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Naval Arms Control: Mediums and Messages

James L. George

There is a nascent awareness that naval arms control, an agenda item which has simmered below the surface for many years, might soon become a major issue. In a speech delivered in August 1988, Admiral Carlisle Trost, chief of naval operations at the time, commented on "the well-orchestrated campaign of Soviet naval arms control proposals." As he noted, while "the proposals are not new . . . what is new is the frequency of their appearance and the apparent willingness of many well-meaning but naive audiences to accept the Soviet declarations at face value."¹ And, as if on cue, Marshall Sergey Akhromeyev, then chief of the Soviet general staff, suggested some new measures, including restrictions on missile-carrying ships and prohibitions on deploying amphibious forces near coastlines.²

Although it is important that the navy fully comprehend the implications of such measures, understanding these "substantive" issues is only one-third the solution. To paraphrase the late Marshall McLuhan's comment on television, the mediums are at least as important as the messages, particularly in the multilateral arms control arena, where most naval measures have arisen. While one might have all the right substantive answers, unless the arms control "rules of the game" are fully understood, all may come to naught. In fact, by the time something even gets into an arms control forum, the game might already be lost. This is not to say that substance is unimportant. Understanding the proposals is a necessary first step.

The Messages

To understand today's naval arms control, it might be best to start with what it is not. It is not what might be called "traditional" naval arms control,

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i.e., the 1920-30s Washington and London-type agreements that set specific ship and tonnage limits. Nor is it usually considered "nuclear" arms control, such as the Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START), although the navy does have a substantial stake in START.³ Instead, today's naval arms control proposals fall under the generic term CBM: Confidence-Building Measures. There are four general types:

- Nuclear Weapon-Free Zones (NWFZ)
- Antisubmarine Warfare-Free Zones (ASWFZ)
- Advance Notification
- Limits on Operations.

Nuclear Weapon-Free Zones. As the name suggests, NWFZs are areas where powers promise not to introduce nuclear weapons. The United States has signed four such agreements: the Antarctic Treaty, the Outer Space Treaty, the Latin American NWFZ protocols, and the Seabeds Arms Control Treaty.⁴ Although three of these four treaties are in non-inhabited areas, this does not make them insignificant: there have been proposals to place nuclear weapons on the seabeds, and the Outer Space Treaty is now restricting Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) research.

Considered more important, however, are the proposed NWFZs for populated areas. With regard to these proposals, the formal U.S. position requires meeting five criteria:

1. The initiatives should come from the countries in the region.
2. All states whose participation is important should participate in the zone.
3. There should be adequate provisions for verification.
4. Existing security arrangements should not be disturbed to the detriment of regional or international security.
5. The parties should be prohibited from developing any nuclear explosive device, including peaceful nuclear explosions.⁵

More informally, the U.S. position has also been that these proposals should not restrict its navy's traditional freedom of passage nor its NCND (neither confirm nor deny) nuclear policy. The United States, with those conditions, did sign the protocols of the Treaty of Tlatelolco (as the Latin American NWFZ treaty is known). It was thought that for similar reasons the United States might sign the Treaty of Rarotonga, which established the South Pacific NWFZ. For reasons still unclear, the United States did not. One reasonable speculation was that when New Zealand broke the "gentleman's agreement" on NCND, the United States felt it could not sign.

These nuclear-free notions are not new. As Table I illustrates, there are twelve such zones or proposals throughout the world. Some could perhaps be beneficial. Keeping Africa nuclear-free makes some sense. If a Nordic nuclear-free zone included the Soviet Union's Kola peninsula, this certainly

would not hurt the United States. A South Asia zone eliminating both Indian and Pakistani nuclear capabilities would also be welcome. In short, decisions on supporting or rejecting such zones depend very much on the region involved.

Nuclear Weapon Free-Zones and Proposals

| Year | Area | Comments |
|------|----------------|--|
| 1959 | Antarctic | Proposed by U.S. Washington Conference; led to treaty. |
| 1959 | Nordic | Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland agreed not to acquire. Discussions for Baltic littoral states, including parts of U.S.S.R. |
| 1959 | Balkan | Proposed by Albania and U.S.S.R. Support from Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia. |
| 1962 | Latin America | Discussions began after Cuban missile crisis. Treaty of Tlatelolco 1967. U.S. signed protocols 1968. |
| 1964 | Africa | Then new Organization of African Unity agreed to zone under U.N. |
| 1971 | Southeast Asia | ASEAN nations declared area Zone of Peace. Work on NWFZ since 1983. |
| 1974 | South Asia | Proposed by Pakistan after India's "peaceful nuclear explosion" of 1974. Supported by U.N. |
| 1974 | Middle East | Proposed by Shah of Iran. Supported by U.N. |
| 1975 | South Pacific | Proposed in U.N. Treaty of Rarotonga signed 1986. |
| 1981 | Northeast Asia | Proposed by North Korea, supported by Soviet Union and China. |
| 1981 | Arctic | Would include parts of both U.S. and U.S.S.R. |
| 1985 | South Atlantic | Proposed by Brazil. Supported by U.N. |

[The Outer Space Treaty (1967) and Seabeds Treaty (1971) are also considered NWFZ accords.]

Table I

ASW-Free Zones. Another old notion is to have ASW-free zones. The basic idea is that in certain areas ASW would be prohibited, presumably making

these regions more secure. An oft expressed fear is that during a conventional war, if ballistic missile submarines were sunk in any significant number, that could trigger nuclear war due to a "use 'em or lose 'em" decision.

At the Second Special Session on Disarmament (SSOD II), Iceland suggested an ASWFZ for the seas surrounding that island. One can easily imagine the problems of an ASWFZ at the Greenland—Iceland—United Kingdom (G-I-UK) gap: it would give the Soviet Union free passage to the open ocean.

These zones seem to be completely unverifiable and certainly restrictive to the United States. In theory, any surface ship (or even airplane) with ASW capabilities could not even transit such an area. In short, unlike the NWFZ, which can have some benefits, this proposal seems to merit a definite "nyet."

Advance Notification. Another popular notion is advance notification of (usually major) movements and exercises. With the recently signed Conference on Disarmament in Europe accord, the United States agreed to several advance notice measures for *troop* movements. However, as underscored, these are for troop, not naval movements. Naval movements are quite different.

Some have argued that advance notices are meaningless since all one need do is pick up a Norfolk or San Diego paper to know about movements, and besides, there is satellite coverage. And, they continue, since Soviet movements are more secretive than ours, the advantage could lie with the United States. However, this could still restrict classic naval freedom of movement. There are "pros" and "cons" to this question. While the cons seem to outweigh the pros, this proposal could be one for further study.

Limits on Operations. There are also many "limiting" proposals, such as equal numbers in certain areas or actual exclusion zones. For example, the Soviet Union has suggested limiting both sides to 15 warships in the Mediterranean. These proposals are probably unrealistic and tend to favor the Soviet Union. In theory, limiting Soviet submarines could be beneficial; unfortunately, it would be almost unverifiable. It might be nice to limit Soviet movements in places like the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and Southwest Pacific, but in those areas they become proverbial sitting ducks in any major confrontation. As annoying as Cam Ranh Bay might be, it would be impossible for the Soviets to defend, while for us it would be relatively easy to defend Subic Bay. Thus, the Soviet proposal to "swap" the two by getting rid of both makes little sense, and furthermore, Subic Bay is more important to us than Cam Ranh Bay is to them.

Other proposals include limiting access to coastal states, banning certain types of weapons, doctrinal agreements for only "defensive" weapon systems, limiting sizes of naval exercises, limiting certain types of ships—and the list

goes on and on. While these proposals deserve further study, most appear detrimental to U.S. and Western interests.

In sum, these various substantive issues—the “messages”—are very important and very complex.⁶ They should be thoroughly studied, evaluated and finally decided upon before getting into the arms control arenas—the “mediums.” Once in these forums, it might be too late to rectify mistakes.

The Mediums

Most of these naval arms control proposals are usually presented as U.S.-Soviet notions, implying that any negotiations would be bilateral. This could happen but probably will not for two reasons. First, the U.S. position has been to simply not negotiate, and probably for a very good reason. As mentioned, while some of the proposals deserve further study, virtually all seem to restrict traditional naval freedom of movement.

Another reason is that despite the press account impressions, virtually all of the proposals have actually been brought up in multilateral forums. In fact, most arms control accords are negotiated not in bilateral U.S.-Soviet talks, but in the multilateral conferences. Although everyone seems to concentrate on the bilateral nuclear negotiations, there has only been one such nuclear treaty implemented: the recent Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty. SALT I was not a treaty, but an agreement; and SALT II, a treaty, was never ratified. By contrast, as shown in Table II, there have been twelve multilateral arms control treaties. There are two basic multilateral arenas: those connected with the United Nations, and the regional forums.

United Nations Forums

Conference on Disarmament (CD). The CD and its predecessors are where most of the treaties have been negotiated, or at least initiated. The Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC) started in 1962, was enlarged, and became the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament (CCD) in 1969. After the first Special Session on Disarmament (SODD I) in 1978, the CCD was expanded again to include forty nations and was subsequently renamed the Conference on Disarmament (CD). The CD, loosely connected to the United Nations, meets twice a year in Geneva. It is currently negotiating several multilateral issues, including a proposed chemical weapons accord originally introduced by then Vice President Bush in 1984.

United Nations Disarmament Committee (UNDC). This is one of the oldest arms control forums, dating back to the 1950s. It fell into disuse during the 1960s but has been revived and meets for a couple of weeks each spring.

Multilateral Arms Control Agreements

| Year | Agreement | Forum |
|-------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1925 | Chemical Weapons Treaty | Geneva Conference |
| 1959 | Antarctic Treaty | Washington Conference |
| 1963 | Hot Line | ENDC |
| 1963 | Limited Test Ban | ENDC |
| 1967 | Outer Space Treaty | United Nations |
| 1967 | Latin America NWFZ | Tlatelolco Conference |
| 1968 | Non-Proliferation Convention | ENDC |
| 1971 | Seaheds Treaty | CCD |
| 1972 | Biological Weapons Convention | CCD |
| 1977 | Environmental Modification Convention | CCD |
| 1985 | South Pacific NWFZ | Rarotonga |
| 1986 | European CBMs | CDE |

ENDC - Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee

CCD - Conference of the Committee on Disarmament

CDE - Conference on Disarmament in Europe

CBM - Confidence-Building Measures

Table II

Sweden has requested studies on naval disarmament by the UNDC which, to date, the United States has vetoed. All UNDC meetings on this subject have been boycotted by the United States to show its displeasure.

First Committee of the United Nations. The United Nations General Assembly has established seven committees, one of which, the First Committee, handles political, security and disarmament affairs. All members of the U.N. are members of the First Committee, and any member can introduce an item for consideration. The First Committee generally has 25 to 50 different agenda items, many on arms control and some occasionally on naval arms control. The First Committee meets each fall for approximately six weeks and forwards its recommendations to the General Assembly. During the 1988 session, Sweden introduced a resolution on naval disarmament. The vote on this resolution was 134 to one in favor, with that "one" being the United States. Even our allies supported the resolution, thus illustrating the isolation of the United States on this issue.

Special Sessions on Disarmament. There have been three Special Sessions on Disarmament. These are quite elaborate affairs, involving two to three years of preparation. President Reagan made major addresses at both SSOD II (1982) and III (1987). Although these sessions are barely covered by the American press, they are widely reported in the world press, especially in the Third World. Several naval arms control resolutions have been introduced at these sessions. Although these resolutions are usually considered only advisory, they do demonstrate the interest in naval arms control.

Regional Forums

Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions. The MBFR talks on Nato-Warsaw Pact force reductions began in 1972, lumbered on for sixteen years, and have now been superseded by the Conventional Force in Europe (CFE) talks. Despite the general stalemate of the MBFR deliberations, some important precedents were established: for example, after many years, the Soviet Union did accept the important notion of asymmetrical cuts.

Conference on Disarmament in Europe. These talks, from the military "basket" of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) process, began in the mid-1980s. In under two years, a remarkably short time for these sorts of things, a series of confidence-building measures for advance notice and monitoring of troop movements (including precedent-setting on-site-inspections) were approved.

Conventional Force in Europe Talks. After two years of arguing over the agenda, the CFE talks between Nato and the Warsaw Pact began in 1988. The Soviet Union originally wanted to include naval forces in the discussions, but that was dropped due to U.S. and Western opposition. Unlike the MBFR talks, this series will end in an agreement. President Bush recently called for an agreement within six months to a year, and there is already talk of a CFE II. While naval arms control has been kept out of CFE I, the same might not be true for follow-on negotiations.

Confidence and Security-Building Measures. Also underway are negotiations for more confidence-building measures, now referred to as the CSBM talks. The complete agenda has not yet been decided. The Soviet Union has proposed a series of naval CBMs, mostly exclusion zones for certain ship types and advance notice for major movements and exercises. It will probably be a constant battle to keep naval CBMs out of this arena.

Other. There have been other special regional forums, for example, the old Indian Ocean Zone of Peace forum. The various NWFZ treaties have been negotiated at regional conferences.

Anyone truly interested in arms control *must* understand these mediums and their politics. These arenas, especially those related to the U.N. or with large groups of neutrals, are not particularly friendly to United States or even to Allied interests. The Soviet Union generally fares better, or at least receives less hostile scrutiny, than we do. The Soviets will propose or generally support just about *any* arms control notion offered, especially if it can conveniently embarrass the West. There are hundreds of such notions, and most fall into dangerous waters, with absolutely *no* verification or compliance provisions. Naturally, the Soviets support these ideas.

The largest group in these mediums is usually the so-called "Neutral Non-Aligned" (the NNAs). One must use the caveat "so-called," since they often include such countries as Cuba and Libya! They also include some more responsible countries such as Sweden (although Sweden has not always been friendly to American interests). The NNAs are well organized, have a strong caucus system and, unfortunately, will support just about anything. (It's that all too frequent situation where delegates come up after a vote to explain that they "really" don't support the measure they just voted for but had to maintain solidarity!)

The Allies, mostly Western European countries but also, depending on the forum, such countries as Japan and Australia, usually support the United States. However, they also want to get along with the NNA, many of which are former colonies of theirs with whom they still have close economic and cultural ties. There is an unfortunate desire to negotiate even the silliest resolutions. Thus, the United States often finds itself isolated on matters of strict national interest, including most naval arms control efforts.

At the U.N. multilateral forums, the American delegations are usually led by Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) personnel with staff support from other agencies. Regional delegations, such as at the CFE, are usually led by the State Department. ACDA personnel are mostly liberal and are, after all, in the arms control business. However, they are still Americans and don't always have an easy time. Being verbally beat up day after day by both the NNA and your own allies, who want to compromise, is not a pleasant experience. It can be particularly brutal at certain forums, e.g., the Special Sessions on Disarmament (SSOD). Those (including this author) who went through some of these sessions sarcastically refer to themselves as being "SSODomized."

In short, if a proposal is truly detrimental, the time to stop it is not in the multilateral forums. By the time it gets there, it might be too late. The time for action is in the other "third" of the process: the United States intergovernmental medium.

The Intergovernmental Process

To fully comprehend the “complete” arms control process requires an understanding of the truly internecine United States intergovernmental system. This system is often described as the United States government arguing amongst itself, and there is much truth to this. (It makes fascinating reading when chronicled, e.g., by Strobe Talbott in his books on arms control, e.g., *Deadly Gambits: The Reagan Administration and the Stalemate in Nuclear Arms Control*.)

In the arms control arena, the main actors are the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the State Department, the National Security Council and ACDA. The process can also involve the Department of Energy, with the CIA acting in an advisory role. The State Department often has three representatives: from Political-Military Affairs, International Organizations and European Affairs. And these representatives sometimes disagree, at least at the staff level. It is complex, confusing and quite frustrating, generating former Secretary of State George Shultz’ tart remark that “nothing is ever settled in this town.”

There are several points to be made with regard to this process. First, the navy *per se* is usually not an actor but instead must go through the JCS. Second, the JCS may or may not be equipped to address naval arms control issues. Action officers are invariably air force or army officers, since the navy still sends few officers to these billets; and they are brought in for short tours, which may get even shorter with the new “joint duty” requirements. Third, both JCS and OSD leadership focus so much on nuclear problems that they tend not to concentrate on multilateral issues until it is too late. Finally, contrary to some right-wing writings, the State and even ACDA people are not all “pro-disarmament appeasers.” They are, however, problem solvers and, as mentioned, arms control is ACDA’s business, just as protecting shipping is the navy’s business. Therefore, if naval arms control is important, it must also become the navy’s business.

Lessons

There are several lessons to be gleaned from these observations. First, the navy should never forget the old saying about “losing more ships at the negotiating table than in battle.” Losing any of its traditional freedom of movement would be just as bad.

Second, the navy must fully understand the substantive issues. No other agency currently has this task or role. For example, a call to ACDA revealed that no one was following naval arms control *per se*.

Third, if truly detrimental, the navy should fight the proposals and not compromise. By understanding the mediums, there is enough room for compromise at a later stage.

Fourth, be clever but not cute. For example, one idea sometimes touted is to trade off Soviet advantages, e.g., troop and tank numbers, with ships. This is a terrible idea for several reasons, not the least of which is that after years of MBFR negotiations, the Soviets have finally accepted the notion of asymmetrical cuts. Why throw something back to them? Besides, how do you really balance carrier battle groups with army divisions? There *are* areas of compromise and advantage. For example, supporting a Latin American NWFZ that protects our freedom of passage and NCND policy was probably a good idea. We might be able to support a Nordic NWFZ *if* it captured Soviet forces. (Moscow, of course, would never agree to such a measure.)

On the other hand, the United States (and probably any democracy with a free press) cannot be "cute," especially in multilateral forums. It simply does not work and eventually backfires. Besides, these days the Soviets have a nasty habit of saying "yes," and then we become the bad guys.

Fifth, and most important, control the initial process within our government, because, sixth, once it gets into the multilateral arenas, it might be too late.

Although the complete story has yet to be told, a good example of the problems posed by the arms control process is the current sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM) issue. The Soviet Union has been trying to capture American cruise missiles since SALT I. While air-launched cruise missiles were captured in SALT II and ground-launched cruise missiles eliminated by the INF Treaty, SLCMs had remained outside the negotiations. A main issue has been difficulty in verification. In the confusion of the Reykjavik Summit, someone threw SLCMs into the pot. At the next summit, in Washington, it was agreed that there would be some limits on SLCMs, but outside the already agreed START limits. Now the intergovernmental process is wrestling with how to verify SLCM limits, i.e., we are doing the Soviets' work. Thus, it appears that someone was asleep on watch, or more likely, and to be discussed below, the right person was not in the appropriate place.

Conclusions

There is, unfortunately, a natural (and perhaps uniquely American) tendency to feel that the "right" substantive answer will always win out. While having the right answer is the first step, that amounts to only one-third of the process in the real world. It still leaves the other two-thirds: the mediums. The best way to control the mediums is to control the people; and there are precedents. Most arms control forums have both a JCS and an OSD representative. At MBFR, for example, at certain times the JCS

representative was a retired army general. Quite naturally, he looked after not just JCS, but army interests. Similarly, the navy could appoint an appropriate senior retired admiral to look after its interests. Furthermore, the secretary of the navy could appoint a senior civilian as either his personal representative or, better, as the OSD representative for naval arms control matters. Some very impressive people have had these top liaison jobs. The navy might also consider placing senior naval officers, e.g., captains, throughout the arms control bureaucracy, including ACDA, the State Department and the NSC staff. Most of the agencies do not resent these representatives. In fact, they sometimes even welcome them since most negotiating teams are usually understaffed.

The navy probably has adequate staff support for evaluating the substance of the various proposals, i.e., the "messages." Amongst its own OPNAV staff and such institutions as the Naval War College, the Naval Postgraduate School and the CNO's new strategic think tank, there is no shortage of talent. However, what appears to be lacking is a complete understanding, with knowledgeable players *in the right place*, for the other two-thirds of the process, i.e., the "mediums." An officer must know his profession, but if he does not know the "rules of the road" and ends up on the rocks, he does no one any good. And sometimes it doesn't hurt to get a professional pilot for truly troubled waters.

Notes

1. Admiral C.A.H. Trost, U.S. Navy, "The Morning of the Empty Trenches: Soviet Politics of Maneuver and the U.S. Response," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, August 1988, p. 13.
2. Michael Parks, "Soviets Propose Reducing Risks of Naval Clash," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 September 1988, p. 1.
3. See for example, James L. George, "START and the Navy," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, April 1986, pp. 32-38.
4. United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *Arms Control and Disarmament Agreements: Texts and Histories of Negotiations* (Washington, D.C.: United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1982).
5. *The Arms Control Reporter: A Chronicle of Treaties, Negotiations, Proposals, Weapons & Policy*, (Brookline Mass.: Institute for Defense & Disarmament Studies, 1988), p. 453.A.2.
6. There is some literature on these proposals, e.g., Rear Admiral J. R. Hill, *Arms Control at Sea* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988). However, they all focus on substantive issues and barely, if at all, on the mediums.



"It doesn't cost much money to think and to write and to study and to keep the brain turned on."

General A.M. Gray
Commandant of the Marine Corps
Newport, R.I. 27 July 1990