Control and reduction of NBC weapons

The Federal Republic of Germany first renounced nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in the 1950s by signing the Western European Union Treaty (WEU Treaty) banning their production. Later came the Two Plus Four Agreement in 1990 ("Treaty on the Final Settlement With Respect to Germany", concluded between the then two German states and the four victorious powers of World War II). This agreement, which accompanied German reunification, marked another arms control commitment. Both agreements were intended to prevent Germany from having its own weapons of mass destruction.

Arms control processes can help to create a more predictable and reasonable approach to competing destructive capabilities and impose formally agreed limits on military expansion so that the arsenals pose less of a threat to world peace. Arms control processes of this kind include:

- agreements on confidence-building measures, such as exchanges of data aimed at greater transparency,
- agreements to improve communication and crisis management, such as establishing a permanent telephone hotline between superpower leaders,
- agreements on bilateral or multilateral restrictions on specific weapons systems,
- treaties to prevent the spread of the technologies used in NBC weapons and their delivery systems, such as the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Whether arms control or disarmament, both objectives can be achieved by various approaches. One approach is via bilateral or multilateral talks aimed at concluding an international law treaty to make specified weapon capabilities transparent and calculable or to limit, reduce or even eliminate weapons. Another approach is for a state to start with unilateral disarmament steps.

In the field of nuclear arms, we find examples of both these approaches. In embarking on the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks and Treaties (SALT), the United States and the Soviet Union wanted to contain developments during the Cold War. The bilateral nuclear arms race could only be slowed by agreeing to set limits on each other's already far-reaching strategic nuclear weapons capabilities. They agreed ceilings on the number of strategic delivery systems. SALT was followed later by START, the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks and Treaty, which required step-by-step reductions in the permissible number of delivery systems on each side and ceilings on the permissible number of nuclear warheads to be carried by those systems. The 2002 Moscow Treaty, better known as SORT (Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty), stands in this tradition, as does the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction) Treaty, which is currently effective.

The goal of eliminating an entire category of weapons was served by, for instance, the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty under which the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to dispense with land-based nuclear weapons with a range of 500 to 5,500 kilometres. There have also been multilateral disarmament agreements to eliminate and ban whole weapons categories, in particular the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).

Another approach to arms control and disarmament is unilateralism. Unilateral pronouncements usually evolve, however, in a context of reciprocity and prior consultation among the relevant players. This approach can clear the way for legally binding treaties to be signed later, although it may not. A positive example is the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991/92. Washington and Moscow made a firm political commitment to decommission, reduce and later destroy thousands of tactical nuclear weapons. Moreover, unilateral concessions and voluntarily self-imposed restrictions have often been undertaken as confidence-building measures. For instance, individual nuclear powers, on occasions, discontinued their testing of nuclear devices for a while and called upon their adversaries to follow suit. Today, all the established nuclear powers have for many years renounced the testing of nuclear weapons and the production of more fissile material for atomic bombs. In setting an example in this way, they intend to facilitate and encourage the conclusion of new treaties and the ratification of international agreements already negotiated, in particular, the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), which bans the production of weapons-grade fissile materials, or the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Finally, preventative arms control arrangements are also conceivable. This means agreeing measures designed to prevent technically possible weapon capabilities from even being developed or built. It would, for example, be potentially beneficial to agree a treaty that averts any development of nuclear, biological or chemical warheads for deployment on drones.

Ultimately, the aim, in the case of both arms control and disarmament initiatives, is usually to establish valid bilateral, multilateral or even worldwide agreements that will make the agreed positions irreversible. This means placing international relations on a legal footing, strengthening international law and countering the danger of states reverting to a policy of “might is right”.

Arms control and disarmament can also serve to strengthen international humanitarian law. This is the case when agreements restrict or prohibit the indiscriminate use of weapons against combatants and non-combatants or the use of weapons that cause unnecessary suffering. And, conversely, international humanitarian law can, for its part, provide a strong rationale for new arms control or disarmament agreements. An important example today of this approach is the recent campaign to outlaw the possession and use of nuclear weapons illegal under international law.

The non-proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and their delivery systems is another, complementary, goal alongside the goal of disarmament. This objective is pursued, on the one hand, through multilateral agreements like the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention as well as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and, on the other, by arranging a multilateral export control regime under which countries with the expertise and technologies to produce such weapons undertake not to pass them on.

Discussion of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation has frequently centred on the issue of verification. At stake is the possibility of checking on a state’s compliance with provisions it has signed up to and preventing that state from breaking away from its contractual obligations. The difficulty with verification is that it usually involves a conflict between two interests: On the one hand, a treaty partner wants the most complete assurance possible that other countries are not cheating under the arrangements. It wants maximum insight into the actions of

other parties, especially through wide-ranging inspection rights. But, on the other hand, it wants to keep its own cards close to its chest and not let another power gain access to economic and technological knowledge on the inside by agreeing to treaty-based compliance control rights. After all, verification rights can be misused for espionage purposes. This difficulty is apparent in the compliance negotiations for the Biological Weapons Convention. The important agreement was adopted back in 1972, but it has still not proved possible to incorporate an effective verification regime.[1]

[1]. http://warpp.info/en/m7/articles/m7-03