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## Arms talks: a new objective

ARMS-control talks, particularly those aimed at strategic arms limitation (SALT) and mutual and balanced forced reductions (MBFR), use as their primary instrument quantitative restrictions on numbers of men and weapons. This tool 'no longer fits the task', argues Christoph Bertram, Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in a just-published paper\*. Moreover, 'unless we can develop a better tool, the task itself may fall into disrepute'.

Bertram proposes a major shift away from quantitative and towards qualitative measures. Counting weapons and men is often the outward sign, in arms-control agreements, of an implicit understanding among the participants of the military missions or tasks which they are trying to proscribe. Why, then, not make perfectly explicit what is meant to be stopped? A qualitative statement, such as that the participants have agreed not to pursue a first-strike capability is not tied to particular hardware and is independent of the rapid technological change that threatens many current agreements.

Bertram begins by looking at the dilemmas of present arms-control discussions. They have to be seen politically as fair and equitable, and this is an almost impossible task given the complex of asymmetries both in doctrine and hardware which goes to make up the strategic balance, and given the technological developments which soon render any agreement obsolete. So quantitative agreements soon attract political obloquy. They are also getting more and more difficult to verify, as new developments are largely in electronics which need never be spotted from satellites, and as field testing can often be dispensed with. Finally, new weapon developments often do not fit easily into old categories such as nuclear and non-nuclear, offensive and defensive, strategic and tactical. The cruise missile is one such weapon which has caused many problems in arms-control discussions.

It is possible to argue that agreements like SALT confer few benefits and that we should back off from giving arms control as practised at present the priority it has had. Certainly there are alternatives: we could try to slow the pace of technological development, either by putting ceilings on R&D expenditure or by more detailed measures such as limits on testing or on procurement. We could put a greater trust in unilateral measures which might generate more goodwill than is

generally evident at negotiating tables. But many of these measures have been tried in various forms in the past without singular success. We should look instead, says Bertram, at one arms-control agreement of recent years which has been effective, and learn from it: the 1972 Soviet-American agreement on Anti-Ballistic Missiles (ABM). This agreement is primarily a qualitative one aimed at preventing a particular military mission, the erecting of ballistic missile defences. The wording of the treaty makes it clear that the restriction does not just apply to the sort of ABM systems that were around in 1972; it applies to any system that might be dreamt up in the future. By not venturing into much detail on hardware, the ABM treaty also circumvents certain verification problems: within the SALT agreement one launcher too many constitutes a violation of a treaty; within the confines of the ABM treaty such infringements do not constitute an immediate threat but can be discussed in a more leisurely way.

What, then, would be the sorts of mission that new qualitative agreements might proscribe? Bertram suggests that in the strategic nuclear field they could include acquiring a first-strike capability, conducting strategic anti-submarine warfare and developing anti-satellite capabilities. In other fields they might include possessing the ability to launch a massive surprise attack in Europe or cutting vital supply lines at sea.

Quantitative negotiations would not come to an end if this new style of agreement were to become the accepted pattern, but detailed balancing would not occupy the centre of the stage. It would be up to participants to prepare their own appropriate mixture of arms constraints consistent with the intent of the agreement and if necessary to defend the mixture against challenge by other participants. The nature of the mixture could always change with time, provided it continued to satisfy all parties to an agreement.

The ideas that Bertram proposes are, by his own admission, not radically new in that they are already incorporated in the ABM Treaty and some multilateral treaties such as that on biological weapons. But they have never been explicitly stated before in connection with the major East-West agreements now under review. They come at a time when there is a climate of opinion emerging which is dissatisfied with the way SALT is proceeding, particularly with the detailed complexities in which it is perennially bogged down. Qualitative arms control agreements wouldn't eliminate these complexities but negotiators would know that the real priority lay in the statement of intent. □

\**The Future of Arms Control: Part II Arms Control and Technological Change: Elements of a New Approach. Adelphi Paper 146, International Institute for Strategic Studies.*