

Deep Cuts Commission Issue Brief

The Uncertain Future of the New START Treaty

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Executive Summary

This Deep Cuts Commission issue brief describes the background and implementation of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the impact of Russia's suspension of the treaty and the treaty's uncertain future.

New START is a bilateral treaty between the United States and Russia, signed in 2010. When its numerical limits took full effect in 2018, U.S. and Russian strategic offensive forces had reduced to their lowest levels in five decades. The two countries implemented the treaty through 2022, despite their difficult bilateral relations, indicating that they considered constraining their competition in strategic nuclear arms a mutual interest.

In February 2023, President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would “suspend” its participation in New START, citing U.S. support for Ukraine in its war with Russia. Russian officials subsequently explained that Moscow would continue to observe the treaty's numerical limits but would not implement its monitoring and verification provisions. Still, Putin's decision was a departure from the general practice observed by the United States and Soviet Union/Russia of “compartmentalizing” arms control, that is, continuing to pursue and implement agreements even when the broader relationship hit difficult

stretches. Washington responded with countermeasures, including halting its implementation of verification provisions.

The sides likely can monitor with fairly high confidence the number of the other's strategic ballistic missiles, strategic ballistic missile launchers, and heavy bombers using their national technical means of verification. However, they will have less confidence over time that the other is observing New START's limit on deployed strategic warheads absent the notifications and on-site inspections provided for by the treaty.

Ideally, the sides would return to full implementation of New START. This would restore confidence that the sides were observing all three of the treaty's numerical limits. It would also allow Russia to pursue its issues with U.S. conversion practices and the United States to raise questions about new kinds of Russian strategic arms. Having the treaty in full force would provide a more solid foundation for discussions on what might follow New START, when it expires by its terms in February 2026.

In June 2023, Washington proposed a dialogue on managing nuclear risks and the post-2026 arms control framework without preconditions. As of late November, there is no sign that Moscow is prepared to

agree to that so long as U.S. support for Ukraine continues. Nothing suggests that the Biden administration is prepared to curtail that support.

Absent the treaty's monitoring and verification measures, concern could arise that one side or the other is exceeding the numerical limit on deployed strategic warheads, for example, by adding extra warheads on strategic ballistic missiles that currently carry fewer than their maximum capacity. That could prompt a side to exercise its right to withdraw from the treaty.

However, the most likely scenario appears to be continued Russian suspension until the treaty's expiration in February 2026 and, during that period, no serious arms control dialogue between Washington and Moscow. That would occur against the backdrop of growing U.S. concern about the ongoing expansion of Chinese nuclear forces, which has already led some to suggest that the United States will need to increase its strategic forces beyond the limits of New START.

The United States, Russia, and China face the prospect of a three-way nuclear arms race. Avoiding that will require creative diplomacy and recalling, or relearning, the lessons of the 1960s. Washington and Moscow then concluded that adding larger numbers of nuclear weapons beyond a certain point did not enhance their security and that arms control made sense.

New START Background

Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev announced a negotiation aimed at concluding a new strategic arms reduction treaty in April 2009. At that time, two treaties constrained U.S. and Russian strategic forces. The 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), signed by Presidents George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev, limited each side to no more than 1,600 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launchers, submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) launchers and heavy bombers as well as no more than 6,000 accountable warheads.¹ START I ran hundreds of pages in length and included monitoring and verification measures such as data exchanges and on-site inspections. By its terms, START I was due to expire in December 2009.

The 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), signed by Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, limited the United States and Russia each to no more than 1,700-2,200 operationally deployed strategic warheads.²

Just two pages in length, SORT did not limit ICBMs, SLBMs, or heavy bombers and contained no agreed definitions, no counting rules, and no verification measures. Indeed, the United States and Russia may have counted different weapons toward the 1,700-2,200 limit. The limit was due to take full effect on December 31, 2012, the same date that SORT would expire by its terms.

U.S. and Russian officials explored a possible successor agreement to START I toward the end of the Bush administration's second term but failed to reach an agreement. Russian officials said the U.S.-proposed position would limit only deployed strategic warheads. They noted that that would allow each side to deploy an unlimited number of delivery vehicles and an unlimited number of non-deployed (or reserve) strategic warheads. That would create, in Moscow's view, an unacceptable "break-out" potential: a side could leave the treaty and rapidly expand the size of its strategic offensive forces.

The Obama administration took office in January 2009 and quickly made clear its interest in negotiating a new treaty to follow the soon-to-expire START I. Obama and Medvedev agreed in April 2009 to launch negotiations. During their July 2009 meeting in Moscow, they issued a joint understanding setting out elements for the new treaty.⁴ That understanding said the sides would limit their strategic delivery vehicles (ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers) to a level in the range of 500-1,100 and limit the number of warheads associated with those delivery vehicles to a level in the range of 1,500-1,675, with the specific levels to be agreed in the negotiations.

Negotiations proceeded relatively rapidly, in part because U.S. and Russian negotiators, where possible, used language from the START I treaty rather than reinventing the wheel. Obama and Medvedev signed New START in April 2010.⁵ The treaty, which entered into force in February 2011, provided three numerical limits for U.S. and Russian strategic offensive forces:

- ▶ 700 deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments;
- ▶ 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM and SLBM launchers and deployed and non-deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments (non-deployed launchers include ICBM silos and SLBM launch tubes that do not contain a deployed ICBM or SLBM); and

- ▶ 1,550 strategic warheads on deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments.

Neither side routinely maintains warheads on deployed bombers, so the negotiators agreed to attribute one warhead to each such heavy bomber, which almost certainly undercounts bomber weapons. The actual number of strategic warheads on deployed ICBMs and SLBMs plus the number of weapons (air-launched cruise missiles and gravity bombs) at air bases hosting deployed heavy bombers likely runs to totals of 1,600-1,750 for each side.⁶ Still, these are numbers for U.S. and Russian strategic offensive forces not seen since the 1960s. New START’s three numerical limits took full effect in February 2018, and both sides met the deadline.

New START’s signature was widely welcomed as enhancing strategic stability between the United States and Russia and promoting predictability and transparency regarding strategic offensive forces.

New START originally had a ten-year term, which would have meant expiration in February 2021. However, the treaty’s provisions allowed the sides to extend the treaty for up to five years. Putin offered to extend the treaty, at first with conditions, but he later proposed an unconditional extension. In 2020, the final year of the Trump administration, U.S. and Russian negotiators discussed extending New START, but they failed to agree because of the U.S. bid to include China in the nuclear arms control process and U.S. insistence that Russia commit to negotiate limits on all nuclear warheads in any negotiation of a follow-on treaty to New START.⁷

In January 2021, President Joe Biden took office and made clear his interest in extending New START to February 2026. In February 2021, just two days before New START would have expired, Washington and Moscow agreed on the treaty’s extension.⁸

According to the last data exchange as of September 1, 2022, U.S. and Russian strategic offensive arms numbered as indicated in the chart below :

In addition to its numerical limits, the lengthy New START Treaty provides for a range of monitoring and verification measures. In addition to monitoring the other side’s strategic forces with national technical means of verification, such as imagery satellites, the treaty’s provisions provide for semi-annual data exchanges, notifications of changes to strategic forces and on-site inspections. The treaty also established a Bilateral Consultative Commission that, among other things, provided a forum for addressing compliance issues.

Prior to the second half of 2022, the major compliance questions regarding New START centered on Russian concerns regarding U.S. conversions of strategic delivery vehicles and launchers.¹⁰ The United States converted four launch tubes on each of its Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines so that they could not launch an SLBM and thus would not be captured by New START’s 800 limit. Russian officials questioned whether the conversions, in fact, rendered the launch tubes incapable of launching an SLBM. Russian officials also questioned the conversion procedures used on U.S. B-52H heavy bombers, arguing that they were insufficient to remove those systems from New START’s limits. Washington responded that the conversions were consistent with New START’s requirements but discussed these issues in the Bilateral Consultative Commission.

Suspension of New START

New START allowed each side to conduct up to 18 on-site inspections of the other’s strategic forces per year. Through 2019, the sides regularly used all 18 annual inspections to which they were entitled. However, U.S. and Russian officials mutually agreed to suspend on-site inspections in 2020 due to concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic,

	UNITED STATES	RUSSIA
Deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs and deployed heavy bombers (limit = 700)	659	540
Deployed and non-deployed launchers of ICBMs and SLBMs and deployed and non-deployed heavy bombers (limit = 800)	800	759
Warheads on deployed ICBMs and SLBMs and nuclear warheads counted on heavy bombers (limit = 1,550)	1,420	1,549

though they continued to implement the treaty's other monitoring and verification provisions.¹¹ Thus, semi-annual data exchanges continued, as did notifications regarding changes to the sides' strategic forces, which ran at an annual rate of about 2,000 per year; as of February 1, 2023, the sides had exchanged over 25,000 notifications.¹²

With concerns about COVID-19 easing in summer 2022, the United States sought to resume inspections, but Russia declined, claiming that U.S. sanctions following the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine prevented Russian inspectors from traveling to the United States.¹³ U.S. officials asserted that arrangements would permit such travel. Washington planned to address these and other issues at a late November 2022 meeting of the Bilateral Consultative Commission, but Russian officials postponed the meeting at the last minute.¹⁴

The U.S. State Department's January 2023 Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty stated that Russia's refusal to allow any on-site inspections and its refusal to hold a meeting of the Bilateral Consultative Commission constituted failures to comply with New START. It concluded that the United States therefore "cannot certify the Russian Federation to be in compliance with the terms of the New START Treaty."¹⁵

On February 21, 2023, Putin announced that Russia would "suspend" its participation in the treaty though not withdraw from it.¹⁶ (New START has a provision allowing withdrawal, with prior notification, but the treaty makes no provision for suspension.) Putin cited concern about U.S. support for Ukraine in its war with Russia and the need to bring British and French nuclear forces into arms control talks.

The decision marked a departure from a policy dating back to the 1970s and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, who chose to "decouple" or "compartmentalize" strategic arms control from the Soviets' global competition with the United States. It reflects Putin's frustration with U.S. support for Ukraine and his desire to punish Washington if that support does not end.

The Russia leader has chosen to apply this linkage strategy at a time when strategic nuclear weapons have become of paramount importance to Russian national security interests. Indeed, the United States abandoned a linkage strategy after the mid-1970s.¹⁷ Washington suspended the strategic stability dialogue immediately after the February 2022 invasion, a mistake that the U.S. government sought

to correct in June 2023, when National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said Washington was "ready to engage Russia now to manage nuclear risks and develop a post-2026 arms control framework."¹⁸ However, Putin seems to want to make arms control a bargaining chip to advance Russian war aims against Ukraine.

The day following Putin's announcement, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov confirmed that, while suspending its participation in New START, Russia would continue to abide by the treaty's three numerical limits.¹⁹ He added that Russia would continue to pre-notify launches of ICBMs and SLBMs but would do so under the terms of a 1988 agreement on ballistic missile launch notifications, not per the requirements of New START.²⁰ In late February, Putin signed a law approved by the Russian Duma (lower legislative house) and Federation Council (upper house) on suspending Russia's participation in the treaty.²¹ Russia did not provide data for the March 1, 2023 data exchange and ceased exchanging notifications.

On June 1, the United States announced countermeasures in response to Russia's "suspension of New START," including that the United States would withhold data on U.S. strategic forces, not provide treaty-required notifications, and not allow Russian on-site inspections on U.S. territory.²² The announcement reiterated the U.S. position that conversion procedures for SLBM launch tubes and B-52H heavy bombers rendered the tubes incapable of launching SLBMs and prevented the bombers from carrying nuclear arms. It added that the sides had worked out additional procedures to address the Russian concern about SLBM launch tube conversions and that Russia could take advantage of those procedures once full treaty implementation resumed. U.S. officials made clear that the United States was prepared to resume full implementation of New START once Russia did so.

Putin's decision to suspend the treaty sparked wide criticism, including among NATO allies who stated that New START "remains in the national security interest of all states."²³ The European Union called on Russia to return to full implementation "by facilitating New START inspections on Russian territory, and by returning to participation in the Treaty's implementation body, the Bilateral Consultative Commission."²⁴ Regret about the suspension of New START as "an essential instrument of nuclear arms control and strategic stability"²⁵ was reiterated in capitals around Europe, including in London, Paris and Berlin. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock urged Putin "to resume dialogue on the treaty with the United States,"

a statement repeated in Germany's Annual Disarmament Report ("Jahresabrüstungsbericht"), which—beyond a return to full implementation—further called for the negotiation of a successor agreement to New START.²⁶

Verification Challenges

It is positive that Washington and Moscow have both stated that they will continue to observe New START's numerical limits. However, they currently do not have data exchanges, notifications and on-site inspections to facilitate treaty monitoring. Using national technical means of verification (NTM) alone, each side independently should be able to monitor with high confidence the other's compliance with the limit of no more than 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM and SLBM launchers and deployed and non-deployed heavy bombers. Counting ICBM silos, mobile ICBM launchers, ballistic missile submarines and their number of launch tubes as well as heavy bombers should not prove difficult with NTM alone. NTM may also suffice to monitor the other side's compliance with the limit of no more than 700 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers, though perhaps not with the same confidence level as with the 800 limit.

The major verification challenge comes with monitoring strategic warheads on deployed ICBMs and SLBMs. Under New START, each side keeps its own count of the number of strategic warheads on its deployed strategic ballistic missiles, with on-site inspections creating a risk that cheating would be discovered. For example, when one side conducted an inspection of a facility hosting deployed ICBMs or submarines with deployed SLBMs, the inspecting side was given a list showing each deployed ICBM or SLBM, its location and the number of warheads on it. The inspecting side could then choose one deployed missile for inspection to count the number of deployed warheads. That raised a risk that any warhead loading of a deployed ICBM or SLBM exceeding the number on the list would be detected. The treaty provides for inspection of one deployed missile at the facility, not all deployed missiles, as that would severely disrupt facility operations. The sides felt that the agreed inspection system created sufficient risk of discovery that cheating would be deterred.

The U.S. government assessed that, as of 2022, "Russia was likely under the New START warhead limit."²⁷ That said, the U.S. ability to make that assessment will, absent on-site inspections, erode with time. The same is true for Russia's ability to monitor U.S. compliance with the deployed strategic warhead limit.

Sullivan's June 2023 offer to resume a dialogue without preconditions appeared to be a change in the U.S. position, which had put talks regarding strategic stability issues on hold in February 2022. Moscow did not dismiss Sullivan's remarks out of hand; indeed, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov called Sullivan's comments "important and positive," adding that "we are expecting it to be supported with steps that will be made *de facto* through diplomatic channels," a suggestion that Russian officials wanted to see Sullivan's ideas conveyed in writing.²⁸

New START's Future

There was some hope in 2021 and the first half of 2022 that, despite the nadir in overall U.S.-Russia relations, Washington and Moscow recognized their mutual interest in keeping constraints on their strategic nuclear arms competition. Officials in both capitals even expressed interest in further negotiations. However, Putin's February 2023 announcement put New START in limbo.

The best course would be for Russia to resume the practice of "compartmentalizing" arms control, that is, to drop the linkage that it created tying New START implementation to the U.S. position on supporting Ukraine. Should Moscow sever that linkage, the United States and Russia should resume full implementation of New START, including the treaty's monitoring and verification provisions, as soon as possible. That would allow Russia to take advantage of the additional agreed procedures for addressing its concern about U.S. SLBM launch tube conversions and to resume discussions in the Bilateral Consultative Commission regarding conversion of B-52H bombers. Moreover, the United States could raise issues regarding exotic new kinds of Russian strategic arms, such as the Burevestnik nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed ground-launched cruise missile and Poseidon, a nuclear-powered, nuclear-armed undersea autonomous delivery vehicle.²⁹

Lack of Compartmentalization

For decades, Washington and Moscow "compartmentalized" nuclear arms control, that is, they largely continued the process despite negative developments and problems in other parts of their bilateral relationship. That reflected a shared desire to keep their nuclear competition within certain bounds. Presumably, some constituencies in the Russian Ministry of Defense and elsewhere in Moscow would prefer to maintain New START's constraints on U.S. strategic forces, particularly as the United States is about to begin its strategic modernization program in earnest and the war with Ukraine means that much Russian

defense spending in coming years will be devoted to replacing conventional forces and equipment lost in Ukraine. Those resources will not be available for Russian strategic forces. Putin's decision to suspend New START could well undermine Russian security interests.

The resumption of full New START implementation could facilitate a U.S.-Russia dialogue on what might follow the treaty's expiration in February 2026. That dialogue could address not only what limits would constrain strategic delivery systems—ICBMs, SLBMs, heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments and possibly new kinds of Russian strategic delivery systems—as well as their strategic warheads. The dialogue could also address whether and how to limit other kinds of nuclear warheads, such as non-deployed (reserve) strategic warheads and non-strategic nuclear warheads, which are not constrained by New START. Other issues might include missile defense and their impact on the strategic balance, long-range precision-guided conventional strike weapons (including air-, sea- and ground-launched cruise missiles as well as comparable ballistic missiles), hypersonic weapons and the implications of developments in the space, cyber and AI domains.

Putin has linked New START implementation to U.S. support for Ukraine. The Kremlin's current theme appears to be that it will not resume New START implementation unless the United States drops its adversarial attitude and recognizes Russia's interests and what Moscow refers to as "geopolitical realities" as regards Ukraine. In June, Ryabkov said that unless "Washington and the West as a whole do not radically revise their aggressive anti-Russian policy... productive negotiations on arms control will hardly be possible."³⁰

Some Russian statements suggest they will not permit resumption of New START inspections until the war with Ukraine has concluded. In February, Putin said "They [the United States] want to inflict a 'strategic defeat' on us and try to get to our nuclear facilities at the same time," asserting that inspections of Russian facilities, including those hosting heavy bombers subject to New START's provisions, made little sense when Washington and its allies were allegedly helping Ukraine to mount attacks on those facilities.³¹ Moscow's intent may simply be to let New START run its course and expire in February 2026, after which Russia (and the United States) would be free to exceed the treaty's numerical limits.

The Russian Foreign Ministry added that the U.S. demand to resume New START inspections was "utterly cynical" given that U.S. sanctions on Russia "have impaired the efficiency of the verification procedures stipulated by the Treaty. As the result, Russia's ability to freely conduct verification inspections on a fully equal basis in US territory has been curtailed, creating obvious unilateral advantages for the United States." (U.S. officials contend that Russian inspectors can freely carry out New START inspections in the United States.) The Russian Foreign Ministry also reiterated Putin's claim that the United States sought access to Russian strategic bases in order to assist Ukrainian attacks on those bases.³²

However, nothing suggests that the Biden administration is prepared to reduce support for Ukraine. Biden has regularly stated the United States will continue to support Ukraine "as long as it takes."³³ In addition to a range of weapons provided earlier to Ukraine, including artillery and artillery shells, air defense systems, High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and Bradley fighting vehicles, the U.S. military this fall has begun sending M-1 Abrams tanks and Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine as well as started to train Ukrainian pilots to fly F-16 fighter aircraft. Putin seems to see his action as punishing Biden, perhaps thinking that New START is a favor to the United States, not a mutual interest. (Some in Washington appear to believe that New START is a favor to Russia.) Putin should have known that suspending New START would not change U.S. support for Ukraine but rather steer both sides into a difficult-to-resolve deadlock prolonged by his intentional linkage of these issues.

By all appearances, Putin remains prepared to continue the war against Ukraine for some time to come, at least through the U.S. presidential election in November 2024. At present, three of the leading contenders for the Republican nomination—Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy—oppose outright or question continued U.S. support for Ukraine.³⁴ Relatedly, newly elected Republican Speaker of the House Mike Johnson linked additional funding for Ukraine to domestic political issues that would not be acceptable to the Biden administration. A cut-off of U.S. assistance would have significant negative implications for Ukraine and its ability to continue the fight.

It is unclear what, if anything, might lead Putin and the Kremlin to decide to "decouple" New START from the difficult issues on the broader U.S.-Russia relationship and

allow full implementation of the treaty's provisions, including those for purposes of verification. Moscow has taken the position that the United States must move to improve relations but, other than ending support for Ukraine, has not indicated specific steps that might deescalate bilateral tensions to a point where it would consider resuming New START.

Putin also raised the issue of British and French nuclear forces. In past nuclear arms negotiations, the United States turned away Soviet attempts to include, or secure compensation for, British and French nuclear arms. The extent to which Putin's raising British and French forces is driven by real concerns about those forces or simply is a counter to rising U.S. concerns about China's expanding nuclear forces is unclear, especially as maintaining strategic parity with and "mirroring" the United States seems to be one motivating factor in Putin's decision-making.³⁵ U.S. officials are concerned about and would like at least to discuss Chinese nuclear forces with Beijing—a perspective shared by U.S. allies in Europe, such as Germany, which view dialogue with China in light of the country's recent nuclear build-up as unavoidable.³⁶

Sullivan declared in June that the United States is ready to engage in multilateral arms control efforts with Russia and other members of the P5, including China, France and the United Kingdom.³⁷ It is questionable, however, whether appetite for multilateral talks exists in London and Paris, particularly the latter. A resumed U.S.-Russian dialogue on strategic stability issues would offer a venue for discussing Russian concern about British and French nuclear forces and U.S. concern about China's nuclear arms, which has led some in Washington to suggest that New START's limits are too low. A resumed dialogue also would provide the place to discuss questions such as other U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons, missile defense and precision-guided conventional strike weapons.

However, as of late November 2023, it is not clear when, or if, that U.S.-Russia dialogue will begin. In late October, Russian officials confirmed that they had received a U.S. non-paper regarding risk reduction and the post-2026 arms control framework, calling it "a well-known position that has been put into a single document." The Russians were "calmly studying it and will give a response to the Americans in due time," but Moscow was "not ready" for a regular dialogue on strategic stability and arms control until the United States changed "its deeply hostile poli-

cy toward Russia."³⁸ That suggests that the impasse over resumption of New START implementation will remain for some time.

Risks of New START Suspension and Absence of Dialogue

Under these circumstances, even though both sides assert they are abiding by New START's numerical limits, questions could arise about one side or the other's non-compliance. For example, both sides have "downloaded" ICBMs and SLBMs—that is, they removed warheads from deployed strategic ballistic missiles—in order to meet New START's deployed strategic warhead limit of 1,550. For example, the U.S. Air Force maintains only one warhead on each of its 400 deployed Minuteman ICBMs, even though about two-thirds of those missiles could carry three warheads.³⁹

That means the sides have the possibility to "upload" ICBMs and SLBMs, that is, to place additional warheads on strategic ballistic missiles that currently carry fewer warheads than their capacity. The U.S. military maintains a large number of reserve strategic warheads and is believed to have a significant upload capability. Russia's upload capability has grown as it has introduced more modern strategic ballistic missiles, though, for the near term, the United States appears to have the larger potential for uploading ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers. Combined, recent estimates suggest⁴⁰ that deployed warhead numbers could double in size.

Uploading warheads could be difficult for the other side to detect with NTM alone; for example, when working on a deployed ICBM in its silo, a side might erect an environmental cover above the silo and work area around it, obscuring the ability of imagery satellites to observe the work. The absence of on-site inspections sharply reduces the likelihood that a violation of the 1,550 limit would be discovered.

Such questions would further burden the atmosphere for New START's resumption or talk of a follow-on treaty, and more questions could arise if U.S.-Russian relations further deteriorate. If a side had strong reason to believe that the other had exceeded the 1,550 limit, it could choose to exercise the withdrawal provision in New START, which allows a side to withdraw from the treaty with three months prior notice.

Absent such a belief, the most likely scenario would appear to be continued Russian suspension of New START until the treaty expires by its terms in February 2026 and, during that period, no serious U.S.-Russia nuclear arms dialogue. In the United States, this situation will take place against a backdrop of concern about the expansion of Chinese nuclear forces. The Pentagon believes they will grow from about 500 warheads as of May 2023 to over 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030, raising for the first time ever the challenge for Washington of having to deter two near-peer nuclear competitors at the same time.⁴¹ That projected growth has prompted discussions in the United States about the necessary size of U.S. strategic nuclear forces in the future. It has also drawn attention from NATO allies, who, for the first time in the Alliance's 2022 Strategic Concept, identified China's military build-up, the expansion of its nuclear arsenal and the development of increasingly sophisticated delivery systems as one of the pressing challenges in NATO's strategic environment.⁴²

In his June 2023 remarks, Sullivan noted that, while the U.S. strategic modernization program of record would proceed, "the United States does not need to increase our nuclear forces to outnumber the combined total of our competitors in order to successfully deter them."⁴³ However, there are already advocates for exceeding the 1,550 limit on deployed strategic warheads. For example, one think tank report, apparently written before Russia's suspension of New START, recommended that the U.S. military prepare to upload strategic warheads after the treaty's 2026 expiration and proceed with deployment of a nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile.⁴⁴ The Congressionally-mandated Strategic Posture Commission's October 2023 report recommends that the United States "prepare to upload some or all of the nation's hedge warheads" as well as increase the planned numbers of deployed Long-Range Standoff Weapons, B-21 bombers and Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines.⁴⁵

About the same time, the State Department's International Security Advisory Board released its Report on Deterrence in a World of Nuclear Multipolarity. While recommending that the United States encourage Russia to resume full compliance with New START and continue pursuit of a bilateral strategic dialogue with China, the report acknowledged the difficulty of achieving formal agreements entailing further reductions. It instead suggested focusing on behavioral arms control, for example, adoption of practices to reduce nuclear risk.⁴⁶

Were the United States to increase the number of its deployed strategic nuclear warheads or to deploy nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles, it is difficult to imagine that Russia would not take steps to increase its nuclear forces. China might also reassess its plans. That means that the United States, Russia and China face the possibility of a three-way arms race in strategic offensive nuclear forces and perhaps missile defenses as well. Such a race would mean greater instability, less predictability, more worst-case assumptions, growing military expenses and heightened nuclear risk. That growing nuclear competition could play out against the backdrop of the three countries also competing in new domains and the area of emerging technologies, including cyber, artificial intelligence and space, all of which have implications for strategic nuclear forces.

The Way Forward

The United States and Russia (and China as well) should share an interest in avoiding that kind of future, as do the Europeans. After Russia's suspension of New START, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg observed that "more nuclear weapons and less arms control makes the world more dangerous."⁴⁷ Despite growing support for bolstering NATO's nuclear deterrent and ensuring the "flexibility and adaptability"⁴⁸ of its nuclear forces in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Stoltenberg recently made a strong case for arms control during his remarks at the 18th Annual NATO Conference on Arms Control, Disarmament and Weapons of Mass Destruction Non-Proliferation. He warned that matters have reached a crossroads—confronted with a choice between the "collapse of the international arms control order" and an alternative future "where we build trust, develop new behaviors, and increase our security." He pointed out that arms control agreements are not made between friends but adversaries, and eventually would need to engage China if NATO is to succeed in adapting to "a more dangerous and competitive world."⁴⁹

After February 2026, when New START will expire by its terms, the United States and Russia will remain obligated to notify launches of their ICBMs and SLBMs. If political circumstances improve, Washington and Moscow might consider as an interim measure continuing to observe New START's numerical limits while negotiating a new agreement. However, U.S. interest in such an arrangement, without the monitoring and verification provisions of New START, could be limited. Moreover, Chinese developments will impact U.S. calculations regarding its future strategic force posture and numbers.

Avoiding a three-way nuclear arms race will require creative and flexible diplomacy that, despite all the difficulties in bilateral U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relations, could define a path to restore a strategic dialogue between Washington and Moscow and launch one between Washington and Beijing. Doing this may well require recalling, or relearning, the lessons of the 1960s, when Washington and Moscow concluded that, while they were deploying larger and larger numbers of strategic ballistic missiles and heavy bombers along with developing strategic missile defenses, they had reached a point where they were not enhancing their nation's security. Those lessons led to the beginning of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks between the United States and the Soviet Union, the first serious negotiation to try to control nuclear arms levels. Hopefully, recalling those lessons will not require too much time, during which the countries could end up devoting excessive resources to their strategic forces and possibly increase nuclear risks.

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.

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Impress

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