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Overselling and Underperforming: The Exaggerated History of Arms Control Achievements

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Introduction

“The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” This quote, often attributed to Albert Einstein, may epitomize the Biden Administration’s approach to arms control.

The United States and Russia will soon initiate a new round of strategic stability talks, intended “to lay the groundwork for future arms control.”¹ President Biden has stated that arms control is important to stem the development and deployment of “new and dangerous and sophisticated weapons that are coming on the scene now that reduce the times of response, that raise the prospects of accidental war.”² But has arms control achieved what its most passionate proponents have promised? And have the results of arms control treaties matched expectations, as conveyed to the Congress and the American public by various administrations?



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While arms control theoretically can contribute to stability, historical experience suggests that many arms control agreements not only failed to achieve the results advocates confidently predicted but at times facilitated precisely the kinds of destabilizing Soviet and Russian nuclear weapons deployments they were meant to preclude.

For the past half century, the United States has looked to arms control as a means of managing the strategic arms competition and forestalling an “arms race.” Arms control treaties were thought to be useful in maintaining strategic “stability,” avoiding unnecessary economic expenditures, allowing the reallocation of scarce resources for other military priorities, reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy, and demonstrating the declining utility of nuclear weapons in international relations.

During the Cold War, the United States pursued arms control in the belief that both the Soviet Union and United States shared the same goals and objectives. However, a significant body of evidence suggests that U.S. and Soviet arms control approaches reflected diametrically different views of nuclear weapons and nuclear strategy. While the United States sought arms control agreements as a means of codifying deterrence stability via a “balance of terror,” the Soviet Union sought to exploit arms control negotiations to attain a meaningful nuclear superiority and coercive capability over the United States. While the United States sought to limit counterforce capabilities and to preserve mutual vulnerability, the Soviet Union sought to achieve the opposite—a significant growth in its own counterforce capabilities and the protection of its national territory against nuclear attack.

With the demise of the Soviet Union and a decline in Russia’s conventional military capabilities, Moscow placed increased reliance on its nuclear forces to compensate for the asymmetry in conventional forces. This increased emphasis on nuclear weapons in Russian military strategy was exactly the opposite of U.S. policy, which sought to decrease reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy. These competing objectives carried over into arms control negotiations.

The Lessons of History

Consistent with U.S. arms control objectives and the perceived threat environment, the United States reduced the size of its nuclear stockpile by more than 75 percent since the end of the Cold War³ and deferred necessary modernization of its strategic delivery platforms to the point where they now face block obsolescence. Neither Russia nor other nuclear powers have followed a similar trajectory. In fact, Russia has continued the development, production, and deployment of new and more sophisticated nuclear systems to the point where – according to Russian President Vladimir Putin – more than 85 percent of its strategic nuclear forces have been modernized.⁴



Despite these divergent trends, many in the West continue to see arms control as necessary for providing stability, transparency, and predictability in the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship; fulfilling U.S. obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty; reducing the size of nuclear arsenals and the risks of nuclear use; fostering allied cooperation; and maintaining a bipartisan consensus in support of the current U.S. nuclear modernization program. Yet, an objective analysis that weighs arms control expectations against achievements demonstrates that arms control as a Cold War process has failed to live up to its promise of reducing nuclear risks.⁵ Indeed, the contemporary affinity by arms control supporters for more agreements reflects the idealistic sentiments of the disarmament community and may actually undermine support for necessary U.S. nuclear modernization efforts. Importantly, it overlooks the fundamentally different strategic objectives of the parties and downplays or ignores the history of Russian violations.

Contrary to the predictions of arms control advocates, the various arms control agreements negotiated by the United States did not lead to reduced military expenditures. In fact, many of the agreements arrived at were portrayed by various U.S. administrations and sold to the Senate as requiring full funding of all U.S. nuclear modernization programs. For example, the SALT I agreement and SALT II Treaty (which was fatally flawed and never entered into force) were portrayed by the Nixon and Carter Administrations as beneficial to U.S. security only if key nuclear modernization programs were carried out. And the Senate's approval of the New START Treaty was conditioned on assurances that the Obama Administration was committed to a wholesale recapitalization of the U.S. strategic nuclear Triad.⁶

As history demonstrates, the United States was successful in significantly reducing the size of its nuclear arsenal under various arms control treaties yet often failed to modernize the residual nuclear capabilities considered to be essential for ensuring that U.S. deterrent capabilities would remain effective under the terms of the arms control treaties reached. On the other hand, the Soviet Union, and subsequently Russia, routinely developed and deployed strategic forces of increasing sophistication and capability, circumventing or outright violating provisions of arms control agreements that were intended to constrain Moscow's ability to threaten the United States and U.S. allies. Consequently, the narrative that arms control has benefitted U.S. security by stabilizing the bilateral strategic relationship and moderating a Soviet/Russian nuclear arms buildup is questionable at best.

A Record of Unfulfilled Expectations from SALT I and the ABM Treaty to New START

The first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) was signed in 1972 after several years of negotiations with the Soviet Union. It was intended as an interim measure to halt the growth in Soviet hard target counterforce capabilities, deemed by the United States at the time to be



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destabilizing and reflective of a Soviet doctrine that emphasized the importance of striking first—despite subsequent Soviet propaganda statements suggesting the USSR maintained a policy of nuclear “no first use.”⁷ Congressional testimony by treaty supporters cited official Nixon Administration statements suggesting that SALT I would “provide for a more stable strategic balance” and be a useful step toward preventing an “arms race.”⁸

A former Harvard University professor involved in national security research and studies in the 1970s assessed the three major U.S. objectives for SALT this way:

The first objective was to achieve essential equivalence in the strategic forces permitted to each side; the second was to find limitations that would improve the stability of these forces in times of crisis and, in this and other ways, reduce the risk of nuclear war; the third was to reduce arms competition and, in time, military expenditures.... At first glance, essential equivalence may seem to have been established by the equal ceilings. But these in fact represent only very vague limitations in the simplest categories of judging strategic force. Moreover, they appear to have been made possible by settling on numbers sufficiently high to allow deferment of many problems that would have had to be solved had the numbers been lower....

Progress toward the second objective has been even more limited. The principal achievement has been the limitation of anti-ballistic missiles to negligible numbers. This was supposed to allow both sides to forego multiplying their strategic forces to compensate for those that might fail to penetrate the defenses of the other side. However, this opportunity has not been grasped: the multiplication of warheads through MIRVing has instead become the major occupation of both strategic establishments. With the number of warheads growing toward a figure that is more than tenfold greater than that originally thought adequate for deterrence, with continued improvements in yield and accuracy, and with a growing effort on both sides to find ways to reduce the invulnerability of the sea-based deterrent of the other, we certainly do not seem to be moving toward a strategic environment that is more stable in times of crisis. That the third objective, the reduction of the arms competition and military budgets in the strategic area, has receded rather than come closer is evident in the budgets and planned strategic programs on both sides.

Thus the objectives that the United States government had set for SALT remain unrealized.⁹

Critics of the agreement, including the late Professor William R. Van Cleave, a member of the original U.S. SALT negotiating delegation, argued that there was an “apparent inconsistency” between arguing that the treaty would accomplish its major goals, but only if the United States pursued essential modernization programs unconstrained by the treaty. Van Cleave argued



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that the SALT I agreement (and its corollary Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty limiting strategic defenses) “do not solve or even ease our strategic force problems.” By contrast, he noted, “They do, unfortunately, accept higher numerical levels of the threat than we ever before contemplated and do restrict at the same time U.S. ability to cope with the threat.” “Their tendency, therefore, is toward less rather than more stability,” he noted, stating, “Unless our expectations of their promotional value are shortly fulfilled and unless in the meantime we push compensatory programs, there is a strong risk that they could be wildly destabilizing.”¹⁰ Indeed, after the signing of the SALT I Interim Agreement, the Soviet Union dramatically expanded the number of MIRVed ICBM warheads, improving their accuracy and counterforce capability despite U.S. efforts to limit this growth.

Also signed in 1972, the U.S.-Soviet ABM Treaty prohibited nationwide defenses against strategic ballistic missile attack. The treaty was thought to be useful for preserving strategic stability, in that it codified a situation of mutual vulnerability—considered essential to deterring a first strike by either party.

In negotiating the ABM Treaty, the United States sought to convince the Soviets that strategic defenses were destabilizing and unnecessary. Strategic missile defenses also came to be regarded in the United States as an obstacle to achieving negotiated offensive arms limitations via arms control because U.S. deployment of missile defense was expected—per a U.S.-led action-reaction cycle—to compel the Soviet Union to expand its offensive missile capabilities to overcome U.S. defenses. Consequently, it was argued that U.S. strategic missile defense would be both ineffective and an impediment to arms control—as well as prohibitively expensive.¹¹

These arguments posited that if the United States stopped its missile defense program, the Soviet Union would halt its fast-paced strategic offensive missile program, i.e., U.S.-led inaction-inaction. Despite this contention, however, the Soviet Union actually accelerated the expansion of its strategic offensive capabilities after the United States scaled down, refocused, and eventually terminated its deployment of strategic missile defenses. The number of Soviet strategic nuclear weapons reportedly grew from approximately 2,500 in 1972 to more than 10,000 in the late-1980s.¹² Other published unclassified, unofficial estimates indicate the total Soviet nuclear weapons stockpile nearly tripled from roughly 15,000 in 1972 to more than 40,000 at its peak in the mid-1980s.¹³ This was precisely the opposite effect that arms control proponents had predicted.¹⁴

Judging from the scale of Soviet strategic offensive and defensive missile programs after the ABM Treaty was signed, the Soviet Union obviously did not adhere to the U.S. concept of a stable balance of terror or the associated action-reaction logic that U.S. defensive systems were the reason for its missile buildup. In this case also, U.S. arms control goals appear to have been unfulfilled.



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Likewise, the officially espoused U.S. objectives for “stability,” “transparency,” and “predictability” that were trumpeted as expected outcomes of subsequent strategic arms control treaties never materialized. For example, despite then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance’s testimony that SALT II “will greatly assist us in maintaining a stable balance of nuclear forces” and “will slow the momentum of Soviet strategic programs,”¹⁵ critics noted that “the provisions of SALT II permit the Soviets to do those things necessary from their standpoint to create an intolerable threat”¹⁶ to the U.S. deterrent force and that it would “neither enhance deterrence nor add to stability.”¹⁷

More than a decade later, a Congressional Budget Office report on the 1991 START I Treaty concluded:

START would not, however, fulfill many of the ambitions that some hold for nuclear arms control. Its mandated reductions in forces would be only about half as great as the 50 percent cuts Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev originally envisioned at Reykjavik in 1986. They would do no more than return U.S. and Soviet arsenals to their levels of 1982, when the START negotiations began. Moreover, modernizing nuclear arsenals could continue unconstrained, provided that enough older systems were retired from service to keep total deployed weapons below the specified ceilings.¹⁸

Similarly, proponents of the 2010 New START Treaty – which the Biden Administration has extended for another five years – argued that it would help reset relations with Russia after years of animosity and distrust, fostered by more aggressive Russian behavior directed against the United States and its NATO allies; that it would help strengthen U.S. nonproliferation goals, consistent with obligations in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty; and that it would help lay the groundwork for additional movement toward the ultimate goal of eliminating nuclear weapons. President Obama declared that with New START, the United States and Russia would be “setting the stage for further cuts and cooperation between our countries.”¹⁹ Indeed, the Obama Administration argued that without ratification of New START, further arms control agreements – including limitations on Russia’s significant advantage in non-strategic nuclear forces – would be impossible to negotiate. In fact, Russia has to date rejected additional arms control restrictions that would limit the development of its new strategic nuclear weapons or compromise its advantage in non-strategic nuclear weapons, despite the New START Treaty and its extension.

Opponents of New START contended it was an unnecessary and irrelevant Cold War solution to a decidedly post-Cold War problem – that of rogue state proliferation and the potential for nuclear terrorism. Moreover, the treaty was criticized for establishing an inflexible cap of 1,550 strategic nuclear weapons over the next decade, when changes in the strategic environment might require greater flexibility for deterrence and assurance purposes. Importantly, the



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treaty's ostensibly "equal" limits on deployed strategic weapons were set at a level that allowed Russia to build up to the limits while requiring the United States to reduce. And because of the New START Treaty's counting rules – which count a bomber as one weapon regardless of how many weapons it could carry – critics argued that in reality Russia could not only exceed the treaty's 1,550 cap on deployed strategic nuclear weapons but could also possess a strategic arsenal that exceeded the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT, or the "Moscow Treaty") maximum limit of 2,200.²⁰

In addition, although the New START Treaty was hailed by its supporters as restoring transparency and predictability to the U.S.-Russia relationship, its verification procedures were less robust than those contained in the original START I Treaty, undermining the treaty's verifiability.²¹ Consequently, its value as a tool for improving the bilateral relationship is not only problematic, but its purported benefits – as sold by supporters to the Congress and the American people – far exceeded its accomplishments.

Moreover, Russian arms control behavior reflects a pattern of selective compliance – hardly an exemplar of predictability. Indeed, Russian cheating on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty led the Trump Administration to withdraw from both in 2019 and 2020, respectively.

Conclusion

Overall, the issue of whether arms control treaties accomplished their intended goals and objectives, as presented by the Executive branch of government to the American public and to the Senate for its advice and consent, is open to debate; however, there is reason to believe that the promoted benefits of arms control either did not fully materialize or fell far short of predictions. Although the various arms control treaties the United States agreed to were thought by their proponents to be a way of fostering greater stability in the U.S.-Russia relationship, in reality the United States today faces a much more assertive Russia than before – one that has:

- revised its military doctrine to place increasing emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons;
- engaged in aggressive military actions to change the borders of Europe through the use of force for the first time since World War II;
- exercised its military and nuclear forces more frequently and on a greater scale than seen during the Cold War;
- increased its nuclear threats against other states, including NATO allies;
- accelerated an extensive nuclear modernization program, including the continued development of non-strategic nuclear weapons;



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- developed a range of new strategic nuclear weapons systems, including some that are not captured by any arms control treaty; and
- violated its arms control commitments, including the INF and Open Skies treaties.

These developments suggest that the bilateral strategic relationship is not characterized today by a greater degree of openness, transparency, predictability, or stability. Indeed, numerous commentators have suggested that the strategic situation today is one of greater risk and uncertainty, and that the potential for nuclear conflict is greater than ever.²² Hence, the main objectives of arms control espoused by its proponents appear to be ephemeral at best, if not completely illusory.

Another quote—this one variously attributed to George Santayana or Edmund Burke—is relevant here: “Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Indeed, history is an excellent teacher. When it comes to arms control, the Biden Administration should take a lesson from history before rushing to conclude yet another treaty that fails to live up to its promises.

1. The White House, “U.S.-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability,” Jun 16, 2021, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability/>.
2. “Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference,” Hôtel du Parc des Eaux-Vives, Geneva, Switzerland, June 16, 2021, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/16/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-4/>.
3. See Department of State, “Fact Sheet: Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile,” April 27, 2015, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/241377.pdf>.
4. See remarks by Vladimir Putin at a meeting of the Defense Ministry Board, December 21, 2020, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64684>.
5. Even some arms control supporters have acknowledged its shortcomings. See, for example, Thomas C. Schelling, “What Went Wrong With Arms Control?,” *Foreign Affairs* (Winter 1985/86), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1985-12-01/what-went-wrong-arms-control>.
6. In its Resolution of Ratification for the New START Treaty, the U.S. Senate declared that “the United States is committed to accomplishing the modernization and replacement of its strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, and to ensuring the continued flexibility of United States conventional and nuclear delivery systems.” See “New START Treaty: Resolution Of Advice And Consent To Ratification,” December 22, 2010, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/153910.htm>. The Obama Administration also pledged a robust nuclear modernization effort in connection with the New START Treaty in the update to its “Section 1251 Report.” See *November 2010 Update to the National Defense Authorization Act of FY2010, Section 1251 Report, New START Treaty Framework and Nuclear Force Structure Plans*, available at https://www.lasg.org/budget/Sect1251_update_17Nov2010.pdf.
7. As stated in the Soviet publication *Whence the Threat to Peace*, “Soviet military doctrine is of a strictly defensive nature. It contains no pre-emptive strike concepts or guidelines for first use of nuclear weapons.... In contrast, US military doctrine has been based on pre-emptive strike and a constant readiness for first use of nuclear



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- weapons virtually from their inception.” See *Whence the Threat to Peace*, Fourth Edition (Moscow, USSR: Military Publishing House, Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1987), p. 11, available at <https://paxsims.files.wordpress.com/2020/07/whence-the-threat-to-peace-1987.pdf>.
8. See, for example, President Richard M. Nixon, “Message to the Senate Transmitting the Antiballistic Missile Treaty and the Interim Agreement on Strategic Offensive Arms,” June 13, 1972, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard Nixon, 1972* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), p. 674. Also see prepared statement of Dr. Jerome H. Kahan before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 28, 1972, in *Strategic Arms Limitation Agreements: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), p. 210, available at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-92shrg80942O/pdf/CHRG-92shrg80942O.pdf>.
 9. Paul Doty, “Strategic Arms Limitation After SALT I,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (Summer, 1975), p. 64.
 10. Testimony of Dr. William R. Van Cleave before the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 25, 1972, printed in *International Negotiation: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on National Security and International Operations of the Committee on Government Relations*, part 7, July 25, 1972, p. 230.
 11. Ironically, similar arguments are being voiced today by those who believe the United States should negotiate limits on missile defense as an inducement to obtain Russian agreement on offensive nuclear reductions. For example, see Jeffrey Lewis, “The Nuclear Option: Slowing a New Arms Race Means Compromising on Missile Defenses,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 22, 2021, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-02-22/nuclear-option>; Steven Pifer, “Should U.S. Missile Defenses Be a Part of Arms Control Negotiations With Russia?,” *The National Interest*, January 26, 2021, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/should-us-missile-defenses-be-part-arms-control-negotiations-russia-177092>; and Daryl G. Kimball, “Why Biden and Putin Should Restart Talks on Strategic Stability and Nuclear Arms Control,” *Just Security*, June 14, 2021, available at <https://www.justsecurity.org/76911/why-biden-and-putin-should-restart-talks-on-strategic-stability-and-nuclear-arms-control/>.
 12. See Amy F. Woolf, *Russia’s Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization*, Congressional Research Service, CRS Report R45861, July 20, 2020, pp. 8-9, available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R45861.pdf>. Also see Robert S. Norris and Thomas B. Cochran, *Nuclear Weapons Databook: US-USSR/Russian Strategic Offensive Nuclear Forces 1945-1996*, National Resources Defense Council, Inc. (Washington, D.C., January 1997), available at https://fas.org/nuke/norris/nuc_01009701a_181.pdf.
 13. Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, “Global nuclear weapons inventories, 1945–2013,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2013, Vol. 69, Issue 5, pp. 75-81, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1177/0096340213501363>.
 14. For a detailed analysis of this point, see David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith B. Payne, *The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.
 15. Testimony of Cyrus Vance before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, July 9, 1979, printed in U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *SALT II Senate Testimony*, July 9-11, 1979, p. 1.
 16. Testimony of Paul Nitze before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, September 11, 1979, printed in *Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, First Session, on the Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Treaty on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms and Protocol, Thereto, Together Referred to as the SALT II Treaty, Part 4*, p. 401, available at https://books.google.com/books?id=gHIWYhEl6g4C&pg=PA402&lpg=PA402&dq=nitze+I+see+nothing+in+SALT+II+which+relieves+our+missile+problems.+In+fact+I+see+the+reverse.+It+is+quite+clear+that+the+provisions+of+SALT+II+permit+the+Soviets+to+do+those+things+necessary+from+their+standpoint+to+create+an+intolerable+threat+to+our+Minutemen&source=bl&ots=sseuYDP7l_&sig=ACfU3U2L3dEjvelo2cG9ue3nbykNfn



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17. Testimony of Lt. Gen. Edward Rowny before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, August 1, 1979, printed in *Military Implications of the Treaty on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms and Protocol Thereto (SALT II Treaty)*, *Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, Part 2*, 96th Congress, First Session, July 30-August 2, 1979, p. 688-690.
18. Congressional Budget Office, *The START Treaty and Beyond*, October 1991, p. xi, available at https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/102nd-congress-1991-1992/reports/1991_10_thestarttreaty.pdf.
19. See President Obama's remarks at a news conference, April 13, 2010, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Barack Obama, 2010* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013), p. 486, available at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-2010-book1/pdf/PPP-2010-book1.pdf>.
20. See, for example, Mark B. Schneider, "Russian Nuclear Force Expansion and the Failure of Arms Control," *RealClear Defense*, October 24, 2019, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/10/24/russian_nuclear_force_expansion_and_the_failure_of_arms_control_114810.html.
21. For an excellent analysis of this issue, see Bryan Smith, "Verification After the New START Treaty: Back to the Future," *Information Series*, Number 463, July 16, 2020, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IS-463.pdf>.
22. For example, former Secretary of Energy Ernest J. Moniz has written: "Nearly 30 years after the Cold War, the risk of a nuclear weapon's being used is higher than at any other time since the U.S. and the Soviets came to the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis." See "The risk of a nuclear attack is back at historic levels, 75 years after Hiroshima," *NBC THINK*, August 6, 2020, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/risk-nuclear-attack-back-historic-levels-75-years-after-hiroshima-ncna1235925>. Also see Tom Miles, "Risk of nuclear war now highest since WW2, UN arms research chief says," *Reuters*, May 21, 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-nuclear/risk-of-nuclear-war-now-highest-since-ww2-un-arms-research-chief-says-idUSKCN1SR24H>.

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