Nuclear Stability in a Post-Arms Control World

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Introduction

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA is at its most complex since the end of the Cold War. While perhaps the most pressing issue between the two countries is the potential Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, there remain lingering issues from the previous administrations that endanger cooperation, such as the Syrian civil war, the annexation of Crimea, and continued Russian sabre rattling vis-à-vis NATO. These extremely sensitive and public conflicts make finding areas of mutual agreement on any issue difficult for the two countries.

In particular, arms control agreements between the United States and Russia could fall prey to growing fissures between the nations. Since the 1960s, arms control initiatives established a solid base of cooperation within the bilateral relationship. Regulations on the size and makeup of each country’s nuclear arsenal were acknowledged as an area of mutual agreement.1 The two treaties that remain in force today, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and New START, provide broader benefits outside of simple stockpile management, such as data exchanges and on-site inspections that bolster confidence about each side’s arsenal, producing nuclear stability between the two countries and broader stability and cooperation that can spill over to other contentious areas in the bilateral relationship.

Current disagreements and noncooperation on nuclear treaties are undermining what has been a bedrock of cooperation between the United States and Russia for nearly 50 years. It is possible that both treaties could collapse in the coming years, either by violation or expiration without replacement. The United States should prepare for a scenario in which both treaties are defunct and regulations no longer exist on either Russian or its own nuclear arsenals, and should advocate for continued compliance on specific, attainable measures within each treaty—even if the two countries break with the treaties at large. To that end, the United States needs to push for continued on-site inspections and data exchanges while moving forward on its current planned nuclear modernization strategy to cover its deterrence needs. Unilateral downsizing would send a negative signal
to U.S. allies and embolden adversaries, but growing its nuclear stockpile would potentially encourage an arms race between the two powers.

**Arms Control Treaties 101: The INF Treaty and New START**

*The INF Treaty*

The INF treaty was negotiated to prohibit the deployment of missiles, both conventional and nuclear armed, in Europe with launch systems that had the potential to fuel instability between NATO and the Soviet Union. The negotiating process began in response to the deployment of new Soviet intermediate-range missiles with mobile launchers in the late 1970s, a move that allowed the Soviet Union to threaten political and military targets in NATO countries without deploying vulnerable air- or sea-launched systems. The United States pursued a strategy known as the “dual-track decision” in response, whereby it replaced its aging missiles in Europe while simultaneously pushing for the elimination of all intermediate-range missiles and Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs). These actions were premised on a belief that the United States would be better positioned to ensure the security of Europe if it could ban all of weapons in these ranges, while maintaining the ability to deter the Soviets with like capabilities if it could not achieve the so-called “Zero Option,” whereby all problem weapons were banned. Ultimately, the Soviets agreed to the propositions of the INF treaty.

**THE INTERMEDIATE-RANGE NUCLEAR FORCES (INF) TREATY**

- Negotiated between the United States and Soviet Union, inherited by Russia.
- Prompted by Soviet replacement of S-4 and S-5 missiles with longer-range, more accurate SS-20. The United States responded by Pershing II and GLCM deployments, combined with negotiation.
- Prohibited all ground-launched cruise missiles and ballistic missiles with ranges between 500km and 5,500km.

The INF treaty remains relevant for preserving nuclear stability in Europe. Weapons with medium and intermediate ranges present a unique problem, as they tend to be lower-yield payloads used for warfighting purposes and carry the potential to bridge escalation from the conventional to nuclear levels. While the treaty does not regulate air- or water-breathing systems, it still provides a meaningful check on weapons that could hit a range of targets in Europe or Russia and serves as a confidence-building measure for the greater
arms control community, as it is the only treaty that bans an entire class of nuclear weapons. Failure to uphold this treaty would lift the only institutional safeguard on a dangerous and destabilizing pursuit of weapons that have short flight times and may be able to evade a large amount of defensive systems, placing large swaths of territory and targets at risk for limited nuclear use.

Russia may be in the early stages of this arms race now. Since 2014, State Department arms control compliance reports have indicated that Russia has built a new GLCM that places Russia out of compliance with the treaty. The missile, known as the SSC-8, is alleged to fly within ranges prohibited by the treaty. Russia has denied these allegations, and in turn accused the United States of violating the treaty by deploying missile defense systems to Europe with canisters that could launch INF-violating missiles. The U.S. Congress has considered policies that would place the treaty in jeopardy, most notably the “INF Treaty Preservation Act,” which would require the United States to officially condemn Russia as being noncompliant with the treaty and begin research and development into capabilities that would make the United States similarly noncompliant. There is a strong chance that either the United States or Russia will refuse to back down, and the treaty will either break due to an explicit or alleged violation on either side.

New START

New START was negotiated in 2010 to continue U.S. and Russian strategic-level nuclear reductions past the expiration of previous arms control treaties, most notably the original START treaty. The treaty includes limitations on delivery vehicles and warheads. New START also allows for on-site inspections to verify that each state’s declarations are correct and data exchanges that demonstrate progress on disarmament goals. In addition, each state is required to share flight data on its missiles, representing an important bulwark against the risks of accidental nuclear war. The treaty expires in 2021 but can be extended by both sides, without any requirement of congressional or parliamentary approval in the matter.

New START upholds the series of arms reduction treaties between the United States and Russia and continues the broader norm of arms reduction between the two countries. Measures like New START allow the United States and
Russia to continue downsizing from their massive cold war arsenals, which still compose 95 percent of the world’s inventory, and striving toward the disarmament goals outlined in Article VI of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). If the treaty is not extended, both sides will have the opportunity to break out of the limits imposed on their strategic arsenals as well as lose important insight into the other side’s nuclear forces. During the ratification debates for New START in the U.S. Senate, key witnesses from both civilian and military backgrounds indicated that there would be nothing worse for nuclear stability between the United States and Russia than losing visibility over their arsenal as provided by START treaties. Expiration of the treaty would open the potential for a return to the type of arms races on strategic systems seen in the 1960s.

However, this treaty too has come under fire. President Trump indicated over the phone to President Putin that the treaty was “a bad deal” and should be renegotiated rather than extended, putting the future of New START into jeopardy. In addition, Russia’s alleged noncompliance with the INF Treaty has soured many in the arms control community over New START. The prevailing view among detractors is that Russia should not be given an additional arms control agreement with the United States when overwhelming evidence indicates that it is already cheating on another and cannot be trusted.

**Strategy for a Post-Reduction World**

*Prospects for the Future*

There appears to be little appetite for any diplomatic engagement with Russia, even outside of arms control. The United States and Russia have deep-seated structural and ideological disagreements over Syria and eastern Ukraine, as
well as over the role and appropriate reach of NATO, which are compounded by Russia’s interference in the U.S. election. These issues play into a broader anti-Russia narrative that bleeds into arms control. The attempted “reset” with Russia at the beginning of the Obama administration that precipitated

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<th>REASONS FOR LEAVING ARMS CONTROL ARRANGEMENTS</th>
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| RUSSIA                                      | • Desire to deploy intermediate-range systems in response to NATO threat  
• Belief that U.S. missile defense is in violation of the INF Treaty | • Desire to build larger arsenal than allowed under treaty |
| UNITED STATES                               | • Belief that Russian cruise missiles are in violation of the treaty  
• Desire to respond to Russian intermediate-range systems | • Belief that Russians are violating INF Treaty  
• Belief that Russians will not meet disarmament targets of treaty |

the negotiation of New START is largely viewed as a failure. New START specifically was seen by arms control skeptics as a measure to lull the United States into a false sense of security as Russia pressed ahead with its own nuclear modernization, including the new INF Treaty-violating SSC-8 missile. In addition, Russia had not made the same pace of disarmament for meeting the deadlines put in place by New START for force levels until recently, which made some pessimistic that Russia will follow through on its commitments to this treaty as well. Thus, there is a strong possibility that the Russians are noncompliant with the INF Treaty and that one or both sides will withdraw from the arrangement, while New START is not extended. The United States needs to prepare for this possibility and begin putting in the military and diplomatic footwork necessary to maintain nuclear stability with Russia, in terms of keeping mutual vulnerability and deterrence between the two nations, and avoid an arms race reminiscent of the Cold War. To determine the United States’ strategy for the post-reduction world, the points of mutual agreement must be salvaged from each treaty and wrapped into a new arrangement between the United States and Russia.

Ultimately, there is not much cause for optimism for salvaging much of the INF Treaty. Because the treaty completely bans two systems with similar
capabilities, if one side demonstrates a willingness to violate it, there is not much left to salvage. In particular, both sides’ interest in developing GLCMs would almost certainly prevent any sort of treaty that would ban that category of weapon for the time being. The range limit on ballistic missile systems could be reinstated, though the cruise missile threat is the real challenge at this juncture given Russia’s focus on the development of this technology for its warfighting purposes in Europe given U.S. vulnerabilities. On-site inspections for the treaty expired in 2001 and would not likely be favored by the Russians, as they would demonstrate that the Russians were in noncompliance. Even if inspections were somehow agreed to by the Russians, the Russian narrative that U.S. missile defense installations violate the treaty would likely lead to Russians pushing for on-site inspections to be broadened to U.S. missile defense sites in Europe and the United States, something that would likely be strongly opposed by U.S. policymakers given the systems’ sensitivity.

New START provides the basis for aspects to be salvaged from previous arms control treaties. While the reduction aspect may be challenged, by both the Trump administration and potentially the Russians, the data exchanges and on-site inspections may be continued for the sake of nuclear stability. Given national security professionals’ insistence that the United States retains a ‘boots on the ground’ presence in Russia to keep an eye on their nuclear capabilities, there is a strong chance that this could be sold as a mutually beneficial transparency measure as opposed to an arms control ‘gift’ to the Russians, which is how New START has been framed by many of its detractors.

Making the Strategy

The United States needs a strategy that confronts the threat posed by the Russian nuclear arsenal, upholds strategic stability, and keeps open the possibility of future negotiations on arms control treaties. Accordingly, the United States should undertake the following measures to build a workable strategy for a post-arms reduction world:

- **Immediately begin negotiations on a strategic nuclear transparency treaty with Russia.** The United States and Russia could negotiate an agreement that would allow both sides to keep an eye on the other’s strategic nuclear forces via arsenal declarations and associated inspections to verify declarations. Even if the arms control caps are not followed by either side, knowing what the other side has (outside of relying on one’s own national technical means of verification) with inspection procedures to back up the declarations would play a part in avoiding miscalculations that may be present in a world without New START. These transparency measures would likely not include systems previously banned under the INF Treaty at the onset due to the fact that it would likely still be a hot button issue, but eventually transparency could be broadened once the inspections regime is perceived as legitimate.
• **Continue with current nuclear modernization plans.** The current U.S. nuclear modernization plan will recapitalize every aspect of the United States’ nuclear arsenal and provide a twenty-first-century deterrent equipped to respond to a wide range of threats. The plan will replace aging systems in just enough time to prevent any loss of capabilities, though the time lines will be cutting it incredibly close. The United States must stick to this plan in order to keep deterrence intact and avoid any sort of strategic mismatch between the United States and Russia.

• **Consider the deployment of additional air- or water-breathing systems.** Violations of the INF Treaty by Russia introduces another capability that puts U.S. and allied forces at risk throughout Europe without a clear counter. Deployment of additional conventional capabilities, such as the Joint Air-to-Surface Standard Missile (JASSM-ER) air-launched cruise missile, to allied countries would provide weapons with similar ranges to Russian systems that threaten them and hedge against any reassurance challenges that the United States may face. In addition, the development of a follow on to the TLAM-N nuclear-tipped sea-launched cruise missile would give the United States an INF Treaty-compliant nuclear capability that would further expand its range of potential responses to new Russian nuclear capabilities.

In addition to these positive actions, the United States must also do its part to avoid any overtures that could be read as antithetical to nuclear stability. Accordingly, the United States should avoid the following:

• **Break out of New START limits.** Russian budget cuts mean that they will likely not be able to grow their nuclear forces in the short term, removing the need for the United States to attempt to gain the upper hand by growing its own arsenal. If the United States breaks out of limits first, however, it would eviscerate U.S. moral authority and potentially negotiating power in future negotiations by being painted as the instigator in the situation and make it hard to pick up where both sides left off in terms of reductions. This could potentially be exploited by Russia to build an anti-U.S. coalition on nuclear issues and beyond.

• **Building and attempting to deploy a new GLCM.** While this would be a tit-for-tat response to Russian INF Treaty violations, it would not be a helpful decision for nuclear stability for similar reasons to breaking out of New START limits. First, it would demonstrate that United States is unwilling to cling to INF Treaty limitations and thus weaken the U.S. stance on the issue if a follow-on treaty were attempted at some point in the future. Second, the same capabilities could be procured in a way that is compliant with the INF Treaty, such as through air- and water-breathing cruise missiles. Third, U.S. allies do not want to base U.S. GLCMs, aggravating rather than solving assurance problems.
• **Unilaterally downsize.** While it is not the time for growth in the U.S. arsenal, it is also not the time to reduce nuclear forces in this scenario. Downsizing while outside of the treaty would put a cap on U.S. leverage in future negotiations, as the United States would have fewer forces to negotiate away. In addition, it would send a weak signal that might be read by allies and the Russians alike that we are willing to accede to Russian nuclear dominance.

**Conclusion**

The combination of staying the course on modernization, not inciting an arms race, and pushing for increased transparency measures between the United States and Russia would go a long way toward maintaining nuclear stability between the two countries and keeping the future open to the possibility of additional negotiations on arms control. The existential threat posed to the entire world from nuclear escalation means that the United States compartmentalize nuclear stability away from other issues plaguing the U.S.-Russia relationship. If the United States is able to do so, it could lead by example and encourage similar behavior on the Russia side that could lead to substantive agreement on further diplomatic efforts. During the Cold War both sides were able to bracket off nuclear issues as a unique area of potential cooperation. Cooler heads should similarly prevail in this instance, to prevent an arms race reminiscent of the most dangerous time in the history of the world.

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Endnotes


3 Air-breathing systems refer to air-launched cruise missiles, such as the United States’ AGM-86 nuclear cruise missile. Water-breathing systems refer to sea-launched cruise missiles, such as the United States’ Tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAM).


5 Ibid.

6 Woolf, “Russian Compliance with the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.”


10 Article VI of the NPT stipulates that all signees must strive for a world free of nuclear weapons. Both the United States and Russia have ratified the treaty.

11 Auerswald, “Arms Control.”

12 Ibid.


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Woolf, "Russian Compliance with the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty."

Schneider, “Russian Violations of the INF and New START Treaties.”


