What are the Major Barriers to Arms Control?

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Abstract

Arms control is one of the most importance concepts in International Relations and Security Studies. Many students may be familiar with the term, but lack a more detailed knowledge of the main problems and barriers faced by arms control regimes and organizations. This paper provides an easy to understand taxonomy of arms control strategies, and outlines the main barriers facing arms control regimes and organizations. Finally, a series of links is made available to allow students of International Relations and Security to explore some key organizations' work.

What is Arms Control?

Often conflated with disarmament (e.g. Sheehan, 1998, p.1), arms control is essentially limited (seeking systemic sustenance rather than change), and regulatory. It represents an enlargement of strategy scope seeking to identify and harness points of mutual interest in war avoidance/limitation, and minimizing the costs/dangers of arms races (Schelling & Halperin, 1985). The difficulty in attaining such agreements is reflected in the piecemeal and pragmatic nature of arms control (e.g. Pilisuk, 2007, p.95). Below is a brief taxonomy of arms control types, along with some of the more prominent examples of these strategies' application.

Horizontal Restrictions	Restricting the proliferation of some weapon types to the existing group of states who have such technology.	e.g. NPT 1968
Numerical Restrictions	Usually bilaterally, this involves overall caps on weapons, usually by type.	e.g. START I 1991-2
Technology Restriction	Bilaterally, this usually involves mutual agreement to forgo a technology deemed to threaten balance-of-power.	e.g. SALT I 1972
	Multilaterally, this usually stipulates a blanket ban on weapons of a certain type.	e.g. Biological Weapons Convention 1972
Confidence Building Measures	These usually surround transparency, sharing knowledge about escalation/procedures, and (crucially). establishing communication/verification/compliance.	Usually informal and often implicit transmission of information.
Geographic Restrictions	Agreements surrounding the placement, but perhaps also targeting, of weapon systems.	Usually informal, often executive-led agreement.

(Griffiths, O'Callaghan, & Roach, 2007, p.12.).

Arms control can be understood as existing in an overlap between Cold War traditionalism in Security Studies and Peace Research, entailing historical, political, and normative assessment of arms policies (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p.105). Although existent for centuries, key contemporary debate centers on the nature and formulation of nuclear-focused Cold War doctrine, and its suitability for addressing contemporary issues. However, there exists substantial obstacles to the successful employment of arms control strategies.

Barriers to Arms Control

Insecurity & World Anarchy

Underpinning the broadly disappointing performance of disarmament and arms control strategies in the post-Cold War era is the anarchical nature of the international system itself; even the more 'solid' treaty-based control mechanisms explicitly provide for withdrawal of signatories (Keohane, 2002, p.141). Essentially, all the following problems follow from the absence of overarching authority in the international system. States' insecurity and ultimate sovereignty endures; practically the whole body of literature and efforts at arms control seek to contain the resulting supply, rather than address the demand (e.g. Spear, 2005, p.108.).

Verification/Cheating

In an anarchical world, restrictions are either voluntarily enforced or must be subject to effective verification by signatories. This is especially difficult/crucial given that as armament/capabilities diminish, incentives for cheating increase (e.g. Buzan, 1983, p.202; Kodzic, 1975, p.202-3). Mistrust is the norm in arms-control negotiations, formulation, and enforcement (e.g. Griffiths, O'Callaghan, & Roach, 2007, p.13-14). In the Cold War context, where vertical proliferation was a key concern, difficulties in harnessing incentives for cooperation generated by the possibility of mutual annihilation to form agreements frequently stumbled on trust issues (Sheehan, 1988, p.14), not least because the USSR viewed its military secrecy as a significant asset. Post-Cold War horizontal proliferation has taken center stage, and verification of trade restrictions in both goods and information have been shown to fail epically. The illicit nuclear secret/materials network discovered by the IAEA (e.g. Spear, 2005, p.101) and the alarmingly advanced nature of both the Iraqi nuclear program in 1991, and Iran in recent years, highlight the difficulties involved in verifying compliance, status, and objectives (Boutin, 2012, p.231).

Technology

The high technology nature of arms development has great potential to disrupt or nullify control regimes. Especially, the dual-use (military/civilian). of many materials/instruments further hampers the already problematic verification process. The privatization/proliferation of the arms business itself (Cameron & Chetail, 2013). causes additional problems through complicating the process of instigating and monitoring information/material control. Concerning horizontal nuclear proliferation, structural transformation of the supply environment has been proven to mask and aid covert proliferation programs (Boutin, 2012, p.231-4). In the post Cold-War environment, US policies of conventionalizing their extended deterrence program, and rescinding their commitment to ABM restrictions have highlighted tensions between the 'flexibility' requirements caused by horizontal proliferation and more 'traditional' strategies of deterrence. The ABM example serves to demonstrate how technologies can be viewed very differently by various parties. Given that weapons development is broadly inextricable from technology *per se*, some argue that a "weapons innovation cycle" is bound to subsist as long as the world political system remains anarchical (e.g. Buzan, 1983, p.202).

Agenda Setting

'Effective arms control' begs the question: effective for whom? The post-Cold War focus on Chemical/Biological weapons, horizontal proliferation, fissile material, and delivery systems reflects the needs of the United States, which is unquestionably the major player in arms control agenda-setting (Spear 2005, p.109-10). Considered alongside the United States' poor signatory record in cases such as their post CWC chemical weapons build-up (Griffiths, O'Callaghan, & Roach 2007)., one cannot help but be sympathetic to widespread charges that the culture of international control regimes itself is amoral and illegitimate, acts to sustain the North/South divide through selective and discriminatory anti-proliferation approaches (Krause & Wiliams 1997, p.303), and cements the First World stranglehold on key instruments of development and power (Griffiths, O'Callaghan, & Roach 2007, p.14.). Practically all major non-proliferation treaties confirm this bleak summary: powerful states choose the agenda, confer upon themselves rights, and upon others responsibilities (Spear, 2005.). Undoubtedly, power distribution is a key problem facing effective arms control *for all* (Muller, 2000, p.81-3).

Some signs of diversification in agenda setting exist, with 'bottom-up' arms control stimulated by NGO's/international organizations manifesting in more representative controls such as the 1996 Ottawa Process tackling landmines; such developments seem particularly valuable in the face of worrying recent United States' circumvention of existing control regimes for political convenience (Spear 2005, p.110-12.). The punitive nature of current control methods is seen by some as perpetuating a clandestine approach to verification that is not only inappropriate in the post-World War era but actively destructive (e.g. Miller 2005, p.186). Potentially, a more inclusive, transnational (e.g. Adler 1992), multilateral, and transparent approach enhances treaty

effectiveness (Chayes & Chayes 1994, p.90). through fostering of a new culture of collaborative oversight (Miller 2005, p.186-7; Steinbruner 2000, p.192-3).

Another, equally important/worrying take on the agenda-setting issue is of course examination of what is absent. SALW have been highlighted as of increasing importance in a world of increasing intra-state conflict (Hartung, 2008, p.345). SALW, shown to fuel ethnic conflicts, are at the core of insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and are proliferating beyond the meager existing controls (e.g. Spear, 2005, p.107). The United States has a significant and highly politicized domestic pro-firearm faction (NRA), and the Cold War trend of cementing alliances with arms deals has broadly continued into the post-Cold War era. Tragically, the main motivation for continued sales seems primarily economic; although global arms sales have both restructured and dropped since the 1980's, the developing world remains the majority customer (Klare & Lumpe, 1998, p.161.). The US has frequently acted to hamper SALW restriction attempts at the UN level (Spear 2005, p.110), while all major arms producing nations continue to seep rhetoric of moderation while simultaneously trading weapons into volatile zones such as the Middle East (e.g. Pearson, 1994, p.86). The complexity of SLAW restrictions, which must take the form of control rather than blanket bans (Berman 2008, p.16-17), combined with key state actors' refusal to engage with, or deliberate hampering of efforts, paints a bleak picture for future control potential.

Arms Control Organizations

Scholars and students of international relations and security can find out about the current work of the major arms control organizations using these links:

Arms Control Organization	https://www.armscontrol.org
International Atomic Energy Agency	https://www.iaea.org/
Organization for the prohibition of Chemical Weapons	https://www.opcw.org/
Organization for Security & Cooperation in Europe	http://www.osce.org/who
Conference on Disarmament	http://www.unog.ch/cd
United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research	http://www.unidir.org/

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