

A Four-Faction Heuristic “WXYZ” Model for Exploring US Arms Control and Disarmament Politics

CHRISTOPHER A. FORD

This essay is about the factional politics of the US arms control community, which I think can be usefully viewed through a model of competitive dynamics, coalition building, and bargaining between four factions. This is just a model, of course, and making models to help explain complex real-world phenomena can obviously be a perilous business. To be valuable, all models are necessarily simplifications, and thus perforce also incomplete.

As the allegory of the map offered in Jorge Luis Borges’s 1946 story “On Exactitude in Science” makes clear, a representation’s perfect, one-to-one correspondence with its described reality makes a model useless, for at that point it basically *is* the reality and provides not insight but rather unmanageable and pointless complication.¹ Models, like maps, are thus valuable where they simplify *enough* to make the complexities of the real world comprehensible *enough* that what information they do convey allows you accomplish the particular task at hand. They are unhelpful where they either simplify so much that they obscure what it is you actually need to know, or where they provide such a *great* degree of fidelity that they offer no more guidance than simply staring directly at the described phenomenon itself. The “right” scale for a map, therefore, depends on what you’re doing and where you’re going.

With these cautions in mind, let me offer a “four-faction” heuristic that may help observers understand US arms control community politics.

A Political-Ideological Typology

This model imagines the American arms control and disarmament policy community as consisting of four basic groups spread along a general ideological continuum, which for convenience I simply label “W,” “X,” “Y,” and “Z.” In this typology, W and Z are the groups whose members cluster most toward the poles of the policy spectrum, loosely corresponding to fairly hard-Left prodisarmament activists on the one hand, and to fairly hard-Right über-hawks on the other.



The first group—the Ws—dislike and distrust the US national security establishment and particularly its nuclear weapons–related elements, seeing them not merely as arrogant and bloated but also as retrograde, militarist, and thoroughly dangerous. They regard nuclear weapons as dangerous and immoral, want to slash military spending, yearn for an ever-thicker latticework of international treaties and controls on all weapons and methods of war, want nuclear weaponry abolished as rapidly as possible, and bitterly resent the fact that this objective has not already long since been achieved.

By contrast, the Zs—at the other end of the WXYZ spectrum—regard the international environment as irredeemably ugly and competitive, “red in tooth and claw.” They support a powerful military establishment and see a large and robust nuclear arsenal as a crucial component of US national power in a dangerous world. They are profoundly distrustful of diplomacy and international agreements, which they regard as entirely unequal to the task of preserving American security interests and as being destined inevitably to be violated by the other side in any case. (Worse, they fear that agreements create a *false* sense of security that leads officials to neglect defense preparedness.) To them, arms control and disarmament efforts are little more than anti-American “lawfare”—that is, an empty moralism that has been weaponized by a sort of unholy alliance between cynical geopolitical adversaries of the United States and a naïve Western Left that those enemies have gleefully co-opted in order to constrain our country’s ability to protect its security interests. Needless to say, from a Z perspective, nuclear disarmament is both impossible and stupid.

Correspondingly, the other two groups, X and Y, are more intermediate categories. The X group is definitely on the liberal side of the spectrum (in American political terms), but its members are not *unmindful* of hard-nosed factors of security and *realpolitik* in international affairs. They would definitely like to get to a world without nuclear weapons and are willing to take some risks to that end—but not *too* many risks, for while Xs very much want to be seen as exercising moral leadership toward disarmament, they also want to be seen as responsible stewards of US national security interests. (Struggling constantly with managing this tension, one might say, is part of what it means to be an X.)

For their part, the Ys are more politically conservative, hawkish, and security minded than members of the X group, but they are not uninterested in diplomacy and international agreements where such things are felt able to support US security interests—which they differ from Zs in thinking *is* actually possible. The Ys think nuclear disarmament risky and suspect it unlikely, but they are willing to have this conversation as long as enthusiasm for disarmament doesn’t lead policy makers into naïve and dangerous choices. If Xs can be said to be in part defined by their internal struggle to reconcile being prodisarmament with being concerned with real-world

security challenges, then perhaps Ys can themselves be partly defined by a tension between their self-identity as serious, security-focused hawks and their desire to avoid and dissociate themselves from what they see as the sometimes counterproductive zealotry and excesses of their fierier colleagues among the Zs. (As so often in sociology, groups caught between polar communities wrestle endlessly with the anxieties of nuance and identity triangulation in ways that their counterparts on the extremes—secure in their skins as crusaders who never interrogate their own rectitude—seldom seem to worry about.)

So that's my (simplified) conceptual bestiary, describing the spectrum of policy experts who have positions on such issues. In this model, none of these groups necessarily fully trusts any of the others, but it is perhaps this generalized reciprocal unease that makes their shifting coalition politics possible.

Some Illustrations

So let's see how major arms control and disarmament policy issues look through this four-faction prism.

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty

By the time the Trump administration began, Moscow's violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty had already led Ys to join Zs in finding continued US adherence to that treaty to be both a politico-legal affront and a growing national security problem. Even the Xs, after all, had already drawn attention to Russian cheating, which began while a WX coalition was in power during the Obama administration, though its unhappiness with Moscow over the 2008–16 period never produced more than rhetorical condemnation. With years of continuing Russian violations already on the books by the time the YZ coalition of the Trump administration took over, and with Russia continuing to produce illegal missiles, it was inevitable that something would change in the US approach.

There were, for a time, some differences between Ys and Zs on specific *tactics* for dealing with Russian violations, with the former being more inclined to a sort of hawkish gradualism. Rather than simply withdrawing from the treaty immediately, Ys preferred to start by signaling that the United States' patience was running out by beginning treaty-compliant research and development on potential countervailing US INF-class missiles, with the understanding that if Moscow did not change course these would be built. The Ys also tended to favor a step-by-step approach that would have declared Russia to be in material breach of the treaty—thus releasing the United States from its own obligations but holding out some theoretical possibility of return—before throwing the instrument away entirely.



Nevertheless, Russia did *not* change course and indeed soon was actually deploying battalions of illegal missiles. This unchecked trajectory—as well as perceptions of the growing utility to the United States of conventionally armed INF-class missiles in the Indo-Pacific against China’s huge and growing arsenal of such systems, which had never been constrained by INF at all—made it just a question of time until the Ys joined the Zs in utter exasperation, both with the INF Treaty and with W and X counterparts who seemed allergic to the idea of US withdrawal but whom the hawks perceived as offering no answer to Russia’s deployments other than yet more finger-wagging. The movement of US policy toward support for withdrawal from the treaty was thus largely a story of movement within the YZ coalition of the Trump administration, with Ys coming to consolidate themselves around an “out now” position that Zs had taken for some time.

In the context of Republican control of the executive branch, members of the X group were not major players in these developments after 2016. The X faction was given some credit for having found Russia in violation in 2014, but Xs had been presumptively discredited, in the eyes of the Trump administration, for having never been willing to support anything more than *rhetorical* complaints about Russian violations.

As for the über-dovish Ws, the other three factions basically ignored them on INF. In effect, that group sidelined *itself* out of what appeared to be a visceral distaste for ever criticizing any arms control agreement, and out of fear that outrage about Russia’s violations would help the hated Zs destroy the treaty. To the others, the W group seemed to support continued American adherence no matter *how* egregiously INF might be violated—perhaps as a matter simply of political reflex—and thus could not be taken seriously.

Open Skies Treaty

US withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty (OST) could be described in broadly similar ways, except that the security implications of Russia’s ongoing violations did not seem nearly as dire as with INF, leaving the Ys still broadly supportive of Z-driven withdrawal, albeit more ambivalently than with INF. Some Ys, for instance, would have preferred to try to use the United States’ *almost* withdrawing from Open Skies as leverage with which to obtain concessions in other areas—such as NATO defense spending commitments—from European allies who strongly supported OST for self-admittedly political and symbolic reasons. (No one seems to have thought that the treaty provided much by way of concrete security benefits.)

The issue was effectively decided in Washington after the Russians flew an Open Skies observation mission over President Trump’s Bedminster golf club while he was vacationing there.² This handed Zs the perfect emotive weapon with which to prevail

in internal debates about OST tactics, even though the Russian flight path was no surprise to anyone who had been paying attention, for it had been declared to US officials in advance pursuant to treaty protocols. Precisely because the actual *security* stakes were comparatively low, however—and since engaging in arms control for purely symbolic reasons is unappealing to *anyone* in the YZ world—it was not hard for Ys to support withdrawal. (For their part, Xs and Ws were appalled at the US move. Nevertheless, this was not relevant, for a YZ coalition controlled the executive branch.)

Extending New START

When it came to the question, in late 2020, of whether to extend New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), the W and X groups unsurprisingly thought it all but insane not to extend the treaty by a full five years, the maximum time permitted. Many Zs, however, believed that New START was fundamentally disadvantageous to the United States. Feeling that the Obama administration had made dangerous concessions to Moscow in agreeing to less stringent verification protocols than those negotiated by President George H. W. Bush in the original START agreement of 1991—though it was also the case that what was being verified had also changed—and entertaining dreams of potentially outcompeting Russia in the absence of strategic restraints, Zs did not like New START at all since ratification in 2010. Assuming Moscow to be desperate for New START extension in 2020, some Zs felt that the United States should hold New START extension hostage in order to leverage this supposed Russian “desperation” into concessions—such as in getting Moscow to force Beijing to come to the table on a trilateral basis.

For their part, Ys didn’t love New START, but they did *not* see Russia as desperate for an extension, thought it dangerous to try to outcompete the Kremlin in strategic arms under existing circumstances, and saw no reason preemptively to scrap the sole arms control agreement with which Moscow actually appeared to be complying. (Ys also doubted Moscow could “force” Beijing to the table even if it wanted to . . . which it didn’t.) They favored trying to dole out successive incremental extensions in search of potential bargaining leverage, but ultimately could live with extending New START for a full five years rather than preemptively scrapping it. (Needless to say, the W and X groups supported full, unconditional extension and regarded Zs—and potentially also Ys—as playing a disingenuous game by invoking the imperative of Chinese involvement as an excuse to torpedo *all* strategic arms controls with Russia.)

Ultimately, the issue was resolved in Washington by Joe Biden’s victory in the 2020 elections. Upon coming into office, his incoming administration wasted no time in agreeing to a full extension, shortly before New START’s deadline. (With a WX coalition having come into power, debates between the more hawkish Y and Z factions lost their relevance.)



Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty

There has been little US movement on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) issue for years. In 1999, a coalition of Z and Y policy makers coaxed enough members of the X group into their camp over concerns about the future reliability of the US nuclear stockpile without testing—and, one now suspects, also over worries about potential secret Russian and perhaps Chinese involvement in low-yield nuclear testing³—to defeat a US Senate resolution of ratification for CTBT.

The ratification issue has remained stalemated in Washington ever since. To be sure, when X or WX leaders are in power, they piously proclaim their desire for such ratification. Nevertheless, there has never been a serious effort to promote it since the 1999 failure, and there is little prospect of one succeeding anyway. It thus remains today a ritualized affair: WX administrations profess their support for ratification, YZ administrations declare that the United States does not intend to become a party to the CTBT, and nothing changes.

At the same time, *all* US administrations have nonetheless so far continued financial support for the network of seismic and other monitoring stations built under the auspices of the CTBT Organization Preparatory Commission. The logic here is that even those hawks who think a legally binding test ban is not advisable are still willing to spend money to improve the chances of detecting clandestine nuclear testing undertaken by a country such as North Korea or Iran. (Zs sometimes resist such funding, reasoning that the only way to ensure that the hated CTBT is never ratified is to dismember everything to do with it. Even during the Trump administration, however—which emphatically rejected ratification—test-monitoring funding continued.)

Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), or so-called Ban Treaty, raises some substantive questions but in terms of Washington coalition politics is a simple issue. The W group tends to support the ban, but—with the exception of a short-lived “wobble” during the Obama administration, when US officials were willing to attend (and, alas, help legitimize) what was in effect a TPNW-preparatory conference on the “humanitarian consequences” of nuclear use⁴—the TPNW has to date confronted solid opposition across the XYZ spectrum.

Missile Defense

In general, while US missile defenses (MD) were once more controversial across the WXYZ spectrum, the clear rise of a range of missile threats has made support for defenses fairly palatable for members of the X, Y, and Z groups alike. (Ws still tend

to deplore MD.) That said, the question of *how far* such defensive work should go remains controversial.

Traditionally, members of the W and X groups tend to feel any significant US deployment of strategic missile defenses destabilizing, fearing it threatens Russian and Chinese strategic capabilities, undermines whatever strategic stability could be said to derive from mutual vulnerability, and could lead to an offense-versus-defense arms race. This was, indeed, the logic behind the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972. Zs, however, regard limitations on US missile defense with a fiery hatred and disdain, and have consistently pushed for more defense capabilities. When Ys joined their Z brethren in opposing the ABM Treaty, however—albeit more out of concern for North Korean and Iranian missile developments than any real hope of comprehensive MD at scale—the United States withdrew in 2002.

Since that time, Ws and Xs have continued to deplore that US decision, but in the post-ABM Treaty world, even the Xs have been willing to support modest defenses against the types of threats from “rogue regimes.” This has given *limited* defense an enduring constituency in Washington across the XYZ spectrum, but MD debates continue to flare, with Zs continuing to advocate for stronger defenses against a full range of adversary threats, including space-based defenses.

Ws and Xs continue to regard “near peer”-focused MD as destabilizing, with at least some Ys apparently in agreement. Concerned about Russian and Chinese criticism of US defenses, members of the W and X groups also worry that America’s pursuit of defenses will make it harder to reach the arms control agreements they desire. Meanwhile, members of the Y group support better missile defense against “rogue regime” threats but tend to feel that more comprehensive defenses are unavailable for both technical and budgetary reasons, and thus they often regard the pursuit of full-scope defensive capabilities as an unnecessarily provocative and pointless exercise.

Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament

Somewhat surprisingly, the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative that the United States began during the Trump administration has not attracted significant opposition from any of the four factions that have been described here. It seems to have the strongest support from the X group, with many Zs probably thinking privately that the initiative is a waste of time and many Ws likely still suspecting it’s some kind of an intellectual trap or an effort to create excuses for avoiding movement toward disarmament. (In this respect, it surely doesn’t help that CEND was developed under a YZ administration.) Nevertheless, CEND’s sometimes ambivalent but generally supportive coalition still holds, and the Biden administration still seems committed to moving forward.



Looking Ahead

This WXYZ model may also help illuminate the kinds of debates that may be occurring behind the scenes as the Biden administration drafts its Nuclear Posture Review.

One key thing to bear in mind here is that the figurative terrain on which WXYZ policy debates occur has been changing. The initial post–Cold War period of the 1990s, for instance, offered salad days for Xs and encouragingly optimistic ones even for Ws, as the former superpower rivals seemed to have put competition behind them and were dramatically reducing their nuclear arsenals. These reductions were so significant—and the head of political and emotional steam that built up behind them in the WX coalition so powerful—that these post–Cold War disarmament moves created soaring expectations of continuing progress that survived even into the 2010s, the implications of which the disarmament community is still struggling with today.

Now, however, these teleological assumptions are being challenged by the geopolitical revisionism of Russia and China, which turn out to have spent most of the last two decades preparing themselves to *end* the supposedly post-competitive post–Cold War order that Western arms control and disarmament policies aimed to consolidate and build upon. The nuclear weapons buildups undertaken by Russia and especially now China, as well as their growing conventional military power and bellicosity vis-à-vis the United States and their own neighbors—undertaken under a sort of “offensive nuclear umbrella” of strategic saber rattling⁵—have radically altered the security environment facing US officials charged with decision making in Washington.

On the whole, I suspect that the deteriorating security environment—and the lamentably successful efforts of Russian and Chinese strategists to make nuclear weaponry in effect *more* important in Western security calculations than at any time since the end of the Cold War—will tend to shake things up in the direction of skewing intergroup policy outcomes somewhat more in the hawkish direction. It would not surprise me, for instance, if we saw a painfully negotiated, ostensibly WX policy agenda emerge from the Biden administration: one that in practice *looks* rather like what might have been thought merely a XY approach just a few years ago, but that wraps its relatively security-focused moderation in a rhetorical cloak of disarmament rhetoric in order to preserve the appearance—for coalition-management purposes—that those in charge are all *really* Ws at heart.

We shall see.

NOTES

- 1 Jorge Luis Borges, “On Exactitude in Science,” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1999). See <https://kwarc.info/teaching/TDM/Borges.pdf>.
- 2 “Russian Spy Plane Flies over Trump’s New Jersey Golf Club, DC Area,” Fox News, September 26, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/russian-spy-plane-flies-over-trumps-new-jersey-golf-club-dc-area>.
- 3 See US Department of State, “Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments,” June 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-Adherence-to-and-Compliance-with-Arms-Control-Nonproliferation-and-Disarmament-Agreements-and-Commitments-Compliance-Report.pdf>.
- 4 See Kingston Reif, “US to Attend Nuclear Meeting,” Arms Control Association, December 2014, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2014-12/news-briefs/us-attend-nuclear-meeting>.
- 5 Christopher A. Ford, “Offensive Nuclear Umbrellas and the Modern Challenge of Strategic Thinking,” *New Paradigms Forum*, February 11, 2016, <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p2007>.

SOURCE

The views expressed herein are entirely the author’s and do not necessarily represent those of anyone else. This essay is adapted from remarks prepared for the author’s presentation at a discussion with the Hoover Institution and the Arms Control Study Group of the American Association for the Advancement of Science on February 18, 2022.





The publisher has made this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 4.0 International license. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0>.

The views expressed in this essay are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff, officers, or Board of Overseers of the Hoover Institution.

hoover.org

Copyright © 2022 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University

28 27 26 25 24 23 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



About the Author



CHRISTOPHER A. FORD

The Honorable Christopher A. Ford is a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution and distinguished policy advisor at MITRE Labs. He previously served as US assistant secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation, also performing the duties of the under secretary of state for arms control and international security. Dr. Ford's personal website is <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com>.

Synopsis

This essay offers a heuristic to help explain US arms control policy and politics over the last two decades. In this framing, policy decisions are the result of contestation, bargaining, and coalition dynamics between four “WXYZ” factions within the policy community, ranging from dovish “Ws” to hawkish “Zs.” This schema can illuminate major US arms control policy debates and decisions over the last generation.