Deep Cuts Commission Fact Sheet

AFTER THE NEW START TREATY

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) reduced U.S. and Russian strategic offensive forces to levels not seen since the 1960s. It is the last remaining bilateral agreement limiting U.S. and Russian nuclear arms. While reducing the sides' nuclear arsenals, New START and its predecessors enhanced predictability and stability in their uneasy nuclear deterrence relationship. Unfortunately, New START will expire soon, on February 5, 2026.

The Challenge

Without renewed action on nuclear arms control, an unconstrained three-way nuclear arms race looms. China is increasing its nuclear arsenal, Russia is developing exotic new strategic weapons systems, and the United States is considering adding warheads to its strategic ballistic missiles. While Presidents Trump and Putin have expressed interest in renewing a bilateral dialogue on strategic nuclear and related issues, no such talks are taking place. If and when they begin, they will face difficult issues at a time of deep mistrust. If they do not, the nuclear arms race will likely accelerate.

Washington and Moscow still should share a strong mutual interest in constraining their nuclear competition and maintaining strategic stability. The first is in avoiding the costs of an open-ended expansion of strategic nuclear forces while both sides see their spending requirements elsewhere. In addition, Moscow, Washington and Bejing are competing for support from the international community which values efforts to prevent a new nuclear arms race. One example was the agreement on draft language that welcomed the commitment by Moscow and Washington at the 2022 NPT Review Conference "to pursue negotiations in good faith on a successor framework to New START before its expiration in 2026." Non-nuclear weapon state NATO members are concerned that their security interests, for example, transparency and limits on Russia's stockpile of some 2,000 non-strategic weapons, are not being addressed.

New START

The U.S.-Russia New START Treaty was signed in 2010 and entered into force in 2011. Its contains three numerical limits that took effect in 2018:

- no more than 700 deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and nuclear-capable bombers;
- no more than 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM and SLBM launchers and nuclear-capable bombers; and
- no more than 1,550 deployed strategic warheads.

The treaty includes a variety of verification measures to provide confidence that the sides observe the limits, but Russia suspended observation of those measures in early 2023. When Russia did not resume, the United States also suspended observing the measures. Nevertheless, both say they continue to observe the numerical limits so long as the treaty remains in force.

Using national technical means (such as surveillance satellites), the sides likely can achieve confidence in their ability to monitor the other's observance of the 700 and 800 limits. However, it will be more difficult for the sides to have confidence in the other's observance of the 1,550 warhead limit absent New START's required notifications and on-site inspections.

What Next?

As New START neared its original 2021 expiration date, Presidents Biden and Putin agreed to extend it for five years, until February 2026. It cannot be extended again, raising the prospect that, for the first time in more than 30 years, there will be no agreement limiting U.S. and Russian nuclear forces or providing agreed measures to monitor those forces.

A proliferation of systems has begun amid a nadir in U.S.-Russia relations, partly due to the Russia-Ukraine war. Russia has developed exotic new strategic weapons, such as the Burevestnik nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed cruise missile and Poseidon long-range, nuclear-armed torpedo. The United States has deployed lower-yield warheads on some of its SLBMs in the name of deterring Russian nuclear use in a regional war and has begun developing a nuclear-armed, sea-launched cruise missile.

Growing numbers of older, traditional nuclear weapons also constitute a significant issue. Concern in Washington about developments in Russia and especially China has prompted consideration of "uploading" ICBMs and SLBMs—adding warheads to strategic ballistic missiles that now carry less than maximum loadings (Russia has a similar if somewhat lesser potential). Both sides are developing new strategic missile defense capabilities.

There has been no strategic dialogue between Moscow and Washington since January 2022. More recently, Trump and Putin suggested they might want to resume

the strategic dialogue, though Russian officials previously indicated that such a dialogue would be possible only after the conflict in Ukraine is settled.

On July 25, Trump said New START is "not an agreement you want expiring. ... When you take off nuclear restrictions, that's a big problem."* On the eve of the August 15 Trump-Putin meeting in Alaska, Putin suggested the two eventually might reach an agreement on nuclear arms.** Reportedly, the two leaders discussed nuclear arms control, and Trump later noted that China should be involved.

Difficult Issues to Address

A sustained Russia-U.S. dialogue on strategic arms and related issues is in the interest of both countries. The immediate goal should aim to agree to continue to respect the numerical limits of New START as the sides work to establish a new framework to reduce nuclear risk, foster strategic stability, and where possible agree upon limits and reduction of nuclear arms. Work on a new framework would have to address a range of tough questions.

First, New START constrained deployed strategic nuclear warheads but excluded non-deployed strategic warheads and non-strategic nuclear warheads. A logical step after New START would be an arrangement for verifiably constraining all U.S. and Russian nuclear warheads. However, Moscow has shown little interest in limiting non-strategic nuclear weapons. A more modest option would be to exchange data on all nuclear weapons holdings.

Second, a related issue would be how to handle intermediate-range missiles that were banned by the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which collapsed over compliance disputes. One option would be to ban nuclear-armed ground- and sea-launched cruise missiles.

Third, Moscow has expressed concern that strategic missile defense could undercut the strategic balance and has sought constraints on such systems. Trump's embrace of a "Golden Dome" defense to protect the U.S. homeland against all missile threats, including from Russia and China, will fuel this concern.

Fourth, Russia has expressed concern about conventional long-range, precision strike weapons. The United States has shown little interest in limiting such weapons.

Fifth, the sides have sought to address third-country nuclear weapons. Washington has expressed alarm about China's build-up, while Moscow has said a future agreement should take account of British and French nuclear forces. In 2020, Trump tried to launch three-way talks with China, but Beijing declined. Negotiating a three- or five-party treaty would prove extremely difficult, given the divergence in the sizes of the countries' nuclear arsenals and security perceptions.

Considering the complexity of the issues and deep mistrust between the sides, it seems hardly likely that the parties can agree on a new framework by the time of New START's expiration.

Summary of Possible Next Steps

Washington and Moscow should consider and pursue the following options:

- Commit at the presidential level to continue to observe New START's numerical constraints while the two sides engage in negotiations on a successor agreement. The sides should also explore continuing some of New START's verification measures.
- Resume their bilateral dialogue on nuclear arms, strategic stability and related issues and seek to to develop practical measures to reduce nuclear risk.
- Upgrade the pace of discussions among the UNSC Permanent Five (U.S., Russia, China, UK and France) on possible multilateral confidence-building measures, such as generalizing the U.S.-Russia and Russia-China ballistic missile launch notification agreements to apply to all five states and keeping "humans in the loop" for command and control of nuclear weapons.

The broader international community should:

- Urge Moscow and Washington to continue to observe the New START numerical limits and resume implementation of transparency measures.
- Declare their support for confidence-building and transparency measures on long-range conventional strike weapons to limit negative effects on strategic stability due to the deployment of such systems.
- State that the willingness of Russia and the United States to maintain New START numerical limits will be a yardstick for measuring implementation of NPT Article VI commitments.

Additional information about the "Challenges to Deep Cuts"-project can be found on deepcuts.org. The project is funded by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs

* TASS "US plans to engage with Russia to discuss prospects of nuclear disarmament — Trump", July 2025,, https://tass.com/world/1994415

** Reuters "Factbox-Putin's nuclear offer to Trump: arms control, and perhaps China too?", August 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/putins-nuclear-offer-trump-arms-control-perhaps-china-too-2025-08-26/