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Verification and Transparency in Future Arms Control

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Abstract

Verification’s importance has changed dramatically over time, although it always has been in the forefront of arms control. The goals and measures of verification and the criteria for success have changed with the times as well, reflecting such factors as the centrality of the prospective agreement to East-West relations during the Cold War, the state of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the technologies available for monitoring. Verification’s role may be declining in the post-Cold War period. The prospects for such a development will depend, first and foremost, on the high costs of traditional arms control, especially those associated with requirements for verification. Moreover, the growing interest in “informal,” or “nonnegotiated” arms control does not allow for verification provisions by the very nature of these arrangements. Multilateral agreements are also becoming more prominent and argue against highly effective verification measures, in part because of fears of promoting proliferation by opening sensitive facilities to inspectors from potential proliferant states. As a result, it is likely that transparency and confidence-building measures will achieve greater prominence, both as supplements to and substitutes for traditional verification. Such measures are not panaceas and do not offer all that we came to expect from verification during the Cold War. But they may be the best possible means to deal with current problems of arms reductions and restraints at acceptable levels of expenditure.

Introduction

Verification’s importance has changed dramatically over time, although it always has been in the forefront of arms control. The goals and measures of verification and the criteria for success have changed with the times, reflecting such factors as the centrality of the prospective agreement to East-West relations during the Cold War, the state of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the technologies available for monitoring.

While national technical means, and especially overhead surveillance, were sufficient for verification of the Limited Test Ban Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties, further testing restraints, along with recent agreements in the areas of nuclear, conventional, and chemical weapons have posed different challenges and have required additional verification measures. While changes in the political environment along with existing and developing verification technologies have made it possible to conclude agreements in these areas, they require highly intrusive verification. These agreements will have to rely heavily on transparency, confidence-building, and cooperative measures that are possible, and probably acceptable, in a climate of improving East-West relations, but might leave us with hollow verification regimes if relations deteriorate.

This fundamental shift in verification may be understood in the context of the end of the Cold War. Verification, as a requirement of arms control and disarmament, emerged and developed its current meaning and significance during the Cold War. In particular, dealing with a closed Soviet Union drove requirements for the United States and the West in the bilateral sphere, while other agreements were deemed either so unimportant or so clearly to embody mutual interests that they did not require verification provisions. But the world is changing, and verification requirements are changing with it.

Traditional verification will continue, but it will not have the prominence it had in the past. “Coercive verification,” as practiced in Iraq, appeared promising, but our experience shows that it may be a very limited instrument. On the other hand, transparency and confidence-building measures (CBMs) also came into their own during the Cold War and may have broader future application. Because the old Soviet Union was so secretive, it was (with few exceptions) unwilling to
move seriously in this area until the mid-1980s. Consequently, these measures that have been in the background of arms control are becoming more significant.

**Time of Transparency?**

Transparency clearly seems to be an idea whose time has come. The development of transparency measures, or confidence-building measures, has long been held as desirable. These efforts are designed to make military behavior more open and predictable, to build confidence and to reassure states, and to provide early warning of dangerous activities and of the proliferation of arms. Successes in the more distant past, including the Hot Line and the Incidents at Sea Agreement, were important but rare. They were designed to solve specific problems of mutual interest, when it was believed conflict could otherwise result and it was clear that broader agreements were not feasible.

The agreements of the past decade are more widespread than their predecessors, and have broader goals, including the following:

- to foster more formal arms control by breaking down barriers and obstacles;
- to avoid more formal arms control measures and verification procedures;
- to encourage and reinforce improved political relationships;
- to lessen tensions and build confidence;
- to reduce costs, difficulties, and intrusiveness of monitoring compliance;
- to obtain information about military activities and deployments of other countries;
- to obtain insights into other countries’ defense planning, thinking, and decision-making; and
- to allow more predictability in planning defense requirements.

These objectives of transparency measures are more attractive at present because of the new strategic environment in which the certainties and stabilities of the Cold War are eroding. But there are prospects for greater cooperation with Russia even if they were not as great as envisioned in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. Formal arms control as it was practiced during the Cold War is giving way to less formal measures that are probably not verifiable with traditional tools (e.g., registries of nuclear weapons and the disposition of warhead special nuclear material) because of the rising importance of regional conflict and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which have not been amenable to formal arms control measures.

Transparency also has risks and limits, including the prospect that classified, sensitive, or proprietary information will be compromised or released, the possibility of the information channels being used for misinformation from the other party or parties, or the creation of a false sense of confidence, the questionable value of information obtained compared to intrusive verification, and the like. But opportunities exist and must be balanced with the risks. In this context, can transparency make a genuine contribution? Can these measures make a difference?

The line between verification and transparency and confidence-building is not clear. Verification can serve the latter objectives, particularly confidence-building, by demonstrating compliance and thus reassuring the other party or parties. Some parties may wish explicitly to show their good faith through effective verification measures. In other words, they wish their activities to be transparent to the other parties. For example, for years International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards have allowed states an opportunity to show that their civil nuclear programs are not being misused for military ends. Finally, good verification can demonstrate the good faith of the parties to the broader international community, which may have an interest in whether or not the parties are complying with their treaties or agreements even if it is not directly involved.

**Toward Greater Transparency**

Despite the extensive formal nuclear agreements between the United States and Russia, there is a growing sense that they do not get to the heart of today’s most pressing nuclear dangers. Accordingly, there is considerable interest in expanding transparency measures. Such measures would supplement the already extensive provisions contained in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties and would also cover areas of interest not addressed by formal agreements. Two areas of special interest, which have been outside of nuclear arms control historically, are nuclear warheads (as opposed to delivery vehicles) and weapon materials. While both are virtually impossible to verify in any meaningful and practicable way, declarations on stocks, visits to storage areas, and other such measures, could be important in promoting transparency. One specific
area would be exchanges on the safety, security, and
dismantlement of nuclear weapons. Such initiatives
could greatly contribute to reassuring each other and the
world that the dangers of the nuclear forces developed
during the Cold War are diminishing. In addition,
broader exchanges on defense budgets, planning, and
decision-making, on defense R&D, and on nonstrategic
forces could promote predictability, mutual confidence,
and other desired objectives.

In the security environment in Europe following
the conclusion of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in
Europe, there is considerable scope for information
exchanges, technical assistance, and the like, regarding
military budgets, doctrines, and force structure. To the
extent that such modest actions do promote transparency
and thereby reduce tensions and insecurities, they could
actually address the heart of current problems. They are
by their very nature, however, limited and primarily
useful in so far as the positive trends of the present time
continue. If the goal is security and stability in Europe,
promoting transparency through multiple endeavors
rather than further quantitative or qualitative limitations
on conventional forces, appears to deserve the highest
priority by policy makers.

Neither sub-regional issues, such as Cyprus, or
extra-regional issues of special concern in Europe,
including the Middle East and North Africa, appear sus-
ceptible to any but the most modest confidence-building
measures in the foreseeable future, although even
modest measures could be useful. Such issues remain
divisive in European and Atlantic councils, and have
long been a bane to achieving formal arms control
agreements. As recent experience in the former
Yugoslavia appears to indicate, these issues are not yet
ripe for harvest.

A host of confidence-building measures and unilat-
eral actions (reciprocal and coordinated), from mere
dialogue on unresolvable issues to unilateral deep cuts
in some areas of conventional forces in Europe, are
possible and would seem to be the best possible
approach to the outstanding issues confronting
European security. The full implementation of Open
Skies in the new climate will be difficult. This, how-
ever, is a demonstration of what is now possible
because of budgetary and other constraints. In any case,
this transparency regime will exist and have a possi-
bility of developing over time. What is critical is the
political imperative for transparency that led to the
Open Skies Treaty, even if it will largely be symbolic
for the foreseeable future.

A key question is whether these trends will hold for
other, more conflict-prone regions. Much attention has
recently been devoted to adapting measures developed in
Europe and in the old bilateral relationship to the situations
in the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere. In
regions complicated by the proliferation of weapons of
mass destruction, these measures are currently in the
forefront of thinking about how to lessen regional risks.
Confidence-building measures are widely perceived as
offering in the 1990s an important means of dealing
with regional conflict and tensions, including proliferation.
Reflecting the current hopes, Michael Krepon
stated that CBMs "have played an essential role in
improving East-West relations. Nevertheless, these
unilateral, tacit or negotiated steps to improve coopera-
tion or decrease tension were the forgotten stepchild of
the Cold War, always taking the back seat to formal
arms control negotiations. Now with the end of the
U.S.-Soviet rivalry, CBMs are emerging from the
shadows of strategic arms reductions to become the pre-
eminent means of preventing accidental wars and
unintended escalation in strife-ridden regions." Regional
initiatives such as non-attack on nuclear facilities
(South Asia) and the declaratory renunciation of nuclear
weapons (proposed in South Asia) have been put
forward for acceptance. Exchanges among the civilian
and military officials of adversaries, declarations about
military force levels, exercises, and the like, are promis-
ing. There have been discussions of expanding Open
Skies, or at least the concept, to regional settings, but
this idea may not be practicable. While such measures
might break impasses and lead to more formal and com-
prehensive measures, they may be ill-suited to tense
regions because of fears that they may be misused for
the advantage of one of the participants.

Conclusion

Current and future verification challenges are quite
formidable. Monitoring capabilities have grown consider-
ably, but further improvements are necessary. The
effectiveness and cost of verification was hotly debated
during the Cold War, especially from the late 1970s to
the mid-1980s, but effectiveness issues may be less
important in the future. "Cost" issues may actually
become even more important. Verification regimes are
extraordinarily expensive, and more and more they are
contributing only marginally to intelligence in the monitoring of agreements. This trend can be expected to continue to the extent that arms control agreements deal with items that are either difficult or impossible to monitor; that is, as arms control moves into areas that are essentially unverifiable. Of course, on the basis of future budgetary decisions, verification may become far less important and perhaps absent from some agreements. If societies continue to become more open (as is occurring in Russia), this will not pose a problem. Moreover, it may be expected that arms control negotiations and agreements will be given less attention by presidents, parliaments, and publics than other more immediately pressing issues in the future.

The prospects for the declining role of verification will be, first and foremost, affected by the high costs of traditional arms control, especially those associated with requirements for verification. Moreover, the growing interest in “informal,” or “nonnegotiated” arms control does not allow for verification provisions by the very nature of these arrangements. Multilateral agreements are also becoming more prominent and argue against highly effective verification measures, in part because of fears of promoting proliferation by opening sensitive facilities to inspectors from potential proliferant states. As a result, it is likely that transparency and confidence-building measures will achieve greater prominence, both as supplements to and substitutes for traditional verification. Such measures are not panaceas, and do not offer all that we came to expect from verification during the Cold War. But they may be the best possible means to deal with current problems of arms reductions and restraints at acceptable levels of expenditure.

References
