

## The Power of Augmented Reality

### HOW NARRATIVES IMPACTED U.S.-RUSSIAN ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATIONS

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Since the end of World War II, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, subsequently Russia, have been one of the major factors defining the global security environment. In such circumstances, arms control has always been a key activity providing Washington and Moscow a common cause and a reason to engage in negotiation. Understanding the motive forces behind U.S.-Russian arms control arrangements may help explain the dynamic of U.S.-Russian relations over the last half-century and also identify prospective solutions to the existing challenge of maintaining security in an international setting, which includes a number of technologically advanced states with growing foreign policy ambitions.

There are many perspectives on what factors lead to success in arms control negotiations. While some observers [believe](#) that only outdated or useless weapons are being put up for reductions, others [emphasize](#) the role of leaders' worldviews and domestic politics in enabling arms control agreements. And yet, one important factor that is often overlooked is the role of narratives that may serve as a means of signaling a commitment to mutually beneficial, if risky, security solutions based on prospective arms control deals. This memo argues that when mainstream underlying foreign policy narratives in the United States and Russia have focused on security, arms control treaties have hatched relatively easily. But when those narratives – at least for one side – have pivoted around identity, or when there has been no clear shared uniting narrative, negotiations have dragged on or broken down.

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## **Narratives and Arms Control**

Two key features define “narrative” as a story focused on a certain event, trend, or personality. First, to qualify as a narrative, a story needs to fall short of what is broadly, if not universally, accepted as fact and/or of what is commonly considered to be impartial analysis. Most convincing—and therefore influential—are the narratives that do not blatantly mislead but rather intentionally overlook or make up facts in limited numbers and/or rely on hasty generalizations to reach exciting conclusions. In a way, such narratives do not so much distort the truth as augment reality (in terms of facts and/or logic).

Second, exciting conclusions usually make narratives emotionally appealing so that they attract a constituency of believers despite their contradiction with facts or logical inconsistencies. The attractiveness of a narrative usually stems from a principle of justice or ethics on which it is based—often to the detriment of formal logic or factuality.

The signaling power of a narrative derives from its cost-generating function: it divides actors into those who endorse and those who refute the narrative, so that adherence to a narrative may come at a cost. If two or more actors are willing to publicly accept a story that unites them but exacts a cost in relations with other actors, the actors who share a narrative stand good chances of building the trust required to make deals.

One important form of activity in international politics that requires powerful signaling is arms control. It is a challenging process because it is prone to risks of exploitation. Forswearing or reducing the arsenal of any weapon (if it is not completely outdated and therefore useless) may [increase](#) the vulnerability of the party that engages in reductions, especially if it incorrectly assesses the resulting balance of forces or falls victim to outright cheating by its negotiation counterpart. Therefore, arms control deals [require](#) effective mutual reassurance of the stability of intentions. Narratives—the influence of which can be compared to that of an anesthetic—have proven to be helpful in providing such reassurances over the last three decades. They have enabled major U.S.-Russian arms control agreements, including some multilateral ones in which the two sides have participated alongside other states from Europe, Eurasia, and North America.

### **The Impact of Narratives of Shared Security: from Gorbachev to Medvedev**

The history of the last three decades of U.S.-Russian arms control has seen three periods of successful closings of negotiations. The first happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the second in 2001-02, and the third between 2009 and 2011. Before discussing the facilitating narratives, it bears noting that the arms control deals reached in those periods did not become possible because any of the parties were giving up their true national interests, despite what critics said against the three central signing leaders: Soviet

Communist Party Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, and U.S. President Barack Obama.

Now, as late as 2020, Kremlin officials have expressed regret about the demise of the INF treaty (Gorbachev's legacy), and the possible expiration of the New START Treaty (Medvedev and Obama's legacy)—despite being critical of the foreign policy records of those leaders. On the U.S. side, President-elect Joseph Biden promised during his 2020 presidential campaign to extend New START, which he considered to be fully aligned with U.S. security interests.

The importance of narratives for the cause of arms control was clear to Gorbachev because he was looking for ways to achieve a breakthrough in arms control negotiations between Moscow and Washington. In a December 1985 meeting with Soviet envoys attending bilateral and multilateral negotiation forums, he criticized the United States for failing to implement the agreements reached with U.S. President Ronald Reagan in Geneva earlier that year. Gorbachev [argued](#) that there was “no other way” to force Americans to deliver on their arms control commitments than by “excit[ing] the people of the world and Europe by proposals that could bring these people together and ultimately force the U.S. government to make an agreement with us.”

Another brief period of productive arms control negotiations ushering in formal agreements and declarations followed in 2001-02. It again coincided with narratives of shared security that Russian President Vladimir Putin advocated despite skepticism on the part of large groups of Russian bureaucrats who were disillusioned by U.S. policies of enlarging NATO and intervening in conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s.

The 9/11 attacks [prompted](#) Putin to suggest that the United States and Russia “are facing large-scale threats of a new nature and must support each other,” and he called for “removing all hurdles to cooperation.” According to Putin, “Russia [was] not expecting any preferential treatment or rewards for its support to the United States in the fight against terrorism.” After a high-profile visit to the United States in November 2001, the Russian president [told](#) members of the Duma foreign policy committees that he was talking about a “long-term partnership” and not a “tactical rapprochement motivated by the recent world events.”

The narrative of a partnership for the long haul based on a major common security challenge played a significant role in minimizing the fallout from the abrogation by Washington of the ABM Treaty in 2001 and designing a new strategic nuclear reductions treaty – SORT – to complement START I.

It is more difficult to distill a shared collective security narrative during the time of the U.S.-Russian “reset” of 2009-11. Available documentary sources point to a significant role played in the unfreezing of arms control by the worldviews of the newly elected

presidents of the United States and Russia – respectively, [Obama](#) and Medvedev. Each of the two leaders had his personal convictions that shaped his political agenda, at least early in their presidencies. While Obama seemed to have been driven by the vision of a nuclear-free world, Medvedev was looking to set Russia on a new course of cooperation with the United States. In his April 2009 speech in Prague, Obama [promised](#) to pursue ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and to promote the Fissile Materials Cutoff Treaty. Several days before Obama’s Prague speech, Medvedev, in London, signed a joint U.S.-Russian declaration that committed Moscow and Washington to “achieving a nuclear-free world, while recognizing that this long-term goal will require a new emphasis on arms control and conflict resolution measures, and their full implementation by all concerned nations.”

Medvedev was not as much driven in the cooperative arms control effort with Obama by the narrative of a nuclear-free world, for the spirit of the partnership in ending the Cold War was never to be restored; instead, as Medvedev’s remarks at the New START Treaty signing ceremony [indicated](#), the new Russian president was motivated mainly by the prospect of a new pragmatic partnership between the two countries that could help Russia overcome the consequences of the 2008-09 economic crisis and achieve his “modernization” goals. Hence, there was no new cogent pro-arms control narrative during the short-lived “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations. However, the “reset” documents, such as the London declaration, [pointed](#) to the significant staying power of the initial post-Cold War arms control momentum that came back as soon as major hurdles were removed.

### **Aimless Narratives: Implications for Arms Control**

Aside from the brief intermissions between 2001-02 and 2009-11, no clear-cut shared influential narrative has worked in favor of arms control since the second half of the 1990s. At best, only one side’s approach to arms control would, over a certain period of time, contribute to preventing arms races and lowering the risk of an open conflict. While arms control negotiations almost never ground to a complete halt, they were conducted with no clear prospect of successful closure in sight.

In the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States and many of its allies – the collective West – came to believe in the augmented reality of the influential “end of history” narrative. The international security dimension of that narrative [postulated](#) that armed conflict between Russia and the United States or NATO became unthinkable under advancing globalization. As a result, the time had come, that narrative [suggested](#), to dispose of weapons that were designed for a potential great-power war.

Another facet of the pro-arms control narrative of the 1990s included the discussion of the need to overcome mutual nuclear deterrence in U.S.-Russian relations. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, a number of influential authors were arguing that such

deterrence had become obsolete and needed to be done away with if the world in general, and the two nuclear superpowers in particular, were to develop and rely on a “[logic of peace](#)” in international relations.

However, none of these narratives struck a chord with Russian policymakers in the 1990s as Moscow was looking to reassert its status as a major power charting an independent foreign policy course. Moscow was no longer prepared to embrace the triumphalism of cooperative security—largely because the Russian public and many of the country’s leaders did not see significant immediate benefits from joining the cooperative security community led by the West. The costs for Russia of applying to join such a community were not to be underestimated—at the very least, they would have included abandoning the generally positive view of much of the Soviet foreign policy record, a sacrifice the Russian public and many leaders [were not ready](#) to make.

In the subsequent decade, the two sides eventually succumbed to identity and status-based narratives that effectively and predictably foreclosed meaningful arms control options. The U.S. narrative of America’s [dominance](#) in global affairs was clearly incompatible with the Russian emancipation narrative.

One of the immediate casualties of the erosion of the supporting narrative in the 2000s became the Adapted Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe. A negative feedback loop was thereby created. The absence of a shared security narrative hampered arms control that resulted in the demise of key agreements, which fully released Russia from its commitment to the European security order, which, in turn, narrowed down potential options for a new unifying narrative.

The acute and [predictable](#) crisis of arms control since 2012 correlated with the increasingly widespread identity narrative of newly [emerged great-power politics](#) on the global scale. That narrative was initially propelled by the status-thirsty powers, including Russia, that [considered](#) themselves to be a growing force in world politics. The great-power politics narrative was eventually [endorsed](#) by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump, whose chief arms control negotiator [likened](#) arms control to “performative politics.”

In its turn, great-power politics (if one believes in it) requires hedging—a mode of behavior aimed at preventing destructive scenarios, the most dangerous among which is finding oneself defenseless against an existential, even if not very likely, threat. Given the significant [risks of exploitation](#), arms control is usually not considered a viable hedging strategy. When survival or vital interests are at stake, the peace dividend loses its value as a policy goal. In such circumstances, the sides are much more inclined to tout their capabilities, sovereignty, and resolve to prevail in disputes rather than to commit to self-constraints in military doctrines, including conditions for the use of nuclear weapons.

The best that has so far happened between the United States and Russia in the field of arms control under such adverse circumstances is an occasional idea for an ambitious yet hardly realistic multilateral arms control initiative – akin to the Trump administration’s demand for involving China in U.S.-Russian bilateral nuclear arms control or hammering out a deal that would cover all types of nuclear-capable weapon systems. There is little hope for substantive progress even under the Biden administration, aside from the possible extension of New START, short of a unifying narrative that is essential for enlisting the support of the U.S. Congress for any arms control treaty.

## Conclusion

U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations have [almost never come](#) to successful closure without the parties displaying verifiably stable intentions – when there is no suspicion of surprise maneuvers being contemplated by either. Shared narratives are effective means of signaling stable – even if adversarial – intentions and building the necessary trust. By implication, over the last half-century, arms control agreements have never materialized against the backdrop of adverse mainstream trends in U.S.-Russian relations. Those mainstream trends have been reflected in the narratives that have either enabled or discouraged arms control, but not the other way round. Unfortunately, it means that no end to the current U.S.-Russian arms control crisis is in sight unless the mainstream narrative describing their relationship is reversed – either as a result of actual shifts in the state of the relationship, as happened in the late 1980s, or in anticipation of such shifts, as was seen in 2001-02 and 2009-11.