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e-Note 31 - 22 April 2021

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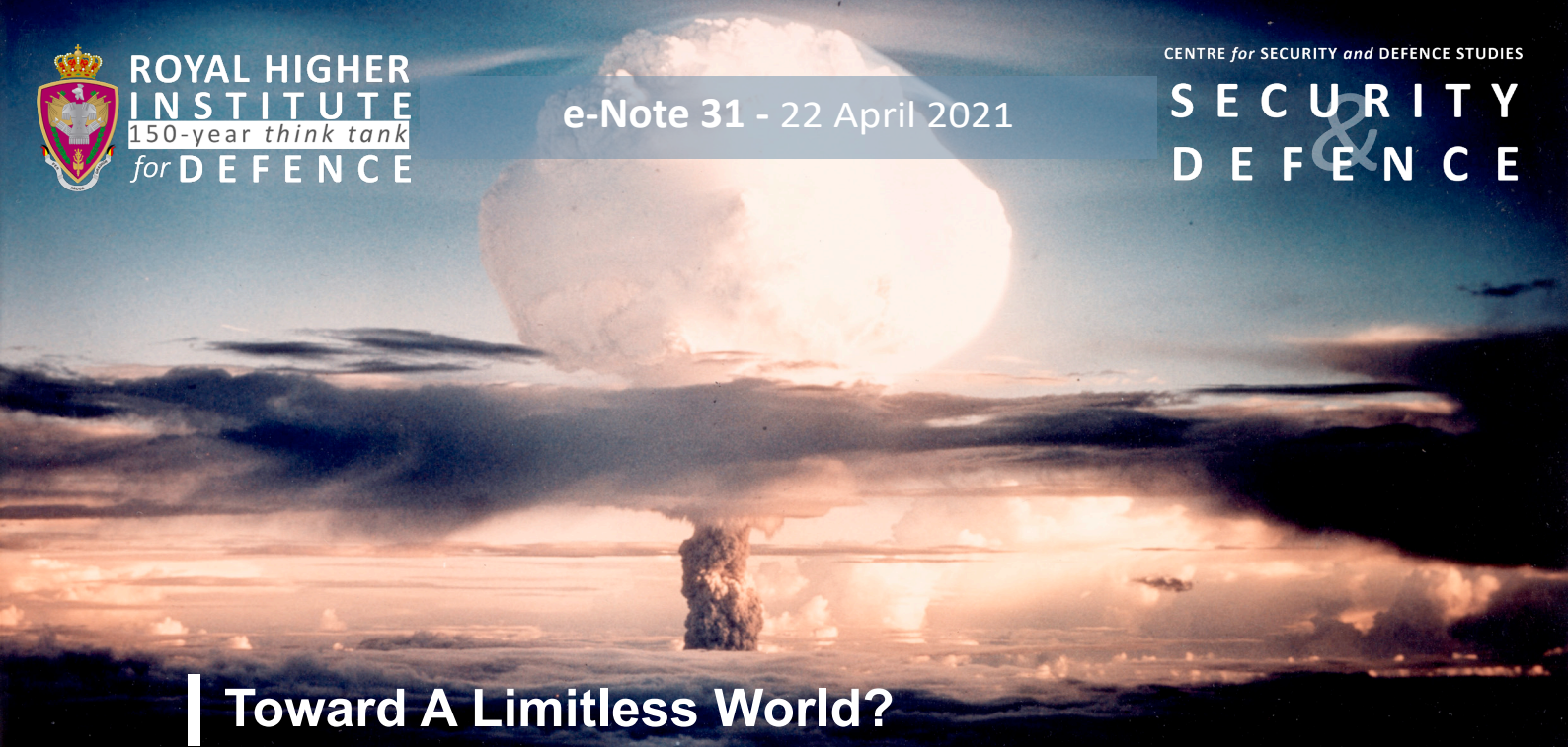

Toward A Limitless World?

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Introduction

The screenplay was written a long time ago. Since the Trump administration announced its intention to proceed to a unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the Open Skies Treaty (OST), analysts and observers were expecting an answer from Russia. Moscow decided in turn to abandon its participation in this confidence-building measures regime. However, it is the Russian decision that appears to have been the most covered by the media. The American withdrawal, some months ago, went practically unnoticed and was little commented.

Largely unknown to the public opinion – like most of the major agreements negotiated and elaborated in the post-WWII era –, the Open Skies Treaty helped to lower the level of mistrust between the member states of the two former Cold War blocks[1] ("The Open Skies Treaty", 2019). As Colin S. Gray noticed, such regimes present an unescapable paradox: their existence and survival largely depends on the absence of any prospect of war between states. In other words, such treaties would be of limited usefulness since they can only be erected when states attempt to prevent the occurrence of risks that already do not exist. As soon as such a situation disappears, these regimes are abandoned or denounced by some of their members[2] (Fatton, 2016).

The logic on which the treaty was based is simple: it allowed states to fly over the territory of the other signatory countries by observation planes in order to guarantee mutual confidence, particularly during major military exercises. The Open Skies Treaty was a centrepiece of the European security architecture. Conceived under the umbrella of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Open Skies Treaty was, with the Vienna Document on confidence- and security-building measures (CSBM) and the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), one of the several provisions aimed at guaranteeing a fragile stability in a strategic period characterised by many uncertainties.

The announcement made by the United States about the Open Skies Treaty is, in fact, the result of a long series of withdrawals from regimes formerly intended to maintain communications between states about their military systems. These international agreements were supposed to reduce the risks

[1] The Open Skies Treaty. (2019). *Strategic Comments*, 25(10). https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2019.1707489
[2] Fatton, L. P. (2016). The impotence of conventional arms control: why do international regimes fail when they are most needed? *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37(2). https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1187952

of inadvertent conflicts resulting from biased mutual perceptions. The ABM treaty, abandoned in 2002, was the first of its kind. Then came the suspension by Russia of the CFE Treaty and more recently the denunciation by Washington of the Treaty on Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF). For several months, it was expected that the same peril could affect the New START, unless the future Democratic administration, led by its new President Joe Biden, resumes talks. The principles on which the post-Cold War international security architecture was based have gradually collapsed. The Georgian crisis of August 2008 as well as the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 permanently buried the crisis prevention capacities of large organisations such as the OSCE. We will not consider here for each of these security regimes the reasons that can explain their dismantling: we will rather discuss the now confirmed trend of these agreements' disappearance. In other words, the fundamental question is: "What will our future world look like in the absence of any political framework for military power?" Or, quite simply: "Are we now entering a world without limits?"

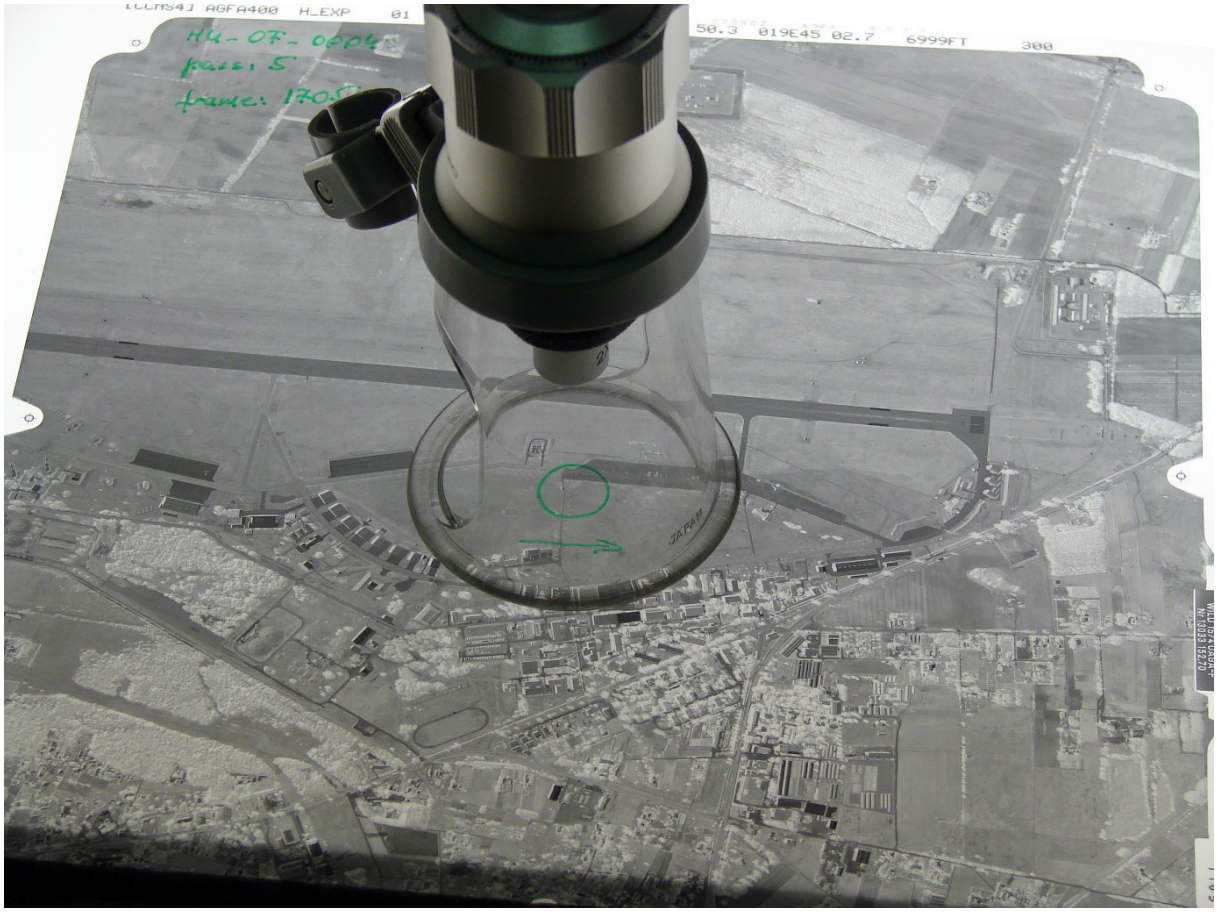

Figure 1: Material shot during a flight under the Open Skies Treaty by a Hungarian crew, August 2007. (source: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe – http://www.osce.org)

A Fragile Peace

One of the most remarkable phenomena of the post-World War II era was the profusion of international security regimes. These were formalised with different intents. Some were aimed at guaranteeing fragile strategic systems that could collapse if there were no agreement. Others were designed to maintain a minimum level of security dialogue between adversaries that, over time, became partners. Regional arrangements and (conventional or nuclear) arms limitation or control agreements were conceived as "reinsurance" frameworks instituted to correct the flaws inherent in a system based on the sole

balance of power. Peace was not the primary goal of such regimes: it was only the consequence of the relative (collective or cooperative) security environment obtained through the participation of states in such bodies. In other words, under the veneer of the institutions, structures and other tools conceived to control or reduce the arsenals of nations, the balance of powers has never ceased to produce its effects.

Why Security Regimes Might Disappear?

Changes in domestic political regimes alone cannot explain the progressive disappearance of international security agreements. In order to understand the variables leading to the vanishing of such architectures, one must re-examine the conditions governing the formation and the maintenance of security regimes. Robert Jervis explains that four main conditions are necessary for the emergence of a security regime between states[3] (Jervis, 1982). The first one is that great powers must want to establish it. This condition seems as trivial as obvious, yet it is very difficult to estimate a state's resolve to link its national security interests to other international actors. In order for a security regime to thrive, all the signatory countries must clearly prefer a more regulated environment to one in which all states behave individualistically. As soon as this condition is no longer met and the status quo resulting from the international agreement does not fully satisfy one or several of its members, the security regime is doomed to disappear.

A second condition is that actors must also believe that others attach the same value to mutual security and cooperation. Once again, if at first glance this condition is simple enough, a closer examination of past security regimes leads us to conclude that it is sometimes very difficult for states to have an unambiguous idea of the importance attached by other states to cooperation. Many factors may alter state's resolve to engage into a security regime. The first one is narrowly linked to a social psychology phenomenon: in this case, a security regime is ruled out not by the fact that a major power is an aggressor but by the fact that, for various reasons, others incorrectly perceived it as an aggressor. A second factor could result from a structural imbalance in material conditions between states. In other words, if one state perceives that its security would be better guaranteed by its technological superiority rather than by an international agreement, then the political incentive to join a mutual security regime would never be high enough. Today's arms race based on advanced and emerging technologies could dramatically alter the various states' perception of other states' arsenals.

A third condition to be met in order to build a mutual security regime is the refusal to envisage expansion as a security provider. Until recently, this kind of criteria was thought to belong to a bygone era. However, the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008 followed by the occupation of Crimea by 2014 led many states to reconsider their long-lasting believes about cooperation and dialogue as security providers. If one adds to this strategic landscape the psychological impact of recent Western operations in Central Asia (Afghanistan) and the Middle East (Iraq, Syria and Libya) on non-Western states, then it is not hard to understand that the current "status quo" is no longer deemed as the best way to guarantee national security.

The fourth and last condition for the formation of a security regime might appear as a truism: the individualistic pursuit of security through war must be considered as too costly. If states believe that war is an acceptable mean to achieve national security, the chances to assist to the formation of a common security regime is very low.

[3] Jervis, R. (1982). Security Regimes. *International Organization*, 36(2). https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300018981

Figure 2: C-130 Hercules planes are used as Open Skies aircraft. The Open Skies Treaty allows states to overfly each others' territory with an observation aircraft. The flights can be used for conflict prevention, crisis management and to protect the environment.
(source: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe – http://www.osce.org)

The Resurgence of Past Divisions

The current dislocation of most of the major agreements that have shaped European international and regional security since the dissolution of the Soviet Union is not without impact on the nature of relations between states in the medium and long term. If this evolution is largely explained by the reminiscence of power politics among the former "major signatories", we can also perceive an aggravation of this trend due to the very absence of regimes aimed at limiting or reducing strategic arsenals. At the European level, deep differences could emerge as to the status of the nuclear force, which would weaken Euro-Atlantic solidarity even further. On a Eurasian scale, Russia (as is already the case) could feel even more threatened by new deployments of weapon systems built on "exotic" technologies or manoeuvres of forces that could lead to misperceptions. For China, which is seeking recognition of its status as a regional (or even international) power by the West, any form of revision of deployments in its neighbourhood could be perceived as a provocation, the response of which would remain largely unpredictable.

Country	Deployed warheads	Other warheads	Total inventory
USA	1 750	4 050	5 800
Russia	1 570	4 805	6 375
UK	120	95	215
France	280	10	290
China	–	320	320
India	–	150	150
Pakistan	–	160	160
Israel	–	90	90
North Korea	–	[30–40]	[30–40]
Total	**3 720**	**9 680**	**13 400**

Figure 3: World nuclear forces, 2019 (source: SIPRI Yearbook 2020). Notes: - = zero; [] = uncertain figure not included in the total. "Other warheads" includes operational warheads held in storage and retired warheads awaiting dismantlement. The figures for Russia and the USA do not necessarily correspond to those in their 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START) declarations because of the treaty's continuing rules. All estimates are approximate and as of Jan. 2020. SIPRI revises its world nuclear forces data each year based on new information and updates earlier assessments.

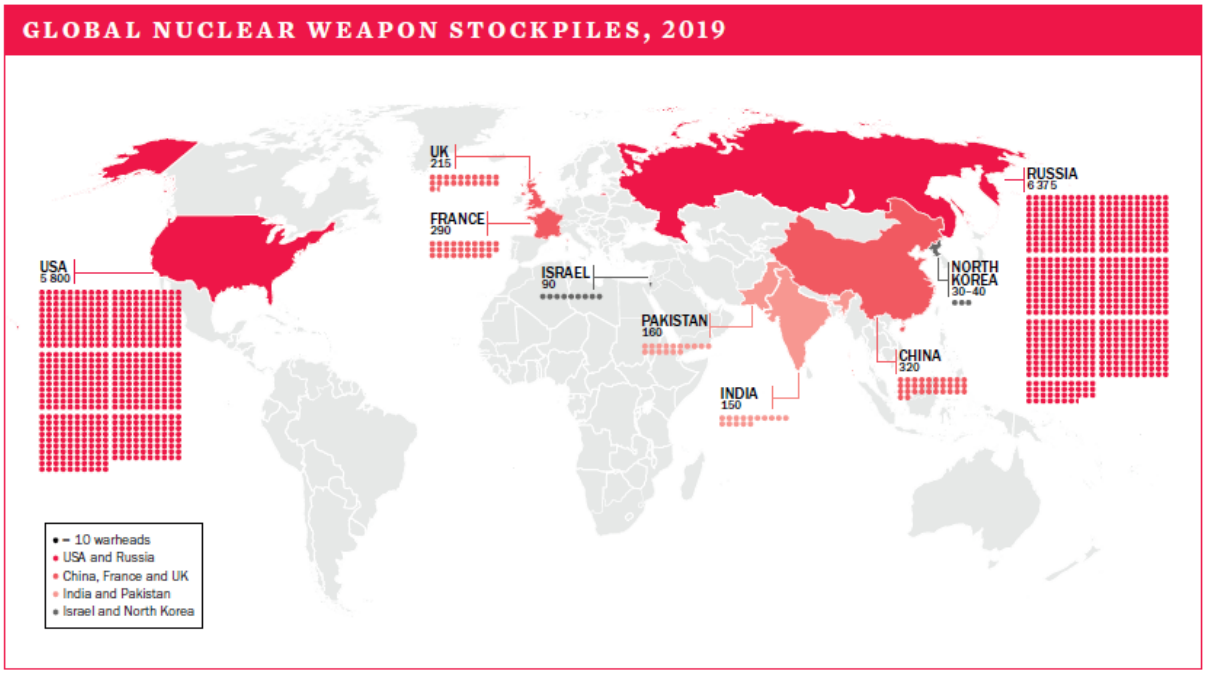

Figure 4: Global nuclear stockpiles, 2019 (source: SIPRI Yearbook 2020)

Figure 5: First stage of a LGM-118A Peacekeeper Missile stocked in the National Museum of Nuclear Science & History. Is it now the turn of international security regimes to be relegated to museums?

The Challenges Ahead

Although the major armaments security, control, limitation or reduction regimes could be improved, they had the advantage of establishing frameworks for exchanges between politicians, the military and observers. They built a somewhat "common grammar" between states. Their dissolution is particularly worrying in the context of the current technological race. Numerous innovations in the field of military technologies (autonomous submarine platforms for thermonuclear attack, hypersonic and hypermanoeuvring missiles[4] (Speier et al., 2017), strike capabilities at very long safety distances), biotechnologies and nanotechnologies (prospects for undetectable weapons) or even artificial intelligence (AI)[5] (Horowitz, 2019; Zhao, 2015) should encourage the organisation of forums for dialogue about the risks to which the world could be exposed if certain researches or acquisitions are pursued without any safeguard. Through international calls, several scientists in favour of the establishment of moratoria on certain domains of research – like AI and deep learning systems based on neural networks – have tried to put the new military-technological issues in the spotlight of the media[6] (Sehrawat, 2017). But there is more.

New ballistic vectors, possibly coupled with cyber-attack means (blurring the detection and identification capabilities of the origins of an aggression), as well as early warning and decision-support technologies based on AI, by accelerating the strategic tempo and contracting the decision time, will inevitably increase the likelihood of a major conflict, not least because of the haste with which our leaders will be forced to (re)act. In the absence of security regimes based on the exchange of observers and information or on consensual methods for verifying military activities, only states with spy or space observation technologies will be able to define a strategic posture that is consistent with the facts. Countries that do not have access to such means will be doomed to try to catch up with the technological developments or will be exposed to risks they cannot predict anymore.

In the field of new conventional arms control, the picture is not so different. Despite growing international concerns about the use of incendiary weapons and explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA) by non-state groups, discussions within the framework of the 1981 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CWC Convention) failed to produce concrete outcomes. Such a paralysis led some state actors to engage reflections about the possibility to develop new arms control regimes that are more limited in scope and membership. The same phenomenon is observed regarding the regulation of cyberspace. Concerns over the destabilising effects of cyberspace in international security resulted in two parallel initiatives by 2019: first, an Open-Ended Working Group on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security and, second, a new group of governmental experts. However, none of these initiatives led to concrete outcomes.

As far as military activities in outer space are concerned, recent destabilising behaviours and declarations have put into question the current status quo. Since 2017, some states, and more specifically the United States, have openly considered space to be a domain of war. Moreover, the US now envisages space as an area for both offensive and defensive military deployments. Many other nations – such as France, India and Japan, for instance – announced their decision to constitute dedicated military space units in 2019. In the aftermath of these declarations, NATO indicated that outer space should be considered as a new domain of operation per se.

[4] Speier, R., Nacouzi, G., Lee, C., & Moore, R. (2017). Hypersonic Missile Nonproliferation: Hindering the Spread of a New Class of Weapons. In *Hypersonic Missile Nonproliferation: Hindering the Spread of a New Class of Weapons*. https://doi.org/10.7249/rr2137

[5] Horowitz, M. C. (2019). When speed kills: Lethal autonomous weapon systems, deterrence and stability. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42(6), 764–788. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1621174 ;
Zhao, T. (2015). Going too fast: Time to ban hypersonic missile tests? *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 71*(5). https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340215599774

[6] Sehrawat, V. (2017). Autonomous weapon system: Law of armed conflict (LOAC) and other legal challenges. *Computer Law and Security Review*, 33(1), 38–56. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clsr.2016.11.001

It is a well-known feature of international politics that military technology and military doctrine represent formidable impediments to the formation of security regimes. The security dilemma is compounded when offensive and defensive weapons are indistinguishable and offense is more efficacious (or deemed as such). The inherent complexity of certain future weapons boosted by AI and built with new exotic materials (based on nanotechnology) associated to constructed and well-established misperceptions between nations, political leaders and peoples could result in an unprecedented political-military environment. Yet, despite the risks of conflict in outer space linked to the doctrinal changes adopted by space powers, discussions regarding security issues in space – especially deliberations in the context of the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) – remain blocked[7] (SIPRI Yearbook 2020 - Summary, 2020).

Conclusion

This limitless world we are moving towards is made up of multiple sources of uncertainties. The logic of power – which has never ceased to be at work – is now exacerbated by the numerous dissatisfactions linked to the paralysis of any attempt at reforming the great regimes. Their transition into a 21st century marked by an acceleration in the pace of technological change is a failure. The confidence that arose from politico-military exchanges has given way to the blindness of technological tricks. Experience shows that new arms control and limitation regimes have rarely prevented wars to occur; they were adopted in order not to reiterate past mistakes. What dangers and what future cataclysms will we have to endure before seeing the emergence of security frameworks adapted to the weapons resulting from the new technological revolution?

[7] *SIPRI Yearbook 2020 - Summary*. (2020). Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

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