

The Future of U.S.-Russian Arms Control

Principles of Engagement and New Approaches

By Heather A. Conley, Vladimir Orlov, Gen. Evgeny Buzhinsky, Cyrus Newlin, Sergey Semenov, and Roksana Gabidullina

As one of its first decisions regarding security policy, the Biden administration agreed to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) for five years with no conditions. New START represents one of the last remaining vestiges of international arms control architecture and one of the few areas of potentially productive U.S.-Russian dialogue in an otherwise toxic, distrustful bilateral relationship. Yet the security environment has drastically changed since New START was negotiated in 2010. The treaty covers only a part of the “security equation” wherein missile defense, new weapons systems, space-based assets, and advanced technologies are not subject to formal arms control agreements. Both Moscow and Washington—though to different extents—have grounds to be concerned about the nuclear capabilities of third countries that are not party to existing arms control arrangements.

Against this backdrop, how can we begin to reframe the U.S.-Russian arms control dialogue for the future? Where should the negotiation or discussion start: with new capabilities or rebuilding some semblance of trust through greater transparency measures? Should principles be reaffirmed and developed in multilateral forums rather than through formal treaties? What can realistically be accomplished during the five-year extension period? These questions provided the backdrop to a U.S.-Russian Track 2 Strategic Stability Dialogue held over four, in-depth conversations in November and December 2020, hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Moscow-based PIR Center. This bilateral and bipartisan dialogue was unique in featuring a wide range of views on arms control on both the U.S. and Russian sides. In doing so, the organizers sought to build the groundwork for an approach to arms control talks that would withstand political fluctuations in both countries.

U.S. and Russian dialogue participants disagreed between and among themselves on how best to reframe arms control in the twenty-first century, but all agreed on the benefits of cooperative efforts to

manage nuclear risks. Although successful arms control negotiations have occurred between Washington and Moscow during equally tense bilateral moments, this juncture feels especially fraught. The Track 2 dialogue centered on developing a roadmap for arms control talks that simultaneously addresses both parties' deep-seated concerns and an evolving strategic environment. Elements of this roadmap have been well-surveyed, and significant roadblocks well-known; other elements will require exploring and mapping new principles, concluding new treaties, or creating a web of interlinking agreements. But before this process can begin, both Russia and the United States must reaffirm the necessity of arms control, as the language concerning doctrinal thresholds for nuclear use has become casual and ambiguous.

U.S. and Russian dialogue participants disagreed between and among themselves on how best to reframe arms control in the twenty-first century, but all agreed on the benefits of cooperative efforts to manage nuclear risks.

The Road That Must Be Traveled

It is with this renewed urgency and opportunity in mind that participants outlined several principles for productive engagement:

- *Begin talks early.* Both Russian and U.S. participants were critical of the Trump administration's delay in initiating a conversation with Russia on arms control, with the discussion on extending New START only beginning in earnest in spring 2019. The delayed talks were further bogged down by extraneous U.S. requests, such as engaging with China on a trilateral basis and seeking a temporary freeze on all nuclear weapons. These delays inevitably ran into the U.S. presidential election calendar. Although it appeared that the Russian government was prepared to agree to a limited extension accompanied by a temporary nuclear freeze, the talks stalled over a U.S. demand that the extension be accompanied by more intrusive verification measures, which Russia was not ready to accept. Ultimately, the decision regarding extension was left until the last two weeks before the treaty was set to expire in February 2021. Although New START was extended for another five years, participants pointed to the need to begin new arms control talks immediately, as the negotiating calendar will again be subject to the political calendar.
- *Signal buy-in to the negotiating process.* Some participants believed that the Trump administration approached negotiations with the assumption that Russia needed arms control more than the United States did and that Moscow would therefore be ready to make concessions in order to achieve an extension. Valid or not, building the next generation of arms control architecture will require a shared belief in the value of arms control. This means equal buy-in to the negotiating process and creative approaches to policy, including entertaining greater flexibility regarding long-standing negotiating postures and recognizing that the other side has legitimate concerns.
- *Table, sort, prioritize.* Following the extension of New START, participants agreed that the United States and Russia should immediately begin informal, mid-level diplomatic discussions while the

new U.S. administration organizes itself. After the United States consults with its allies, these informal discussions could place all issues on the table—giving each side an opportunity to explain areas of priority and air grievances, thereby aligning understandings of current arms control regimes’ problems, particularly the risks posed by certain technologies. Not all issues will be addressed in this initial discussion, nor can all issues be addressed simultaneously; this would result “in the [negotiating] table collapsing,” as one participant put it. But the informal nature of the discussion would enable negotiators to sort these issues into “baskets” and identify emerging agenda items to be prioritized in formal negotiations. This would help ensure greater buy-in from both sides.

Correctly sorting, organizing, prioritizing, and sequencing these issues will likely determine the success of the extension negotiations. Should negotiators tackle issues that present the greatest risk, for example, or build confidence by sequencing issues that might be successfully addressed more quickly? One participant proposed a simultaneous, three-track negotiation structure that would better elucidate the interaction between capabilities. Described as a “strategic equation,” one track would focus on offensive capabilities, a second on defensive capabilities, and a third on conventional capabilities. Others proposed addressing strategic weapons and delivery systems in one track, non-strategic systems in another, and cyberattacks, new technologies, and space-based systems in a third. Another proposal would create a separate track for each technology or platform: command control and cybersecurity risks, hypersonic weapons, space-based systems, and so forth. Yet another approach would have a track on weapons and delivery systems, including nuclear and long-range precision strikes; a separate track on securing targets, including critical infrastructure, space-based assets, and Command, Control, Communications, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C4ISR); and a third track on new domains such as cyber defense and automation.

Once organized, the United States and Russia must prioritize issue areas. Two straightforward questions might guide this process: Which capabilities or technologies pose the greatest threat to predictability and transparency? And where can both sides mitigate risk? Participants wondered if another Cuban Missile Crisis was needed to create greater political investment in the process and initiate serious discussions. Could war games at the Track 2 or Track 1.5 levels help align understandings about which capabilities cause the greatest distress and misinterpretation—and therefore must be immediately prioritized? Some participants believed that such a priority focus could be to reach an agreement that neither side would deploy a cyberattack against the other’s nuclear weapons command and control systems.

- *Ready for agreement, aim for treaties, shoot for arms control processes.* Are treaties (versus voluntary norms and principles) the best pathway to re-establish a productive arms control process? To reach a new agreement, the United States and Russia will need to address a broad range of concerns spanning space-based systems, underwater drones, nuclear cruise missiles, cyberattacks, and other capabilities (see below). But participants were doubtful that the United States and Russia would be willing or, in the United States’ case, able to ratify a legally binding treaty covering all these classes of weapons, in part because of the two sides’ disagreement over which of these technologies are destabilizing. Nevertheless, the United States and Russia should pursue legally binding agreements in which verification is deeply embedded—particularly in relation to the total number of nuclear warheads and their means of delivery—including for future technological developments. New bilateral treaties would set a positive precedent and build the foundation for more complicated multilateral arms control discussions.

- *Be mindful of political realities.* U.S.-Russian arms control must be anchored in domestic political realities and resilient to political fluctuations. In the United States, this means that any future agreement—legally binding or otherwise—must have sufficient, bipartisan Congressional support. Political polarization in Washington, the narrow margin of Democratic control in a split Senate, and the U.S. electoral calendar mean that it may be difficult to achieve a new, ratified treaty in the short term. In this context, U.S. arms control negotiators should engage members of Congress early and throughout the negotiating process to expand the number of informed stakeholders. Indeed, both Moscow and Washington will face political challenges in the lead-up to their respective presidential elections in 2024. Understanding what is feasible within each other’s domestic political contexts is essential. U.S.-Chinese relations also will increasingly weigh on U.S.-Russian relations. Understanding how arms control negotiations will impact the strategic balance in specific regions, such as the Indo-Pacific, could be helpful.

Extending New START

At the time of the Track 2 dialogue in fall 2020, President-elect Biden had indicated his intention—as ultimately occurred—to extend New START before its February 5 expiration without pre-conditions. However, a reported internal debate within the Biden transition team over how long to extend New START mirrored the discussion that took place within our Track 2 discussions and remains illustrative of larger debates within the U.S. national security community. Some U.S. participants favored multiple rolling extensions within a five-year period. Proponents of this view believed an unconditional, five-year extension might “reward” Moscow, reduce urgency in the negotiating process, and place the expiration date beyond Biden’s four-year term—potentially reducing U.S. leverage in follow-on discussions with Russia and increasing uncertainty over whether the United States would ratify a new treaty. Conversely, Americans who called for an unconditional, five-year extension believed that the United States would benefit from a legally binding verification of Russia’s strategic nuclear forces and that a full extension would create “breathing room” and a stable foundation for follow-on discussions covering a wider range of systems. Overall, U.S. participants were divided on the issue, while Russian participants were unanimously in favor of a five-year extension. Yet nearly all participants agreed that extending New START in some form would sustain transparency and predictability; this sole remaining U.S.-Russian strategic treaty could be built upon by, for example, introducing unilateral and verifiable commitments to reduce deployed warheads below the New START ceiling of 1,550. This would signal mutual restraint and provide a positive tone ahead of the August 2021 review conference for the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

Next-Generation Arms Control

For over a decade, U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations have been paralyzed by the question of what is and is not on the negotiating table. Russia seeks to establish the parameters for future negotiations that will address a broader array of issues affecting strategic stability, such as missile defense, before consenting to negotiating any one element. The United States is not going to negotiate with Moscow on missile defense, cyber defense, and conventional precision-strike systems until Moscow demonstrates willingness to engage on non-strategic nuclear weapons. Each views its own unrestricted capabilities as hedges against the other’s. Withdrawals from and violations of previous arms control treaties, combined with the overall toxic state of bilateral relations, has diminished the political space for arms control talks.

Both Washington and Moscow have an interest in breaking this stasis over the next five years to achieve a new arms control agreement (or agreements) to succeed New START. A future agreement will need to address a broad range of old and new capabilities that affect the strategic calculus, including mis-

sile defense, non-strategic nuclear weapons, conventional strike systems, hypersonic missiles, nuclear cyber threats, space-based assets, and novel strategic systems. Such an overarching agreement or set of narrowly defined agreements could exist in a legally binding form on its own or alongside separate codes of conduct, principles, norms of behavior, and other non-binding arrangements that address issue areas (such as cyber defense, space-based systems, and artificial intelligence) for which there are greater challenges to verification.

MISSILE DEFENSE AND NON-STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Russian officials have long expressed concerns about U.S. missile defense, which is intended to counter threats from North Korean and Iranian intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) but which Russia and China believe hinders their own deterrence capabilities, thereby upsetting the strategic balance. Highlighting these long-standing Russian concerns about the intent of U.S. missile defenses, former U.S. president Donald Trump has [remarked](#), “Our goal is simple: to ensure that we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States – anywhere, anytime, anyplace.” Furthermore, during the course of the Track 2 dialogue, the United States [successfully intercepted](#) a test ICBM using the Aegis Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) Block IIA ship-to-missile technology—which, Russian participants noted, underscored and reinforced their concerns.

Russian participants noted that their recent advances in hypersonic guided cruise missiles—which U.S. participants noted with great concern—were a result of the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, leading Moscow to attempt to counter ABM systems and remain at strategic parity with the United States. Because of these developments in hypersonic technology, U.S. participants wondered whether missile defense was still a concern for Moscow.

In response, Russian participants maintained that U.S. missile defense systems remain destabilizing due to uncertainty regarding their efficacy against Russian strategic systems. In its current form, U.S. missile defense may not be able to upset the strategic balance, but its potential for improvement is a major concern for the Russian arms control community. Progress in bilateral arms control will likely require addressing the growing technological capabilities of both the United States and Russia in order to avoid a destabilizing cycle in which Russia develops new offensive systems designed to defeat U.S. missile defenses, compelling the United States to develop greater global missile defense capabilities.

The United States continues to express great concern over Russia’s development of non-strategic nuclear warheads and its implications for transatlantic security—a subject outside the purview of New START restraints. U.S. and Russian participants engaged in a productive discussion that attempted to better understand Russia’s military purpose and intent in possessing such a high number of non-strategic weapons. Russian participants maintained that non-strategic nuclear weapons are a means of regional deterrence. Moscow is concerned over North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) conventional superiority over Russia in Europe. Moreover, Russia is within range of NATO non-strategic nuclear weapons, while Russia’s own non-strategic nuclear weapons are allegedly kept in depots in the center of Russia, far from the European theater, and would take time to make operational. U.S. participants argued that Russia has announced the movement of non-strategic weapons to Kaliningrad and Crimea and that the number of warheads far exceeds the need to deter NATO forces and weapons systems. A future agreement could seek to ground this debate in the logic of sufficiency. How many non-strategic nuclear weapons are enough for Russia to achieve regional deterrence and offset NATO missile defense systems in Europe? Joint declarations on numerical or locational limits—to be closely followed by the development of verification mechanisms—could be a first, politically binding step toward arms control without treaties. Another potential way forward

could be for Russia to move more non-strategic weapons away from the European theater (accompanied by verification) or for both countries to renew lab-to-lab scientific cooperation on methods of counting non-strategic nuclear capabilities.

Progress in bilateral arms control will likely require addressing the growing technological capabilities of both the United States and Russia in order to avoid a destabilizing cycle in which Russia develops new offensive systems designed to defeat U.S. missile defenses, compelling the United States to develop greater global missile defense capabilities.

CYBER DEFENSE AND SPACE-BASED SYSTEMS

Cyber threats to C4ISR and critical infrastructure are ripe material for bilateral discussions regarding a potential code of conduct or joint statement of principle prohibiting the use of cyberattacks against nuclear command-and-control infrastructure and early warning systems. Participants on both sides emphasized that cyber activities cannot be disassociated from nuclear arms control discussions; to ensure strategic stability, nuclear communications structures must be immune to cyber penetration. Among U.S. participants, there was some concern that Russia would use cyber capabilities to deny its opponent's advantage during the opening phases of war. However, both the United States and Russia have a mutual interest in securing their own command and control systems against cyberattacks. Although difficult to achieve, this could create room for some discussion of cybersecurity standards for protecting strategic systems.

Unfortunately, discussions related to the nexus of cyber defense, space-based assets, and arms control are nascent, unlikely to produce quick results, and occur against the backdrop of regular offensive and defensive cyber breaches by the United States and Russia into each other's systems. Nevertheless, the United States and Russia should make attempts to delink cyber threats to strategic infrastructure from other forms of cyberattacks and cyber espionage and to initiate preliminary talks on the former. One participant noted that the entire field of arms control was at one point nascent and the path forward unclear, but engagement (though messy at first) helped align understandings of the threat and paved the way for more formal agreements. Participants agreed that because of challenges around verification, it may be difficult to achieve legally binding agreements on uses of cyberattacks, but establishing rules of the road and norms could help clarify intentions and reduce cyber risks.

Nevertheless, the United States and Russia should make attempts to delink cyber threats to strategic infrastructure from other forms of cyberattacks and cyber espionage and to initiate preliminary talks on the former.

Likewise, the increased use of space-based assets, particularly anti-satellite weapons designed to inhibit missile warning or reconnaissance and surveillance systems, must be addressed within any weapons treaty. New START does provide for non-interference in national technical means of verification. In the C4ISR domain, however, that is not enough. Outer space bears great potential for disrupting the strategic balance. To prevent such a disruption, Moscow and Washington could explore a formal agreement to ban anti-satellite tests and space-based conventional weapons and develop some form of transparency and verification mechanisms. Signaling mutual restraint may prompt other parties to make their own unilateral commitments not to target space-based infrastructure.

HYPERSONIC AND HIGH-PRECISION WEAPONS

The proliferation of high-speed and high-precision weapons—nuclear or conventional and regardless of delivery system—is a threat to strategic stability and offers an opportunity for negotiators. Some form of agreement, formal or informal, is needed for these systems. The United States and Russia could begin a discussion on limiting use of these weapons. The United States has expressed concern over Russia’s unmanned underwater vehicle, Poseidon, and its Avangard hypersonic missile systems. Russian participants in turn noted that the United States has its own systems unparalleled by the Russian military, including the Boeing X-37 unmanned spacecraft, which Russian participants posited may be closer to actual deployment than the Russian systems. This opened a conversation on the role of information, during which it was noted that Russia will at times overstate its capabilities in order to project strength—which can obfuscate actual capabilities, create uncertainty around Russia’s intent, and intensify U.S. weapon development, thus heightening strategic instability.

Doctrines

Russian and U.S. participants discussed the role of information and signaling in deepening their understanding of shifts in the other’s nuclear doctrine. Strategic ambiguity is an inherent feature of both U.S. and Russian nuclear doctrines. Both are also based on nuclear deterrence and ensuring second-strike capability. However, in recent years more questions have arisen regarding what circumstances might prompt the United States and Russia to employ nuclear weapons. On the U.S. side, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review uses strategic ambiguity in identifying what type of attack would require a nuclear response rather than a conventional one. Its inclusion of “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks” as such an instance prompted Russian participants to wonder whether the United States had lowered its threshold for nuclear use. These concerns are reinforced by the U.S. deployment of low-yield warheads on Trident II (D5LE) submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). On the other side, there are unresolved questions about whether the concept of “escalate to de-escalate” is a part of Russia’s nuclear doctrine. While ambiguity serves an important purpose, excessive ambiguity can be destabilizing and could send the wrong signals, which is particularly dangerous while U.S.-Russian bilateral relations are in a state of crisis.

The Biden administration’s renewed emphasis on arms control and on reestablishing policy that is consistent and credible provides a signaling opportunity. The Biden administration could decide to reaffirm the 1986 Reagan-Gorbachev statement that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” as Russia has proposed. The United States could reaffirm a no-first-use policy (although this would not address the use of new conventional platforms and technologies), clarify the language in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review by reaffirming that the primary role of nuclear weapons for the United States is deterrence, or issue a “sole purpose” declaration. It may be politically challenging for the United States to initiate any of these statements. However, if it takes any of these steps, Russia should ideally respond jointly and in kind. Several participants present in the Track 2 dialogues posited that, at a minimum, Russia could do more to clarify its policy from the highest levels of government regarding an “escalate to de-escalate” approach.

But affirmations and clarity related to doctrinal language only get you so far. It is the perception of intent and the ability to verify statements and treaties that ultimately matter for arms control, and this perception is affected by the domestic, bilateral, and geopolitical environment. Moscow’s threat perception is shaped by the United States’ conventional capabilities, NATO’s frontiers, and Washington’s perceived Russophobia. Washington’s threat perception is shaped by Russia’s military modernization and its political willingness to deploy military capabilities in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere—as well as by cyberattacks and domestic influence operations of foreign origin.

But affirmations and clarity related to doctrinal language only get you so far. It is the perception of intent and the ability to verify statements and treaties that ultimately matter for arms control, and this perception is affected by the domestic, bilateral, and geopolitical environment.

Multilateral Disarmament

The United States and Russia no longer view arms control exclusively through the lens of U.S.-Russian strategic stability. Washington increasingly acknowledges that China is now a larger threat and military competitor, and it seeks to limit Beijing's quickly growing nuclear and conventional forces. From Washington's perspective, arms control agreements that do not include China are incomplete, even if they provide for a measure of security and predictability in U.S.-Russian strategic relations. Participants widely felt that the Trump administration's efforts to coerce Russia into pressuring China to join trilateral negotiations were clumsy at best and damaging to these arms control efforts at worst. Some participants observed that the United States and Russia have deep expertise and a strategic culture related to arms control and non-proliferation issues, despite a significant slowdown over the past decade. However, China has no bilateral arms control culture. It must be created through nascent bilateral and multilateral arms control steps involving China—but, even so, an arms control culture may not develop at all if Beijing remains unwilling to engage.

As Russia and the United States embark on bilateral arms control negotiations, the United States—after extensive consultation with its allies and partners—should seek to establish confidence-building measures with China, such as agreeing to notify each other in advance of ballistic missile test launches, in order to reduce regional misunderstandings and miscalculations. These smaller steps could open the way for a bilateral and/or trilateral dialogue with Moscow that could discuss wider issues such as verifying and limiting intermediate-range nuclear missiles in the Indo-Pacific.

Russian participants noted that Beijing is unlikely to engage in arms control negotiations unless it can negotiate from a position of strength. Because the United States and Russia account for 92 percent of the world's nuclear stockpile, it will be difficult to convince China—or other states—to reduce or limit its arsenal unless the United States and Russia both agree to asymmetric reductions (which they are unlikely to do). Participants discussed the number of missiles China possesses; while some estimates ranged from 200–300 strategic and intermediate-range nuclear weapons, others suggested these figures were much higher, which raises important questions about how to institute a viable verification regime. The United States, having only recently withdrawn from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, has not yet deployed mid-range missiles in Asia but has considered doing so. Discussing limits on intermediate-range missiles could be a starting point for initial trilateral discussions.

Multilateral arms control could also occur through the UN Security Council, though participants were generally quite skeptical about whether the P5 format could produce a binding agreement. For one, multilateral deterrence is by nature impossible, as each state has different threat perceptions and different countries to deter; one cannot involve China without India, and India without Pakistan, although India's and Pakistan's nuclear stockpiles are not officially declared. Nevertheless, participants believed that the P5 could issue a statement reaffirming the Reagan-Gorbachev principle and establish nuclear risk reduction centers in Asia, which would together signal a multilateral commitment to reducing nuclear risk.

In sum, there is some room for optimism that Russian and U.S. negotiators can use the five-year extension to New START to begin building a new arms control “scaffolding” that will be able to address new technologies and prioritize the issues presenting the most immediate challenge to second-strike capabilities. Once a sturdier U.S.-Russian strategic stability negotiation framework is constructed, greater trilateral negotiating opportunities with China can be pursued. Progress in these areas will pave the way for greater success in other important multilateral non-proliferation forums such as the NPT Review Conference. ■

Heather A. Conley is senior vice president for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic and director of the Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. **Vladimir Orlov** is founder and director of the Moscow-based PIR Center. **Gen. Evgeny Buzhinsky** is chairman of the PIR Center Executive Board. **Cyrus Newlin** is an associate fellow with the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program. **Sergey Semenov** is coordinator of the PIR Center Nonproliferation and Russia Program. **Roksana Gabidullina** is a program manager and research associate with the CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program.

CSIS wishes to express its great thanks to the Moscow-based PIR Center for the constructive role it played in developing and implementing this dialogue. Dialogues, however, are only as good as the participants who generously give their time and insights, and this dialogue received an abundance of both. CSIS would also like to thank Dr. Olga Oliker, Dr. Jeffrey Mankoff, and Sharon Squassoni for their thoughtful leadership and guidance throughout this dialogue series and for the indefatigable efforts of CSIS program manager and research associate Roksana Gabidullina, as well as our funders, the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

This report is made possible with support from the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

This report is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2021 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.