



## VOICES

# Weapons of mass destruction and conventional disarmament: Scope for Synergy?

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### LEGALITY ISSUES AND THE USE OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF WEAPONS

The most obvious contrasts between mass-destruction weapons and others are in terms of legality and use. Owning and trading in most conventional arms is legal, in contrast to the formal prohibition of chemical and biological weapons, and of nuclear weapons other than for five States under the provisions of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Conventional weapons are used every day throughout the world, for hunting and personal protection, internal conflict and policing purposes as well as inter-State war. Countries that have developed nuclear weapons would all claim – whether we believe them or not – that they have them in order not to use them, i.e. for deterrence and only secondly for defence. Moreover, no way has yet been found to use such weapons for practical purposes of local warfare, crisis management or internal order, though defence planners have sometimes toyed with inventions – like neutron bombs or ‘mini-nukes’ – whose apparent ‘useability’ would risk eroding the nuclear taboo.

Even so, there are ways in which the two weaponry challenges are interlinked or run parallel. Nuclear weapons, and chemical and biological ones if used in a context of warfare, require conventional weapons – missiles, drones, aircraft or submarines – to

During my career both as an official and a researcher, I have spent more or less equal time and effort dealing with the issues of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and with conventional arms control and armament policy. In retrospect I realize it is uncommon to combine these two interests, perhaps especially for a woman. While female pioneers like Alva Myrdal were equally concerned about all arms and destructive techniques, in modern times we tend to find women most prominently engaged on WMD issues on the one hand, and issues of inhumane conventional weaponry and small arms on the other. This is perhaps not surprising given the particular ethical and humanitarian issues that both those topics raise, and the way they both relate to a gender discourse (the huge majority of small arms users are men). It is also noteworthy how few women work on the supply side of the arms business, in the defence industry and on arms collaboration policy.

Some might say this is to women’s credit: but it is a pity if it strengthens the tendency in the arms control establishment to draw hard frontiers – and maintain separate career tracks – between WMD-related issues and those of conventional disarmament. For one thing, technological advances are threatening to dissolve that barrier by introducing non-nuclear, – chemical or – biological techniques that could have the same massive and indiscriminate impact as existing WMD. For another, the struggle to reduce arms and end conflicts is always in need of fresh ideas; and some might conceivably emerge from thinking about contrasts and comparisons between the two fields, notably in terms of the challenges they pose for control and the possible solutions. This article will try to do just that, though necessarily in very broad terms – and offering more questions than answers.



Titan 2 - the largest intercontinental ballistic missile ever built by the United States. Courtesy of Kingdofy

deliver them. Missiles have become a central but peculiarly intractable issue of arms control precisely because they can carry multiple payloads, plus having ‘peaceful’ uses in space exploration. Technologies like precision guidance have similar across-the-board applications.

In policy terms, the two kinds of capability become fatefully intertwined when nuclear capacity is seen as offsetting a conventional force deficit, or as a way of protecting territories so small, remote and close to the enemy that their defensibility may otherwise be in doubt. Such thinking has been found on both sides of the NATO/Warsaw Pact (now, NATO/Russia) or the India/Pakistan relationship, and it may also be a motive for smaller States facing regional isolation. Among the grave risks of such ‘nuclear dependence’ is that it gives any conventional clash the potential of escalating into WMD use that would be fateful not just for the targets, but for the users and the world. The 21st century concern about terrorists or other non-State groups gaining ‘asymmetrical’ advantages by acquiring WMD techniques also has conventional parallels: *vide* the worldwide effort to stop terrorists getting MANPADs<sup>1</sup> that can be used *inter alia* to attack top political targets.

### **MOST CONVENTIONAL ARMS ARE PRODUCED, TRADED AND OWNED BY LARGE STATES**

Even the more abstract, symbolic purposes that nuclear status is often seen as serving, linked as it is to permanent UN Security Council membership and regional leadership, are not completely alien to the conventional field. The great bulk of conventional arms are produced, traded and owned by large States<sup>2</sup> that are not at war, lack major internal conflicts and face relatively low risks of armed violence all round. This may partly be explained by economic motives (arms sales, employment in the defence industry, keeping a technological edge) and by the post-Cold War increase in military interventions overseas. Yet the sheer size of arsenals, including many weapons systems ill-fitted to modern expeditionary purposes, suggests that less tangible factors like generalized deterrence, self-assertion and status-building must be at play.

These connections are not just intellectually intriguing, but matter for anyone aiming to monitor, curb and eventually eliminate the tools of violence. Regional enmities and aggressive national

policies may all too easily break out through the conventional channel if the nuclear route is suppressed, and vice versa. Conversely, the kind of progress in trust and cooperation that allows WMD to be cut back or eliminated also helps reduce excess conventional arms build-up, and at best ends with nations using their weapons cooperatively as in joint peace missions – like Europeans in East and West after the Cold War. One kind of arms control should never be made hostage to the other, not least because the most urgent weapons-related risks for peace and humanity will differ objectively from region to region and case to case. But it is legitimate to ask if they could inform and reinforce each other better than at present.

### **PROGRESS IN CONVENTIONAL ARMS CONTROL**

At first sight, it is the contrasts between the two fields that stand out in this respect

[1] Man-portable air defence systems.

[2] The top five weapons producers are the United States, Russia, Germany, the United Kingdom and France; the top exporters are the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Russia (facts from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <http://www.sipri.org>).



Russian SA-6 GAINFUL is a two stage, solid-fuel, low-altitude surface-to-air missile. Photo courtesy of [weapons.technology.youngster.com](http://weapons.technology.youngster.com)

too. Conventional arms control has made most progress hitherto through regional deals that cut levels, improve transparency and/or constrain forces' behaviour; with global provisions reserved for inhumane weapons that in practice matter less for winning wars. Negotiated nuclear cuts have also been limited to the U.S./Russian relationship, while nuclear – or WMD-free zones provide an important regional dimension; but the most fundamental instruments of WMD control are still the global ones – including the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). This makes sense not just because WMD are an issue for all humanity, but also because the threat of proliferation and break-out looms so large in this field and demands global treatment in an age of worldwide trade, travel and technology diffusion.

purposes of monitoring nuclear breakout, like seismic monitoring or the emissions monitoring linked with a fissile materials cut-off. This does not of course mean that the verification machinery being established by the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) could not be put to good use in other fields of security governance and science<sup>3</sup>. Nor is it saying that the CTBTO's high standards in terms of non-discrimination and comprehensiveness, with equal rights and obligations for all Member States, would not be desirable as a model for conventional disarmament or indeed for quantitative nuclear reductions. It is just that it has so far proved beyond the reach of practical politics to transplant such approaches to other than 'inhumane' weapons.

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At the technical level, meanwhile, the issue of testing is less germane to conventional weapons dangers – except, tellingly, for missiles – than for nuclear restraint. It is also hard to think of techniques that could be applied to it in the same global style as they can be for

**CALLS FOR AN ARMS TRADE TREATY**

The parallels that do exist in control approaches can be seen above all in the 'dual-use' dilemma. Just as WMD policy seeks to build firewalls between non-weapon-related nuclear, chemical and biological activities and their destructive applications, conventional disarmers must

[3] Such possibilities are discussed on the CTBTO website at <http://www.ctbto.org/verification-regime/potential-civil-and-scientific-applications-of-ctbt-verification-data-and-technologies/>.

find ways to stop 'leakage' from, and misapplication of, personal gun ownership and the national arsenals needed for minimum defence and peace missions. The conventional task is on a different scale because of the ubiquity and huge economic weight of the arms trade: yet this merely underlines the importance of the current United Nations drive for an Arms Trade Treaty that would regulate and restrain transfers globally – and on a universal and equal basis – for the first time in history. Also crucial for curbing both WMD and conventional proliferation are mundane measures like safety of stocks, export controls, tracing technologies and detection of illegal transfer routes. Finally, unwanted weapons and materials of both kinds must be destroyed without endangering people or the environment. Cooperation on such tasks, in regional groupings or between big powers, has double value in both fields for its confidence-building effects.

The ultimate challenge in each realm of disarmament is to find political solutions that unite States of different regions, persuasions and levels of development. The ultimate obstacles are the human attitudes of 'Mine are OK, yours not,' 'I'm not going first,' and 'I prefer the risks of arms racing to those of reduction.' Women can fall into those mental traps too, but should not. My fondest wish is that more of them in the new generation will work on the whole range of issues outlined above.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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is currently teaching security studies at the University of Iceland and the College of Europe at Bruges, after a career spent mainly in the British Diplomatic Service. From 2002 to 2007, she was Director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and also served on the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission headed by Dr Hans Blix. In June 2010 she was a keynote speaker on conventional arms control at the Annual Security Review Conference of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).