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Arms Control and Disarmament: Adjusting to a New Era

by Christopher A. Ford[1]

This latest *ACIS Paper* publishes Assistant Secretary Ford's remarks on May 20, 2020, as the keynote speaker at an event commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Sandia National Laboratory's Cooperative Monitoring Center. He offers thoughts on some of the most critical challenges the public policy community is facing regarding how diplomacy in arms control and disarmament can contribute to global security. How we adapt our approaches to a changing security environment is perhaps the most important and potentially consequential decision diplomats have faced since the height of the Cold War.

Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for inviting me to speak to you – even if it must be through this video link. I always enjoy engaging with the great people who work at our national laboratories, and it is certainly an auspicious occasion to celebrate the Cooperative Monitoring Center's quarter century of contributions to United States and to international security.

For this keynote address, I thought I would explore with you how we at the Department of State are trying to bring new thinking to bear on some of the most critical challenges facing the public policy community: how arms control and disarmament diplomacy can constructively contribute to U.S. and to global security.

Matters of arms control and disarmament policy, after all, have long presented policymakers with special challenges. Because weapons of mass destruction issues – and particularly matters related to nuclear weapons policy – raise existential questions of human survival, while simultaneously being linked to critical challenges of national autonomy in the face of intimidation and potential aggression, they are policy matters of inescapable concern to every citizen and frequently generate understandably strong feelings. Yet they are also matters involving sometimes extraordinarily arcane technical questions and game-theoretical challenges, which can be baffling to non-experts even while sometimes hiding unwisdom behind a technocratic façade.

In historical terms, moreover, questions about how we approach nuclear weapons policy are still matters of collective human first impression. They are also areas in which enormously consequential decisions must be made with radically incomplete information, which is frustrating and challenging, but also in some sense merciful. We have no control studies of what would happen if *different* courses of action were taken, nor – happily – any examples to learn from of *failed* nuclear deterrence and the descent to nuclear warfare. (When the seminal U.S. nuclear weapons theorist Herman Kahn was once criticized by U.S. military officers unhappy at being lectured on nuclear strategy by a

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bespectacled, overweight, pencil-pushing civilian, he shot back: "How many thermonuclear wars have *you* fought recently?" In this arena, as Kahn admitted, everybody is thankfully just a theorist.[2]) These are among the most difficult policy questions, even on the best of days.

Such challenges are at their most acute, however, when they arise in periods of significant geopolitical change. To the degree that nuclear weapons policies – and approaches taken in the related fields of arms control and disarmament, which attempt to use diplomacy to preserve the peace and to mitigate nuclear risks as much as possible – make sense, they do so *in the context of* the particular global security environment that decision-makers happen actually to face. (Few strategies in this respect, one imagines, make sense entirely *a priori*. The details always matter.) The ways in which we adapt our approaches to changing permutations of that security environment represent perhaps the most important and potentially consequential decisions presented by statecraft at any time since the height of the Cold War. For this reason, it is of great importance that we think carefully about how we respond to the significant geopolitical shifts that are underway.

I. The New Competitive Context

So what are the shifts we now face? Many expected the post-Cold War era to be one of transnational or post-national opportunity: a time in which the great power contests of the past could be put behind us. And indeed it did, for a time, seem to be living up to that promise.

Some politicians spoke of the emergence of a "new world order," for instance, while some scholars suggested that the resolution of the Cold War ideological contest had left liberal democracy as the only legitimate system and presumptive "end state" of human governance. Europe set about integrating itself into ever-tighter variations of Union, and began also to bring many of the former states of the Warsaw Pact and the former Soviet Union into its fold – an approach also followed by the Cold War-winning NATO alliance itself. New agreements were reached to eliminate the majority of the nuclear weapons that the superpowers had aimed at each other for decades, to prohibit entire classes of weaponry (*e.g.*, chemical weapons and antipersonnel land mines), and to try to ban nuclear testing. Moreover, building on ideas that had been gestating since the Helsinki Final Act of the 1970s, a global criminal court was established, while international legal scholars debated the international community's right (or obligation) to protect the citizens of countries from their own governments. Even the intractable problems of the Middle East seemed briefly to be on the mend, with negotiations between longtime Israeli and Palestinian antagonists and the establishment of a Palestinian proto-state, while Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland also buried the hatchet.

Free trade agreements blossomed among the major powers, and a newly export-focused China was embraced and admitted into the World Trade Organization, despite the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) massacre of its own citizens protesting for democracy on Tiananmen Square, as an expression of the world's hope that this embrace would help transform China into a more rule-abiding and responsible power. All in all, the era's globe-spanning financial markets, industrial supply chains, and commercial markets – not to mention the development of a truly globalized information space that opened up vast new human communicative and interactive possibilities largely independent of national borders, through the Internet – seemed not just to be producing unprecedented growth but more generally to be tying the world together into a single, cosmopolitan, neoliberal whole. Or so we told ourselves. Domestically, politicians of many stripes and in a growing number of countries increasingly embraced this seeming neoliberal consensus, suggesting for a time that the "end of history" pundits may have been correct.

To be sure, that "new age" had its crises, many of them enormous – including an East Asian debt crisis, genocide in Rwanda, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and violent ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia that led to NATO's military intervention. After the disappearance of the Soviet Union, and while the People's Republic of China (PRC) focused upon internal stabilization and economic growth, Western leaders' national security attention turned from great power concerns to the challenges of preventing less powerful countries from rocking the geopolitical boat with dangerous weaponry. This raised nonproliferation to a central issue of global concern, most dramatically with the tragically fraught issue of weapons of mass destruction in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, revelations about A.Q. Khan's nuclear proliferation network, Iran's nuclear weapons

[2] *See* Sharon Gamari-Tabrizi, *The Worlds of Herman Kahn: The Intuitive Science of Thermonuclear War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), at 48-49 & 83.

program, and North Korea's development of nuclear weaponry. And of course there was also the horrific rise of jihadist terrorism in the Middle East and farther afield, and the subsequent turn of the West – and especially the United States – toward "kinetic" responses to rogue state and non-state challenges after the terrorist atrocities inflicted upon us in the 1998 embassy bombings and of course the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The post-Cold War world was not, therefore, exactly a peaceful one. But it was taken for a while to be an "end of history" in at least one sense: for the first time in many hundreds of years, the main challenges the world faced were *not* ones related fundamentally to the major powers' geopolitical competition with each other. The main issues, it appeared, were either supra- or trans-national ones, or they were national questions in the sense that they concerned what the relationship should be between particular (usually less powerful) states and a broader international environment that was congealing into some kind of neoliberal community.

Today, however, many of these dynamics seem to have reversed, or at least their teleology has been called fundamentally into question, in areas ranging from domestic politics to economics to security policy. From the perspective of global security policy, the most dramatic of these shifts – and certainly the one with the most potential to result in catastrophic war – has been the largest powers' return to the geopolitics of political-military competition.

I suppose we can take heart that in many circumstances, competition today is mediated by an array of international institutions, treaties, rules, and norms – many of which did not exist in prior competitive centuries, and all of which reflect deeply embedded social and economic preferences for peace, stability, and prosperity. Nevertheless, we are clear-eyed about the challenges presented by increasingly powerful revisionist states that are both dissatisfied with their status in the international system and willing to act in dangerous, destabilizing, and entirely unscrupulous ways in order to trade up.

Paradoxically, the challenges we face today are in part consequences of our past victories. Claiming to have been made anxious by many of the aforementioned post-Cold War trends, including a coalescing neoliberal community, the expansion of NATO toward its borders, the spread of democracy and so-called "color revolutions" in its perceived traditional sphere of influence, and nursing grievances of lost geopolitical clout, Russia was perhaps the earliest openly to proclaim its intention to build itself back into the kind of great power competitor to the United States it had once been. Vladimir Putin made this clear at least as early as his so-called "Millennium Message" published in 1999 as he first arrived in the Kremlin, declaring that Russia's return to muscular greatness – restoring what he viewed as the proper order of things after the collapse of Soviet imperial power, which Putin has described as a "global catastrophe" – was a national duty that required "an immense effort from all the nation's intellectual, physical, and moral forces."

Putin's revisionist agenda has thus turned increasingly toward self-aggrandizement by means of extravagant provocations, such as Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, overseas expeditionary warfare in Syria, interference in Western elections, the use of energy as a weapon, chronic violations of arms control agreements and arrangements, the deployment of "private" military contractors to hotspots around the world, a build-up of non-strategic nuclear weaponry, and the pursuit of bizarre new "exotic" strategic delivery systems, as well as assassinations and assassination attempts against defectors and political opponents in the West using radioactive poison and an illegal chemical weapon. Needless to say, such dangerous choices have gravely damaged what hopes there might have been for post-Cold War reconciliation and cooperation.

For their part, leaders in the PRC had long signaled their own geopolitically revisionist intentions, but for most of the post-Mao era they lacked the capacity to act openly on such intentions and generally espoused only reassuring rhetoric about "win-win" global solutions and the supposedly non-threatening nature of the PRC's rise. This messaging plan generally hewed to Deng Xiaoping's famous "24-character strategy" of encouraging the country to "bide its time and hide its capabilities" while quietly building up its strength.

Under Hu Jintao and now especially under Xi Jinping, however, the CCP clearly feels that it no longer needs to follow Deng's strategy of "hiding and biding." Chinese officials now openly speak of "national rejuvenation" objectives that include the "Strong Military Dream" of ensuring that Beijing's armed forces acquire world-class capabilities superior to those of anyone else on the planet by 2049, which will mark the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic. Today, the PRC is engaged in a gigantic, full-spectrum military build-up that includes the development of power-projection capabilities with global

reach, and will also involve at least doubling the size of Beijing's nuclear arsenal during the next decade. It has also adopted a whole-of-system strategy called "military-civil fusion" that incorporates the civilian sector – to include academic researchers – into its efforts to acquire and develop advanced and emerging technologies overseas for diversion to military and security end uses that support the CCP's global ambitions.

Nor is the CCP's ambition limited simply to making the PRC into what late 19th Century Japanese imperialists called *fukoken kyohei* ("a rich country with a strong military"). Xi himself explained in his speech to the 19th Party Congress that in this "new era," China is transitioning from a "rich country" to a "powerful country." He also outlined that in this "new era," China will make its bid for global leadership. Beginning well before Xi Jinping came to power, CCP officials began speaking increasingly of a "China model" of governance that the rest of the world should follow. This global vision of what the Party describes as a "harmonious world" is explicitly modeled on the so-called "harmonious society" the Party has been aggressively trying to build in China since 2003. (Suppressed dissidents in China today sometimes thus speak of having been "harmonized" – which tells you pretty much all you need to know about whether the PRC vision of a so-called "harmonious world" is one that other countries should do anything but dread.)

Today, Xi Jinping himself describes geopolitics in notably ideologized terms, inviting international partners to join what he calls a "community of common destiny" and depicting the international system as a rivalry between Western democratic capitalism and the "new model" of development he says the PRC offers to the world – that is, Party-run, police-state *dirigiste* capitalism. Through the CCP's lens, at least, a competition for the future of the world is already in full bloom.

And now, playing catch-up, U.S. leaders have also joined the state competitive game, keenly perceiving the degree to which Russian and PRC ambitions represent efforts to undermine the United States' own post-Cold War position in the geopolitical arena, and alarmed by the threats those two countries present to democratic values worldwide. Today, we strive to meet these challenges, with the U.S. National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy both highlighting interstate competition as a challenge requiring renewed focus, with the former specifically singling out "the revisionist powers of China and Russia" as strategic competitors.

Although in its supra-regional, nuclear-armed, and structurally trilateral manifestation, today's competitive framework is historically unique – for it does not resemble either the dyadic rivalry of the Cold War or the more broadly multilateral challenges of 19th Century European statecraft, Early Modern European dynastic competition, the feuding statelets of the Italian Renaissance, or the competing "Warring States" of ancient China. But state-on-state competition is now once again a feature of the international arena in explicit ways. And this shift, in turn, has profound implications for how we think about issues such as arms control and disarmament.

II. Destabilizing Received Wisdoms

Whether one admits it or not, geopolitical developments have radically destabilized some of the received wisdoms that certain portions of the policy community have internalized after the end of the Cold War. This is particularly the case in the arms control and disarmament arena, where some seemed to draw the conclusion that we could now just collectively *will* ourselves magically to stable disarmament without concern for details such as security and deterrence, while others seem to have concluded that the risks and compromises inherent in negotiated restraint were anathema, intrinsically asymmetric, and in any event unnecessary in a unipolar world.

Well beyond merely the institutional challenges of organizing one's policy bureaucracy for a state-competitive environment, we thus also face profound *conceptual* challenges. This new era will likely require some new thinking – new models, new paradigms, and a new policy discourse that transcends debunked verities from an older time – if strategy and statecraft are to provide answers to today's problems.

All of this makes it a fascinating, challenging, and potentially hugely rewarding time to be part of the national security and foreign policy community. Former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson titled his 1969 memoir *Present at the Creation* in a reference to his involvement in American diplomacy during the seminal years in which an entirely new international system was created in the wake of the Second World War and with the onset of decades of U.S.-Soviet rivalry; a memoir from the world's transition from the Cold War to the singular moment of U.S. unipolarity and neoliberal globalization three decades ago might perhaps use similar imagery. It would seem that we are on the cusp now of something yet again different, but,

as is so common during important global shifts, the facts of the security environment are changing faster than our conceptual paradigms. It's time to do better.

III. Building a New Discourse

In the so-called "T" family of bureaus at the State Department – the portions concerned with arms control, nonproliferation, disarmament, arms transfers and security partnership capacity building, space and cyberspace security, missile defense, deterrence, and the national security challenges presented by emerging technologies – we are working to develop, articulate, and implement new approaches in response to these new problems. Some of these efforts are being undertaken at what might be called the strategic level, and others more specifically in the arms control and disarmament field itself.

For one thing, the Western policy community needs to rediscover the fact that real strategy – as opposed to merely driving toward one's most-desired end state irrespective of circumstances – represents a challenge of choice-making under constraint: of prioritizing certain critical goals and, necessarily, concomitantly *de*-prioritizing others. We cannot afford the luxury of a psychology that imagines we can achieve all the policy objectives we want, meeting all challenges in all places with equal vigor, out-spending and out-thinking all potential adversaries all the time, and not having to make difficult trade-offs or to live with concededly suboptimal outcomes in some important areas in order to ensure we meet critical needs in the *most* important ones.

Already, the challenges of great power competition have forced U.S. leaders into hard choices about such trade-offs. The National Defense Strategy, for example, openly admits this, emphasizing for the reader that as we emerge from a period of "strategic atrophy" and face "increased global disorder" and "a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory," there can be "no complacency – we must make difficult choices and prioritize what is most important." In this context, notes the NDS, "[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."

It is too early to tell precisely what this new environment will bring. It may be, for instance, that our successors will look back on the United States' years of terrorist-hunting in the Middle East much like some later observers looked back on Britain's far-flung Victorian wars – that is, as fascinating and picturesque, if controversial, endeavors that yet turned out to be, in geopolitical terms, merely a sideshow to and even a distraction from the dynamics that shaped the epochal geopolitical contests of the generations that followed. It is far too early to tell. Either way, the shifts in today's security environment clearly demand agile thinking and long-game perspectives, habits of mind to which much of our policy community has become unaccustomed. Making the difficult choices that lie ahead will require a degree of equity-balancing prudence and intellectual humility that may have to be painfully re-learned by those who still inhabit the various *we-can-have-it-all* mindset of the fading unipolar moment.

We are presently doing what we can to help meet the conceptual demands of the *current* geopolitical moment. In a recent edition of the State Department's *Arms Control and International Security (ACIS) Papers*, I sketched a conceptual framework through which our various efforts in my corner of the State Department can be fit together into a vision of competitive strategy that focuses upon relative rates of progress, rather than necessarily assuming an absolute teleology of "victory." In a nutshell, our efforts promote U.S. comparative advantages and slow the development of adversary threat capabilities, so as to buy time in which diplomatic, political, and socio-economic change can eventually soften the competitive harshness of the current environment. In such ways, we are trying to build upon the insights of the NSS and the NDS in articulating a sustainable approach to competitive posture and long-term success.

More specifically in the arms control and disarmament arena, we have not shied away from pointing the finger at some of the obsolete modes of thought that the dynamics of the current global security environment tend to problematize. I have, for example, pointed out some of the conceptual pathologies of those convinced that arms control and disarmament can be approached independently of questions of geopolitics and security. In another monograph in the *ACIS Papers* series, I also described the progress being made with our message that in a competitive environment of constrained resources – in which our side does not hold all the cards and cannot realistically expect entirely to run the board – there remains real value in seeking negotiated restraints and measures to improve mutual confidence-building and transparency, even if such agreements must be reached, ever so very carefully, with scofflaws and scoundrels.

The cautious but supportive reaction across the policy community to current U.S. diplomatic initiatives on disarmament suggests that we are making progress against such pathologies, and beginning to build a common-sense coalition of serious thinkers from both the Left and the Right. Convinced by our own internal U.S. "nuclear vision review" in 2017 that prior approaches to nuclear disarmament were conceptually flawed and even counterproductive in the current security environment, we have been working to build a new disarmament discourse that marries the United States' longstanding commitment to its obligations under Article VI of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) with a renewed awareness of, respect for, and emphasis upon the need to address real-world security challenges if disarmament is to have any future.

One of the results of this work is the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) Initiative, which – despite delays caused by travel lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic – is now poised to begin substantive work along three distinct lines of effort in exploring potential ways in which the disarmament community can move forward in realistic, security-aware ways. This dialogue and engagement across the various chasms that divide the disarmament policy community is critical. If you'll forgive the comparison, transformative chemical reactions tend to occur at the margins, rather than in the center, of a homogeneous substance; analogically, it is our hope that by bringing a broad range of stakeholders together from across these divisions we will catalyze new answers to at least some of the problems that have long stymied disarmament discourse. Sandia's Cooperative Monitoring Center knows from its own experience the value of bringing diverse parties together in cooperative and collaborative security-building, so I'm sure you can apprecaite the importance of this approach.

Another manifestation of our commitment to meeting the needs of today's state-competitive environment is our effort to model a mature and realistic approach to arms control. This means pursuing verifiable agreements that meet security needs – such as our search for "next-generation arms control" that will achieve the President's objective of a trilateral arms control agreement with Beijing and Moscow – while being willing to walk away from agreements that do *not* serve the interests of security and stability, or that are simply being flouted, to our detriment, by the other side. With a new Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control now on board at the Department, we are stepping up our efforts to build a new framework for arms control in order to prevent the nuclear arms race that threatens to emerge if the PRC and Russia do not end their current nuclear build ups and join us in a new arms control framework. So far only Russia has responded to our invitation to those two countries in December 2019 to begin discussions on this topic, but I can assure you that we will hold the PRC to account if it continues to refuse to come to the table to negotiate effective measures to prevent a nuclear arms race. Security and humanity both demand this.

Even where traditional arms control frameworks do not seem viable for a variety of technical reasons, U.S. diplomats are today also on the cutting edge of efforts to develop global consensus on norms of responsible state behavior in new areas such as outer space, as well as emerging areas of technology such as lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS). We have already had tremendous success building consensus around such a framework for cyberspace, which now includes: affirmation that existing international law applies to state behavior in cyberspace; adherence to certain non-binding norms of responsible state behavior in cyberspace during peacetime; and the development and implementation of practical confidence-building measures to reduce the risk of conflict in cyberspace. Through such efforts, we hope not just to direct U.S. policies into the most productive available channels and to thwart certain disingenuous Russian and PRC diplomatic overtures, but also to restructure and reorient global arms control and disarmament discourse more broadly – into forms that are adaptive, rather than maladaptive and dangerous, in the present state-competitive security environment.

To be sure, change, especially to one's mindset, can be slow and challenging. Some still cling to outmoded ideas and approaches even while the geopolitical "facts on the ground" change around them in ways that make their understandings increasingly incoherent and their favored policy recipes increasingly inapt. There are signs, however, that some of the more intransigent reflexive enthusiasms of the past are losing momentum.

The counterproductive and misguided Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), for instance, has lost much of its early momentum. This is not entirely surprising, of course, since its supporters remain unable to explain how that treaty's ineffective and polarizing virtue-signaling actually meets nations' security needs and does not undermine collective efforts to deter aggression in the current security environment. TPNW supporters also

remain unable to explain why their civil-society activism for disarmament – which, after all, is only meaningfully directed at politicians and publics in Western democracies – is not, in practice, likely to embolden and empower the nuclear-armed autocrats and geopolitical revisionists in Moscow and Beijing who do not face such pressures. (In fact, it would appear that even the basic *science* behind the TPNW-galvanizing "humanitarian impact" movement is today being increasingly called into question, with state-of-the-art combustion, soot-propagation, and climate modeling having undermined some of the hypotheses that catalyzed many of the earlier hyperboles of "nuclear winter" theorizing.) The TPNW remains deeply flawed, and however well-intentioned many supporters of this treaty may be, these are the sorts of conceptual, evidentiary, and structural flaws that real-world national leaders and parliamentarians are starting to notice.

Accordingly, there is hope that this progress will continue, and even the polar fringes of the arms control and disarmament policy community will continue to pull back from the crumbling received wisdoms of yesteryear, for those Humpty-Dumpties cannot likely be reassembled. I hold out hope that they will see that, even in an era of polarized tribal identity politics, we need to move forward together through engagement with issues (and difficult trade-offs) related to real-world security, power, competition, and deterrence, in order to find appropriate responses to the great power competitive challenges that the PRC and Russia have created.

Where precisely this ends up we know not, of course, for these new security dynamics indeed represent uncharted territory. It should by now be obvious, however, that there can be no going back to yesterday's conventional wisdoms, and this insight should guide us – and our successors, whomever they may be – in finding a thoughtful path forward.

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