

A short history of disarmament and arms control

People have been hoping for disarmament and trying to control weapons and armed forces for thousands of years. Yet weapons systems have been modernized again and again as spending on arms rises. Annual global military expenditure had grown to more than US \$1.7 trillion in 2012. That is 1,700,000,000,000 dollars!

True, history has repeatedly seen breakthroughs by these efforts to agree arrangements on disarmament and arms control. But the world is still far from achieving anything like the goal of “general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control”, to which almost every country committed itself in 1968 by signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Definition

The term “disarmament” refers to measures, usually formal agreements, to reduce or completely abolish military capacities and means (both weapons and troops).

In contrast, “arms control” comprises agreements aimed at reducing the danger of war breaking out and minimizing the negative impacts of a war on human beings. This is why the concept of “arms control” also includes instruments to promote transparency and build confidence, for instance by means of reciprocal monitoring and inspection and the setting of ceilings for weapons. The application of international humanitarian law to protect people and the environment in war situations also falls under the concept of arms control.

At one time, measures to control arms would often be subsumed under the umbrella term of “disarmament”. But after 1945, with the United States and the Soviet Union confronting each other with weapons systems and troops in the Cold War, the term “arms control” came to describe all the measures intended to reduce tensions between the nuclear superpowers. After the Cold War, the focus of arms control measures shifted to efforts to prevent proliferation to other powers, especially missile technology and nuclear weapons.

Methods of disarmament/arms control

Disarmament and arms control measures can be imposed on states, be taken unilaterally by a state or be agreed between two states or multiple states.

Right up to the recent past, the most widely occurring form of disarmament was imposed disarmament on those who had been vanquished in war. In Antiquity, for example, a victorious Rome demanded, in the aftermath of the second Punic War (218–201 BC) that Carthage give up all its war elephants and its entire battle fleet bar ten ships. To demonstrate their power, the Romans set hundreds of Carthaginian ships on fire before the gates of the city state.

In the modern era, the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 laid down far-reaching disarmament measures to be taken by Germany and its allies, in the wake of Germany’s defeat in World War I.

Then there are unilateral measures in the form of a country independently deciding to reduce its military capabilities and assets. For instance, Costa Rica decided in 1948 to completely disband its armed forces, becoming the only country in the world to have done so. In the United States, President George H.W. Bush, responding to the new post-Cold War environment in 1991, announced a unilateral initiative to scrap thousands of American tactical nuclear warheads. A little time later the then Soviet leader, President Mikhail Gorbachev, followed suit with a parallel move.

Finally, there are disarmament and arms control agreements that states negotiate and agree upon. Arrangements of this kind may be bilateral or multilateral.

Historical summary

The history of humankind is a history of violence and war—but also of repeated attempts to make and secure peace, and of efforts to limit the terrible consequences of war. Back in the 7th century BC, the Greek city states jointly agreed, within the “Amphictyonic League”, to protect the temples of Demeter at Anthela and Apollo at Delphi. The Ancient Greeks also managed to agree that, in the event of war, cities should not be cut off from their water supplies or completely destroyed. Nevertheless, it should be noted that wars between the city states or even wars over sanctuary sites still took place.

In Europe, during the Middle Ages, the Roman-Catholic Church tried to use its influence to limit at least the forms that war could take. In the 9th and 10th century, local and regional Pax Dei arrangements were agreed with the intention of protecting the clergy, their property and the non-combatant poor. The Second Lateran Council banned, in 1139, the use of crossbows against Christians, although they were permitted against dissenters. In 1675, France and Germany banned the use of poisoned bullets.

Parallel to the trend towards ever more potent firearms, international peace movements arose in the 19th century. In Germany, Bertha von Suttner became the most prominent advocate of peace, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1905. Disarmament and arms control efforts gained momentum internationally in that period. International peace conferences were held at The Hague in 1899 and 1907, bringing together the most powerful countries in the world. Although they failed to agree steps towards disarmament and principles for the peaceful settlement of international conflicts, the diplomats were able to agree standards for behaviour in war (“*ius in bellum*”), including the prohibition of the use of poison gas. Unfortunately, when World War I broke out a short time later, not all signatory states adhered to these laws and customs of war.

After the horrors of WW I, the push for disarmament and arms control took on a renewed urgency. The Geneva Protocol of 1925 again banned the use of poison gas and biological weapons. Various other Geneva Conventions then formed the foundations for international humanitarian law, for instance by setting out rules for the treatment of prisoners of war. The first World Disarmament Conference took place in 1932, bringing national leaders together to discuss steps intended to lead from disarmament to complete abolition of offensive weapons and mechanisms for preventing future wars. Nothing came of this initiative, however, especially because Nazi Germany was comprehensively rearming. In 1933, Hitler took Germany out of the

League of Nations, which had been founded in 1919 and paved the way for today's United Nations.

World War II was soon followed by a Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union—an era of bloc confrontation and military build-up. But despite the hostility, the perils of a catastrophic nuclear war did lead to renewed efforts to reach an arms agreement. By the 1960s there was some success, with the parties concluding the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which prohibited test detonations in the atmosphere, in space and under water, although still allowing underground testing. In 1968, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (in full: Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons) was signed. This multilateral agreement remains important today. Since the 1970s, the Soviet Union, later Russia, and the United States have repeatedly arrived at agreements on their nuclear arsenals, with various limitations and reductions.

With the passing of the Cold War, conventional weapons in Europe were limited in 1990 by the CFE Treaty. In 1997, the Chemical Weapons Convention entered into force, banning the possession of chemical weapons and providing for the destruction of any stockpiles in possession of treaty states. Progress was also made in nuclear disarmament.

In the 21st century, however, disarmament and arms control has tended to play a relatively minor role in international politics despite the gigantic arsenals still in existence. With the public becoming less worried by the prospect of a nuclear disaster, governments have shifted their focus to the task of preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons. Another reason for this shift is that the world's mightiest military power, the United States, insists on retaining its "freedom of action" and does not wish to lose its technological lead. Technological superiority in new weapons technologies such as missile defence, drones and precision-guided munition would be hampered by binding international agreements.

Motives and drivers of disarmament and arms control

Disarmament and arms control clearly depend on the ideas and objectives that shape foreign and security policy as well as on military strategy. But the internal power of each country's "military-industrial complex" (in the words of US President Dwight D. Eisenhower) also has an impact on the formulation of foreign, military and disarmament objectives. Most countries have always regarded the military instruments of power as the key to national security, to achieving and expanding influence in the world and ensuring access to natural resources or territories. So it is hardly surprising that history records only modest success in relation to disarmament and arms control efforts. Nevertheless, there are also forces that drive these efforts, which have, under certain historical conditions, repeatedly led to arms agreements. These drivers include:

- concerns about the stability of international relations and one's own position within a power nexus;
- real or supposed military advantages that result from agreements on disarmament and arms control;
- opportunities for making savings in the arms sector by renouncing weapons that now have hardly any military value;

- the aim of agreeing on codes of behaviour in a war (e.g. treatment of prisoners of war, distinguishing between soldiers and civilians) that are in line with one's own interests;
- sections of the public and peace movements that raise their voices against the destructive potential of wars, demand action to alleviate human suffering in war, and present an ethical, moral, political or social critique of the perils of military build-up, thus exerting pressure on policymakers, both nationally and internationally¹.

Sources and further information

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¹. <http://warpp.info/en/m7/articles/m7-01>