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Challenges Technologies Pose to U.S.-Russia Arms Control

A Conversation with Dr. Heather Williams

Interviewed by FSR Staff

Fletcher Security Review: Could you describe your current work on U.S.-Russia arms control?

Heather Williams: For the past two years, I have participated in Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues with Russia, specifically on arms control. As you can imagine, these have largely been dominated by disputes around the INF Treaty. The dialogues can be frustrating due to a tendency to “shame and blame,” but they are also a great opportunity to hear the Russian perspective and try to foster dialogue. I'm encouraged by these dialogues as we often identify areas of misunderstanding and miscommunication, and because they typically include a next generation component. I'm hopeful these relationships will carry over and lay the groundwork for dialogue for decades to come. At the same time, the dialogues are very difficult at present and it is impossible to ignore the

feelings of distrust on both sides.

Additionally, I lead studies on the future of arms control with a focus on potential for U.S.-Russia strategic bilateral arms control. Over the long-term, I'm actually optimistic about prospects for U.S.-Russia arms control - it is in both countries' interests to reduce risks of escalation and avoid a costly arms race, and arms control is one of the best tools for achieving that. However, arms control of the future is likely to look different from arms control of the past. There are limited prospects for the U.S. Senate ratifying another treaty, especially in light of Russia's violations of the INF Treaty. Arms control might no longer be bilateral strategic legally-binding treaties, but rather asymmetric exchanges and confidence-building measures. In the short-term, however, this is a difficult time for arms control as both the Unit-



Soviet Union General Secretary Gorbachev (left) and United States President Reagan (right) signing the INF Treaty
(White House Photographic Office / Public Domain)

ed States and Russia feel cheated and like the other side can't be trusted.

FSR: How has social media impacted conflict escalation, particularly between the United States and Russia? Do you think it will escalate tensions further, or become less motivating?

HW: Social media has the potential to increase the risks of misperception leading to conflict escalation. But there is still a lot about social media, and other potentially disruptive technologies, that we don't understand. Are tweets interpreted the same way as more traditional forms of signaling? What makes a tweet credible? Ultimately, I don't think a tweet can start a war, but rather the underlying geopolitical context (and contests) could create a highly volatile environment in which all signals are likely to be misinterpreted. Especially given some domestic trends in the both the United States and Russia, these signals might be represented as particularly threatening and cause for pre-emption or escalation. Another concern with social media signals is that we don't know what is real and what is bluster. If a government is trying to signal something, I doubt they would use Twitter to do so, and for the most part, social media falls into the "bluster" category. But if someone ever did

try to use it to send genuine signals, we would probably miss it. Again, the geopolitical context in which this happens is extremely important.

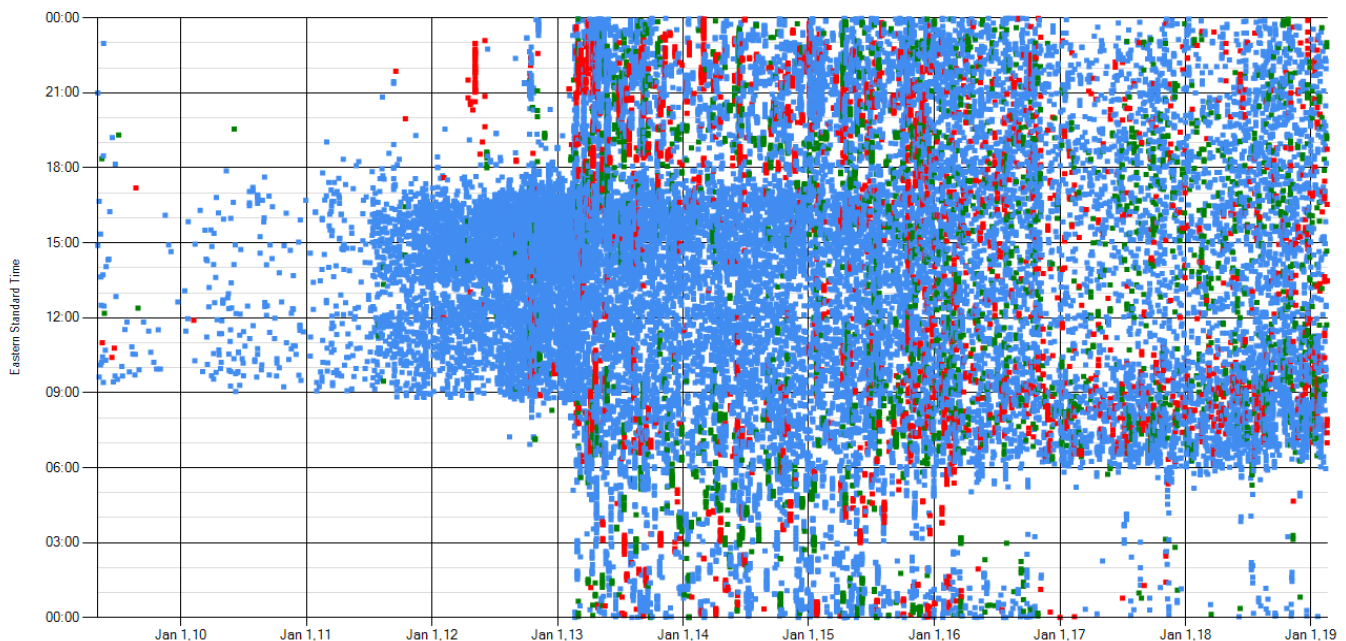
FSR: In your perspective, are we likely to see an increase in other types of weaponry—conventional, AI, cyber—before any progress is made in nuclear disarmament?

HW: Yes, we are already seeing it. These emerging technologies add to the complexity of strategic stability, threatening arms races of crisis escalation, depending on how they are used. Countries with a conventional or nuclear disadvantage may try to exploit these technologies asymmetrically to strengthen their deterrence or gain a strategic advantage. At the same time, these technologies could reduce reliance on nuclear weapons. Ultimately, we don't yet fully understand whether or not they will have a stabilizing or de-stabilizing effect.

FSR: What do you see as the largest obstacles to disarmament? Are they changing?

HW: The return to great power competition presents a significant challenge for nuclear reductions and disarmament. Ultimately countries rely on nuclear deterrence or extended nuclear deterrence because they feel it is

Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) 36753 tweets plotted (10 tweets per day) First tweet=14:54, 4 May 2009 (Red: Sunday Green: Saturday)



Twitter activity of Donald Trump from his first tweet in May 2009 to May 2018. Data source from @realDonaldTrump (Phoenix7777 / CC BY-SA 4.0)



President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev (left) and **President of the United States** Barack Obama (right) discuss New START (The Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / CC BY 4.0)

essential to their security and deterring nuclear or other existential threats. President Barack Obama's statements about pursuing the "peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons" were made during a very different era of U.S.-Russia relations. Russian aggression in Ukraine and pursuit of new nuclear capabilities, such as intermediate-range cruise missiles, has confirmed the importance of nuclear deterrence for many European states. Despite this, however, I do not think nuclear disarmament is impossible - rather, both the United States and Russia have a shared interest in reducing the risks of nuclear use, which includes arms control and arms reductions.

FSR: Do you think nuclear disarmament is possible in our lifetime? If so, how might it come about and how long might the process be?

HW: Probably not in my lifetime. But the pursuit of that goal is a worthy objective as long as it does not

undermine strategic stability, increase the likelihood of conflict, or jeopardize America's commitment to its allies. It's worth recalling that arms control does not equal disarmament. Arms control is actually a tool for security and defense policy to gain insight into an adversary's arsenal and reduce risks. No matter how bad U.S.-Russia relations are, I believe neither wants a conflict to escalate to nuclear use (allegations that Russia has a doctrine of "escalate-to-deescalate" misrepresent its strategy). This fundamental and shared interest should be the foundation going forward and takes two forms. On the one hand, it requires a strong deterrent to signal commitment and prevent escalation. And on the other hand, it requires a willingness to engage in dialogue. Right now, that balance is about 90:10 and both sides are understandably distrustful because of treaty violations and withdrawals. But history shows the balance can swing the other way either due to a change in personalities, a "close call", or given enough time when geopolitics improve.

Dr. Heather Williams

Dr. Heather Williams is a lecturer in the Defence Studies Department and Centre for Science and Security Studies at King's College London. She also does research for the Institute for Defense Analyses on Strategy, Forces, and Resources, and previously was a Research Fellow at Chatham House. Williams received her doctorate from King's College London for her dissertation on U.S.-Russia arms control from 1968-2010.