arms control has enjoyed have often been found among partners who are likewise disadvantaged, humble and exposed to suffering. Among the few areas where arms control has witnessed continuous dynamic development are the down-to-earth issue of limiting inhumane and indiscriminate weapons and the task of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) after conflicts in weak states.

One set of reasons for this has already been much analysed: namely the attitudes of great powers, who have appeared since the 1990s to be less concerned about restraining and dissuading each others’ military build-ups and more interested in freedom to optimize their own capacities for conflict intervention and the combating of non-state enemies like terrorists. In these latter contexts weapons have ceased to be seen as a danger per se or a necessary evil, but are regarded more as a legitimate, indeed essential, tool in the “proper” hands. To remove them from the “wrong” hands or stop them arriving there in the first place, the preferred methods have been *coercive*—unilateral denial or forceful destruction—rather than *cooperative*—the negotiation of mutual, identical or balanced restraints. The focus on non-state enemies has further undermined the traditional expedient of arms regulation by treaty, since international legal instruments are not well-designed to deal with such actors. At the political level these trends have been encapsulated in specific events like the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the latest actions of the Russian army in Georgia, which have divided world opinion and made it harder to sustain the sense of common values and purpose on which successful regulation needs to be based.

Since many others have written eloquently on these topics, the present commentary is not going to pursue further the question of who has mistreated arms control and why. Nor is it going to suggest that all will be solved—as it was for Cinderella—by a magical transformation and the arrival of a handsome prince. True, the next president of the United States will have a chance to signal a new start in this as in other fields; but he will be doing so in a difficult environment of new East–West as well as

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North–South tensions, where arms control is unlikely suddenly to become anyone’s first priority and where the trust needed for major progress will take some time to build.

The more unconventional question to be raised here is: has Cinderella herself become too attached to the ashes? Has arms control in some sense helped to paint itself into a corner? At least two lines of argument could be developed on this. One is that there has perhaps been too much intolerance on both sides between advocates of arms control *pur et dur* and the new coercive/cooperative school.

Has arms control in some sense helped to paint itself into a corner?

Certain new approaches developed by states and institutions have been based on objective analysis of the treaty method’s shortcomings, and have tried to preserve such values as self-restraint and mutuality, openness and the non-zero-sum enhancement of security. No one gains from rejecting these as “not really arms control”, and it is high time to look instead for some kind of synthesis between the best of both the old and the new. Part of such a fresh start would be to find ways of enlisting “good”, or at least compliant, non-state actors as part of the defence against destructive ones—and to search for regulatory methods that do make sense in a non-Westphalian setting.

The second question, posed in the rest of this text, is more general. Has arms control done enough to show its relevance to the broader concepts of security emerging since the end of the twentieth century, and to the challenges that seem most crucial for mankind in the twenty-first?

Take one example: the new preoccupation with “human security” and with building systems of security governance (after conflict or as part of more peaceful national transformations) that guarantee the rights and welfare as well as the physical survival of the citizen. This powerful concept has inspired several new lines of practical security thinking, including the call for more frequent international intervention inspired by a “responsibility to protect” (which of course demands more available forces with more weapons) and a focus on blocking flows of small arms and light weapons (SALW) that produce the greatest casualties in intra-state warfare. It pushes toward greater sophistication in post-conflict peacebuilding, where the need for security sector reform (SSR) to create viable, transparent and just central authorities has been understood for some time, and understanding is now dawning of the need to (re-)establish viable, just and self-sustaining economic conditions as well. Is the relevance of arms control in this fast-developing field really exhausted by SALW restraints, successful DDR within the conflict area, and an SSR policy that leaves the territory with a democratic army dedicated to peacekeeping?

These are all good things for the post-conflict nation itself: but they can leave gaps and even imbalances from a wider security viewpoint. A recovering or reformed state that aims to play a responsible part in global society should be advised that a good defence policy also includes *permanent* efforts for military self-restraint, arms control and disarmament. Nowhere in the world can a strong national defence be created in a vacuum, without considering the effect on neighbours and local security dynamics. Rebels, terrorists and SALW trafficking centres thrown out of one country can and do re-establish themselves next door. DDR and SSR programmes can easily overlook the need to make new regimes watertight also against possible long-range smuggling of weapons of mass destruction. Disarmament focused only on SALW can miss the destabilizing effect and human destruction produced by larger weapons systems. Outside aid for SSR can slide toward actual military assistance to the new regime, which—particularly if it reflects goals more important for the giver than the recipient, like global anti-terrorism efforts—can easily get out of proportion, alarm neighbours, and perhaps lead to abuse of the new equipment for internal repression.

In any continent, “security in one country” is just as hard to sustain as “communism in one country”, and weak states above all need stable relations with their neighbours. Europe’s nations have shown how good neighbourliness can be built by undertaking active military tasks together, notably for peacekeeping. But Europe’s peace from the 1950s to the end of the twentieth century was also

grounded in a complex web of conventional and nuclear arms control agreements and codes of confidence-building measures, governing friends and potential opponents alike. The decay of that system in Europe since 2001 has led to results that have made even the rich, “strong” states of the West suddenly very nervous about their own safety, facing a resurgent Russian Federation that now in its turn finds arguments to disregard restraint. In other regions of the world that start off with, so to speak, a much greater arms control deficit, it seems reckless to believe that local rivalries and the divisive impact of outside interventions can be contained short of open war without any effort at all to discuss reciprocal arms limitations and clarify regional codes of conduct. It is great news that Iraq in 2008 ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, but why was this thought of—or why did it become possible—only five years after Saddam Hussein fell?

There is of course a larger argument about armaments and human security, based on the eternal “guns versus butter” trade-off. According to the *SIPRI Yearbook 2008*, military spending in Africa has increased by 51% *in real terms* during the 10 years since 1998, and slightly faster in North Africa despite the fact that that is not where the conflicts have been. Spending in South Asia has risen by 57%, in Oceania by 45%, in the Middle East by 62% and in South America by 38%. To take Africa in more detail, some of the rise derives from military reform and local peacekeeping, but in other cases spending seems related to actual or potential conflicts, ambitions for regional leadership and—significantly—the disposal of new oil wealth, which also explains some current steep rises among Latin American, Middle Eastern and post-Soviet countries.

It would be wrong to criticize these countries’ choices in some top-down and West-centric way, especially when by far the single biggest factor inflating military expenditure worldwide since 2001 has been US spending. But another set of statistics about how countries prioritize the various aspects of their public spending is thought-provoking. On average, the world’s rich countries spend three times as much on health as they do on defence and nearly three times as much on education. The *SIPRI Yearbook 2007* calculates that the world’s low-income countries spend slightly less on health than on defence—an average of 2.1% of gross domestic product against 2.5%—and only 50% more on education than on defence. Those last proportions have been improving since 1999 but only slowly. The final part of this equation is to note that citizens of poor countries are not only more likely to die from conflict violence than citizens of rich ones, but are many times more likely to die of disease, hunger and other effects of poverty than they are to die by violence. What that adds up to is that the effect of defence spending in squeezing out other expenditure becomes much more serious the poorer a country gets. Of course much the same problem arises when rich countries make primarily military inputs into poor ones, pouring more effort into military operations than development aid.

These are hardly new problems, but in the early twenty-first century they need to be seen together with the evidence of new instability and extreme fluctuations in the prices of energy, food, and perhaps soon other commodities. Not only do such macro-crises greatly aggravate the riddle of proper resource use for all nations, and in the worst case perhaps help to trigger new conflicts, but they have the potential to combine with defence in a vicious circle. If a country is earning more oil money and profitably exporting food it is almost always tempted to put some of its gains into military equipment. If it lacks energy and food and fears that it might have to fight to protect what it has and to get more, it will be driven to greater defence efforts even while it can afford them less. If it is relatively prosperous but fears it might be swamped by climate refugees and famine refugees, it will probably invest more at least in barricading its borders. All this hardly helps the chances of the world’s handling the increased shortage of and competition over vital resources—complicated and aggravated by climate change—in a peaceful, cooperative, just and lawful way. There is also a vicious sub-circle in the fact that military forces as such eat up disproportionate amounts of energy and have heavy carbon footprints. If we accept that importing luxury fruits from the other side of the world is

not helping global survival, what should we say about sending troops halfway around the world for sometimes quite small, local tasks?

The point about asking such questions is not to pretend to answer them. It is to suggest that if we want to free Cinderella from her dusty hearth without waiting for a prince, arms control needs to break out of the niche(s) it has been pushed into by others' neglect and—maybe—its own traditionalism. The questions raised here about the relevance of arms restraint to peacebuilding, regional cooperation, human development, new global economic instability, and climate change cover only part of the potential interface between the “big idea” of arms control and the hottest topics of the twenty-first century. Building such connections can be seen as a policy and philosophical challenge, but it is also about reaching out for contact between the elites, non-governmental organizations, international institutions and specialized forums involved. Cinderella does not need to be left “home alone” from the ball unless she wants to be.