

Nuclear Arms Control in the Age of Twitter: Decoding Current US policies

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Executive Summary

Only 18 months into his Presidency and nuclear arms control has become a defining feature of Donald Trump's Administration. On May 8, 2018, he announced America's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A month later, on June 12, 2018, he concluded an agreement in Singapore with Kim Jong Un working towards denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. And in July 2018 he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, which included discussion of the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and 2010 New START Treaty, according to Russia's ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Antonov. And as with all areas of policy, Twitter has come to play a role in Trump's handling of nuclear issues, often resulting in mixed messages and confusion among adversaries, allies, and within the Administration.

Is this the end of arms control as we know it? What is Trump's vision for arms control? And how should allies, partners, and adversaries interpret the mixed messages coming from the Trump Administration? For while the recent agreement with North Korea suggests an interest in arms control, withdrawal from the JCPOA potentially sends a contradictory message.

This in-depth briefing will address three main trends in Trump's nuclear policies to date: differentiating himself from Obama, his identity as a deal-maker, and his use of Twitter. The briefing will then observe these trends across his arms control policies towards North Korea, Iran, and Russia. In closing, the briefing demonstrates that Trump's mixed messages around arms control and nuclear policy in general threaten America's credibility as a partner in international cooperation with both adversaries and allies.

Note:

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Trump the Deal Maker

Upon assuming the Presidency, Trump had over three decades of experience following nuclear issues from outside of government. For example, in a 1984 interview, he stated his “fantasy” was to be an arms control negotiator. For the most part, his views on nuclear weapons largely aligned with the Republican Party platform: scepticism of disarmament and multilateral forums, prioritising non-proliferation, and support for nuclear modernization. In a 2000 manifesto as part of his presidential campaign he advocated “surgical” strikes on North Korea, which was alluded to at numerous points in the 2016 campaign and in tweets, such as on January 2, 2017, as President-elect: “North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won’t happen!”

But despite his previous mainstream views, Trump’s approach to nuclear weapons policy during the campaign and since assuming office are unique in at least three ways. First, much of Trump’s nuclear policies are motivated by a desire to differentiate himself from Obama seemingly for symbolic rather than substantive reasons. For example, numerous Republicans have come out in opposition to Trump’s nuclear policies and some of his decisions even contradict his own Administration’s policies and statements by other senior officials. Second, as demonstrated in a survey of his statements on nuclear weapons prior to inauguration, Trump strongly self-identifies as a negotiator and believes he can get a better deal than any prior Presidents. And finally, while Trump’s views may seem relatively mainstream, his means of communicating them, particularly his use of Twitter, are original in the policy-making sphere. This policy brief will now examine how these traits played out across Trump’s approaches to arms control with North Korea, Iran, and Russia.

North Korea

One of the greatest nuclear challenges of the past two decades has been controlling North Korea’s nuclear programme ever since it withdrew from the NPT in 2003. Upon assuming office, Trump inherited a belligerent North Korea led by Kim Jong Un carrying on his familial legacy of provocation, to include nuclear and missile testing. Arms control with North Korea broke down in 2009 with the failure of the Six Party Talks between China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. But more dramatically, in the early months of Trump’s Presidency there were increasing calls for a disarming first strike on North Korea.

Following overtures by the South Korean government during the Olympics and a April 28, 2018 cross-border meeting between Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, President Trump met with Kim in Singapore in June 2018. From the North Korean perspective, the meeting itself was a political coup by providing the regime and its nuclear programme with previously unattainable political legitimacy. The summit agreement included four main components: establish improved relations; peace on the Korean peninsula; denuclearization of the peninsula; and recovering POW remains. In addition, however, Trump cancelled major military exercises with South Korea, allegedly without prior consultation with Seoul or the U.S. Department of Defense. In exchange, Kim agreed to destroy a missile testing site. The agreement remains highly controversial because of its lack of detail and definitions, particularly ‘denuclearization’.

Trump’s approach to the North Korea agreement manifests his identity as a deal-maker and desire to differentiate himself from Obama. For example, following the Singapore summit, he stated, ‘I know when somebody wants to deal and I know when somebody doesn’t.’ One possible explanation for the Singapore summit is that it was intended as an initial overture to open relations for more detailed negotiations, which is supported by Secretary Pompeo’s subsequent trip to North Korea. Another interpretation, however, is that both Trump and Kim wanted the *appearance* of an agreement- for Kim, the meeting bestowed legitimacy on his nuclear programme; for Trump, it was an opportunity to differentiate himself from Obama and suggest he achieved something that was unattainable to all of his predecessors.

Regardless of the motives behind the Singapore summit, the subsequent agreement is lacking on details and may prove to be a harbinger of controversy rather than cooperation. In its current form the agreement causes confusion among allies and within the U.S. government. It also potentially sets a dangerous principle, whereby the United States will negotiate with dictators, particularly if they possess nuclear weapons; but they will unilaterally attack those who are developing but *do not yet possess* nuclear weapons, such as Muammar Qaddafi or Saddam Hussein. An additional risk of this approach is that it suggests lack of coordination with allies and American unilateralism. Overall, while the Singapore summit is indeed a positive step away from threats of a first strike on North Korea, it also raises questions about America's trustworthiness as a strategic partner if it does not consult with allies and prefers the *appearance* of an agreement rather than substantive progress within arms control. The way ahead for any U.S.-North Korea nuclear agreement largely entails resolving difficult details and untangling American mixed messages. For despite the agreement, North Korea continues to develop its nuclear programme and a visit by Secretary of State Pompeo yielded no clarity. North Korea has no incentive to relinquish its nuclear programme, given that the meeting with Trump gave it the desired legitimacy and attention on the global stage.

Iran

Just before Trump concluded one arms control agreement he withdrew the United States from another, the JCPOA with Iran and other members of the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom). As a candidate Trump heavily criticised the agreement and referred to Iran as the 'biggest sponsor of terrorism in the world' in a tweet. Trump's criticism of the JCPOA is not an aberration, however, and the agreement was criticized by many American conservatives on three primary points. First, any agreement was perceived as legitimising a state sponsor of terrorism, and the agreement did nothing to sever Iran's ties with groups such as Hezbollah. Second, the JCPOA did not limit Iran's growing missile programme, and Tehran ignored calls from the United Nations to cease missile testing. And third, the agreement still afforded Iran the right to enrich uranium, albeit in limited amounts and at lower levels. Indeed, the JCPOA cut Iran's stockpile of enriched material by 98% along with its capacity to enrich nuclear material and dramatically reducing its centrifuges. In exchange for these and other limits on its nuclear programme, Iran received sanctions relief from the United States and other parties to the agreement.

During both his campaign and early Presidency, Trump regularly called the JCPOA the 'worst deal ever.' Referring back to Trump's traits and approaches to arms control, the decision to withdraw from the JCPOA largely reflects a campaign promise but also presented an opportunity differentiate himself from his predecessor by cancelling one of Obama's foreign policy achievements. This resonates with Trump's identity as a deal-maker, whereby his statements upon withdrawal suggest he believes he can get a better deal. While withdrawal from the JCPOA may be driven by Trump's desire to differentiate himself from Obama and negotiate a better deal, it is also important to remember that the JCPOA did not have universal support and remained controversial among conservative Washington circles.

American withdrawal from the JCPOA raises numerous risks, such as fuelling hard-line positions in Tehran. But beyond the region it also risks setting a dangerous precedent of punishing countries that give up nuclear programmes while rewarding those who develop them, particularly on the heels of the Singapore summit. As in the case of North Korea, Trump's position and statements suggest a lack of coordination with allies and a shift towards American unilateralism on arms control. Due to U.S. withdrawal and return to sanctions, many allies are now in the difficult position of defending the agreement without U.S. support and encouraging their businesses to continue operating in Iran in the face of intense economic pressure. Withdrawing from the JCPOA understandably raises questions about America's trustworthiness as an arms control partner- can Washington abide by agreements across administrations?

These risks may present a challenge for *any* future administration pursuing an arms control agreement. An additional risk is much broader and applies to the global nuclear regime. Trump and other critics of the JCPOA argued one of its weaknesses was that it allowed Iran the right to enrich uranium; however, this right is afforded under the NPT and undermining this 'pillar' of the NPT may raise questions among many members about the Treaty's enduring benefits.

Arms Control with Russia after Helsinki

While North Korea and Iran have received intense attention with regards to nuclear policy, Trump has yet to turn an arms control focus towards Russia. Upon taking office, Trump inherited an ongoing multi-year dispute over the INF and other treaties, including Open Skies and the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. The 2010 New START Treaty, which reduced both the United States and Russia to 1550 warheads, is due to expire in 2021, with limited prospects for a follow-on. In addition to the tangible benefits of these treaties, such as arms reductions and on-site inspections, they also bestow a degree of confidence and set a cooperative tone, at least on nuclear issues. The loss of arms control would suggest a return to nuclear competition, especially as arms control's precarious future comes amidst geopolitical tensions with Russia due to allegations of its interference in the 2016 U.S. election, aggression in Eastern Europe, and use of a nerve agent on British soil.

Any future U.S.-Russia arms control will face the significant hurdle of overcoming disputes about the INF Treaty. A 2014 U.S. State Department report alleged Russia was in non-compliance with the Treaty, and in 2017 the United States identified the treaty violation as the 9M729, a land-based cruise missile within the 500-5500km range prohibited by the Treaty. For its part, Russia accuses the United States of violating the treaty with unmanned aerial vehicles and missile defence interceptors that could be codified as 'cruise missiles', which the U.S. State Department denies. The United States and Russia have met twice in the past two years in the Special Verification Commission of the INF Treaty to discuss these allegations, but there has been no resolution to date. This is particularly important for any follow-on agreement that might require Congressional approval, given that Congress is unlikely to support a new agreement if Russia is in non-compliance with existing ones.

Failure to conclude a New START follow-on would also have implications on the broader global nuclear order. Pressure is mounting on NWS, particularly the United States and Russia, to make deeper cuts in their nuclear arsenals. Washington and Moscow are also facing pressure to adopt additional risk reduction measures, some of which are particularly ambitious, such as de-alerting of nuclear forces, recommended by the Clingendael Institute; whereas others are more modest, such as calls by the European Leadership Network for them to, 'reinforce the principle that a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought.' Any steps towards progress in arms control or even informal risk reduction would contribute to strengthening the NPT as it faces a difficult review cycle and RevCon in 2020.

While it remains unknown what Trump and Putin discussed in Helsinki, some reports suggest this included items from the arms control agenda and one relatively easy option would be to extend the New START Treaty for an additional five years to 2026. One of the biggest hurdles to further arms control with Russia in the short-term is that New START is an Obama legacy, which Trump may be reluctant to associate with purely on principle. As demonstrated in North Korea and Iran, Trump is eager to distance himself from his predecessor's policies and craft his own arms control legacy. This could be an opportunity if advisors, allies, and adversaries are able to convince Trump that arms control with Russia is another opportunity to prove his negotiation skills are superior to Obama. But while this could be an opportunity for Trump to propose a new arms control agreement, any agreement will be difficult to conclude as long as questions remain around INF.

Trump's penchant for mixed messages was perhaps best manifested in the recent Helsinki Summit. In one example, Trump mixed up the words 'would' and 'wouldn't': specifically, during the press conference with Putin he stated he could not imagine why Russia *would* be behind election interference; afterwards, however, he clarified he meant to say, he could not imagine why Russia *wouldn't*. While these mixed messages do not specifically apply to arms control, any progress in U.S.-Russia arms control will be subject to the broader geopolitical context and relationship. Trump's mixed messages with regards to Russia are particularly worrying with regards to assuring U.S. allies, which may be concerned that Trump's loyalties are with Moscow rather than with Europeans, given that he praised Putin in the same week as he tweeted, 'They (the EU) truly have taken advantage of the U.S., but not for long.' As demonstrated in the case of Russia, along with North Korea and Iran, Trump's mixed messages, including his use of Twitter, challenge prospects for meaningful progress on arms control while simultaneously undermining American credibility with allies and as a future arms control partner.

Conclusion

The current dire state of arms control is not entirely the result of America's mixed messages; indeed, Trump inherited a series of arms control challenges, including North Korean nuclear aggression, domestic scepticism about the JCPOA, and Russian non-compliance with the INF Treaty. Rather, Trump's mixed messages exacerbate an already challenging situation in addition to creating more long-term questions around American credibility. His engagement with arms control appears to be primarily for image rather than security purposes, but this should not be perceived as the death knell of arms control. Indeed, looking to history, in 1983 the Soviets walked out of arms control talks and it seemed there would be no further agreements- and yet within a decade, and with the arrival of Gorbachev, the United States and Soviet Union concluded some of the most ambitious and intrusive arms control agreements in history, including the INF and START agreements.

Therefore, this assessment should not be taken as the tombstone of arms control; rather it argues that part of America's arms control strategy must entail re-building confidence in American as a partner and crafting a consistent message. This may not be possible under President Trump. Therefore, while short-term prospects for arms control are unlikely, the United States along with its European partners and allies can craft a long-term vision for arms control, particularly with a focus on risk reduction.