Deep Cuts Commission Issue Brief

FUTURE FORMATS OF NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL

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Executive Summary

This Deep Cuts Commission Issue Brief analyzes the factors currently shaping the feasibility of nuclear arms control, assesses the suitability of traditional instruments, and proposes alternative formats that could help stabilize relations among the major powers.

The current crisis in nuclear arms control follows more than five decades of largely successful bilateral U.S.-Russian cooperation.[1] Political commitment by the two parties has varied over time but has at key moments endured even during periods of friction. This stands in stark contrast to today's profound confrontation, the roots of which reach back beyond the war in Ukraine to the 1990s.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 effectively removed the major structural counterweight to U.S. dominance. For Washington, maintaining strategic stability with Moscow appeared less urgent, given Russia's diminished role in shaping the global security agenda. For Russia, however, the emergence of a "unipolar"[2] world order increased the need to coordinate with and adjust to the United States.

Cracks in bilateral arms control emerged early and widened as neoconservatives gained influence within the Republican Party, amplifying an already existing view[3] that limits on U.S. power were unnecessary and counterproductive.[4] This shift reflected a broader partisan realignment: hawkish foreign policy positions, once found across the aisle, became increasingly concentrated within the Republican Party.[5]

Russia, meanwhile, regained strength in the 2000s. According to Russian experts, it responded to U.S. missile defense policies by developing new second-strike capabilities,[6] allocating resources to counter NATO's eastward expansion, and challenging perceived U.S. ambitions for military dominance.[7]

The war in Ukraine has heightened tensions between NATO and Russia, particularly over nuclear deterrence,[8] nuclear-sharing arrangements,[9] missile defense deployments in Europe,[10] nuclear-capable missile tests,[11] and explosive nuclear testing.[12] The Trump administration's Golden Dome project has added another layer of complexity to these already sensitive dynamics.[13] Maintaining the previous practice of compartmentalizing arms control has become more difficult, not only because the U.S. suspended the Strategic Security Dialogue in 2022, but also because Russia has used arms control as a signaling instrument to attempt to influence U.S. policy. For its part, Moscow has expressed the view that it could not cooperate with a country that it perceived as directly hostile. At the same time, more hardline voices in Washington and Moscow have gained prominence, even as multilateral approaches attract growing attention and policymakers seek to address a broader range of weapons and emerging technologies.

Overview of Traditional Approaches to Arms Control

With the nuclear arms control regime in an unprecedented state of crisis, it is worth examining what form future agreements might take. In the past, the majority of arms control arrangements have been legally binding bilateral treaties, though some have merely been politically binding declarations or even unilateral declarations. Many observers regard multilateral nuclear arms control as an indispensable long-term objective, though it remains distant, impractical under today's conditions and would be a completely novel case in nuclear arms control.[14]

This section provides an overview of traditional approaches to nuclear arms control, which may offer useful guidance as the international community considers a post-New START (New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) framework.[15] This is particularly pertinent given the current window of opportunity for negotiations over Russia's proposal to observe the numerical limits of New START for at least one year following its expiration, albeit without the Treaty's monitoring measures.[16] While the United States has not formally responded, President Trump commented to a reporter that "it sounds like a good idea to me".[17] Many analysts and policymakers suggest that the United States should at least issue a counterproposal,[18] while some within Republican arms control circles and parts of Congress argue that Washington need not respond—or reject the initiative outright.[19]

Legally Binding Bilateral Treaties

Legally binding arms control treaties are the most well-established form of agreement, given the clarity of parties' obligations, verification mechanisms, and a codified understanding of what constitutes non-compliance. These treaties often create specialized mechanisms or bodies to ensure implementation and address grievances or ambiguous situations. A few examples among many include the Bilateral Consultative Commission under New START Treaty and the Special Verification Commission under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, though the latter proved ultimately ineffective in addressing non-compliance concerns.

Once in place, legally binding treaties are comparatively difficult to withdraw from, making them the most stable form of arms control. As the INF Treaty illustrated, active support from heads of state and, in the case of the United States, ratification by Congress and codification in domestic law, makes these agreements politically and practically valuable. Even if a party eventually withdraws, as with the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, such treaties can establish formal constraints that shape behavior for years. Although the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, the Treaty had provided a framework that guided U.S. missile defense policy for more than two decades. While a similarly focused politically binding agreement might also have shaped U.S. policy on missile defense, the ABM Treaty provided a legal structure and precedent.

Legally binding treaties are also the most difficult to achieve. Even in the so-called "golden age" of arms control, when both countries agreed that nuclear arms control should be treated in isolation from other issues, legislative ratification and entry into force was a difficult process. Arms control is no longer insulated from broader disagreements between the United States and Russia, including long-range conventional weapons, missile defense, governance in outer space, human rights, and other issues. Nevertheless, the pursuit of legally binding arms control agreements should remain the primary goal of negotiations, even while politically binding agreements may seem easier to achieve.

The majority of agreements that have resulted in reductions in nuclear arsenals have been legally binding treaties, with a general, though not universal,* trend toward increasingly stringent verification regimes. That said, some early agreements included little or no verification—for example, the 1972 Interim Strategic Offensive Agreement (SALT I) and 1979 SALT II, which primarily capped the growth of deployed delivery vehicles. SALT I and SALT II focused mainly on limits to deployed delivery vehicles,** while the INF Treaty

* For comparison, New START permits fewer on-site inspections per year than the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) and encompasses a narrower verification scope.

** SALT I was not technically a treaty, but it did have legally binding elements. It was a combination of an executive agreement on strategic offensive weapons and the ABM Treaty. In the United States, executive agreements require only a simple majority from both Houses of Congress while a true treaty requires a two-thirds majority in the Senate.

required the elimination of all U.S. and Soviet ground-launched intermediate-range missiles and launchers. Later agreements, including START I, the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), and New START, added limits on deployed warheads, representing actual reductions (SORT's reductions were largely nominal, but still marked a shift toward constraining overall arsenals).[20]

All bilateral nuclear arms control agreements have either expired or been abrogated, with the exception of New START,[21] which is set to expire in 2026. Russia has suspended participation in certain parts of New START, and the United States temporarily suspended implementation of the Treaty's verification measures[22] after Russia declined to resume its own, though both countries are understood to be observing the Treaty's numerical limits.[23]***

In the past, the United States and Russia were able to compartmentalize arms control, but this is no longer the case. The priorities of both governments appear to have shifted away from arms control, making the prospect of legally binding bilateral treaties markedly more difficult. Another challenge for U.S.-Russia negotiations is the reported expansion of China's nuclear forces. While China's increasing nuclear arsenal is still greatly outsized by the U.S. and Russian arsenals, deterrence dynamics will evolve the larger China's arsenal becomes, including between the U.S. and China and potentially Russia and China. The nuclear capabilities of the United Kingdom and France are currently even less comparable in scale, though they could become a factor if these arsenals were to expand significantly or if U.S. strategic commitments shift.[24]

The U.S. and Russia should use the lead-up to New START expiration to lay the groundwork for a follow-on treaty. In the interim, the U.S. could respond affirmatively to the Russian proposal to observe New START limits for a year after expiration, while retaining the option to issue a counterproposal if needed. Such steps would strengthen strategic stability and help avoid the high costs of a renewed nuclear arms race. Any follow-on agreement will likely need to account for changes in the global nuclear landscape since New START was signed, including considerations for new weapons systems that New START does not cover. Europeans should actively consider how U.S.-Russia strategic talks could affect their own security, define their arms control priorities, and ensure their perspectives are clearly conveyed to Washington, helping shape agreements that reflect current realities.

Politically Binding Bilateral Agreements

The United States and the Soviet Union/Russia have a long history of negotiating agreements that, while not legally binding, contributed to strategic stability. Most confidence-building measures (CBMs) fall into this category, starting as early as 1971.[25] Some politically binding agreements were created as adjuncts to formal treaties, for example those accompanying the START treaties.[26] Over time, the U.S. and Russia negotiated a variety of CBMs to reduce the risk of nuclear escalation, including data exchange protocols, direct emergency telephone lines, and similar measures.

These measures serve two main purposes. Some aim to prevent crises by reducing misunderstandings or misperceptions before they arise. Others focus on managing crises, providing channels for communication and coordination during tense situations.[27] Some, such as the Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers (NRRCs), continue to operate,[28] but many have seen reduced engagement or fallen into disuse as U.S.-Russian relations deteriorated.

The Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD), established in 2021,[29] while initially intended to pave the way to future legally binding agreements, was also an opportunity to generate new political commitments.**** As of September 2021, the body had established two working groups: one on principles and objectives for future arms control, and another on capabilities and actions with strategic effects.[30] However, it has not met since January 2022. While the SSD was initially promising in terms of what it might yield, it too fell victim to the changing security environment.

*** The United States views the suspension of New START by Russia—as well as its suspension of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty—as a treaty violation as suspension is not a provision of the treaty itself. Russia has argued that its suspension of New START is consistent with the Vienna Convention on the Law of the Treaties' provisions for suspension.

**** The United States and Russia held several meetings in 2020 to discuss the extension of New START and to explore a framework for a future agreement. However, these talks did not result in an agreement before the conclusion of the first Trump administration.

The U.S. and Russia should agree to resume SSD meetings. Its focus should remain on issues of strategic stability and potential futures for nuclear arms control. While informal exchanges on other topics through separate channels may be of value, the SSD itself should be insulated from broader geopolitical disputes insofar as possible to preserve its effectiveness.

Political Declarations

Absent legally binding treaties or agreements, the United States and Russia have relied on political declarations, which, like politically binding agreements, are not codified by either country's legislature but nonetheless contribute to reducing nuclear risks. The most famous example is the so-called "Reagan-Gorbachev Principle,"[31] which asserts that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. While reaffirming this principle should not be controversial, as recently as 2020 serious doubt was cast on whether or not the United States and Russia could agree to even this.[32] In January 2022, the five nuclear-weapon States under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—jointly reiterated this commitment.[33]

At the 2026 NPT Review Conference, all nuclear-weapon States should reaffirm the "Reagan-Gorbachev Principle" and expand their statement to reconfirm their commitment under NPT Article VI to pursue the early cessation of the nuclear arms race.

As with politically binding agreements, political declarations do not substitute legally binding treaties, but they do lay the groundwork for them. As arms controllers look to the "art of the possible" today, the effect of political declarations should not be discounted: it was in the same summit where Reagan and Gorbachev agreed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought, that the seeds of the INF Treaty were planted, banning—if only for a time—deployment of an entire class of nuclear weapons. Such language could reduce frictions among nuclear-armed states, reassure non-nuclear-weapon States, and lower tensions that might otherwise increase the risk of nuclear proliferation.[34]

Similarly, the U.S. and Russia have, in the past, employed more unilateral steps in the hope that they might be reciprocated. These steps made significant strides in reducing nuclear stockpiles through non-binding unilateral declarations, including the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) of 1991-1992. The United States pledged to withdraw and destroy its ground-launched short-ranged weapons overseas, while Russia pledged to remove all non-strategic nuclear weapons from surface ships and multipurpose submarines, among other reductions.[35]

The PNIs happened in a particular time at the fizzling of the Cold War and emergence of a possible new era in U.S.-Russia relations. While neither side appears to have any desire to take unilateral steps today, their stabilizing effect should not be underestimated, as they reflected the mutual interest of both countries in reducing nuclear risks. Many PNI measures were reciprocated, particularly in their potential to set the stage for proper arms control negotiations. Some observers have proposed confidence-building measures inspired by the PNIs, such as voluntarily limitations or moratoria on certain missile deployments.[36] Recent experience, however, also shows how difficult it can be to sustain confidence in absence of verification or formal treaty obligations.[37]

Unilateral political declarations could be considered "low-hanging fruit" at a time when the international community is anticipating the final nail in the coffin of formal bilateral nuclear arms control. It will be important to consider how a variety of instruments might be utilized to maintain global stability—for instance, by renewing commitments to uphold existing nuclear testing moratoria[38] or by enhancing transparency around nuclear postures and doctrines. The former would have particular impact, considering the recent controversy around President Trump's statements about renewed nuclear testing.[39]

Legally Binding Multilateral Treaties

While past efforts in arms control have focused primarily on the United States and Russia, expanding to multilateral frameworks has always been an aspiration of some states and the expert community.[*****] The 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), although not focused on nuclear weapons, was

***** Although formally bilateral, the INF and START I treaties continued to apply to multiple successor states after the collapse of the Soviet Union, illustrating how arms control commitments can extend beyond the original parties without formal multilateralization.

among the most ambitious, resulting in the verified elimination of over 50,000 pieces of heavy military equipment and fostering unprecedented transparency in post–Cold War Europe.[40] The Treaty on Open Skies[41] similarly showed how multilateral arrangements can advance arms control, allowing states to conduct surveillance flights over each other's territories. The United States withdrew in November 2020, followed by Russia in 2021, leaving the Treaty effectively defunct.[42]

Despite its fate, the Open Skies Treaty illustrates the potential value of legally binding multilateral agreements in reducing nuclear risks and creating an environment conducive to broader arms control. Such treaties often require less sharing of sensitive information as compared with bilateral U.S.-Russian agreements, making them easier to justify domestically—but also more vulnerable to political unrest. The CFE, by contrast, contained a large amount of sensitive information that could not realistically have been shared during the Cold War, yet both it and Open Skies can serve as inspiration.

Any discussion of future nuclear arms control cannot ignore the broader multilateral context. In particular, calls during the Trump administration to include China in a wider "denuclearization"[43] process illustrate the approach's appeal, even if progress proved difficult. China has consistently emphasized that its smaller nuclear arsenal does not justify the same legally binding constraints that apply to the United States and Russia.[44] Meanwhile, Russia has argued that the United Kingdom and France[45] would need to be involved in any attempt to multilateralize nuclear arms control.

The P5 have maintained a structured dialogue for over fifteen years, focusing on transparency, risk reduction, and the development of a shared vocabulary on key nuclear terms.[46] While the process has produced only limited tangible outcomes, such as technical exchanges and incremental reporting coordination, it remains a valuable platform for engagement. Building on this foundation could, over time, provide a pathway for more inclusive and substantive multilateral arms control initiatives. Unfortunately, the P5 are currently not meeting at senior levels, rather delegating to "less frequent meetings of officials two bureaucratic levels lower".[47] It would be important, for progress on arms control in general and ahead of the 2026 NPT Review Conference in particular, for the P5 to resume more frequent meetings at senior levels.

While leaning more toward nuclear risk reduction than traditional arms control, legally binding multilateral treaties should be considered for their "scene-setting" effect. The U.S. and Russia should explore a return to the Open Skies Treaty when feasible, mindful of the unstable situation surrounding the war in Ukraine. They should also identify other areas outside direct nuclear arms control—such as preventing an arms race in outer space or emerging technologies—that could be subject to legally binding multilateral treaties.

Desirability of Alternatives to Legally Binding Agreements

In arms control, there is a strong preference for agreements that are legally binding. They provide clear frameworks and mechanisms to which states must adhere, ensuring accountability, promoting stability, and allowing for certain measures that would be difficult to implement without a legal basis. However, when political tensions run high or reaching consensus on binding commitments proves challenging, agreements that are not legally binding can offer pragmatic alternatives. These may include risk reduction, transparency and confidence-building measures, military and scientific dialogues and exchanges, norms of behavior, crisis communications, and more.

What are the Benefits of Alternatives to Legally Binding Agreements

Non-legally binding, or politically binding, commitments can enhance legally binding agreements by adding supplementary layers of risk reduction and cultivating trust and confidence among participating states. While legally binding agreements delineate precise obligations and frameworks for adherence, politically binding commitments offer greater flexibility in addressing evolving challenges that formal treaties may not fully encompass.

The Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (VD) illustrates such flexibility: although focused on conventional forces and faced with implementation challenges in recent years, it remains formally in force and has allowed participating states to

adapt measures to changing conditions. Yet this flexibility also has drawbacks. The absence of legally enforceable obligations can limit consistency and predictability, and the requirement for OSCE consensus has restricted substantial updates. Nevertheless, a model similar to the VD could be a feasible option where treaty ratification is unlikely, provided its political and procedural foundations are clearly articulated.

Non-legally binding commitments can enhance legally binding agreements by adding supplementary layers of risk reduction and cultivating trust and confidence among participating states. While legally binding agreements delineate precise obligations and frameworks for adherence, non-legally binding commitments can offer flexibility in addressing evolving challenges that formal treaties may not fully encompass. The Vienna Document is focused on conventional forces and has faced implementation challenges, but still offers examples of such flexibility. Participating states to the VD updated it over the years to reflect changing conditions; such a model could be a more feasible option in situations where treaty ratification is unlikely in the near future.

An additional benefit is that the very process of negotiating such commitments also promotes dialogue, helping states to build mutual understanding and address concerns even before any formal agreement is reached. Beginning with the SALT process, talks between U.S. and Soviet/Russian officials illustrate how ongoing discussions themselves can help to improve mutual understanding and alleviate concern, thus serving as confidence-building measures. This complementary approach fosters a more comprehensive and adaptable strategy toward promoting international security and cooperation.

Beyond fostering dialogue, non-legally binding agreements signal intentions, manage risk, and reduce bureaucratic hurdles—such as moratoria on certain weapons development/deployment or actions—potentially laying the groundwork for deeper cooperation in the future.

Non-Legally Binding Agreements for Emerging Technologies

While initially discussing a follow-on to the New START agreement, the U.S. and Russia acknowledged the necessity to address emerging threats posed by "new and dangerous and sophisticated weapons" that shorten response times and increase the risk of accidental war.[48] When the negotiations resume, the parties may need to negotiate multiple separate agreements that collectively form one comprehensive package. This package could encompass non-legally binding commitments related to emerging technologies, such as AI and ever more capable offensive cyber capabilities.

The arms control architecture could greatly benefit from integrating proven risk reduction and trust-building measures in response to these technologies. Measures could encompass crisis communication enhancements designed for usability, the establishment of universal definitions through a glossary of terms, the promotion of moral and ethical norms such as "human-in-the-loop" principles, ensuring accountability and quality control, and facilitating information exchange through military-to-military channels.[49]

As outer space becomes increasingly militarized, integrating it into arms control discussions becomes unavoidable. While not a new domain, space has become a critical factor in military operations and strategic interests. This often leads to its categorization alongside emerging technologies within arms control frameworks, reflecting the evolving threats and capabilities associated with it.

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in unilateral, bilateral and multilateral non-legally binding commitments concerning space arms control that negotiators could draw from. These commitments primarily focus on addressing key issues such as destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing and preventing the first placement of weapons in outer space.[50] Additionally, the 1972 Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents on and over the High Seas[51] could serve as a potential model for defining rules of engagement in outer space.

For instance, negotiators could explore the feasibility of determining permissible speeds for satellites or establishing "keep-out" zones around certain types of

declared satellites, such as early-warning and strategic command-and-control assets. This would expand the discussions around traditional nuclear arms control domains, as some have called for, into other areas such as space security. Clear guidelines on speeds and protected zones could help alleviate concerns about hostile actions against satellites in general, and especially early-warning systems.

What is More Desirable: Non-Binding Agreements or Nothing at All?

Relying exclusively on non-binding political agreements to regulate nuclear arms control can pose significant risks. Unlike legally binding agreements, these statements lack enforceability and accountability mechanisms, which can increase the likelihood of ambiguity in interpretation. This can lead to suspicions and accusations of non-compliance among participating states, further exacerbating discord and undermining trust. Without clear guidelines and mechanisms for verification and enforcement, non-binding agreements may fail to effectively address the complex challenges of nuclear arms control and risk escalating the situation rather than resolving it.

Despite these inherent limitations of non-binding commitments, it is important not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. These agreements can help pave the way for more comprehensive agreements and play a valuable role in promoting stability and transparency. In the absence of U.S.-Russia negotiations on a follow-on arms control treaty that delineates specific reduction and limitation numbers, both states should at least uphold key New START commitments. Following Russia's suspension of participation, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Russia "intends to adhere to a responsible approach and will continue to strictly observe the quantitative restrictions provided for by the New START Treaty within the life cycle of the Treaty."[52] Similarly, the United States expressed its intent to adhere to the Treaty's central limits as long as it assesses that Russia is doing so.[53]

Historically, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union/Russia have at various times declared moratoria on nuclear testing in their pursuit of arms control and disarmament goals. After Russia's "de-ratification" of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, it released a statement reaffirming its commitment to a moratorium on nuclear testing and indicated its intention to respond in kind should the United States decide to conduct nuclear tests.[54] The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization's sophisticated monitoring systems are capable of detecting even the slightest traces of nuclear explosions, providing a dependable method for verifying adherence to moratoria on explosive nuclear testing. The United States and Russia also have their own national systems for detecting nuclear explosions. The question of zero-yield nuclear testing is also relevant, though the opportunity to discuss this productively has yet to appear.

Political declarations, such as the "Gorbachev-Reagan formula" and agreements such as the 1973 Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War,[55] can serve as important symbolic gestures, signaling intent and commitment between states. However, their effectiveness relies on their specificity and clarity. When these statements are too broad or ambiguous, or if they appear inconsistent with a state's actions, they do not instill confidence and may even evoke skepticism. Therefore, their impact is limited unless accompanied by concrete actions and commitments.

One proposal is for the U.S. to reaffirm the understanding as described in the preamble to the New START Treaty of the "interrelationship between strategic offensive arms and strategic defensive arms".[56] This could help to assuage Russian concerns that the U.S. military might undermine its strategic deterrent by employing a potent mix of missile defense systems and conventional precision-strike weapons. However, this might not bode well with U.S. allies.[57] For its part, Russia could agree to include into future legally binding agreements the "exotic" nuclear-powered delivery systems of the new nuclear weapons it unveiled in 2018, such as the Burevestnik cruise missile and the Poseidon torpedo. In any event, both sides should recognize that meeting for dialogue on the issues discussed in this paper is not a "reward" to one another, but rather the behavior of responsible actors.

Unilateral disarmament measures have the potential to significantly advance arms control objectives. Yet, their realization hinges on the presence of the requisite political will, which, given the current landscape, renders their likelihood rather low. Traditional arms control frameworks are firmly rooted in principles of reciprocity and cost-benefit analysis, fostering reluctance among states to pursue unilateral actions that may compromise

their security without commensurate benefits or assurances. On top of that, unlike formal treaties, unilateral measures are not subject to verification and enforcement mechanisms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As this paper has discussed, the arms control regime is in an unprecedented state of crisis, with only one bilateral arms control treaty remaining between the U.S. and Russia, due to expire in February 2026. That should not suggest that the concept of arms control is dead, as some have argued, but perhaps in a coma. Seeds should be planted now to set the stage for when arms control is once more ready to bloom. While a legally binding arms control treaty is unlikely to be the subject of negotiations in the near future, steps can be taken to ensure there is fertile ground for such treaties. Moreover, while legally binding treaties are arguably the most desirable, each of the other forms of agreement detailed above has value. The authors of this paper recommend the following:

Think long term. While working-level government representatives might support the prospect of renewed negotiations for a new arms control treaty, there is not yet the political will to discuss specific provisions of a new arms control treaty, legally binding or otherwise. In the few fora that remain in which the U.S. and Russia can engage, working-level representatives from both countries should start shaping a long-term vision of bilateral nuclear arms control and prospects for widening participation to other P5 members in a way that reflects their respective security concerns and strategic interests. While such discussions could take place under the auspices of the P5 Process, the U.S. and Russia need not be limited to that forum; indeed, reestablishing official bilateral dialogue on nuclear arms control would be the most direct channel to progress. Working on the conceptualization of such a regime now would support its future implementation. China, France, and the United Kingdom should take an active role in voicing their security interests in shaping such a regime.

Consider what a package of agreements could look like. Given the currently disparate views between the U.S. and Russia on what a future arms control architecture should cover, the two governments could shift toward a framework in which different kinds of arms are controlled through different agreements with different legal and political statuses. For example, deployed strategic arms—as a category of weapons the U.S. and Russia have experience in limiting through arms control agreements—might be the subject of a future legally binding treaty. Novel weapons and emerging technologies, such as AI, might be better addressed through politically binding agreements, while non-strategic nuclear weapons would likely remain a topic for which the U.S. seeks legally binding limits. For categories of weapons for which there is little experience in arms control, legally binding treaties with less stringent verification provisions could be envisioned. The U.S. and Russia should orient themselves that multiple kinds of agreements could be considered as a package.

Be conscious of the tradeoff between linkages and compartmentalization. Traditionally, U.S.-Russian arms control has remained comparatively immune to linkages with other issues in bilateral relations. That is not the case today. While there may always be political issues that the governments may link to the success of an arms control initiative, informal discussions and later formal negotiations should beware of these linkages, as they may hinder a return of an arms control regime. In this respect, the model of a package of agreements described above would be helpful.

Strive to specify timelines and concrete, verifiable actions. Regardless of the legal or political status of an agreement, the verification provisions—or lack thereof—or other considerations, arms controllers should endeavor, when possible, ideally to include specific timelines and measurable actions to be taken. There may be a tendency when there is low-hanging fruit in arms control to shy away from getting so specific as to create perceived restrictions to sovereignty or that an accusation of non-compliance could result in the initiative being abrogated or suspended. Sometimes that ambiguity is of strategic benefit and in fact a precondition for progress. However, including such timelines and specific actions contributes to norm building that could lead back to a more robust arms control regime.

Push for a culture shift in the arms control community. As the prospects for arms control seem increasingly bleak, there is a tendency to dismiss any initiative as impossible and any discussion of a new initiative as a "reward" to one's counterpart. Not only is this counterintuitive to the goal of arms control, but it is incorrect. Government representatives, particularly at the working level, should be considering what the metrics of success for nuclear arms control could be, rather than dismiss-

ing any initiative out of hand as impossible under present circumstances. What sorts of measures would foster strategic stability? What sorts of agreements would bolster confidence in a state's deterrent capability? Beyond those questions, what is the guiding principle of arms control? Is it parity between alliances? Are rigid alliance blocks outdated? If parity is no longer the main driver, what replaces it? Should perceptions and doctrines increasingly incorporated into arms control work? These are the questions that arms controllers should be asking their counterparts now. In the absence of such discussions, this work may be done by the non-governmental arms control community.

Involve international organizations when practical and useful. When the goal of a given initiative, either directly related to an arms control treaty or merely in support of strategic stability, has a nexus with the mandate of an international organization, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization or potentially the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the U.S. and Russia should engage with such organizations. In the past, this has helped to cement the associated initiative in the international nonproliferation architecture—though not irreversibly—provided an additional level of confidence to non-nuclear-weapon States that obligations are being met, and provided a neutral arbiter for disputes.

Invest in education, outreach, and forward-looking structures. Arms control is not only about treaties and agreements—it is also about people, understanding, and preparation. Governments, academic institutions, and policy research centers should train the next generation of arms control practitioners, develop clear explanatory resources on key concepts, and anticipate how emerging technologies and entanglement risks can be managed, with proposals grounded in what can realistically be verified. Framing proposals around risk reduction, rather than traditional arms control alone, can enhance both relevance and impact. Maintaining institutional structures and dialogue channels will ensure that states are prepared to seize opportunities when they re-emerge.

Indeed, arms control is in crisis, as the arms control community has repeatedly reminded us. It is for today's practitioners to set the foundation for the future of arms control to effectively reduce nuclear risks.

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Endnotes

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About Deep Cuts

For years, more and more arms control treaties have been eroding and nuclear disarmament is in a deep crisis. The goal of this research and transfer project is to analyze obstacles to U.S.-Russian nuclear and conventional disarmament, to strengthen European security and to develop concrete risk-reduction measures that limit the potential for military escalation in the short term and aim to cut nuclear stockpiles in the long term.

The Deep Cuts Commission was established in 2013 and is coordinated by IFSH. The project partner is the independent Arms Control Association in Washington, D.C.

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Impress

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