The Prospects for U.S.-Russian Arms Control

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Introduction

Since the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb in 1949, the rivalry between Moscow and Washington has always had a nuclear dimension. The strategic arsenals of the two superpowers grew quickly in the subsequent years, soon attaining a destructive potential sufficient to destroy each other many times over.

The understanding that unrestricted competition in the strategic nuclear sphere is not only unwinnable but outright dangerous led to a series of U.S.-Soviet and later U.S.-Russian agreements on the rules of the road. Washington and Moscow agreed to limit and then cut the numbers of their strategic nuclear weapons, to not deploy missile defense systems that could threaten those weapons, and to get rid of some of the most destabilizing systems altogether.

The end of the Cold War sharply reduced both the rivalry between Russia and the United States and the relevance of nuclear weapons. But the issues never disappeared completely and were quick to return when political circumstances changed. In December of 2017, when the Trump administration’s U.S. National Security Strategy officially proclaimed the return of “great power competition,” the Russian and U.S. nuclear arsenals combined still represented more than 90 percent of the world’s total. However, the arms control architecture, which previously provided a safety net, was falling apart.

Today with the U.S. and Russian militaries operating in close proximity in the Middle East and Europe, as well as at sea in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the potential for conflict and escalation cannot be ignored. The fact that all the nuclear arms control treaties between Moscow and Washington are gone, save for the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), whose future looks bleak, is worrying. If the world has entered the stage of open competition between the nuclear-armed great powers, all sides should be interested in managing that competition in the safest possible way.

This report aims to take stock of the current state of U.S.-Russian arms control (or the lack thereof), evaluating possible alternatives—including a trilateral process with China and more flexible political agreements—and laying down the issues and possible trade-offs that will be on the negotiation table when or if Moscow and Washington once again decide to pursue arms control.

Where We Are

Strategic Systems

The 2010 New START treaty is the only remaining arms control agreement between Russia and the United States that covers strategic offensive systems. It is set to expire on February 5, 2021, but can be extended for up to five years by mutual agreement. Russia has on a number of occasions stated at the highest level that it’s ready to extend the treaty. The United States is currently in the third year of an interagency process of figuring out its position.

While executive action would be enough to extend in the United States, Russian legislation would require passing a law of extension by both chambers of the parliament, which would require additional time. The law of ratification for New START took eight months (from May 2010 to January 2011) to get passed. Passing a simple extension law would obviously be much easier because it would not require evaluating long and complex treaty text, but it would still take time. The United States maintains that there is no rush to consider an extension. When Moscow proposed a meeting of legal teams to discuss the extension issue in February 2020, Washington declined.

While overall the treaty is seen as a success in both countries, disagreements have arisen about its implementation from both sides.

Russia has issues with the conversion of U.S. B-52H heavy bombers and Trident-II sea-launched ballistic missile launchers to make them treaty-compliant. Moscow says it cannot confirm the conversion and bombers and launchers should still be counted against the treaty limits. Washington believes that the conversion was adequate and rejects Russian concerns. While for a period of time Moscow signaled that this issue would have

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to be resolved before the treaty could be extended, President Putin stated in December 2019 that Russia would be ready to extend with no preconditions. Under this proposal, U.S. conversion procedures would continue to be discussed in the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) under the New START.6

The United States has meanwhile raised issues related to the counting of launchers of prototype intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and the modification of the Tu-22M3 bomber—all rather technical issues, which Russia has already addressed in the BCC.7 The one serious outstanding issue from the U.S. side is how to count the new Russian nuclear systems unveiled by President Putin in his annual address to the Federal Assembly on March 1, 2018. These weapons include the new heavy ICBM Sarmat, the Avangard boost-glide vehicle, a hypersonic air-launched ballistic missile called Kinzhal, an intercontinental nuclear torpedo termed Poseidon, and the nuclear-powered cruise missile Burevestnik.8 U.S. officials insist that those weapons should be covered and hence counted toward the limits imposed by New START. U.S. secretary of defense Mark Esper went as far as to say “if there’s going to be an extension of New START, then we need to make sure we include all of these new weapons that … Russia is pursuing.”9

Russia has already agreed that the Avangard boost-glide vehicle is covered under the New START treaty, and it was demonstrated to U.S. New START inspectors in 2019.10 When Sarmat reaches the prototype stage of development, it will also be counted under the New START limits. Kinzhal, which has already been deployed, is currently carried by a MiG-31 aircraft with a range of less than 8000 km, which falls short of the definition of a strategic weapon under the treaty. However, recent media reporting suggests that Moscow is planning to deploy Kinzhal on Tu-160 heavy bombers,11 which would make it subject to the New START limits as well. Russia’s position on the Burevestnik and Poseidon is that they should not be counted under the treaty without amending it because New START only deals with ICBMs, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers.12 In any case, both systems seem to be in early stages of development, which means there is a good chance they will not be deployed before New START expires in 2026 or is superseded by a follow-on treaty, where they could be included under a separate category.

With Putin’s clear statement that Russia is prepared to extend New START without preconditions, the decision on extension lies with the United States. While this choice will be primarily political and is thus hard to predict, an early indication of U.S. intentions

7 “Problems Related to Implementation of the Treaty.”
would be an official reaction to Russian overtures (e.g., the Avangard demonstration and Putin’s proposal for a clean extension). However, if Washington simply ignores them, ramps up its demands, or tries to spin them in a negative light, it will be a signal that the United States is not interested in maintaining New START and is not serious about future arms control with Russia.

**Intermediate-Range Systems**

The United States withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty on August 2, 2019, citing Russian development and deployment of ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) within the prohibited range of 500 to 5500 km. Russia denied the U.S. allegations and raised its own concerns, the biggest of which was the capability of U.S. Mk-41 launchers at missile defense sites in Poland and Romania to launch GLCMs.

Six months after the treaty ended, there is no talk in either of the capitals about reviving the INF. There is also no race to build INF-range systems in either Europe or Asia. However, this situation is hardly sustainable.

In August 2019, the United States tested a BGM-109 Tomahawk cruise missile launched from a Mk-41 cell mounted on a mobile platform, which made it a GLCM and would have been a violation of the INF treaty. The Pentagon is currently working on an array of new systems that clearly fall within the prohibited range of 500-5500 km range prohibited by the INF Treaty. More concerning than the August 2019 Mk-41 launch was the December 2019 test of an intermediate-range ground-launched ballistic missile (IRBM). While the missile in question was more of a proof of concept than an actual weapon system, development on it will most likely continue. The development or deployment of this system would be a new threat; even the United States has never accused Russia of testing or deploying IRBMs, which are much faster, and thus more destabilizing, than cruise missiles like the Tomahawk. The Soviet Union’s introduction of SS-20 IRBMs in the 1970s led to the Euromissile crisis, one of the most dangerous moments of the late Cold War. Unquestionably, the development and deployment of U.S. ground-launched cruise and ballistic intermediate-range missiles will trigger a Russian response.

For its part, Russia has refrained for now from testing INF-range ground-launched systems. The clearest post-INF development was a reported January test of the Tsirkon sea-launched hypersonic cruise missile to a range exceeding 500 km. However, the United States believes that Moscow has already deployed the Iskander 9m729 GLCM with intermediate range. Russia maintains that the 9m729 is just an upgrade to the existing Iskander 9m728 cruise missile, with increased accuracy and a range of 480 km, which is below the threshold of 500 km that would qualify it as intermediate range. The Russian military will likely continue equipping its Iskander brigades with 9m729 missiles, which will probably increase Western concerns.

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All of these developments are concerning because they have the potential to start a new missile arms race, both in Europe and Asia.

During a meeting with foreign and defense ministers on February 2, 2019, President Putin announced that Russia will not “deploy intermediate-range or shorter-range weapons … until U.S. weapons of this kind are deployed to the corresponding regions of the world.”

A proposal for a moratorium on INF-range deployments was formalized in the letters reportedly sent by the Russian president to the leaders of major countries in September of 2019. Russia also announced that it was ready “to discuss relevant technical aspects” of “additional verification measures.” This proposal was received with skepticism in the West. The only country which engaged with Moscow on the substance of its proposal was France, and discussions between Moscow and Paris are still ongoing.

While a lot of Western experts have criticized the Russian proposal as an attempt to lock down the status quo, where Moscow has an advantage after deploying a GLCM with allegedly intermediate range, there are several reasons why it deserves more attention. First, there does not seem to be a better (or any other) proposal on the table. With the disappearance of the INF treaty, neither the United States nor Russia faces any legal constraints on deploying INF-range systems. This state of affairs should worry not just Washington and Moscow, which will be targeted by such missiles, but their neighbors as well. Thus far, the NATO and EU response has been muted and underwhelming despite a threat that the United States claimed was great enough to require withdrawal from the INF treaty.

Second, we know very few specifics about the Russian proposal for a mutual moratorium on deployments. Moscow is reportedly ready to discuss verification of the moratorium, which is something even the INF treaty did not have after its verification provisions expired in 2001. With the treaty no longer in force, discussion of a moratorium could be used to exchange concerns and try to come up with mutually acceptable solutions instead of accusing the other party of treaty violations.

Third, Moscow has been remarkably reserved in its response to U.S. missile testing since its withdrawal from the INF Treaty. In particular, Moscow has not responded to U.S. GLCM and IRBM tests with tests of its own. In the same February 2 meeting where he proposed the mutual moratorium, President Putin authorized “creating land-based modifications of the sea-based Kalibr launching systems” and “land-based launchers for hypersonic intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles” (most likely Tsirkon). If none of these materialized one year later, it is not because of the lack of capabilities—it would be rather easy to mount a Kalibr on a truck—but because the Russian side is making a demonstration of restraint. It would be a mistake for the United States to put the opportunity signaled by this demonstration of restraint to waste.

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17 “Meeting with Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu,” President of Russia.
Where We Seem to Be Going: Trilateral Arms Control

In May of 2019, U.S. president Donald Trump announced his interest in pursuing a “three-way deal” with Russia and China on limiting and perhaps further cutting nuclear arsenals. Despite a strong rebuttal from Beijing and lack of interest from Moscow, Washington continues pushing for this approach. The U.S. State Department is working on a trilateral arms control proposal, but as of early March 2020, it still has not been finalized.

Putting aside the question of what benefits the United States would get from participating in a trilateral negotiation where the other two sides would be naturally coordinating against it, the whole approach seems to be rather problematic from the Russian point of view.

First of all, Moscow simply does not see strategic arms control with Beijing as a priority. The two countries have developed an unprecedented degree of security cooperation, which has reached a new level since 2018 with the participation of Chinese troops in Russian military exercises.

Moreover, in spheres where Moscow is interested in arms control with China, it already exists. These spheres have mostly to do with conventional deployments along the Sino-Russian border and transparency measures toward one another’s nuclear arsenals. A 1999 agreement between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan on the mutual reduction of armed forces in the border regions incorporates information exchange provisions as well as verification mechanisms, which include on-site inspections. Additionally, Russia and China have agreed on the mutual de-targeting

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of strategic weapons as well as nuclear no first use against each other. Transparency in the nuclear sphere is further enhanced by a 2009 agreement on the notification of launches of ballistic missiles and space launch vehicles. While the United States sees additional transparency of Chinese nuclear forces as an important goal and would reportedly focus on it in the proposed negotiations, Russia is quite comfortable with its existing level of insight into China’s capabilities.

Despite statements by U.S. officials and experts, there is little evidence that China is planning to substantially increase its strategic nuclear forces—and even less that Beijing is aiming at parity with Moscow and Washington. Due to the proximity between the two countries, it makes little sense for Russia to focus on Chinese strategic systems. At the same time, Moscow is not ready to engage in discussing tactical nuclear weapons (see chapter III).

Second, Russia sees the U.S. proposal for multilateral arms control as a distraction from the pressing issue of bilateral arms control with Washington. With New START set to expire in less than a year and no negotiations for a follow-up treaty planned, Moscow faces the uncomfortable perspective of an unconstrained nuclear competition with the United States. At best, it views the idea of trilateral arms control proposal as a sincere U.S. goal that has little chance of succeeding but will suck all the oxygen from the more pressing bilateral track. At worst, Moscow sees it as a pretext for the U.S. side to abandon arms control altogether.

There does, to be fair, seem to be some confusion in the West about the apparent inconsistency between past Russian statements that future rounds of strategic arms talks should be multilateral and Moscow’s current insistence on sticking to the bilateral track. However, those apparent contradictions are quite easy to reconcile. While Foreign Minister Lavrov did say that “further steps that could be proposed on reducing strategic offensive weapons will have to be considered in a multilateral format,” he was talking about France and the United Kingdom. Moscow believes that the nuclear arsenals of Washington’s NATO allies are a factor in overall U.S. nuclear capabilities. When considering further nuclear reductions, Russia’s position is that the British and French nuclear forces cannot be ignored—just like other factors adding to U.S. strategic capabilities like missile defenses or conventional strategic systems cannot be ignored.

However, nuclear cuts do not seem to be on the table at the moment, and it is quite feasible—and indeed logical—for Russia to focus on the most pressing issue—namely keeping existing constraints on U.S. strategic nuclear forces by extending New START or negotiating a new bilateral treaty with similar levels.

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25 “Lavrov: Talks on further nuke cuts have to involve not only Russia and U.S. but also other countries,” Russia Beyond, June 22, 2013, https://www.rbth.com/news/2013/06/22/lavrov_talks_on_further_nuke_cuts_have_to_involve_not_only_russia_and_us_27372.html.
Third, Russia will not push China to participate in any trilateral discussions. Russian officials have stated on multiple occasions that Moscow will agree to join trilateral talks unless Beijing supports them. But as Lavrov put it in February 2020, “If China suddenly changes its mind, we will be pleased to participate in multilateral talks. But we will not try to convince China.”26 Moscow will not, in other words, put its relations with Beijing under stress to do Washington’s bidding. With the United States willing to leave bilateral strategic arms control, Beijing, if anything, will become more important for Moscow to balance Washington.

Washington’s approach is also likely to prove counterproductive with China. Some in the United States would agree with former undersecretary of defense John Rood, who told the Senate Armed Services Committee that “if the United States were to agree to extend the treaty now, I think it would make it less likely that we would have the ability to persuade Russia and China to enter negotiations on a broader agreement.”27 However, it is hard to see how a threat of unconstrained growth of U.S. strategic systems will change Beijing’s calculus when Washington already possesses an arsenal that is an order of magnitude bigger than China’s. If anything, this approach is likely to encourage Beijing to build up its strategic capabilities.

Finally, the U.S. proposal for trilateral arms control is complicated and does not seem to be well thought out. There is nothing inherently impossible in the idea of trilateral strategic arms control among the United States, Russia, and China. But even were Beijing to drop its long-standing opposition to such negotiations, several difficult issues would have to be resolved.

On the purely technical side, China does not have much experience with transparency and information exchanges about nuclear weapons or inspection activities. The closest experience to multilateral nuclear arms control was the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-I) and the INF treaty after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia as well as Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan became parties of the treaty because they inherited pieces of the Soviet arsenal.28 But while the post-Soviet INF agreement had some features of a multilateral process, like inspectors from all participating states, there were some important limitations. All of the successor states were included as a collective party to the treaty, with the United States being the other party.29 Each new state was given a share of the Soviet inspectors’ existing quota based on the number of facilities subject to inspection within its territory, but from the organizational point of view representatives of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine were assigned to the Russian

delegation. Among the post-Soviet republics, only Russia kept nuclear weapons and had the capabilities to produce new missiles and warheads, while the other states were mainly monitored to ensure the withdrawal and destruction of weapons deployed on their territories. Moreover, most diplomats and inspectors from the newly independent republics were previously Soviet diplomats with relevant experience. This would not be so in the case of China.

Beijing and Moscow have important experience in conventional arms control with mutual reduction of armed forces in the border regions. However, diplomats and officers in charge of conventional arms control normally do not work on nuclear issues. Moreover, nuclear weapons are much more technologically and politically sensitive than conventional arms, and China has more reasons to fear the United States on the nuclear front than it feared Russia on the conventional side. In other words, it is unlikely to be as forthcoming as it was in the border talks with Russia and its Central Asian neighbors.

In the absence of experience and with the fear of disclosing too much information, it is easy to imagine that China would prefer a Strategic Arms Limitation (SALT)-style agreement providing for verification with national technical means rather than the more intrusive mechanisms similar to the ones in the START or INF treaties. Because it is hard to imagine a treaty having different verification mechanisms for different parties, having China join an agreement on different provisions than Russia and the United States is probably not a viable approach. Resorting to the SALT-level of verification standards would mean losing a lot of transparency measures, including inspections, which are hailed as one of the main achievements of U.S.-Russian arms control. Exchanging the ability to check how many warheads are deployed on a Russian ICBM for clarity about the number of launch vehicles and some decrease in concealment measures on the Chinese side could find supporters in Washington, but it would not have any upsides for Moscow. And this approach would still leave the issue of differences in sizes of arsenals unresolved.

All in all, while seeking to bring China into the strategic arms control process is generally a worthwhile idea, the way the Trump administration is currently approaching it seems unlikely to work. And even had it worked, it is unclear whether trilateral talks would be better than two parallel bilateral tracks. Trilateral talks would last longer because any move by one of the capitals would cause reactions in two other parties and would probably involve some backroom bilateral discussions anyway. A failure of trilateral negotiations now would also probably complicate any future attempts to do arms control with China. Washington would probably be better off engaging Beijing directly on the process of arms control, introducing to China mechanisms of information exchange and inspection activities without linking these talks in any way to the U.S.-Russian bilateral track.
Where We Should Not Go: The End of Arms Control Treaties

There is a significant chance that the New START, the only remaining nuclear treaty between Moscow and Washington, will not be extended. The Trump administration has been openly critical of the treaty, citing its "failure" to include Russian tactical weapons and some of the new strategic weapons. Moscow responded that if those were the preconditions for an extension, the treaty was doomed. U.S. insistence on pursuing trilateral arms control could also bring an end to the bilateral track. Finally, the dislike of the current administration towards the legacy of the Obama administration, which negotiated New START, is an open secret.

Even if New START is not extended, we should not expect an immediate increase in the number of deployed warheads or launchers. Much would depend on the broader state of U.S.-Russian engagement. If Moscow and Washington are still interested in pursuing arms control, the post-New START situation would be suboptimal but not unprecedented. The earlier SALT-I and START-I treaties ended without successor agreements in place. In both cases, the United States and Russia issued statements committing themselves to maintaining the levels agreed to in the expired treaties during ongoing negotiations for a replacement. This approach was not without downsides. While SALT-I verification was based on national technical means and could continue uninterrupted, START-I had an elaborate cooperative verification mechanism, which included data exchanges and on-site inspections. Those verification measures were terminated when START-I expired and were not re-established until new verification mechanisms of the New START were provisionally implemented pending treaty ratification.

Worse, there currently is no substantive arms control process between Russia and the United States, and there have been no negotiations since 2010. If this situation continues and New START is allowed to expire, the two countries would be in uncharted territory as, since 1972, Moscow and Washington have never been in a situation where both an operative arms control treaty and negotiations for a new treaty were lacking.

The U.S. side might prefer not to have any formal treaties at all and instead achieve some sort of political agreement with Russia. This approach would be also not completely without precedents. For example, SALT-II was never ratified by the U.S. side and later expired, but the parties made a political (rather than a legally binding) agreement to abide by its provisions. However, SALT-II was much less ambitious than New START, with verification provided mainly by national technical means. A similar solution following the expiration of New START would either require letting New START verification mechanisms expire and falling back on the less intrusive national technical means—which would represent a significant loss of transparency for both Russia and the United States—or the two sides to engage in arms control negotiations to maintain informal verification measures.

While a number of creative solutions have been proposed, which could replace some of the lapsed verification provisions in the absence of a formal treaty, significant time and effort invested in getting diminished results raise the question of whether extending New START or negotiating a new treaty would represent a better use of resources.

The reason for not extending the New START would matter significantly. If the U.S. side chose to let New START expire for ideological or internal political reasons but remained interested in pursuing bilateral limitations in order to avoid an arms race and strengthen mutual security, informal or politically binding arms control could be a possible answer. Recently, Russia has been more willing to engage in and even come up with politically binding arrangements in the absence of legally binding treaties. For instance, Moscow has been promoting a “No first placement of weapons in outer space” pledge as an interim measure pending negotiations of the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space Treaty. In 2019, President Putin proposed a political agreement on the non-deployment of INF-range weapons (see chapter I).

However, if the United States were to leave the arms control architecture to gain advantage over Russia, Moscow would be much less inclined to negotiate on the issues of importance to Washington. Russia is mostly interested in transparency as an instrument to verify agreed limits on specific weapons. In the absence of such limits, Moscow will cut back on its own transparency. As Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov put it, “There are ideas in Washington that verification, transparency, and other similar mechanisms are enough to provide security. Our position is as follows: there is no need for verification for the sake of verification and transparency for the sake of transparency.”

The fact that much more information on nuclear forces is publicly available in the United States compared to Russia is probably a part of such calculus. Some confidence-building instruments like the 1988 Agreement on Notifications of Launches of ICBMs and SLBMs...
and the 1989 Agreement on Reciprocal Advance Notification of Major Strategic Exercises could survive. But overall, mutual knowledge about each other’s nuclear forces will decline, and the longer this situation continues, the greater the uncertainty will become.

Even if there is no agreement or even dialogue between Russia and the United States, the countries might unilaterally decide to commit to mutual restraint and keep their weapons at the New START limits. However, such a balance would be inherently unstable, both because of worst-case-scenario estimates of the adversary’s forces and development and production of new types of systems. If one of the parties increases its forces, the other will likely follow. Despite U.S. officials’ statements that Washington is “not attempting to match or counter adversaries system for system”34 and Russia’s continuous assertions that it “must not and will not be drawn into a costly arms race,”35 nuclear parity is so deeply ingrained in the military and political leadership, as well as populations of both countries, that a new arms race is likely to be only a matter of time.

Where We Should Go: Further Bilateral Negotiations

While there is not enough time left to negotiate a new U.S.-Russian arms control treaty before February 2021 (New START took around nine months to negotiate, plus several months to ratify), it is hard to see a way to keep limits on the strategic forces of the parties without such negotiations at some point. Moscow and Washington could, therefore, extend the current treaty for the length of time necessary for new negotiations (Russia has stated that it would be open to an extension of fewer than five years) or a new treaty could simply supersede New START, per article XIV of the treaty. In case New START is not extended, the sides may continue negotiations, nevertheless. Below are some of the issues that would have to be considered in new talks.

What the United States Wants

Russian tactical nuclear weapons have been a particular U.S. concern since at least the early 1990s. The U.S. Senate’s resolution of advice and consent to ratification of New START called on the executive to “seek to initiate negotiations with the Russian Federation on an agreement to address the disparity between the non-strategic nuclear weapons stockpiles of the Russian Federation and of the United States and to secure and reduce tactical nuclear weapons in a verifiable manner.” The United States continues adhering to this view of the need to address Russia’s numerical advantage in tactical nuclear weapons. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper in his advance policy questions before his confirmation said that he believed it was “time to bring all of Russia’s nuclear arsenal under a new arms control agreement.”

Russia was never happy with this approach. The Russian State Duma, in a statement accompanying the ratification of the New START in 2011, stated that any new cuts

or limitations—strategic or tactical—should be considered together with all other outstanding arms control issues, but singled out the issue of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Speaking at the Conference of Disarmament, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said: "the first step to solving this issue should be withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons to the territory of the possessor state and dismantlement of the infrastructure for deployment abroad."

Even if the United States would consider putting its tactical nuclear weapons on the table, the task of actually negotiating arms control measures covering tactical nuclear weapons would be far from easy. Moscow and Washington have almost no experience in this sphere. In the early 1990s, the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, or PNIs (a set of unilateral steps taken by presidents Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and George H.W. Bush), removed and eliminated some of the tactical weapons. However, the PNIs lacked transparency or verification measures, which haunts them to this day. In 1997, presidents Yeltsin and Bill Clinton agreed “that in the context of START III negotiations their experts will explore, as separate issues, possible measures relating to tactical nuclear systems, to include appropriate confidence-building and transparency measures.” However, proper START-III negotiations never started and neither did the basic work of agreeing on definitions and terminology or figuring out how to control non-deployed warheads (whose e-delivery systems would be dual-capable).

The United States has also stated its interest in limiting the new Russian strategic systems not covered under the New START, such as the Poseidon and Burevestnik. Moscow has shown a willingness to make these systems the subject of future negotiations. As President Putin said in his 2018 NBC interview, "the number of delivery vehicles and the number of warheads [new weapons] can or will carry should, of course, be included in the grand total."

The “military” chapter of President Putin’s March 1, 2018, speech was likewise in part an invitation to an arms control dialogue. There is a good case to be made that at least some of the new Russian systems he presented were developed with the possibility of being used as bargaining chips in future negotiations. Both the Poseidon and Burevestnik are highly complex systems with a long and sometimes tragic research and development cycle. There are many open questions about their integration into Russian military planning and they are somewhat excessive in terms of enhancing Russia’s ability to overcome U.S. missile defense. The leak of Poseidon’s existence to the media back in 2015 supports the idea that Russia is developing it in part as a bargaining chip to be traded for specific concessions by the United States. Russia also has examples of strategic military programs that were shelved when conditions changed, such as the

Barguzin rail-mobile system, the RS-26 light ICBM, and others that it would likely be willing to give up in negotiations.

If this is indeed the case, because both Poseidon and Burevestnik were specifically designed to defeat missile defenses, Russia might well condition their inclusion in any future arms control talks on U.S. concessions related to missile defense.

While further cuts of nuclear arsenals seem to be off the table for the moment, the previous U.S. administration was pursuing this idea. In 2013, President Obama proposed cutting an additional one-third of U.S. deployed strategic warheads and called on Russia to follow suit.\(^\text{43}\) Obama’s appeal received a lukewarm response from Moscow because of deteriorating relations between the countries. Moreover, with the United States’ developing strategic conventional weapons and missile defense systems, Moscow believed that further cuts to strategic nuclear arsenals would exacerbate Russian vulnerability.

However, with new Russian nuclear systems designed to evade U.S. missile defenses and strategic conventional capabilities being incorporated in Russian military thinking and force structure, Moscow might now be more willing to discuss further cuts if the idea were to be raised by a future Democratic administration. As President Putin said in 2018, “we are ready to continue this dialogue. We agree to a reduction or to retaining current terms, to a reduction in delivery vehicles and warheads. However, today, when we are acquiring weapons that can easily breach all antiballistic missile systems, we no longer consider the reduction of ballistic missiles and warheads to be highly critical.”\(^\text{44}\)

Published U.S. expert analyses suggest that the land-based leg of the U.S. nuclear triad is the most vulnerable and least flexible part, and could be cut further without compromising U.S. security.\(^\text{45}\) It is not obvious that Moscow would be willing to reduce its arsenal of land-based ICBMs, which form the backbone of its force, in exchange for the least valuable U.S. missiles that Washington could get rid of anyway. To engage Russia in additional cuts, Washington might need to propose reductions to its SLBMs/SSBNs, where it has an advantage over Moscow, or consider focusing on reducing the number of warheads instead of delivery vehicles.

Russia is likely to ask for French and British participation in any new reductions (see chapter II). Also, from Russia’s perspective, no new cuts would be possible without addressing the issue of possible INF-range deployments in both Europe and Asia because those systems would be able to target Russian strategic weapons if located close to Russian borders, which would make them de-facto strategic.

What Russia Wants

**U.S. ballistic missile defense** has been a significant concern for Moscow for decades. Effective missile defense would tilt the strategic balance towards Washington, potentially

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44 “Interview to American TV channel NBC.”

undermining Russian nuclear deterrence. Preserving the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which prohibited the parties from establishing nationwide defense against strategic ballistic missiles, was a constant preoccupation for Soviet and Russian diplomacy until the United States withdrew from the treaty in 2002. Since then, Moscow has voiced its concerns over U.S. missile defenses in Europe, and to a lesser extent in Asia, as well as the possible development of a space-based component. Recent developments in this sphere, such as the renewed focus on the space-based component in the U.S. Missile Defense Review and ongoing effort to use SM-3 Block IIA missiles against ICBMs, seem to confirm Russian preoccupations. Indeed, the array of new nuclear delivery systems presented by President Putin in 2018 (see chapter I) was announced as a response to U.S. missile defense.

Russian officials are quite cognizant of the fact that current U.S. missile defenses would not be able to intercept a significant portion of the Russian strategic arsenal. The main concern in Moscow seems to be perceived U.S. attempts to create a global multilayer strategic missile defense system, which in the future could threaten the balance, and Washington’s unwillingness to put (or even discuss) any limits on it.

Somewhat paradoxically, there seems to be less concern about U.S. homeland Ground-Based Midcourse Defense, based on ground-based interceptors (GBIs) in Alaska and California. One possible reason is that their numbers are well below even the ABM Treaty limits, and the future of the GBIs seems uncertain. Conversely, U.S. plans to give its Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System the capability to intercept ICBMs with the SM-3 Block IIA missile are seen as aimed specifically at Russian strategic forces.46 Aegis Ashore in Japan (despite assurances from Tokyo that it will be under national control) is also considered a threat in Moscow as a part of a future global U.S. system.47 The 2019 U.S. Missile Defense Review (MDR), which listed space-based sensors and interceptors among the possible options for future development,48 played into old Russian fears of Washington breaking one of the last taboos and placing weapons in space (more on this below).

However, Moscow is also not trying to recreate the ABM Treaty. On the one hand, Russia recognizes that missile defense has become something of a “sacred cow” for the U.S. defense establishment. On the other hand, some of the newer Russian mobile air defense systems like S-500 Prometey will be able to intercept ICBMs,49 and at least one of the Voronezh radars in Yeniseysk is being built inside Russia’s national territory, which would contraven the 1972 treaty. Because of these developments, any future agreement covering missile defense would have to be different from the old ABM Treaty.

46 "Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov’s interview with Kommersant."
47 "Japan fails to convince Russia it will deploy US Aegis Ashore missiles only for defense," TASS, January 10, 2020, https://tass.com/world/1107123.
While the Russian proposal to establish a joint missile defense system in Europe is probably gone for good, Moscow’s request for legally binding assurances from the U.S. that its ABM systems (especially the regional ones in Europe and Asia) are not aimed at Russian forces, though declined in the 2000s and early 2010s and since forgotten, should still be on the table.

Discussions could start with the ABM systems and infrastructure outside of the United States and Russian national territory and their capabilities. Here an obvious example would be the 1997 memorandum of understanding related to the ABM Treaty and two agreed statements produced in New York and later ratified by Russia but not the United States. The 1997 agreement would have limited the velocity of interceptor missiles, the velocity of ballistic target missiles, and the range of the ballistic target missiles. Putting limits on both the quality and quantity of missile defense systems outside Russian and U.S. national territories could form a basis for a new understanding. In addition, the parties might also agree to regularly meet to discuss the changes in the security environment, which would require updates in the allowable capabilities.

However, since the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, Washington has shown no willingness to accept any agreed limits on its missile defenses, whether legally or politically binding. Russia only managed to achieve a recognition of the interrelationship between strategic offensive and defensive arms in the New START preamble and proposals for missile defense transparency during the Obama administration.

**Weaponization of outer space** is another traditional Russian concern. While there is no legally binding prohibition on the deployment of conventional weapons in orbit and outer space has been heavily used by militaries for communication and reconnaissance, there has been no significant placement of weapons in outer space. Known instances of explosions/intercepts in space have shown that kinetic warfighting in space would quickly saturate the earth’s orbit with debris. However, from a military perspective, there are more narrow threats that could originate from weapons placed in space: space-based attacks against satellites, space-based land-attack weapons, and space-based missile defense interceptors.

A significant space-based attack against satellites would require substantial resources to organize, could lead to debris creation (unless directed-energy weapons are used), and would invite attacks against U.S. satellites (possibly with land-based systems), which Washington as the party most dependent on satellites could ill-afford. Attacks against early warning satellites could also be seen as a prelude to a strategic attack, which would risk a strategic response.

On the other hand, Soviet and Russian diplomats devoted much effort to trying to prevent the United States from withdrawing from the ABM Treaty and deploying the Strategic Defense Initiative (“Star Wars”) in the 1980s. For the United States, the idea of space-based missile defense will not die and keeps returning in different forms; its latest installment was mentioned in the 2019 MDR.

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Land attack weapons in space, also known as kinetic bombardment, were never banned but the United States never found them practical enough to justify the investments necessary to develop them and the possible space arms race their deployment could provoke. That is why they were not of much concern to Moscow. However, after the release of the latest MDR, Russian officials again began raising concerns. In 2019, First Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Russian General Staff Lt. Gen. Viktor Poznkhir said that with U.S. space-based missile defenses “you cannot exclude the possibility of their use for preventive attacks against Russian and Chinese targets.”

In response, Moscow and Beijing proposed a draft Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects (PPWT) at the Conference on Disarmament in 2008. An updated version was presented in 2014. It was criticized by the United States for the absence of verification provisions, not addressing the issue of ground-based antisatellite weapons, and the possibility of “inspector” satellites being used as weapons.

Russian officials have signaled that they were open to counterproposals and amendments to the draft treaty. However, the U.S. side declined these Russian proposals as hypocritical and cynical and announced its focus on transparency and confidence-building measures instead.

52 “Letter dated 10 June 2014 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation and the Permanent Representative of China to the Conference on Disarmament addressed to the Acting Secretary-General of the Conference transmitting the updated Russian and Chinese texts of the draft treaty on prevention of the placement of weapons in outer space and of the threat or use of force against outer space objects (PPWT) introduced by the Russian Federation and China,” United Nations, http://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/OpenAgent&DS=CD/1985&Lang=E.
54 Ibid.
Conclusion

Implementation of the New START agreement has shown that it is good at what it was designed for—to limit the strategic nuclear systems of Russia and the United States. With enough political will, Moscow and Washington could resolve their remaining issues in the BCC. The treaty could then be extended for up to five years. There is not enough time to negotiate a new strategic arms control treaty before February 2021, so if the United States is interested in verifiably limiting Russian strategic nuclear forces, it should extend the New START at least for the time needed for negotiations on a replacement to be conducted.

While intermediate-range systems in Europe (and Asia) are not in the headlines at the moment, the current situation is not sustainable either. If Washington and NATO want to manage potential escalation, they should engage Russia in a military dialogue, either based on the Russian moratorium proposal or a plan of their own.

Russia is not interested in the concept of trilateral arms control as proposed by the United States. The idea would be difficult to pull off even under the best conditions and does not seem to be well thought out. Moscow does not see strategic arms control with Beijing as a priority, questions whether the idea is just a smokescreen for Washington to avoid engaging in arms control talks at all, and will not push China to participate. There is no evidence that Washington can use a New START extension as a bargaining chip to persuade Moscow and Beijing to accept the proposal.

Failure to extend New START will not mean an immediate increase in numbers of strategic systems, but it will make an arms race more likely over time. In the event that the treaty is not extended, U.S.-Russian arms control negotiations would have an important stabilizing effect, just as their absence would be destabilizing. Assuming a genuine interest from both sides in cooperative arms control, politically binding agreements could be a viable alternative to formal treaties. At the same time, political agreements would be less effective. Russia is not interested in arrangements that provide transparency but not agreed limits.

Moscow and Washington have many issues on their bilateral agenda to which they need to devote attention and that could be included in further bilateral negotiations. The United States is interested in limiting Russian tactical nuclear weapons, new Russian strategic systems, as well as ground-based antisatellite weapons and “inspector” satellites. Russia for its part is concerned about U.S. missile defense, space-based missile interceptors,
space-based land-attack weapons (to some extent), and U.S. tactical weapons in Europe. All of these issues will be difficult to address. The parties have sought and failed to tackle them in the past and solving them now would require a genuine interest and willingness to accept trade-offs on both sides. However, the first important step in this direction would be to restart formal permanent arms control negotiation between Russia and the United States.
About the Author

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