

How the U.S.-Russian Strategic Stability Dialogue Can and Must Make Progress

Statement by the Deep Cuts Commission

For decades, the United States and Soviet Union (later Russia) have co-existed in a dangerous state of mutual nuclear vulnerability that requires effective dialogue, military restraint, and bold action to achieve deep cuts in their massive nuclear stockpiles. This is why the United States and the Soviet Union formally agreed in 1973 that an objective of their policies must be “to remove the danger of nuclear war and of the use of nuclear weapons” and that they must both “act in such a manner as to prevent the development of situations capable of causing a dangerous exacerbation of their relations, as to avoid military confrontations, and as to exclude the outbreak of nuclear war [...]”¹

Despite substantial past progress in capping and reducing their massive Cold War-era arsenals through a series of bilateral arms control and reduction treaties, the two nations still possess thousands of nuclear weapons on a range of delivery systems capable of inflicting catastrophic destruction within minutes of a launch order from either side’s leader. Today, relations between Russia and

the West remain as fraught and tense as they were during the Cold War, with multiple points of friction and spheres of potential military confrontation – from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, in and around Ukraine, in outer space, and in cyberspace.

In this context, it is in the interest of both sides that the Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) is effective and productive.² As Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin stated at their June 16, 2021, Geneva summit, even in “periods of tension” Washington and Moscow have demonstrated that they “are able to make progress on our shared goals of ensuring predictability in the strategic sphere, reducing the risk of armed conflicts and the threat of nuclear war.”³

In order to seize opportunities to reduce nuclear dangers, both sides need to move swiftly and decisively. A top priority has to be the search for a follow-on agreement or agreements to the 2010 New START Treaty, the last remaining bilateral treaty capping the world’s two largest arsenals, before it expires in early 2026. U.S. and Russian leaders

should also explore other measures to reduce nuclear dangers, prevent new arms races, and prepare the ground for inclusion of additional nuclear powers in the arms reduction effort. Europeans can facilitate progress by encouraging the United States and Russia to be bold, while taking European security concerns into account.

Following the June summit, the two sides agreed to discuss strategic stability in “an integrated, deliberate, and robust process,” and they established two working groups: the Working Group on Principles and Objectives for Future Arms Control, and the Working Group on Capabilities and Actions with Strategic Effects.⁴ Two rounds of the dialogue have been held, but the next round will not convene until 2022.

Next Steps

The extension of New START was critically important to retain limits and verification on U.S. and Russian nuclear forces. But the treaty will expire on February 5, 2026, leaving little time for the two sides to negotiate and conclude complex new arms control arrangements.

With leadership from the top and support from key U.S. allies in Europe, the two sides can and must move quickly to find effective new solutions before New START expires. To make progress, they will need to tackle four difficult but resolvable sets of issues relating to strategic nuclear weapons control and reduction:

Further reducing strategic arsenals. A key objective of the next round of talks should be to maintain verifiable limits on U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear warheads and delivery systems, including new kinds of strategic systems not included in New

START. A new agreement should aim to further reduce the total number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads and delivery systems and adopt stricter counting rules for nuclear weapons attributed to strategic bombers. An up to one-third reduction in deployed strategic forces would still leave each side with an overwhelming nuclear retaliatory force that is more than sufficient to deter a nuclear attack by any adversary. New mutual, verifiable limits on strategic nuclear weapons will need to factor in new systems being developed by both sides, including hypersonic weapons.

Extending arms control to include “tactical” nuclear weapons. In parallel with New START follow-on negotiations, U.S. and Russian negotiators should also address non-strategic nuclear weapons, beginning with a transparency agreement requiring detailed declarations of tactical nuclear stockpiles, including warheads in storage. More ambitious agreements to reduce nuclear risks could include understandings not to locate nuclear warheads at or near bases with dual-capable non-strategic delivery systems. U.S. and Russian non-strategic nuclear warheads could be stored in locations further from NATO bases in Europe and Russia’s western border. Making progress on non-strategic nuclear arms control is important; however, it should not become a prerequisite for lower ceilings on the two sides’ strategic nuclear arsenals.

Averting a race in intermediate-range missiles. In the absence of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the risk of a new INF missile race in Europe will grow. President Biden, in coordination with NATO, should respond constructively to Russia’s 2020 proposal for a verifiable moratorium on the deployment in Europe of missiles formerly banned by the 1987 INF Treaty, and also include the 9M729 (SSC-8) cruise missile. The Russian proposal⁵ is a

starting point for mutual discussions. Another option would be to verifiably ban nuclear-armed ground-launched and sea-launched cruise and ballistic missiles of intermediate range.

From a European point of view, a new agreement that addresses non-strategic weapons, including restrictions on intermediate-range missiles formerly prohibited by the INF Treaty, could facilitate agreement among NATO allies on a more sustainable defense and deterrence posture and improve European security.

Limiting strategic missile interceptors. Further progress toward deeper reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons are unlikely to gain traction unless Washington and Moscow agree to constraints on their long-range missile defense capabilities, and/or at least agree to outline their plans for development, testing, and deployment of such systems in the future. It is our assessment that the United States, and Russia, can field sufficient numbers and types of missile interceptors to mitigate the threat of a limited ballistic attack from North Korea or, possibly in the future, Iran, and at the same time agree to parameters on the quantity, location, and capability of missile defense systems that do not undermine strategic stability.

Given that Russia and the United States are currently taking decisions on the expensive modernization programs of their nuclear forces, reaching new bilateral agreements on these and possibly other weapons systems is essential to maintain strategic stability and avert unconstrained, costly, and dangerous nuclear weapons competition.

Serious progress toward the negotiation on a New START follow-on agreement, and other restraints on U.S. and Russian nuclear

stockpiles, would also help fulfill the United States' and Russia's obligation under Article VI of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

Europe's Role in Reducing Nuclear Dangers

The Biden administration has been informing allies about progress in the Russia-U.S. talks and has stated its intention to consult with them during possible negotiations. This willingness to coordinate within NATO increases opportunities for and responsibilities of Europeans to move arms control forward.

NATO is pursuing a double track approach of increasing defense and deterrence capabilities while allies at the same time see arms control as "an essential contribution to achieving the Alliance's security objectives and for ensuring strategic stability and our collective security."⁶

European allies should support the bilateral dialogue on nuclear dangers by making constructive proposals on the way ahead on nuclear arms control. After the demise of the INF Treaty, this is particularly important because there are no arms control treaties left in Europe.

The United States and its NATO allies should revive something like the Special Consultative Group that accompanied the INF talks in the 1980s.⁷ Or allies could use the "Special Advisory and Consultative Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Pro-

liferation Committee” set up in 2013 to facilitate the transatlantic dialogue on arms control.⁸

European allies could help to increase a political space for arms control talks by postponing decisions on beefing up the nuclear deterrence posture until it has become clear whether the United States and Russia will be able to conclude arms control talks successfully.

Involving Additional Nuclear-armed States

Both Russia and the United States want to broaden, in the long run, participation in the nuclear arms control process. This goal is in line with NPT commitments. NPT members have called “on all nuclear-weapon States to undertake concrete disarmament efforts and affirm [...] that all States need to make special efforts to establish the necessary framework to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons.”⁹

The United States and NATO want to engage China, which is in the process of expanding its nuclear capabilities, in nuclear risk reduction and, eventually, the nuclear disarmament enterprise. Indeed, China’s nuclear build-up, if unconstrained, could negatively affect the readiness of the United States and Russia to further reduce their nuclear arsenals. Moscow would welcome China joining nuclear arms control discussions but would also like to see France and the United Kingdom involved in nuclear arms control and the disarmament process.

China, France, and the United Kingdom agree that further cuts in the nuclear arsenals of Russia and the United States, which still account for about 90% of global nuclear

stockpiles, is a necessary precondition for their own involvement in the nuclear arms control process. London has recently announced that it will increase the cap on its nuclear capabilities and reduce transparency on its nuclear posture.¹⁰

All five states, which are members of the NPT, should reaffirm their commitment to further progress toward the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons at the upcoming 10th NPT Review Conference, Jan. 4-28, in New York. The nuclear five should support a final NPT Review Conference statement that calls for:

- energetic efforts by the United States and Russia to reduce nuclear risks and maintain strategic stability, and to conclude talks on a New START follow-on agreement or agreements that achieve further, lower limits on strategic nuclear warheads and delivery systems and limits on non-strategic and non-deployed nuclear weapons no later than 2025, and
- deeper engagement between the five nuclear-armed states on nuclear disarmament pathways and on nuclear risk reduction, either bilaterally and/or through a new multilateral format.

The United States and Russia have a special responsibility to reduce the threats posed by nuclear weapons and to meet their NPT Article VI disarmament obligations. They must be prepared to take meaningful action that reduces the role of nuclear weapons, to lower nuclear risks, and to slow and reverse a burgeoning nuclear arms race. Failure is not an option.

- ¹ “Agreement Between The United States of America and The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Nuclear War,” Washington, June 22, 1973, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/5186.htm>.
- ² See also “Statement by the Deep Cuts Commission. Turning the Tide: NATO, the United States and Russia Need to Agree on Ambitious Arms Control Agenda,” June 7, 2021, https://deepcuts.org/images/images/News/Statement_by_the_Deep_Cuts_Commission_Summits_June_2021.pdf.
- ³ “U.S.-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability,” June 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability/>.
- ⁴ “Joint Statement on the Outcomes of the U.S.-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue in Geneva on September 30,” Geneva, September 30, 2021, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4875989?p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB.
- ⁵ President of Russia, “Statement by Vladimir Putin on Additional Steps to De-escalate the Situation in Europe After the Termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty),” Moscow, October 26, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64270>.
- ⁶ NATO, “Brussels Summit Communiqué Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021,” Brussels, June 14, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm.
- ⁷ Martin A. Smith, “Reviving the Special Consultative Group. Past Experiences and Future Prospects,” *NATOWatch* (Briefing Paper, 11), July 5, 2010, http://www.natowatch.org/sites/default/files/NATO_Watch_Briefing_Paper_No.11_0.pdf.
- ⁸ Oliver Meier, “NATO Agrees on New Arms Control Body,” *Arms Control Now*, February 2, 2013, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2013-02-26/nato-agrees-new-arms-control-body>.
- ⁹ “2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Final Document, NPT CONF.2010/50 (Vol.I)”, New York, 2010, [https://undocs.org/NPT/CONF.2010/50%20\(VOL.I\)](https://undocs.org/NPT/CONF.2010/50%20(VOL.I)).
- ¹⁰ See also “Statement by the Deep Cuts Commission. The United Kingdom’s Damaging Decision to Build Up its Nuclear Force and How to Respond,” March 31, 2021, https://deepcuts.org/files/pdf/Statement_by_the_Deep_Cuts_Commission_on_UK.pdf.

Commission members may not fully agree with each and every point included here, though as a group they are fully aligned in support of the recommendations.

About Deep Cuts

The Deep Cuts Commission provides decision-makers as well as the interested public with concrete policy options based on realistic analysis and sound research. Since it was established in 2013, the Commission is coordinated in its deliberations by the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH), the Arms Control Association (ACA), and the Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO, RAN) with the active support of the German Federal Foreign Office.

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