

# **Disarmament and control of conventional weapons and armed forces**

The term “conventional weapons” refers to weapons that are fitted with conventional explosives, i.e. do not use nuclear, biological or chemical ordnance. Conventional weapons may include “heavy” weapons such as battle tanks, artillery systems, armoured combat vehicles, combat helicopters, fighter aircraft or naval weapons. Conventional weapons also include “small arms and light weapons”, such as handguns or light and heavy machine guns that can be used independently by one or several persons. In the course of history, there have been far more victims of conventional weaponry than of weapons of mass destruction, even in the “nuclear age” that followed World War II.

## **Key arms agreements**

Bilateral or multilateral agreements on reducing and removing conventional weapons and armed forces are quite a rare phenomenon in the history of humankind. Yet disarmament has happened on many occasions: Primarily in the wake of a war, when the victor can dictate disarmament terms to the vanquished. In the Roman Empire, for instance, having won the second Punic War (218–201 BC), Rome forced Carthage to hand over its war elephants and nearly all its battle fleet. Another example is the post-First World War settlement under the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, when the losing parties, Germany and her allies, were required to disarm on a large scale. On the other hand, there have also been many occasions when a victorious power reduces its own troop numbers, weapon stocks and arms expenditure in the aftermath of a war, and does so as the result of an autonomous, unilateral decision. For example, both the Soviet Union and the United States made such a move after the Second World War, and the US did so after its military interventions in Korea (1950–1953), Vietnam (1964–1973) and Iraq (2003–2011).

The first arms reduction and control agreement in modern times was concluded in 1817 between the United States and the United Kingdom. Known as the Rush-Bagot Treaty, it provided for a limitation on the number of battleships of both sides on the Great Lakes of North America. This treaty prevented a planned build-up of naval forces in the region. After the First World War, the victorious powers, United Kingdom, the United States, France, Italy and Japan, concluded the Washington Naval Agreement of 1922 in an effort to limit the proliferation of warships. Again, a maritime arms race between these powers was taking off at that time. The naval treaty laid down ceilings for battleships, setting tonnage limits according to a ratio agreed between the five powers. In total, 77 existing or planned battleships were decommissioned, converted into aircraft carriers or not completed in the shipyards. The treaty did, however, exempt smaller vessel categories from any restrictions, so an arms race soon began with these types of ship. Later, in the face of a militarily resurgent Nazi Germany and expansionist policies being pursued by Japan and Italy (German allies in the 1930s), this naval treaty became worthless on the eve of the Second World War.

Despite arms build-ups and growing tensions during the Cold War, primarily in the context of the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, along with their respective allies, it did prove possible in that period to conclude the first arms control agreements. These

arrangements prevented the arms race from spreading into areas that had not yet been militarized or were of little importance to political and military strategists at the time. The Antarctic Treaty was signed in 1959, ensuring that no military activities took place in Antarctica. And the Outer Space Treaty, concluded six years later, prohibited states from establishing military bases or engaging in military tests and exercises on the Moon or any other celestial body.

After ongoing negotiations between the NATO countries and those of the Warsaw Pact over the period 1973 to 1989 had failed to halt the build-up of armed forces and weaponry on either side, the breakthrough finally came in 1990 with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty). The “Iron Curtain” dividing Europe between East and West had just fallen, and the Warsaw Pact was about to break up. In that situation, agreement was reached on limiting heavy weapons—battle tanks, armoured combat vehicles, heavy artillery, combat aircraft and combat helicopters—right across Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals. Over the following years, more than 50,000 items of heavy weaponry were eliminated from the European theatre, partly by being scrapped but partly through redeployment or sale. Strong reductions also resulted from unilateral disarmament efforts, so the overall outcome on all sides was significantly below the ceilings set by the Treaty.

There was also some success in agreeing on confidence-building arrangements aimed at transparency over military measures. These include the Open Skies Treaty of 1992, which grants the parties—the NATO states and former members of the Warsaw Pact—the right to undertake a certain number of reconnaissance flights per year over the territory of states of the other side to monitor military developments using aerial photography. Today, however, the treaty is of little practical value because of fundamental changes in the political situation across Europe and the advances made in satellite technology.

There are other agreements designed to outlaw certain weapons systems. The UN Weapons Convention of 1980, for instance, prohibits blinding laser weapons. And, largely through pressure from non-governmental organizations, the Ottawa Convention was concluded in 1997 by states willing to renounce the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel mines and to destroy their existing stocks. So far, 161 states have joined the treaty, although the major players—Russia, the United States and China—are not among them.

There is a long history of efforts to find arrangements that might protect soldiers and, above all, civilians from the worst brutalities of war. In fact, a wide-ranging set of international rules has emerged over the last 150 years. The first Geneva Convention, agreed under the auspices of the Red Cross in 1864 (on “Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded”) was followed by the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 and numerous follow-up Geneva Conventions (especially the 1949 Convention) laying down provisions to protect the wounded, prisoners of war, civilians and the environment in armed conflicts.

To the extent that, at least in purely legal terms, it limits the type and scale of warfare, international “law of war” or “humanitarian international law” (*ius in bellum*, i.e. rightful conduct in war) can also be seen as a form of “arms control”. But since this body of law starts from as recognition of the supposed military necessities in war situations and only seeks to avoid or prevent suffering that is seen as indiscriminate, superfluous, unnecessary and disproportionate,

the law of war has in practice done little to alleviate the sufferings of people in the world and regional wars of the past century and a half. There is little scope for prosecution in the event of violations of the Geneva Convention. For instance, the United States has refused to grant the detainees in Guantanamo the status of prisoners of war. And all the nuclear powers and their allies claim the right to use nuclear weapons as a last resort, although any nuclear strike would undoubtedly cause “unnecessary” and “superfluous” suffering, especially on the part of civilians.

Despite some important achievements in the field of disarmament and arms control, the results have been modest. Curtailing arms spending, weapons systems and armed forces and agreeing bilateral and multilateral arms treaties are policy aims that play only a minor role for most countries. These countries have never rejected the principle of war being used as an instrument of politics. Armed forces and the latest weapons systems are generally regarded by governments as the guarantee for security and international influence, and as a potential instrument for maintaining or expanding their power. This is reflected in the figures for global military expenditure, which amounted to US \$1,756 billion in 2012. That constituted 2.5 per cent of global GDP. By far the biggest portion of this money was spent on the approx. 20 million troops in active service in the armies of the world and on conventional arms.

Observers are therefore agreed that conventional arms control in Europe requires a thorough and fundamental overhaul—if not even a new beginning.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sources and further information**

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<sup>1</sup>. <http://warpp.info/en/m7/articles/m7-02>