
The Future of Arms Control

An Interview With John Holum by Tamara Chalabi

Director, US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency

T*he Journal:* Do you think there is a greater need for arms control in the post-Cold War era?

Holum: I think the need for arms control is growing in the post-Cold War period. During the Cold War, this topic was focused on the US-Soviet relationship. Now that the arms race is over, much remains to be done. We have begun dismantling warheads at the fastest possible rate—two thousand a day. Furthermore, even though the START treaty is yet to be ratified, the Russian Federation is applying many of the same standards. In this respect, at least, a great deal of progress has been achieved. However, with the disintegration of the East-West framework the question of proliferation has become much more important. As technology becomes more advanced, and accessible to a greater number of people, the job of arms control is becoming increasingly complex.

The Journal: In his State of the Union address, President Clinton described the status quo as one of "rampant arms proliferation, bitter regional conflicts, ethnic and nationalist tensions in many new democracies, and fanatics who seek to cripple the world's cities with terror." What is the responsibility of the US in the current situation?

Holum: Well, because the US is the world's largest nuclear power, I think we have an obligation to set an example in arms reductions. In this context, the principles enshrined in the Non-proliferation Treaty—such as test bans and restrictions on trade in weapons grade materials—provide an important reference point. As a prominent member of the community of nations, it is our responsibility to ensure that these principles are adhered to. The risk of an arms race in South Asia looms ever larger, threatening economic development. I think one of the most worrisome situations that we face now is that India and Pakistan are poised on the brink of a nuclear arms race that utilizes missile technology. The risks of a crisis are dramatically heightened by the fact that they are adjacent to each other. My assertion is not that these countries are irresponsible, or less able than other countries to deal with high technology, but that their proximity to each other inevitably causes an increase in tensions.

The Journal: Export control is one measure you have taken to strengthen arms reduction.

Holum: Iraq's nuclear program has made considerable progress, but at the same time Iraq has not acquired the necessary technology and materials needed to fully develop its nuclear arsenal. So export control did have some impact there. Iraq's example illustrates both the capabilities and limits of export control. If export controls are going to succeed, they must be unilateral. There are those who want to reserve the right to apply unilateral controls to focus the world commu-

nity. However, given that technology is widespread—missile technology, nuclear technology, chemical and biological weapons technology—we will not be able to deny countries the wherewithal to develop nuclear arsenals unless all the countries with relevant technology agree to participate. This is under way now. The East-West tradework controlling exports to the former Soviet bloc has gone out of existence. We are in the course of negotiating a successor regime that will focus on countries of concern, and unite all of the suppliers, including former targets of export controls, such as Russia, to focus on these concerns.

The Journal: Shouldn't more measures be taken to limit conventional weapons as well?

Holum: Yes, there should be. We have reviewed our access of conventional arms transfers, but again we need a multilateral agreement. It is one of our main foci now. The US government is in the process of developing a policy on conventional arms transfers. One thing that should not be done is to focus on particular kinds of weapons. Convention controls exist for landmines, fragmentation bombs, and other dangerous conventional weapons, and these controls try to establish global limits on the use of those weapons. So, one way is to focus on particularly destructive weapons. Another way would be to try to tilt the balance in favor of defense over offense in conventional arms. The Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty has been very successful—it controls six kinds of offensive weapons, and some 17,000 pieces of equipment were destroyed last year. It will make conventional offensive warfare much more unlikely. Another way to approach the issue is by regions. We should be concerned about regions of particular volatility and try to limit, cooperatively, exports of arms into these regions. We were pursuing that with the permanent five members of the Security Council who also happen to be the most successful exporters of conventional arms in the Middle

East context.

The Journal: How would you deal with some of these difficulties?

Holum: There are a whole range of difficulties in coming to terms with the conventional arms transfer policy. It's very difficult to deal with, particularly in a period of declining defense budgets, because the military says we need to export more in order to maintain our defense industries so that the industries can continue to produce the weapons needed for our own defense. It is true that exports are an indispensable part of the process, but we need to have constraints on our exports in order to ensure that we do not run into our own weapons somewhere in the world.

The Journal: Each of the conventions would have an independent inspection organization of its own. Wouldn't it be more cost effective for the UN to have centralized power, especially for the emerging nation-states?

Holum: I am not sure it would be, because the verification paths are quite different from each other. The IAEA has particular expertise in dealing with the nuclear facilities, and it needs an administrative structure to support that. The chemical weapons convention focuses on an entirely different set of problems that requires different skills and capabilities than the IAEA has. The same thing would be true of the conference on the test bans because much of that area relies on seismic testing that the IAEA does now.

The Journal: Do you think the arms inspection of Iraq's facilities is being conducted sufficiently? Should the international community or the UN attempt to secure a larger role in arms inspection?

Holum: I think Iraq is a special case. I should mention that the UN in all these contexts becomes the voice of the world community and the Security Council has the authority to impose or recommend sanctions in response to violations. So the UN does have a central role. The UN in Iraq also has a verification role under the guise of the UN Special Commission which focuses particularly on chemical and biological weapons. I don't mean to downplay the UN's role, but I think it's necessary for someone else to have the same basic capabilities. One of the difficulties with UN verification is that the membership of the treaties does not perfectly coincide with the membership of the United Nations.

The Journal: Do you think that the Non-proliferation Treaty realistically preserves stability, and do such restrictions constitute fair constraints on poorer nations now that the bipolar structure has broken down?

Holum: I think that the Non-proliferation Treaty has been a remarkable success. As I said in a speech the other day, I reject the idea that it is the treaty that is discriminatory. It is basically a vehicle to urge nuclear countries to proceed with disarmament. In the post-Cold War world, because the constraints on the bipolar world are off, this global principle becomes all the more important. As you see in the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, there are a lot of conflicts that were once contained by the bipolar framework but which are now bursting out of the seams.

The Journal: To what extent do you think the US and the UN should use force to ensure adherence to the Non-proliferation Treaty.

Holum: I think it's always best to have multilateral force. I would qualify the notion that the US is the most active enforcer of the Treaty. I think we probably are, but there are other

I think that the Non-proliferation Treaty has been a remarkable success... I reject the idea that it is the treaty that is discriminatory.

countries that are intensely interested in and involved in the non-proliferation cause—Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, the Scandinavian countries, and Canada, to name a few. There are number of countries around the world that have developed sophisticated arms control and non-proliferation regimes, and their international governments have taken a leading role in encouraging non-proliferation. It's very encouraging to see so much leadership internationally focused on this problem.

The Journal: The former Soviet Republics have become a serious potential threats to controlling the nuclear arsenal. Considering there is tension between various republics—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and others—do you think that this situation can be kept under control?

Holum: I think we can accomplish a great deal. In fact, we are in the process of doing so. It is a very big risk because the former Soviet Union had very tight control on all of its nuclear capabilities and on the people who knew how to build these weapons. When the former Soviet Union dissolved, those controls were weakened. One of the things that we can do is to try to help the countries that have nuclear capabilities in their territories to make sure that the materials are protected, and to ensure that the experts are employed or not available to other countries. I think we've come a long way. There have been a lot of reports in the press about diversion of nuclear materials, but as far as we know, there has not been any serious significant leakage of nuclear materials out of the former Soviet republics. At the same time, I think it's extremely important that all the states that have nuclear weapons in their territories adhere to the START agreement. All but the Ukraine have

agreed to be non-nuclear states, and even they are expected to follow suit in the long-run. This represents a fundamental realization on their part that their ultimate security lies not in an arms race, but in economic development. This is a very hopeful sign.

The Journal: Within a multilateral framework, do you think that force can be used as a means to limit and constrain conflict?

Holum: Well, we demonstrated in Iraq that the multilateral community would use force. I think the most compelling current issue is that North Korea will test the international system. Obviously, I hope that we can resolve the issues within the current framework of negotiations under very strong direction from the UN Security Council.

The Journal: In your most recent statement to the Committee on Foreign Relations, you described the Chemical Weapons Convention as one of the most extraordinary achievements in arms control. Chemical weapons have been called the "nuclear weapons of the poor." Is it fair to impose such an imbalance of power between rich and poor nations?

Holum: Well, that assumes that chemical weapons can be of some value. I use that comparison in a pejorative sense in that they are much more affordable than nuclear weapons and they are weapons of mass destruction and terror. But that does not mean that they are a good answer to nuclear weapons or vice versa. The problem with chemical weapons is that they are much more likely to be used than nuclear weapons, as we have seen a number of times. They are weapons of indiscriminate effects. It is less likely that the United States would be struck by chemical weapons since it is geographically removed from the regions where such weapons are produced. On the

The question of
a country's

whole, we should focus more on countries
attempting to develop nuclear capabilities.

right to arm
itself for self-
defense is a...

The Journal: Should the issue of
weapons development be covered by in-
ternational law?

[difficult] prob-
lem.

Holum: I think we can make defi-
nite strides toward global agreements on
weapons of mass destruction. The issue
becomes more complex when dealing
with general weapons because, even un-
der the United Nations Charter, countries have the legitimate
right to arm themselves for self-defense. So I think we're quite
a long ways from achieving any breakthrough. Some good
initial steps have been made both in terms of addressing par-
ticularly destructive weapons, and in terms of confidence build-
ing measures. The United Nations registers conventional arms
transfers with the Open Skies Treaty, and this helps countries
monitor their neighbors with very sophisticated devices.

The Journal: If limiting weapons development becomes
part of international law, would the sovereignty or power of
the state be challenged?

Holum: I think international law can legally prescribe
the use of force, but the question of a country's right to arm
itself for self-defense is a much harder problem. At the mo-
ment, I think most countries would be reluctant to yield to UN
authority until they have seen how the institutional mecha-
nism would work. I personally hope for an expanded role for
the United Nations. With the removal of the East-West ideo-
logical dimension from global conflict, I think that we will see
a greater role for the UN. In the interim period, we should con-
centrate on both the legal impediments against the use of force
for illegitimate purposes, such as in the Iraqi case, and on in-

ternational principles, such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Chemical Weapons Convention as well as others that constrain the kind of arms that countries supply. The agreement to give up the option of developing a nuclear potential is a voluntary concession, and it is one small exchange of sovereignty for added safety. I think these steps have been successful so far, and I think decisions by the international community regarding which uses of force are not acceptable begin to get a handle on the problem. ❷