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The Russian Nuclear Weapons Buildup and the Future of the New START Treaty

Dr. Mark Schneider

Mark B. Schneider is a senior analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy and a former senior official in the Defense Department.

On October 1, 2016 the Department of State released the most recent Russian and U.S. data on their strategic nuclear forces provided in accordance with the New START Treaty. The data indicate that five and a half years into the New START Treaty's seven year reduction period, the number of accountable deployed Russian strategic nuclear warheads has further increased to 1,796, well above the New START ceiling of 1,550, which goes into effect in February 2018.¹ On the other hand, accountable, deployed U.S. strategic nuclear warheads have declined from 1,800 at New START Treaty entry into force (EIF) in early 2011, to 1,367, well below the New START limit.²

Compliance with New START should have been easy for Russia. At New START EIF, it had 1,537 strategic nuclear warheads, below the New START limit of 1,550, 521 deployed delivery vehicles, well below the New START limit of 700, and 865 deployed and non-deployed delivery vehicles, just above the New START limit of 800.³ The excess Russian non-deployed delivery vehicles were mainly items that were accountable but not operational and, hence, their elimination should not have been painful. For example, by 1999, only one of the five Russian Typhoon class missile submarines was reportedly operational, and this was just as a test platform for the new Bulava-30 SLBM program.⁴ The U.S. would have paid for the elimination of these submarines under the Comprehensive Threat Reduction (CTR) program if Russia had wanted it to do so.

As a result of the buildup of its strategic offensive forces, however, Russia is now 246 warheads above the New START Treaty limit on deployed warheads.⁵ It now appears unlikely that Russia intends to comply with the New START Treaty ceilings in early 2018 when they come into legal effect. Announced ongoing Russian strategic nuclear modernization programs will substantially increase the number of deployed strategic nuclear weapons that would have to be removed from accountability by February 2018. According to Bill Gertz, an Obama administration official told him, "The Russians are doubling their [nuclear] warhead output," and, "They will be exceeding the New START [arms treaty] levels because of MIRVing these new systems."⁶ This appears to be substantiated by the latest Russian

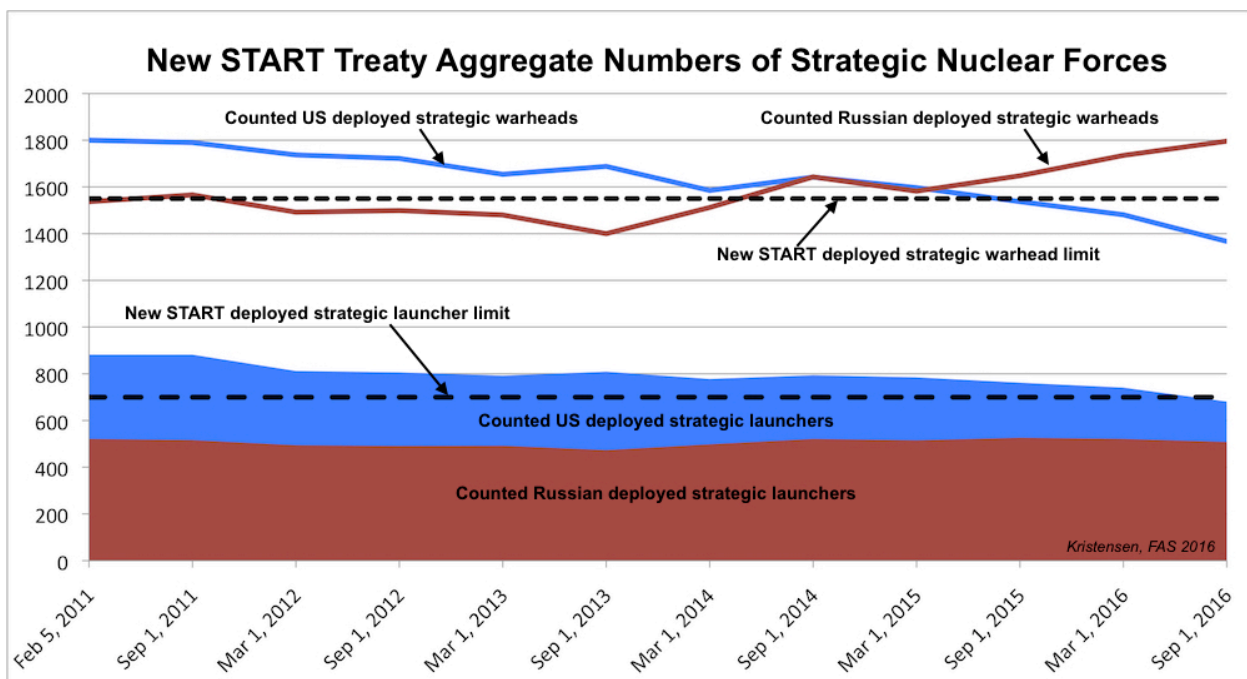


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data on their deployed warhead numbers. There are no announced Russian force reduction programs that would put Russian forces in compliance with the 2018 New START limits and time is growing very short.

A dissenting view is voiced by Hans M. Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists. According to Kristensen, “Rather than a nuclear build-up, however, the increase is a temporary fluctuation caused by introduction of new types of launchers that will be followed by retirement of older launchers before 2018. Russia’s compliance with the treaty is not in doubt.”⁷ However, Kristensen’s claim that Russia intends to comply with New START is, at best, problematical. Unfortunately, the fact is that Russian warhead growth is a trend, not a routine fluctuation. This is well illustrated by the following chart from a recent blog by Kristensen.⁸



Russia has consistently been above the New START warhead level since mid-2014 while deployed U.S. warheads have significantly declined. The Russian warhead numbers reflect the deployment of both new heavily MIRVed ICBMs and SLBMs without compensating reductions in older forces. In 2012, the Obama administration predicted that Russia would deploy “several substantially MIRVed new strategic missiles...”⁹ It did not, however, predict that Russian forces would grow. Indeed, measured against the declared Russian number of 1,400 deployed strategic nuclear warheads in mid-2014, the Russian force has increased over 28%.¹⁰ In the same period, U.S. deployed strategic nuclear warheads declined from 1,688 to 1,367, a decline of 19%.

Concerning deployed delivery and non-deployed delivery vehicles, Kristensen states, “Russia and the United States continue to reduce the overall size of their strategic nuclear forces.”¹¹ This is certainly true for the U.S., but it is not true for Russia as is illustrated by Kristensen’s own chart. There has been little change in the Russian number of deployed delivery vehicles since New START EIF. He does not



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describe what he believes Russia will do in order to comply with the deployed warhead limit of New START in the limited remaining time for Treaty compliant reductions. Regarding Russian elimination of delivery vehicles, Mr. Kristensen says, “Russia will have to dismantle another 47 launchers to meet the limit of 800 deployed and non-deployed launchers by February 2018. Those launchers will likely come from [the] retirement of the remaining Delta III SSBNs, retirement of additional Soviet-era ICBMs, and destruction of empty excess ICBM silos.”¹² But, there are no announced Russian programs to do any of this. The closer the Russians get to the deadline without action, the less palatable their options will be. Submarine ballistic missile launchers are not removed from accountability by “retiring” them. Under the New START Treaty, the process involves “...removing all missile launch tube hatches, their associated superstructure fairings, and, if applicable, gas generators.”¹³ There is also a time consuming verification provision that requires the display of the submarine for 60 days.¹⁴

It is unlikely that Russia will decide to eliminate the Delta III force anytime soon: one of them reportedly has just been put through an expensive overhaul process, and Russia launched an SS-N-18 SLBM from a Delta III submarine during an unannounced large strategic nuclear exercise in October 2016.¹⁵ Eliminating the Delta III submarines would reduce the Russian Pacific Fleet to two ballistic missile submarines,¹⁶ something Russia would likely want to avoid. Moreover, it is impossible to compensate even for the current coverage of 246 deployed strategic nuclear warheads (much less the additional warheads Russia will deploy by February 2018) by removing warheads from Delta III submarines—there simply are not enough of them. Pavel Podvig, a Russian expatriate who probably does the best current order of battle assessments for Russian strategic nuclear forces, says that Russia has three operational Delta III submarines.¹⁷ A 2016 article by Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris credits them with two.¹⁸ Yet, it would take over five Delta IIIs to compensate for 246 warheads currently over the New START ceiling. Announced Russian strategic nuclear modernization programs suggest that Russia would have to compensate for about 100 *additional* warheads by February 2018.¹⁹ To be in compliance with New START by disarming Delta III submarines would require over seven active submarines to be disarmed. Thus, a route to Russian New START compliance through Delta III disarming is not possible.

Kristensen’s assertion that Russia’s nuclear warhead advantage is going to be temporary is unlikely to be true regardless of what Moscow plans to do with regard to New START Treaty compliance. The Russian advantage in deployed strategic nuclear warheads is probably larger than the New START numbers suggest because New START accounting does not fully reflect Russian enhancements of its heavy bomber capability. Under New START, a bomber load of weapons is counted as a single warhead irrespective of how many warheads it actually carries. Indeed, in 2010, Hans Kristensen told *The New York Times* that the bomber weapon counting rule was “totally nuts” because it “frees up a large pool of warhead spaces under the treaty limit that enable each country to deploy many more warheads than would otherwise be the case...”²⁰ *RIA Novosti*, a Russian government news agency, reported, “Under the Treaty, one nuclear warhead will be counted for each deployed heavy bomber *which can carry 12-24 missiles or bombs*, depending on its type.”²¹ The 2016 article by Kristensen and Norris cited above states that Russia now has about 2,600 real deployed strategic nuclear warheads.²² Assuming the Obama administration has not increased the number of nuclear weapons at our heavy bomber bases from the 2011 level, the U.S. probably has about 1,550 deployed missile and bomber strategic nuclear weapons today.²³ This suggests a real Russian advantage of approximately 1,000 deployed warheads—hardly a passing blip.



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Kristensen also claims that both the U.S. and Russia have the same number of nuclear warheads – 4,500. He cites no source for the Russian number and it is extremely unlikely that the Russian nuclear stockpile is this small. Russia has more deployed strategic nuclear warheads than the United States and ten times the number of tactical nuclear weapons.²⁴ The Obama administration has described the difference in tactical nuclear weapons as “hundreds” vs. “thousands.”²⁵ In 2009, the main official Russian news agency *ITAR TASS* (now called *TASS*) reported that Russia “probably” had between 15,000 to 17,000 nuclear weapons.²⁶ The estimate of Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris for 2009 is about half this number.²⁷ In November 2011, the Obama administration estimated Russia had 4,000-6,500 nuclear weapons.²⁸ The U.S. nuclear weapons number Kristensen is using is from the Obama administration, but it does not distinguish between active and inactive weapons, which is a significant difference. Thus, Kristensen’s comparison is, at best, misleading because he compares a U.S. number which includes active and inactive weapons to a dubious Russian number which apparently counts only active Russian weapons. Kristensen appears to ignore the fact that Russia has maintained a large and fully functional nuclear weapons complex reportedly capable of producing 2,000 weapons per year, while we have not.²⁹

Russia is unlikely to make maximum use of the remaining time for reductions to meet New START ceilings. Instead, it appears to be planning for a major confrontation with the United States over Eastern Europe, economic sanctions imposed upon them over their aggression in Ukraine, and the deployment of missile defenses in Europe. There is a great deal of talk in the Russian State media concerning an imminent nuclear war with the West.³⁰ Pavel Felgenhauer, a distinguished Russian journalist, has suggested that the Russian military is fanning tensions to protect the Russian military budget from cuts. He writes, “The most effective way to secure greater budgetary allocations, therefore, is to amplify tensions with the US and make all-out war a distinct possibility.”³¹ Another distinguished Russian journalist, Alexander Golts, has sarcastically observed, “We have just one need now, dear fellow citizens - how to prepare in the best possible way for the war that, if we analyse the actions of our own chiefs, is on the point of breaking out.”³² Both noted the ominous implications of recent reported Russian nuclear civil defense actions.

According Russian U.N. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, U.S.-Russian relations are at the worst point since the 1973 Middle East crisis.³³ This crisis involved a serious risk of military action by the Soviet Union and the U.S. “responded by putting its nuclear forces on worldwide alert...”³⁴ If Russia is planning for a confrontation with the next U.S. President, it certainly will not reduce its strategic nuclear forces anytime soon. Nuclear threats of many types will be a major part of Russian pressure on the U.S. to accept Russian domination of Eastern Europe and to withdraw missile defense from Europe.

There is precedent for Russian expressions of hostility following U.S. elections. The day after the U.S. election in 2008, then-President Dmitry Medvedev made nuclear related threats in a speech before the Russian Duma. He stated that in response to U.S. deployment of missile defense in Europe:

For example, we had planned to decommission three missile regiments of a missile division deployed in Kozelsk from combat readiness and to disband the division by 2010. I have decided to abstain from these plans. Nothing will disband. Moreover, we will deploy the Iskander missile system in the Kaliningrad Region to be able, if necessary, to neutralise the missile defence system. Naturally, we envisage using the resources of the Russian Navy for these purposes as well.³⁵

In 2008, Russia represented a more modest threat to the West than it now does. Today, Russia has much more extensive nuclear modernization programs underway than in 2008. Typical Russian nuclear



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threats involve the targeting of nuclear missiles and the threat of preemptive nuclear strikes.³⁶ One of the most explicit threats was made in 2015 when the Russian Ambassador to Denmark declared, “I don’t think that Danes fully understand the consequence if Denmark joins the American-led missile defence shield. If they do, then Danish warships will be targets for Russian nuclear missiles.”³⁷ Russian nuclear threats may be less restrained after the U.S. election. The deployment of Russian nuclear capable Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad has already happened. Just before the October 2016 Russian exercise in Kaliningrad involving nuclear capable Iskander missiles, *TASS* reported the Iskander would “deliver a simulated preemptive strike against the missile systems and other remote critical targets of a simulated enemy.”³⁸ Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius said this deployment involved an improved version of the Iskander with a range of 700-km, which also raises the issue of compliance with the INF Treaty.³⁹ He indicated the purpose of this was to “seek concessions from the West.”⁴⁰

Russia is well aware that there has been no apparent U.S. response to their INF Treaty violations. Absent a major change in policy, there would likely be little or no serious U.S. response to Russian “suspension” of its obligations under the New START Treaty. Russia has little to lose if it initiates a post-election nuclear crisis, assuming of course it does not get out of hand – which is apparently what Russian leaders believe. Putin is a risk taker. In the 1990s, as Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, he developed Russia’s doctrine of nuclear first use during conventional warfare.⁴¹ In September 2016, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter pointed out the danger that Russia may resort to “to smaller but still unprecedentedly terrible attacks...to try to coerce a conventionally superior opponent to back off or abandon an ally during a crisis.”⁴² Hopefully, the likely Putin’s post-election provocation will not go beyond words. However, wishful thinking is not an effective deterrence policy. We need to enhance our deterrence posture promptly to minimize the chance of a major Russian miscalculation.



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