

Current State of Nuclear Arms Control

Closed-door discussion on the state of international nuclear arms control and policy debate focusing on how to overcome existing challenges and return to a future schedule of structured negotiations to build confidence building measures amidst heightened tensions and reinstall security predictability to Europe and abroad.

Invitation-only closed session

In cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS)

Date: Wednesday, 16 June 2021

Time: 14:30 – 15:45

Venue: Grand Hotel River Park Bratislava

Moderator: Amelie Stelzner, Policy Advisor German Armed Forces and Civil Affairs, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung ([In-person](#))

Kick-off speaker:

Andreas Nick, Member of the German Parliament, Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee ([Virtual](#))

Martin Sklenár, Director General Defence Policy, Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic ([In-person](#))

Asle Toje, Deputy Leader, Norwegian Nobel Committee Director ([In-person](#))

Policy Takeaways

The arms control treaties that sealed the end of the Cold War have been unravelling in recent years. The robust treaties provided an element of predictability to transatlantic and international security and thus contributed to confidence between the world's superpowers. With changing geopolitical landscapes, the advent of new significant players, and the emergence of new technologies and weapons, the erosion of the treaties which were at the core of the global security order poses notable security dilemmas worthy of attention. This closed-door side-event at the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum 2021 brought together representatives of the public defence sector, academia, and non-profit organisations from 12 countries. The 31 participants, 22 in-person and 9 virtual, discussed the current state and the future of Nuclear Arms Control in the Central-European and global context.

Key insights:

- In the changed and evolving geopolitical context, China's rise and assertiveness on the world stage is a major concern.
- Cooperation among all actors is critical in addressing nuclear threats, including cooperation among small and major powers and new powers such as China. The UN should be at the forefront of coordinating nuclear arms control, with strong support from NATO, the EU, and OSCE.
- Nuclear arms control needs to be perceived in a broader context, for instance in relation to new and emerging technologies and in relation to climate change.
- A major obstacle to global arms control is the erosion of trust among global powers and in global leadership. Robust structures must be put in place to ensure stability, predictability and trust.

Discussion points:

Three decades after the end of the Cold War, the legacy arms control regimes are coming under pressures. Despite their age and seeming drop in public interest, nuclear weapons remain a major threat to humanity. With the INF treaty expiration, reluctance surrounding the new START treaty or absence of nuclear weapon states in the NPT, it is clear comprehensive and more cooperative non-proliferation and control systems are needed. Seeing the arms-control crisis as an opportunity, the discussion participants provided four distinct suggestions for setting up an improved arms control structure.

First, nuclear weapons are still a grave concern, which is not likely to dissolve in the near future, nor will they be overtaken by new and emerging technologies. On the contrary, the surge in development and procurement of more advanced technologies and weaponry calls for a more comprehensive approach to global arms control.

Second, global security needs to be rooted in cooperation. Given the geographical location of GLOBSEC, in Slovakia, multiple Central European representatives voiced the reliance of small countries on robust structures and international organisation for their safety. Although the United Nations is considered to be the main guardian of nuclear security, NATO, OSCE, and the EU should be major contributors to the security systems in their respective unique capacities.

Third, the cooperation needs to reflect the playing field and include all the varied actors. In comparison to the international order during the Cold War, the current geopolitical power centres are strikingly more fragmented. As new actors gain in military, nuclear, and technological power, the international community needs to guarantee their inclusions in discussion on arms control. The rise of China in particular should be addressed by their further participation in global nuclear control to maintain a more stable global arms system.

Fourth, nuclear weapons need to be addressed in a broader and civilian context, namely in relation to climate change. Coupled with the ongoing affects of climate change, the potential impacts of a nuclear attack become ever-more destructive and long-lasting to the global civilisation, for instance in terms of food chain disruption. Disarmament, especially nuclear disarmament, should be made integral to the agenda of future United Nations Climate Change Conferences (COPs) and EU climate arrangements.

Recognizing the changed and complex geopolitical environment, the participants recognized the multifaceted tensions causing mistrust within the international order. First, it is the divergence of threat perception of the small and major powers including but not limited to; nuclear threats, climate change, and rise and use of AI in combat that is further exacerbated by geographical location. Second, the erosion of trust in political leadership of the major powers, where the tendency today is for domestic politics to spill into foreign affairs. In an ominous sign, recent war simulations indicate that a nuclear exchange could materialize within a week of conflict, where nuclear power leaders can no longer be trusted to make the right decision or be guided by a moral compass. It was noted, that despite a change in the White House administration, tensions have subsided, but by no means evaporated. Against the backdrop of this, strong structures resilient to political waves are crucial to prevent miscalculations in the name of advancing political gains.

Finally, the contributors recognized the lasting political power of nuclear weapons. Notwithstanding their value, nuclear free zones are also mirrored with nuclear zones of power, where limited nuclear exchange is pressing. Another discussion point for the global nuclear arms control structures, that requires more examination, is how to prevent areas which are nearly nuclear-free from being engulfed by great power rivalries.