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“ARMS CONTROL FOR ADULTS” IS STILL TOO YOUNG



US President Donald Trump intends to propose a new arms control initiative to Russia and China. The news was announced by Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Non-Proliferation Christopher Ford. Although the initiative still lacks detail and is more a striking metaphor than a substantive proposal, Ford’s remarks at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London this past February gave a glimpse of its contours.

Ford spent much of his talk criticizing the arms control philosophy he believes most US experts adhere to. Ford took aim at their excessively abstract and “theological” approach to such a serious subject, claiming that they value commitment to international non-proliferation treaties above protecting US national interests. Without pulling any punches, he called the arms control discourse pathological, criticizing what he saw as its “inappropriate and even dangerous answer to the problems of international peace and security in today’s complex and challenging world.”

In Ford’s view, the growing power of the People’s Republic of China and alleged violations of arms control treaties by Russia are the key threats to US security. He described the approach proposed by the Trump administration as “arms control for adults,” because it elevates US security interests above false fidelity to the rules.

Announcing Trump’s future proposal, Ford described the purpose of the Creating an Environment of Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative as fostering the conditions to make acquiring nuclear weapons seem unnecessary to countries that don’t possess them and to decrease the importance of retaining them to countries that do. This is supposed to be achieved by developing new institutions focused on disarmament. In the meantime, the task is to reduce risks and manage competitive tensions between the leading powers until conditions are right for universal nuclear disarmament.

In the world as viewed by President Trump, Secretary of State Pompeo and Assistant Secretary Ford, global security is falling victim to great power rivalry. Among the great powers, the United States, Russia and China possess the largest nuclear arsenals capable of destroying the planet. And yet old arms control and nuclear disarmament regimes are no longer relevant because they are not responsive to modern threats. Ford is categorical that only the treaties that really work should be supported. He calls for withdrawing from those which are violated by other parties. This new vision for nuclear disarmament seems realistic to the Trump administration because it puts at the center of attention not speculative problems related to observing outdated rules, but real security issues. However, the new initiative has one blind spot: the current arms control and nuclear disarmament regime is the product of a long historical period that had a much bloodier beginning than today's world.

After WWII the Soviet Union and the United States were caught in a number of extremely dangerous confrontations, some of which threatened to wipe out life on Earth, like, for instance, the Cuban missile crisis. After they stepped back from the abyss, the Soviet Union and the United States recognized that without mutually binding arms control agreements, peace and stability on the globe would depend on the decisions of petty officers on the front lines. The proxy wars raging in various parts of the world compelled the two countries to start negotiations and enter into a series of historic treaties.

Today the professional community of Russian and US diplomats, experts, technical specialists and servicemen are dismayed by the erosion and decay of those treaties. Ford's remarks took aim primarily at that group of experts and their consensus views. However, Ford gets out ahead of his skis.

He proposes dismantling existing regimes and establishing new ones, while overlooking the fact that the modern world has not experienced even a fraction of the painful crises that served as the basis for the set of arms control and nuclear disarmament treaties of the 1960s and 1970s. We have not internalized the valuable experience of restraint and do not appreciate how fragile peace really is. If great powers competition is really the dominant trend in today's world, then we are only at the beginning of a painful road which should lead us to a mature arms control.

In other words, “disarmament for adults” is still too young and conditions for it are not yet right. And it is in no one's interests for that to change anytime soon. A world without catastrophic wars and conflicts is better than the world that compelled countries to establish those effective arms control regimes in the first place. Wouldn't it be better to give up trying to dismantle systems that work well enough as is?

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Source: **“Arms Control for Adults” Is Still Too Young**



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