



ANALYSIS

ENDURING ARMS CONTROL MYTHS: A CENTURY OF EXPERIENCE*

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*"In recent years the United States has gone well beyond treating arms control agreements as the supreme law of the land. We have elevated them into a kind of holy writ. Arms control has become a form of secular religion, with the arms control community as its faithful acolytes."*¹

Contemporary arms control has been guided by almost canonical concepts and propositions that are intellectually seductive because they promise relatively easy solutions to some of the most difficult national security problems. Yet, as the following study shows, most of the propositions that have historically guided U.S. arms control efforts are not only incorrect, but also harm the U.S. ability to effectively counter its adversaries.

The historical pattern indicates that one of the reasons is that, while the United States follows treaties to the letter and imposes restraint on its existing or prospective programs that would violate even the "spirit" of an agreement (whatever this "spirit" is), adversaries simply ignore them when they are inconvenient. At the same time, they use treaties to restrict U.S. programs that threaten the advancement of their goals. The case studies also illustrate that multiple arms control fallacies usually operate at the same time and feed off each other, often compounding the resultant U.S. national security problems.

For arms control advocates, hope springs eternal that the next agreement will improve political relations among adversaries. For example, despite the worsening national security environment and Moscow's decades-long history of violating agreements, the Biden Administration emphasized the importance of arms control, not deterrence, as the "most effective" tool to prevent nuclear "use." Ironically, there were no nuclear arms control negotiations under Biden and Russia violated, and then illegally "suspended," the now-expired New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).² President Trump has expressed sweeping arms control goals, raising a question that, until recently, seemed

* This analysis piece is based on Michaela Dodge, *Enduring Arms Control Myths: A Century of Experience*, Occasional Paper, Vol. 6, No. 6 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2026), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/Vol.-6-No.-8.pdf>. The author is grateful to the National Institute for Public Policy for its permission to republish this material.

¹ James Strom Thurmond, quoted in Government Printing Office, "Military Implications of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)," *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Third Congress*, August 9, 11, and 18, 1994, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31210018779619&seq=1>, p. 99.

² Department of State, "U.S. Countermeasures in Response to Russia's Violations of the New START Treaty," Fact Sheet, June 1, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-countermeasures-in-response-to-russias-violations-of-the-new-start-treaty/>; and, Boris Bondarev, "The Fallacy of Negotiating With Putin," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 20, Issue 76 (May 10, 2023), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-fallacy-of-negotiating-withputin/>.



sidelined: what new arms control steps will the United States take with regard to a follow-on agreement to New START?³

Consequently, a critical issue now is to understand the demonstrably fallacious concepts and expectations that have driven U.S. arms control positions, and continue to have harmful effects. Some of these are unique to the nuclear age; others can be seen many decades earlier. By demonstrating the mendacity of such concepts and expectations, this analysis piece provides an outline for a more factually-grounded framework for any future U.S. arms control endeavors. This is a matter of simple prudence to help contemporary U.S. policymakers avoid basing their decisions regarding arms control on demonstrably misguided concepts/expectations.

The study is based on an examination of government reports, Congressional hearings, academic commentaries, and pertinent diplomatic histories, including the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922, the London Naval Treaty of 1930, the nuclear testing regime, as well as interviews with experts of diverse backgrounds and opinions on arms control. Arms control is not new; it was not new when nuclear weapons were invented in 1945, and the pathologies underlying problematic U.S. arms control behavior have extended from the pre-nuclear age to the present.

Chronic Arms Control Fallacies Continuing to Shape the Negotiations Process

There are several chronic pathologies recurring in the U.S. arms control process to date. They are important to counter as the United States prepares for the next round of arms control negotiations with adversaries.

Fallacy #1: The Fallacy That a Liberal Economic Order Will Lead to Peace

Prior to World War I, Sir Norman Angell argued persuasively that the common advantages of international trade and cooperation had rendered aggression so costly and disadvantageous that all countries behaving rationally would increasingly cease war and the preparation for war in favor of the mutual benefits available via amity and undisturbed economic cooperation.⁴ Sir Norman's advocacy of disarmament as a natural corollary of this supposed dynamic had a powerful effect within the British elite prior to World War I and jeopardized the needed British preparation for conflict. Of course, economic arguments only

³ Amy F. Woolf, Nikolai Sokov, and Dai Huaicheng, "Evaluating Current Arms-control Proposals: Perspectives from the US, Russia and China," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, October 2024, [iiss_mdi_evaluating-current-arms-control-proposals_22102024.pdf](https://www.iiss-mdi.org/evaluating-current-arms-control-proposals_22102024.pdf).

⁴ See Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage* (London: William Heinemann, 1912), pp. 119, 220; and Michael Rühle, "From Pacifism to Nuclear Deterrence: Norman Angell and the Founding of NATO," *Information Series*, No. 582 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 4, 2024), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/IS-582.pdf>.

partially, and sometimes not at all, shape leaders' calculations when deciding how to best advance their interests.

History shows that leaders are willing to pay massive economic penalties for advancing their national interests through war—and that the population often supports them in their endeavors. Fear, honor, and interest defined from a leader's vantage point are not easily reducible to monetary figures, if such a thing is possible at all. There is no universally shared conception of rationality informing a decision-making; that is why adversaries' beliefs and values must be taken into account when Washington is devising a strategy to influence their behavior.⁵

During the Cold War, much the same argument was applied by some to the Soviet Union as the rationale for détente era arms control agreements. It was later similarly repeated in the expectation that China would rise peacefully and take its place within the civilized "international community." Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was virtually unthinkable by much of the U.S. and European foreign policy establishment until the very last moment, when Russia's preparations made it obvious that doing so is what Russia intended. The United States supposedly could prudently remove regional forces, including nuclear, from Europe and Asia. That expectation has proven again to be a serious mistake.

During the post-Cold War era, many U.S. officials believed the potential for conflicts among great powers was a thing of the past, and therefore the United States could move away from maintaining military capabilities or a defense industrial base associated with the need to prepare for great power confrontation and even war. In 1990, then-President George H. W. Bush stated:

A new partnership of nations has begun ... An era in which the nations of the world, east and west, north and south, can prosper and live in harmony. ... A world quite different from the one we've known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.⁶

One of the standard arguments was that increasing economic interdependence and the associated goal of prosperity would trump political hostilities and lead to more peaceful relations, including among political opponents. This is akin to Norman Angell's pre-World War I brutally disproven thesis, and the idea is not faring much better this time around. Adversaries have their own ideas and political calculations that defy enduring American expectations that opponents will engage in benign cooperation based on shared Western

⁵ For more information on this topic, see Sarah Faris, "Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?," Information Series, No. 635 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/sarah-faris-tailoring-deterrence-what-and-why-no-635-september-2-2025/

⁶ George H. W. Bush, address to a joint session of Congress, reprinted in, "Bush 'Out of These Troubled Times...A New World Order,'" The Washington Post, September 12, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/09/12/bush-out-of-these-troubled-times-a-new-world-order/b93b5cf1-e389-4e6a-84b0-85f71bf4c946/>.

norms and the goal of overall economic prosperity. China is using its wealth to challenge U.S. interests, disrupt its alliances, and supporting Russia's conquest of Ukraine.

***Fallacy #2: The Fallacy That the Arms Control Process
Will Independently Improve Political Relations***

The notion that arms control will markedly improve political relations with opponents is, perhaps, the most prominent and enduring, but most obviously wrong, expectation. For example, despite expectations advanced on behalf of the League of Nations, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, and the Naval Arms Agreements, there was little/nothing that these diplomatic/arms control efforts did to promote improved political relations with the aggressive, expansionist powers of the early 20th century. The process of obtaining an arms control agreement becomes almost as important as the agreement itself, and the contents of the agreement are secondary, because the process is said to improve political relations between states. A close examination of the historical record shows that this common assumption is wrong. U.S. adversaries understand full well that weapons serve political means, and so does the process designed to control the weapons. They use the arms control process to restrain those U.S. capabilities that potentially create most strategic dilemmas for them, and leave the door open as much as possible for the development of their own capabilities that challenge the U.S. attainment of its own objectives.

During the Cold War, the United States mistakenly separated thinking about an adversary's political goals and the arms control process. This step was an essential enabler of negotiations because it made it easier to convince the American public that the process of negotiating with the Soviet Union served U.S. interests regardless of adversaries' political objectives. Otherwise, why negotiate with an adversary with fundamentally different political goals, bent on destroying the United States and its allies, and investing massive resources in weapons capable of doing so? Why negotiate with an adversary that uses the process of negotiations to weaken the United States and restrain U.S. programs that generate the most challenges for its ability to pursue its goals?

The Soviet Union used the arms control process to limit U.S. armaments while expanding its own capabilities to meet the demands of its explicitly "war-fighting" nuclear doctrine.⁷ Moscow knew it could not win a military competition with a fully engaged United States, so it used the arms control process to help restrain Washington in areas of U.S. advantage (e.g., missile defense) while leaving space for its own nuclear force expansion as wide open as possible, including violating arms control agreements when it suited Soviet interests.

⁷ See, for example, Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), p. 85; Lothar Rühl, "Offensive Defence in the Warsaw Pact," *Survival*, Vol. 33, No. 5 (September/October 1991), pp. 442-450; Beatrice Heuser, "Warsaw Pact Military Doctrines in the 1970s and 1980s: Findings in the East German Archives," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (October-December 1993), pp. 437-458; and, Beatrice Heuser, "Victory in a Nuclear War? A Comparison of NATO and WTO War Aims and Strategies," *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (November 1998), pp. 311-327; and, Matthias Uhl, "Storming on to Paris: The 1961 Buria Exercise and the Planned Solution of the Berlin Crisis," in, *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War*, Vojtech Mastny, Sven Holtsmark, and Andreas Wenger, eds. (Oxford: Routledge Press, 2006), pp. 46-71.

Moscow understood and played on the same enduring and naïve arms control expectations that drove democracies during the interwar period—and succeeded brilliantly.

Despite decades of advocacy to the contrary, the arms control process never had any innate power to improve political relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, no matter the wishes of U.S. participants. It has no innate power to improve relations between the United States and its self-declared adversaries today, and therefore it does not offer a unique means of resolving fundamental national security challenges.

Fallacy #3: U.S. Armaments Incite Opponents' Arms Buildups; U.S. Inaction Stops It

U.S. arms control advocates in and out of government have been prone to believe that U.S. actions are the most important driver of adversaries' actions, and that if the United States stops pursuing armaments or reduces them, others will follow. Based on this assumption, they advocate U.S. unilateral restrictions and unilateral force reductions and demand that the United States refrain from pursuing certain programs and activities involving modernization lest they cause adversaries to react in ways deemed undesirable to the United States. Yet, adversaries have political goals and pursue military policies and programs to achieve those goals with minimal regard for U.S. (in)actions. They do not engage in benign reciprocity in this regard despite Washington's belief that it can set a "good example" and appeal to opponents' "better angels."

During the Cold War, the U.S. understanding of an arms race driven by U.S. actions and technological developments to which the Soviets were compelled to respond, without regard for the Soviet strategic culture, resources, or political objectives, was a primary rationale for the ABM Treaty and the SALT process. The experience illustrates the fallacy of such thinking. Despite almost a complete cessation of U.S. missile defense efforts, the Soviets greatly increased the number of their strategic nuclear warheads.

The U.S. multi-decade cessation of nuclear testing, unilateral reductions, and an almost complete halt to nuclear forces modernization, were not reciprocated by any of its adversaries. Washington delayed, scaled down, or altogether stopped its nuclear modernization programs as soon as the Cold War ended, and stopped all nuclear warhead testing and yield-producing experiments in the 1990s following President Clinton's signature of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The U.S. Senate rejected the treaty after a full floor debate, but Washington has been complying with its terms ever since, despite its adversaries having active nuclear testing programs.

Russian, Chinese, or North Korean nuclear warhead production complexes are more capable of producing new nuclear warheads than is the U.S. nuclear warhead complex. After the end of the Cold War, China substantially increased its military spending and launched a major nuclear weapons buildup.⁸ This cycle appears to be a repeat of the 1970s and 1980s when Moscow dramatically increased the number and lethality of its strategic nuclear

⁸ Bill Gertz, "EXCLUSIVE: China building third missile field for hundreds of new ICBMs," *The Washington Times*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/aug/12/china-engagedbreathhtaking-nuclear-breakout-us-str/>.

warheads following the signing of the 1972 ABM Treaty that prohibited U.S. missile defense research and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) I agreements—confounding U.S. expectations at the time.

***Fallacy #4: The Mirror Imaging Fallacy:
Assuming That Adversaries Share U.S. Assumptions***

The United States often bases its arms control efforts on demonstrably wrong assumptions about its political adversaries, namely that they perceive and understand rationality the same way as does Washington, and share its priorities. The assumption is rooted in the mirror-imaging fallacy. U.S. leaders and their government representatives often act as if other political leaders will think and act as they do, and have very little appreciation for the profound differences between and among them, if they are aware of them at all. But foreign leaders likely define rationality differently based on their divergent strategic cultures and individual experiences.⁹ The mirror imaging results in suboptimal arms control agreements and treaties that disadvantage the United States and allies in the long run.

During the Cold War, a significant part of the U.S. national security establishment embraced the expectation that if the United States did not deploy strategic missile defenses, Moscow would, correspondingly, arrest its offensive missile buildup—but if the United States deployed such defenses, Moscow would respond by expanding its offensive missile capabilities. The United States approached the SALT talks “...as a seminar. We would educate the Soviets, and they will see things the way we do. Then we could come to a mutually beneficial agreement.”¹⁰

The Soviet Union, far from subscribing to this logic, took advantage of U.S. missile defense restraint to expand its arsenal of strategic nuclear warheads. This dynamic continued following the Cold War, after the initial economic shock from the breakup of the Soviet Union passed. In contrast to popular expectations, the U.S. 2002 withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was followed by the signature of the Moscow Treaty, which reduced U.S. and Russian offensive strategic forces.

***Fallacy #5: The Assumption That States Will Comply with
Their Arms Control Obligations, or Can Be Persuaded to Comply***

The United States tends to advance arms control initiatives with the promise (or expectation) that opponents will not risk the potential cost of non-compliance, or that violations can be alleviated or corrected by consultations or via some form of pressure, if necessary. This is a reflection of the unsound assumption that weapons are “not tools dearly bought to accomplish ends for the sake of which foreign leaders are willing to kill and die,

⁹ Faris, “Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?,” op. cit.

¹⁰ J.D. Crouch, Nuclear Strategy Forum Remarks, “Challenging the Arms Control Mythology: A Century of Experience,” September 2025, available in *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (April 2026), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Proceedings-September-2025.pdf>.

but rather, that they are expensive burdens that these leaders would prefer to shed.”¹¹ If weapons that violate agreements are unconnected to leaders’ geopolitical goals, a symbolic punishment or even public opinion pressure will make countries give them up, the fallacious reasoning goes.

However, this reasoning is historically unsound, because authoritarian states do not care about compliance to the degree democracies do, particularly when treaties regulate weapons these states consider necessary to achieve their political objectives. The principle that treaties must be obeyed (*pacta sunt servanda*) has a meaning in Washington far different from that in Hitler’s Berlin, Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang. Nevertheless, Washington typically negotiates as if they all shared the same understanding and willingness to restrict their actions based on a formal agreement. Washington’s propensity for idealism and mirror imaging, and optimistic political investment in arms control prevent it from speaking out honestly about violations and increasing threats until the evidence is undeniable and response utterly necessary. In this process, democracies often lose precious time that could have been devoted to countering the threat while it was more manageable.

Germany was violating provisions of the Versailles Treaty the day the treaty was signed in 1919. Shortly thereafter Japan and Germany built significantly over the tonnage permitted by the Washington Naval Agreements with very few consequences for their violations. The Soviet Union has pushed agreements to their limits and often deployed larger forces than agreements permitted or violated them outright when it suited its interest. Moscow’s violations rarely incurred substantive costs for the violator.

Democratic governments have historically found it extremely difficult to bring determined violators back into compliance with their treaty obligations. This is partly because democratic leaders become invested in the arms control status quo as soon as they get elected. No government wishes to tell the voters they are potentially less safe under its aegis than before. The resulting dynamic sees aggressors’ violations diminished in the public discourse, and those who question the conciliatory approach in the face of another party’s violations are often labeled as alarmists, if not enemies of arms control and peace.

Implementing Long-Overdue Corrections

The United States ought to take the steps below to correct the pathologies in its arms control thinking. Should the United States fail to do so, the nation and its allies would be better off without arms control. Arms control processes and treaties or agreements that do not correct for these long-standing pathologies would leave Washington disadvantaged vis-à-vis revisionist adversaries who are willing to disregard their arms control obligations and use weapons to advance their goals in opposition to U.S. and allied interests.

¹¹ Malcolm Wallop and Angelo M. Codevilla, *The Arms Control Delusion* (Institute of Contemporary Studies, 1987), p. 42.

Create a Red Team for the Arms Control Process

In arms control endeavors, the United States must devise mechanisms to guard against unwarranted idealism, mirror imaging and its related foolish expectations of “action-reaction” and opponents’ arms control compliance, and a political investment in the process that works against calling out arms control failures. These misconceptions lead to misguided and harmful arms control practices and are the major driver behind the continued failure of arms control to meet its proponents’ expectations and promises. The pathologies must be consciously guarded against, or the United States and its allies will find themselves consistently disadvantaged against revisionist, hostile, and better-armed adversaries.¹²

At a minimum, every U.S. arms control negotiation should be advised by a red team specifically designed to watch for the pathologies at play analyzed in this analysis piece. Arms control negotiations ought to start with a solid analysis of the other states’ political objectives and due consideration of the connection between weapons to be subjected to arms control and political objectives they are meant to advance. The connections between arms and opponents’ political objectives are vastly more important in an arms control process than the weapons’ technical characteristics that the arms control process traditionally tends to dwell on, and is much more analytically demanding.¹³

Tailor Arms Control

Realistic analyses of the connection between arms and other parties’ strategic goals, and the low priority that opponents place on compliance should inform U.S. arms control goals and practices. U.S. arms control goals and practices must be “tailored” to the character of opponents no less than deterrence, and for the same reasons.¹⁴ Opponents will differ in material ways, and an approach to arms control predicated on the usual mirror-imaging pathologies will likely doom the outcome of the process.

In the absence of such an informed practice, it is misguided to measure the success of arms control negotiations by the achievement of an agreement. Setting the conclusion of an agreement as the standard of success essentially denies the significance of the opponent’s character and the specific content of the agreement. It also creates an environment in which continued quietude regarding noncompliance is prized above seriously exploring all options to adjust for the other party’s noncompliance.

¹² Keith B. Payne, “A Fading Western Alliance System? Who Is to Blame and Why Should We Care,” *Information Series*, No. 662 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 8, 2026), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-a-fading-western-alliance-system-who-is-to-blame-and-why-should-we-care-no-662-june-8-2026/.

¹³ Keith B. Payne, “Deterrence is Not Rocket Science: It is More Difficult,” *Information Series*, No. 527 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 6, 2022), https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-deterrence-is-not-rocket-science-it-is-more-difficult-no-527-july-6-2022/.

¹⁴ Faris, “Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?,” *op. cit.*; and Keith B. Payne, “Nuclear Deterrence In a New Era: Applying ‘Tailored Deterrence,’” *Information Series*, No. 431 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, May 21, 2018), https://nipp.org/information_series/payne-keith-b-nuclear-deterrence-in-a-new-era-applying-tailored-deterrence-information-series-no-431/.

Countries hostile to U.S. interests will not consent to agreements that meaningfully limit their capabilities if those capabilities are useful for advancing their priority interests. That is why eminent strategist Colin S. Gray observed that arms control is either impossible, or unimportant: “The political antagonism that generates the objective need for alleviation via arms control—always assuming, again fallaciously, that arms control could control—is the very reason why arms control must fail....”¹⁵

U.S. arms control goals and practice should be informed by an acute understanding of the other party’s priority goals and hostility toward the United States, and how misinformed U.S. arms control enthusiasms can advance their goals. Arms control, as typically practiced by Washington, will be misguided and unable to achieve anything fundamentally helpful with countries that are openly hostile to U.S. interests. This, of course, is why U.S. arms control must be tailored by an unvarnished understanding of opponents, untainted by the pathologies discussed here, and rank idealism.

Realize that Arms Control Disproportionately Impacts Democracies

Arms control impacts democracies differently than it does authoritarian regimes, because democracies seek to abide by arms control treaties while autocracies often will not, leaving compliance asymmetry that often disadvantages democracies. The United States should refrain from investing significant political capital in the arms control process and welcoming a signature of arms control agreements with unwarranted visibility and expectations. Both of these dynamics work against a prompt publication of concerns with another party’s noncompliance and violations, particularly if they happen on the watch of a government that concluded agreements with violators in the first place. Giving less prominence to the process would make it easier to discuss compliance concerns and violations earlier on.

Congress should also demand a detailed analysis of most likely compliance issues and violations, and require that the administration articulates concrete consequences for instances of noncompliance and violations. While such a document cannot be binding on future Congresses and administrations, ideally, it would serve as a natural follow-up point for a discussion about their consequences after detecting noncompliance and violations. The ideal would be that the government exercises more effort imposing consequences for noncompliance and violations than debating whether they happened in the first place.

The compliance asymmetry is evident with regard to the United States stopping all nuclear warhead testing and yield-producing experiments in the 1990s following President Clinton’s signature of the CTBT, a multilateral treaty which the Senate rejected after a full floor debate, as stated above. Since then, the United States lost much of the warhead development and production skills and capabilities.¹⁶ Russia and China did not bind

¹⁵ Colin S. Gray, *Weapons Don’t Make War* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), p. 174.

¹⁶ Mark B. Schneider, “The Enormous Costs of ‘Science Based Stockpile Stewardship’ for Nuclear Weapons,” *RealClearDefense*, January 7, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2026/01/07/the_enormous_costs_of_science_based_stockpile_stewardship_for_nuclear_weapons_1157136.html.

themselves by similar restrictions, despite signing the CTBT and, as a result, their respective nuclear warhead production complexes are likely much more capable of producing new nuclear warheads than is the U.S. nuclear warhead complex.

The United States must reconstitute flexibility and resilience within the nuclear weapons complex so as to respond in a more timely way to opponents' arms control violations. Washington should proceed with greater urgency to reconstitute its ability to produce more plutonium pits (substantially more than the current program of 80 per year). The United States should be able to conduct a fully instrumented nuclear test within the next two years.¹⁷ It also ought to expand the Stockpile Responsiveness Program to help reconstitute skills necessary for developing nuclear warheads with new military capabilities should the United States decide such capabilities are necessary to strengthen deterrence.

Conclusion

Arms control will continue to be a part of national security discussions for years to come. In the future, the United States must not repeat mistakes of the past, namely approaching arms control with the same vapid misconceptions and pathologies that have historically proven wrong. The 1990s were supposed to bring the new era of globalization and interconnectedness which were to lead to the "end of history," an era of international cooperation that transcends national interests and obviates the need for arms—a new world order. This was an illusion.

Yet, the United States continued the arms control process based on fallacies that predate the end of the Cold War, and in some cases predate the Cold War by decades. As a consequence, the United States today is less equipped to counter its revisionist adversaries and uphold its extended deterrence commitments. If the United States will not correct the flawed misconceptions that have gained prominence within the arms control discourse over the past several decades—its arms control pathologies—U.S. negotiations will be doomed to the same misguided approaches that have created or magnified U.S. national security problems both recently and in decades past.

While there are no easy institutional solutions to overcome these established arms control misconceptions, a broader awareness of these enduring problems is a necessary beginning to avoid falling into the same traps. As typically practiced to date, the United States is likely to be more secure without arms control treaties; they do not fundamentally alter the challenges it faces from revisionist powers bent on changing the status quo, and they disproportionately restrain law-abiding democracies. There should be no rush to negotiate another arms control agreement.

¹⁷ Thomas Scheber, *A Responsive Nuclear Warhead Infrastructure: What Still Needs to Be Done? Why Is Responsive Infrastructure More Urgent Now Than in the Past?*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2025), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Vol.-5-No.-8.pdf>.

To paraphrase Senator Ben Sasse, arms control treaties will not bring about heaven, and their lack will not cause hell.¹⁸ In fact, avoiding the investment in misguided arms control removes an institutional obstacle to calling out adversaries for what they are, and could contribute to strengthening the case for necessary U.S. nuclear and conventional weapons modernization and missile defense programs. Without these, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to keep peace in the future.

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¹⁸ Ross Douthat, "How Ben Sasse Is Living Now That He Is Dying," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/09/opinion/ben-sasse-death-pancreatic-cancer.html>.