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Arms Control and the New START Treaty

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Amb. Marshall S. Billingslea is Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control. These remarks were delivered at a symposium on “Arms Control and the New START Treaty” hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on November 17, 2020. The views reflected here are his own.

Thank you, David, for that introduction and thank you to the National Institute for Public Policy for hosting this important discussion. And thanks to all of you tuning in from home.

As we move inexorably towards February, I’m constantly asked by allies, partners, our Congress, reporters—you name it—whether the New START Treaty will be extended or if another agreement will be struck. To have a substantive discussion about the future of New START or any other nuclear arms control agreement, we first need to make sure we understand the past.

Unfortunately, the Russian Federation has steadily increased its reliance on nuclear weapons. They have adopted a highly provocative nuclear doctrine that embraces early escalation and use of nuclear weapons—a strategy called “escalate to win.” I have sat across the table from the Russian General Staff now on several occasions, and I can tell you that their thinking has regressed substantially on this topic. Astoundingly, they asserted in our last discussion on



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doctrine that the laws of armed conflict, particularly the concept of proportionality, do not apply to nuclear weapons. We find this deeply troubling.

In keeping with this dangerous way of thinking, Russia is building up and modernizing an arsenal of thousands of nuclear warheads that are completely unconstrained by the New START treaty. When the Obama administration negotiated New START, they knew that 60 percent of Russia's arsenal would escape any form of limitations, and they were rightly criticized by the Senate for it. By the way, that ratio has steadily worsened over the past decade, as the size and variety of nuclear weapons deployed on tactical and shorter-range systems has surged, along with mammoth investments by the Russians in their nuclear weapons production infrastructure. Russia has today far more nuclear warheads for non-strategic range systems than it does for the systems counted under New START, and they have been adding many more annually. Moreover, Putin has essentially walked away from the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) that were affirmed by his predecessors and our own Presidents.

Russia continues to behave as though there's some sort of distinction between the use of strategic versus tactical nuclear weapons. This likely is because their war plans for invading NATO territory contemplate scenarios where they would employ a battlefield strike, believing NATO would capitulate, rather than retaliate. But we have warned that the use of any nuclear weapon—whether mounted on an ICBM or fired from an artillery tube—has strategic implications. It would unquestionably change the nature of the conflict.

It is because of this, and because of Russia's pursuit of ridiculous Strangelovian science projects such as "Poseidon" and "Skyfall," which do not fit within any nuclear deterrence framework, that we have refused to reaffirm the Gorbachev era joint statement that "nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." The Russians have repeatedly asked us to issue this statement with them, as well as in a P5 context.¹ But we are not going to ask President Trump to affirm something with Vladimir Putin when we know that Putin thinks that a nuclear war can be won, and his people are constantly wargaming and planning on how to fight one. No future President should sign up to such nonsense, and they should be roundly castigated for it if they do.

Now, lying about their doctrine, about implementing the PNIs, about their promises not to test with nuclear yield at Novaya Zemlya, are just par for the course with the Russians. They cannot be trusted when it comes to arms control.

We must not forget that Russia clandestinely cheated on the INF Treaty for more than a decade. They secretly produced, tested, and deployed an intermediate range, nuclear tipped cruise missile. The Russian military now deploys multiple battalions of the SSC-8 missile, presumably aimed at NATO.



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The United States, on the other hand, fields no similar system, yet. Unlike Russia, we scrupulously honored our legal obligation to forswear these types of weapons. But the Russians blew up the INF Treaty with their conniving. Frankly that will wind up being a good thing, given that Communist China was never bound by it, and has proceeded to build more than 1,200 such missiles across more than 13 different categories. Now we see Vladimir Putin, desperately trying to lock in his exploitive advantage, by calling for an INF Moratorium. So he can build and deploy battalions of these nuclear-tipped missiles, but we would be precluded? Another of these terrible arms control gambits that President Trump and all NATO allies, except the French, have rebuffed.

No, instead we need to accelerate development of the Ground Launched Cruise Missile (GLCM) for the Marine Corps, and the Army's Mid-Range capabilities. We need to field multiple deployable batteries by 2023 at the latest, work on rotational concepts with both NATO and with individual allies, and make sure that the GLCM is designed to be exportable so that we can provide it to allies for their own fielding. We need this capability to deter not just Russia, but even more so for China. No future President should be naïve enough to fall into Putin's INF Moratorium trap, and we should be vigilant on this front.

The list of Russian arms control chicanery is long. I warned when the Senate ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention that Russia planned to violate it, including with developing the deadly series of Novichok nerve agents. Now we see the Russians using Novichok in multiple assassination attempts.

And of course, Russia has systematically dismantled conventional arms control in Europe. They abandoned the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty. To this day, Russia is violating the Open Skies Treaty. They're not implementing the Vienna Document notification requirements, and their occupation of Crimea, parts of Georgia and Moldova, and their unconventional warfare operations in Ukraine all are flagrant violations of the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act.

We need to keep this in mind as we contemplate new negotiations and reconsider old agreements. Russia is a serial arms control violator. The question is not whether they will cheat on any given treaty, if it constrains them. It is how.

That is why effective verification has been a fundamental principle of arms control. An agreement with Russia that cannot be verified is not an agreement; it's a folly.

The United States must not be in the business of negotiating new agreements or extending old ones if we cannot be assured that the other parties will hold up their end of the bargain. I know Bryan is going to speak to the massive verification deficiencies of the New START Treaty, so I



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will not delve further. Suffice to say that this Treaty, from a verification standpoint, is pure folly.

When President Trump appointed me as Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control, his instructions were clear: Defend our Nation's people, interests, and allies while pursuing the most complete, effective, and verifiable arms control agreement possible.

In that spirit, President Trump offered President Putin the opportunity to do something that none of his predecessors were willing or able to do: put a cap on both countries' nuclear stockpiles, covering all nuclear warheads.

This was a bold and unprecedented proposal, and we were pleased to come to an agreement at the highest levels of our respective governments. Of course, in pursuing an agreement that would be complete, effective, and verifiable, we knew we would need firm agreement on two key points:

What exactly are we freezing? And at what level will we freeze?

These are not secondary considerations. We need simple answers to these very straightforward questions—what is a warhead and how many will be allowed under the cap. We gave suggested answers to both questions. Unfortunately, Russia has so far declined to respond in kind. This is regrettable, as we are at the brink of what has the potential to be an historic agreement.

Covering all nuclear warheads is a crucial part of a “complete” agreement. The Senate, in its resolution of ratification, demanded that the Obama administration pursue an agreement that captured all of Russia's stockpile. Something they failed to do for eight years. Something we achieved in just over six months. Vladimir Putin has publicly agreed to a cap on total warhead levels, which if implemented, would halt Russia's continued build-up in its tactical, battlefield nuclear weapons. We have been clear: we are willing to extend the New START Treaty, but only if it is accompanied by a framework agreement that covers all warheads, and by development of a verification regime to go with it. Given that the Kremlin acceded to this, this is now the de minimis threshold for all future nuclear arms control deals with Russia. Any future deal which fails to cap all warheads should be regarded as an abject failure. Any simple extension of New START without capitalizing on Putin's acquiescence to an overall warhead limit would demonstrate a profound lack of negotiating acumen.

That is, by the way, why we are not racing to adopt a fake “freeze.” A fake freeze would be one without any definitions, without an exchange of data on warhead levels and types, and without a way ahead on verification. A real freeze, on the other hand, will address these crucial elements. There is still time to hammer out these details.



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The other part, of course, is that any future nuclear arms control treaty be multilateral, including China. On this, we have also secured Russia's agreement, though they also demand inclusion of the UK and France. My counterpart, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov has said, "We cannot endlessly negotiate with the United States the limitation of nuclear arms, while some other countries are strengthening their nuclear and missile capabilities." He added that "Making nuclear disarmament a multilateral process is becoming a priority." To that end, Russia has even provided text, to which we have agreed. So this is another *de minimis* threshold. Any future nuclear arms treaty that does not include China should be regarded as a complete failure.

For too long, the foreign policy "establishment" opined that integration with China will lead inevitably to its liberalization. If we just traded more with China, if we just engaged in more diplomatic dialogue, eventually they would come around. Astonishingly, there are still those who think this way – who think that a democratic China is just one more trade deal, or one more roundtable, away.

If anything, the opposite is true.

Chairman Xi Jinping is not a "democratic leader," he is a dictator. Someone who runs concentration camps for Uyghurs, crushes peaceful protests in Hong Kong, attacks Indian troops on their side of the border, fabricates borders by building islands in the South China Sea, tries to cripple its neighbors with trade embargoes, and is planning on invading and crushing Taiwan's democracy.

There is no excuse for ambivalence or ignorance about the rise and intentions of this brutal regime. The world saw the Chinese Communist Party's true colors at the outset of the Coronavirus pandemic. As the world sought answers about the novel virus, the Chinese government hid behind a Great Wall of Secrecy. More than 1.2 million men, women, and children are dead as a result.

Now, when it comes to their nuclear buildup, the CCP is hiding behind the same Wall of Secrecy.

China steadfastly refuses to say how many nuclear weapons it has, how many it plans to develop, or how it plans to use them. For decades now, attempts to engage the Chinese Communist Party in a substantive dialogue on nuclear arms control have proven futile.

Unfortunately, this sort of deception campaign is nothing new. There's an old Chinese military stratagem: "hide a dagger in a smile." It's still being taught – and apparently practiced – today.



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We recently declassified intelligence on China's secretive crash build up, including our analysis of images from China's 2019 Military Parade, held in celebration of the 70th anniversary of the founding of Communist China. Much of the parade was standard propaganda: they unveil new military technology and trot out goose-stepping soldiers in crisp uniforms. But one thing in particular caught our attention: their display of missiles stretched over two and a half miles – nearly 10 times longer than what it was a decade ago.

Among the missiles featured was their Dongfeng-41 missile, or DF-41. The DF-41 boasts the longest range in the PLA's operational arsenal. It's built to destroy a target up to 9,000 miles away and estimated that the DF-41 could reach America in 30 minutes. This missile is an integral part of their arsenal, and they want more of them. Lots more.

In May of 2020, the editor-in-chief of the *Global Times* – a state-controlled media outlet in Beijing – wrote and published an article calling for the rapid expansion of the PLA's nuclear arsenal. The author argued that the arsenal ought to house at least 1,000 nuclear warheads. More specifically, he says this arsenal should include at least 100 of these DF-41 missiles capable of reaching the United States in 30 minutes. And what does the author think of people who disagree? Well, "they are as naïve as children."

There is absolutely no way he could have made these suggestions without the approval of the senior-most levels of the Chinese Communist Party.

Of course, the CCP doesn't plan to let these weapons collect dust. In 2019, China launched at least 225 ballistic missiles. That's more than the rest of the world combined. The same was true in 2018.

Even now – while nations desperately redirect their entire governments to fighting the virus that China deliberately let spread – their missile testing continues. As of October, they have already shot off 180 missiles.

And speaking of testing, they've dug out a small mountain at the nuclear testing site Lop Nur. The level of activity there suggests they are operating the site year-round. This raises serious questions, and grave concerns. Unfortunately, the answers are barricaded behind their Great Wall of Secrecy.

Everything I've just detailed – and I could go on – are reflections of a fundamental shift in China's nuclear posture. In 2015, for example, they claimed to be interested in maintaining only a "lean and effective" nuclear force. Just four years later, the CCP retired that phrase – and the intention with it.



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As for their so-called “No First Use” policy? Well, not only is the policy shot through with holes so wide that – as our strategic commander has said – you could “drive a bus through it,” but the systems they’re building clearly reveal the policy is propaganda, not principle. While they won’t publicly admit it, they are actively developing a nuclear “triad” – the ability to launch nuclear weapons by land, air, and sea.

Chairman Xi Jinping says he expects the PLA to become a “first tier” military force, on par with Russia and the United States. The rapidity and composition of their buildup – coupled with their economic predations and grotesque human rights violations – suggests he may have even grander ambitions.

This cannot continue. With every missile launched – with each truckload of rock excavated from Lop Nur – with every new building constructed at their warhead and missile production complexes – with each sinister insinuation in state media – the CCP brings the world closer to an unprecedented nuclear arms race.

For months, we have been calling on the Chinese Communist Party to negotiate in good faith. This is not merely an ask that we have of the Chinese; this is their obligation. They are legally bound to honor it. Article VI of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – more commonly known as the NPT – states plainly that all parties must pursue negotiations in “good faith” at “an early date,” in order to prevent a nuclear arms race. China is perilously close to standing in direct violation of the NPT.

China claims to be a great power but is clearly incapable of acting like one.

We are at the crossroads. No longer can nations avert their eyes and pretend not to see the dagger that the CCP is waving around. We have made clear that tacit support is not sufficient. The time has come for all nations to speak up and call on the Chinese to act responsibly and honor their obligations. Now is the time for countries who historically have taken strong positions on nuclear weapons to demonstrate their sincerity on the topic. Many nations have already answered the call, urging Russia to take our deal and on China to sit down and negotiate. The credibility of those countries who have to date remained silent, including some of our Allies in Asia, is on the line. They should speak now, while we are at a historic juncture where they can influence the outcome, or be prepared to hold their tongues on nuclear arms control matters in the future.

I spoke a little earlier about the naïve optimism of those who expect China to democratize or Russia to behave in good faith. Just as we should be careful not to indulge in senseless optimism, we shouldn’t succumb to pessimistic doomsday predictions. Yes, we are facing grave challenges today. But we have been challenged before. Abraham Lincoln, a man who well-understood the relationship between our democratic principles and our national security,



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famously said “All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.” “As a nation of freemen,” he reminded us, “we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”

If we are to be destroyed, our destruction will come from within. I am counting on Tim to talk about what could constitute our own self-sabotage, such as walking away from our nuclear modernization, shelving the GLCM or the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile, or the follow-on to the ALCM, or negotiating away our missile defenses. For my part, I have set forth the mandatory minimums of any future arms control agreement, and even that is not enough. It must be accompanied by robust recapitalization and expansion of our nuclear enterprise.

Lincoln was right then; the same is true today. So long as we retain our faith in our Founding principles, we have no cause for pessimism. Those of us on this call today know that a democratic people—a free people—will build faster, build stronger, and build better than a people whose determination and ingenuity are strangled by the iron grip of totalitarian rule. You and I know that a people who fight to preserve their freedom will always fight with greater spirit than a people who fight to dominate others.

As we have shown time and again, when the American people set their mind on a common goal, nothing—no one—can stop us. When called to the task, I know we’ll do it again. Thank you.

1. The “P5” refers to the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

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