

U.S. Withdrawal From Open Skies Bolsters Case for New Strategic Regime

The 50-year-old arms control regime that helped keep the Cold War cold is beyond repair. It's time to start discussing ways of moving toward a new global strategic regime.

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Donald Trump is often accused of being utterly unpredictable. Yet on a number of issues he has demonstrated a high degree of consistency. Arms control is a prime example.

In 2017, Trump delivered on his promise to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) six-nation agreement on the Iranian nuclear program. In 2019, he canceled the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia. His plan now to leave the Open Skies Treaty, a 1992 accord that allows for aerial reconnaissance of the territory of 35 countries in Europe and North America, fully follows the logic of abolishing U.S. international security commitments. The next shoe to fall will likely be the New START Treaty, which the Trump administration seems happy to let expire next February.

Accusations of Russian infringements of the treaties and agreements, as well as the condemnation of Iranian activities outside the scope of the JCPOA, serve as a necessary and useful pretext for wrecking the established regimes. The prospect of crafting even better agreements, held out by President Trump and his aides, cannot be taken seriously. This administration has no interest in continuing with strategic arms control. It prefers to operate from a position of superior strength.

Indeed, in Trump's view, this is the only acceptable posture for the United States in a hypercompetitive world. Abolishing limits on what the United States can do militarily would greatly increase the country's leverage. This, at least, is the expectation.

There are several conclusions that other countries, starting with Russia, should draw from this. One is that the 50-year-old arms control regime that helped keep the Cold War cold is beyond repair and is fast becoming history. Attempts to resuscitate it, noble as they are, will be futile. Even if a miracle happens and the New START is extended, it will be the last U.S.-Russian treaty regulating their most potent weapons.

This means that for a long period of time, the global strategic regime will be essentially unregulated. Call it fully liberal. Nuclear deterrence based on the ability to set in motion mutual assured destruction will not be, as it has been so far, the principal element of global strategic stability; it will be the only one.

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Reliable round-the-clock communications between the military and security headquarters of the major powers and hotlines between their leaders would help deal with incidents: U.S.-Russian deconfliction in Syria has demonstrated the effectiveness of maintaining contacts. Yet deconfliction has to be balanced against the profound lack of mutual trust between the political and military leaderships of the great powers. Having fewer windows on the opponent — and this is where ending Open Skies comes in, along with New START's soon-to-expire inspection regime — increases the risk of worst-case scenarios becoming basic ones. Keeping calm under those circumstances will be crucial.

Another conclusion is that for Trump, only one foreign country really matters: China. With the United States and China having probably passed, during the new coronavirus pandemic, the point of no return on the path leading from rivalry to confrontation, the U.S.-China conflict, centered as it has been on economic and technological issues, will acquire a military dimension. Ironically, recognition of the dangers of a direct military showdown might make Washington and Beijing institute some safety mechanisms or guardrails, but this may only happen *after* a showdown, as it did between Moscow and Washington in the aftermath of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. This assumes, of course, that the showdown will not escalate into an actual clash. Thus, it makes sense to watch East Asia.

Thirdly, the strategic field has extended way beyond nuclear weapons, which used to be the prime object of arms control. It has embraced advanced non-nuclear systems, such as various hypersonic missiles; cyber weapons; AI technologies, and is on the cusp of expanding to outer space, where a new class of arms could be deployed. Numbers are no longer the issue; it is capabilities, which are much more difficult to control. It is time, therefore, to start exploring

how to integrate all these factors into new-age strategic thinking.

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Finally, people who continue to care about global stability and security in the by now generally forgotten military sense will have to put their heads together, across borders, to begin discussing ways of moving toward a new global strategic regime. It would have to be comprehensive, including all the major military players and all the relevant technologies; it would have to rest on nuclear deterrence which would have to be properly safeguarded through a system of communications lines and networks and transparency mechanisms; and it would need to rely on a strategic culture of restraint — for a country's own sake and safety. It will be immensely difficult to achieve any of this, but failure is too frightening to consider.

Open Skies will not disappear completely, however. Over thirty countries have pledged to keep adhering to the treaty, including Russia, America's NATO allies, and Eastern European states. Unlike INF or START, Open Skies has never been a major pillar of arms control, but it has provided a measure of transparency and predictability in a region that is again going through a period of division and estrangement. Keeping the skies over Europe open is a useful thing, but the main task now is to start preparing for a new strategic world.

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