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On Arms Control and Why New START's Suspension Does Not Really Matter

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The United States ought not mourn Russia's suspension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). Claims that the treaty was "a key stabilizing force in U.S.-Russian relations for more than a decade" are mistaken.¹ New START's demise will not make U.S.-Russia relations any worse than they already are, thanks to Russia's aggressive actions, including its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.² That is because arms races, and by extension arms control, are a reflection of politics, as the eminent strategist Colin Gray famously postulated.³ His fundamental point is that because arms control reflects overarching political relations, arms agreements with foes are unlikely to accomplish much, and agreements with friends are likely to be superfluous. It is also why Russia's New START suspension does not fundamentally alter the relationship between the two countries; nor does it make the United States and allies any less secure than when the treaty was intact.

Arms control has a history of failing to live up to the arms controllers' high expectations. For example, the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty led the Soviet Union to spend increased resources on offensive nuclear weapons, contrary to what proponents of the treaty argued would happen at the time.⁴ Reaching an agreement can hardly be considered a success when the agreement does not advance U.S. national security interests or puts an adversary in a better position to compete. Even arms control that succeeds initially can fail when one side unilaterally chooses to cheat. As Colin Gray observed during the Cold War, "The political antagonism that generates the objective need for alleviation via arms control—always assuming, again fallaciously, that arms control could control—is the very reason why arms



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control must fail....”⁵ The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty coincided with an unprecedented thaw in bilateral relations and successfully eliminated an entire class of ground-launched nuclear missiles—until Russia blatantly cheated on it, leading the Trump Administration to withdraw from the treaty in 2019. The first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) in 1972 failed to result in meaningful nuclear reductions, and the follow-on SALT II in 1979 did not enter into force due to worsening relations between the two countries. New START is no different.

Today, Russia has shown that it does not care about improving relations with the United States and U.S. allies. Russia regularly abuses the arms control process to advance its revisionist goals, impedes the United States, and avoids meaningful transparency and predictability. In other words, as long as Russia maintains the aggressive, revisionist political goals it currently has (and China as well), the lack of meaningful arms control should be no surprise—unless the United States was willing to sign an agreement that serves Russian purposes, and not its own.

Arms control by itself cannot change the political dynamic among countries; it can, however, place the United States at a political and military disadvantage if conducted foolishly by Washington. By the nature of its political system, the United States cannot ignore arms control treaties like Russia can and now does, leading Washington to bear the political costs of withdrawing from treaties after years of Russia’s violations. New START’s focus on a relatively narrow category of systems obscures the U.S. disadvantage in nuclear production capabilities and very long lead times for nuclear weapon system modernization in the post-Cold War era. In addition, New START leaves out systems that Russia would not agree to include within its limits. By accepting those terms, the United States essentially disadvantaged itself. The folly of lamentations over New START is reflected in the endless Western claims that it limited the total number of strategic nuclear forces to the agreed levels. It most certainly did not; it limited only those systems that it counted—an omission pointed to by critics at the time of its signing and since fully exploited by Moscow.⁶

U.S. Arms Control Practice: Hope Springs Eternal

In some respects, the debate about arms control somewhat resembles the debate about climate change. Warmer than usual weather? Climate change is to blame! Colder than usual weather? Climate change, of course! Similarly, no matter how badly the Russians abuse the arms control process, no matter how many arms control treaties they violate (and they have now violated virtually all arms control treaties to which they have ever been a party), no matter how many times China refuses to join the arms control process, the arms control community’s answer to armament challenges is always the same: some hypothetical arms control agreement that is beyond what political relations make possible. The U.S. arms control community’s approach fits the definition of insanity attributed to Albert Einstein: “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

The Obama Administration’s “reset” policy with Russia, of which New START was once considered a “crown jewel,”⁷ came on the heels of Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia. At the



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time, a few Russia experts in the United States and (mostly Central and Eastern) European states warned that the Medvedev/Putin regime was not the constructive partner President Obama hoped it to be; they warned against the danger of offering disproportionate concessions under the “reset” banner, and of losing sight of Russia as a geopolitical adversary. They were treated as if discussing Russia’s belligerent actions was the obstacle on the road to better U.S.-Russia relations, rather than an accurate portrayal of Russia’s belligerent goals and actions that are themselves the cause of bitter relations.

New START suffered from many flaws. These included the United States having to make nuclear reductions to be in compliance, while the agreement allowed Russia to increase its nuclear forces in some of the treaty defined categories.⁸ The treaty’s verification protocol was severely degraded relative to the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, New START’s predecessor, making the treaty very difficult to verify reliably.⁹ Even under the best conditions, New START allowed the United States to sample between two and three percent of Russia’s forces annually.¹⁰

At the time of the Senate’s consideration of New START, the Obama Administration pressed the U.S. Senate to approve New START in its lame duck session after Democrats lost a few Senate seats in the midterm elections—effectively short-circuiting the full deliberative process. This lame duck session approval was unusual and was not customary in U.S. legislative practice.¹¹ The Administration at the time argued that the ongoing loss of on-site inspections and insight into Russia’s strategic forces was dangerous and had to be brought to an end promptly by the treaty. Yet, inspections were halted in 2020, and Russia refused to reinstitute them before suspending the treaty. Yet, the Biden Administration and some arms controllers now suggest that Russia’s ending of inspections and subsequent withdrawal is very little real cause for consternation. Former State Department officials Rose Gottemoeller and Marshall L. Brown, Jr., state that “We do not see that Russian suspension constitutes an extraordinary event that jeopardizes US supreme interests.”¹² This is a curious response given the supposed critical value attributed to the treaty earlier. In a separate piece Gottemoeller argues, “Washington should do everything it can to lower the nuclear temperature and return New START to full implementation”¹³—as if doing so is plausible in the current political context. Either the treaty matters and its suspension threatens U.S. security, or it does not (as this author argues)—but one cannot have it both ways. As New START illustrates, there are costs in trying to placate an adversary—including leading Putin to despise Western resolve and expect that he can get away with ever greater lawlessness.

Professor Dana Struckman argues that “Washington should not abandon all hope of this treaty or future arms control/risk mitigation endeavors.” But hope is a sorely inadequate basis for U.S. national security policies. He further argues that “America should continue to adhere to the tenets of the Treaty even after its likely expiration.”¹⁴ This is what the Administration has done until recently, when it announced it would revoke the visas of Russian nuclear inspectors, deny pending applications for new monitors, cancel standard clearances for Russian aircraft to enter U.S. airspace, and stop sharing information on the status or locations of missiles and telemetry data on test launches.¹⁵ Leveraging uncertainty about U.S. capabilities



ought to be seen as an opportunity that could increase the pressure on Russia to return to New START rather than an obstacle. Further, those arguing for staying within the treaty limits ignore the negative developments since New START entered into force, including what ADM Charles Richard, then-Commander of United States Strategic Command, called China's "breathtaking" nuclear and conventional modernization and Russia's new nuclear systems outside of the treaty framework.¹⁶ The New START-influenced U.S. force posture assumed that Russia was no longer an adversary, and that "prospects for military confrontation have declined dramatically."¹⁷ That assumption clearly was naïve.

Politics Determines Arms Control Prospects – Not Vice Versa

Rose Gottemoeller argues, moreover, that "Cold War history shows that it is not only necessary to avoid nuclear threats, but also to control and limit nuclear weapons."¹⁸ This is a breathtaking rewrite of history. Throughout the Cold War, brandishing implicit and some explicit nuclear threats for deterrence purposes played an indispensable role in keeping the peace in Europe vis-à-vis an adversary with much more capable conventional forces, including those nuclear threats the Kennedy Administration issued to end the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Those U.S. threats were backed by a vigorous nuclear weapons program and diverse nuclear capabilities designed to make them credible in the eyes of adversaries and allies. Gottemoeller argues that "Convincing language and the means to communicate it can alone produce results."¹⁹ But, even the most charged diplomatic language without U.S. military power behind it cannot prevent a determined adversary from pursuing its confrontational course of action, as is demonstrated daily by Russia's war on Ukraine. The aphorism attributed to Frederick the Great should attend all U.S. arms control considerations: "Diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments."

The Russians cannot make it any clearer to the United States that they are not interested in the cooperative relationship which the New START agreement assumes. Even with all the loopholes and flaws in New START, Russia still managed to find a way in which it could unambiguously be declared in noncompliance with provisions of the treaty.²⁰ Bonnie Jenkins, U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control, has stated that "we're not seeing any evidence that Russia is in noncompliance,"²¹ even though earlier this year, her own bureau issued a report stating that "the United States cannot certify the Russian Federation to be in compliance with the terms of the New START."²² The report specifically notes Russia's denial of U.S. inspections as a cause for the specific noncompliance determination and also notes uncertainty about whether Russia actually abided by New START's warhead limits.²³ The claim that "we're not seeing any evidence" of Russian noncompliance while acknowledging that Russian compliance cannot be determined is the type of verbal sleight of hand that attends discussions of New START.

Following Russia's suspension of New START, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the United States remains "ready to talk about strategic arms limitations at any time with Russia irrespective of anything else going on in the world or in our relationship."²⁴ President



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Biden called Russia's withdrawal a "big mistake," a condemnation that hardly is likely to have impressed Russian President Vladimir Putin.²⁵ When is enough, enough? The United States could clearly use its manpower and resources on more productive avenues than on futile pleading for more arms control – pleading that is likely to lead Russia to further despise U.S. will and power.

The divergence of Russia's political goals and the traditional objectives of the arms control process got the United States into the mess it is in today, which is why it is past time for the United States to introduce a measure of realism into its deliberations. The idea that the United States ought to talk with Russia about strategic arms limitations "irrespective of anything else going on in the world or in our relationship" is manifestly wrong-headed because discussions, just like arms control, come with a cost. They provide a false promise that retards steps the United States must take to successfully outcompete its determined adversaries in the future; it wastes precious attention and energy.

Russia's political goals, nuclear force buildup and related aggression are ultimately why the suspension of New START is relatively insignificant. The treaty did not prohibit the Russians from doing what they wanted to do already, including developing new nuclear weapons unaccountable under the treaty, maintaining their massive advantage in tactical nuclear weapons, and building up their nuclear arsenal. President Biden stated that "Today, my Administration is ready to expeditiously negotiate a new arms control framework to replace New START when it expires in 2026. But negotiation requires a willing partner operating in good faith."²⁶ Russia has demonstrated over and over that it is neither a willing partner, nor operating in good faith. Negotiations at this juncture would be theater, just like efforts to bring Russia back into compliance.

Next Steps

The United States ought to reassess its nuclear posture free of assumptions that informed the New START force posture and should take into account China's rapidly modernizing and expanding nuclear forces. U.S. force posture decisions ought to increase the costs to Russia of noncompliance, and perhaps require it to divert its resources to monitoring U.S. nuclear forces rather than murdering Ukrainians or building nuclear torpedoes. The Biden Administration, as evidenced by its 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, takes a business-as-usual approach in today's most unusual situation and includes no new program of record – but does terminate a system intended to help offset Russia's and China's revisionist intentions buttressed by nuclear and conventional build-ups.²⁷ Second, the United States should refrain from negotiating a follow-on treaty while Russia remains in noncompliance with its existing arms control obligations. Until Russia demonstrates the political willingness to be a more constructive partner in this realm, the energy and attention devoted to negotiation are not worth the (highly uncertain) benefit. Third, given the growing uncertainty surrounding Russia's actual deployed warhead totals in the absence of inspections, the United States should immediately assess its nuclear warhead upload potential, identify bottlenecks to uploading promptly, and remedy them.



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Fourth, any follow-on arms control agreement will require a fundamental rethinking of the U.S. arms control practice to date given the negative developments in international security since New START entered into force. Such a revision ought to recognize that the arms control process and the state of political relations cannot be divorced from each other. It should also recognize that actions aimed at strengthening deterrence, including building up missile defense, modernizing U.S. nuclear weapons, and increasing the number of deployed nuclear warheads and delivery systems can contribute to stability rather than instability.²⁸

Conclusion

Given the arms control community's desire for negotiating with the Russian Federation "irrespective of anything else going on in the world," one cannot but think of George Kennan's quote, "The evil of these Utopian enthusiasms was not only, or even primarily, the wasted time, the misplaced emphasis, the encouragement of false hopes. The evil lay primarily in the fact that these enthusiasms distracted our gaze from the real things that were happening."²⁹ The real things happening today are the rise of revisionist nuclear powers that have no interest in disarmament, very little interest in arms control, and use their nuclear weapons to challenge the status quo and change it according to their worldview. The United States would be foolish to ignore these developments in the way it approaches arms control and its own armament, particularly when it comes to the most powerful weapons on the planet.

¹ Alexander Gabuev, "Is Russia Shooting Itself in the Foot by Suspending the New START Treaty?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 24, 2023, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89131>.

² Russia's challenge, however, started much earlier. One would be remiss to forget Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

³ Colin S. Gray, "The Arms Race Is About Politics," *Foreign Policy*, No. 9 (Winter 1972-1973), pp. 117-29, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148088>.

⁴ David Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge and Keith Payne, "The 'Action-Reaction' Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities" (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2021), pp. 63-68, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.

⁵ Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. X, 16-19.

⁶ See for example, Statement of Robert Joseph before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, June 24, 2010, pp. 358-361, available at https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/042910_to_071510_Transcript_The%20New%20Start%20Treaty%20TD%20111%2057.pdf; and, Statement of Keith Payne before the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 27, 2010, pp. 287-292, available at <https://www.congress.gov/111/chrg/CHRG-111shrg65071/CHRG-111shrg65071.pdf>.

⁷ Janine Balekdijan, "A New START for the Russian Reset," *HuffPost*, December 20, 2010, available at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-new-start-for-the-russi_b_798945.

⁸ Mark Schneider, *New START: The Anatomy of a Failed Negotiation* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 2012), p. 2, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/New-START-Final-for-web.pdf>; and, Keith Payne,



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⁹ The New START Working Group, “New START: Potemkin Village Verification,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2428, June 25, 2010, available at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/06/New-START-Potemkin-Village-Verification>.

¹⁰ A Rebuttal to Sen. Kit Bond’s November 18, 2010 Floor Speech in the U.S. Senate on the New START Treaty, U.S. Department of State, November 24, 2010, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/151981.htm>.

¹¹ Jane Hudiburg, “Lame Duck Sessions of Congress, 1935-2018 (74th-115th Congresses),” *Congressional Research Service Report* No. R45154, October 13, 2020, pp. 25-26, available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45154/7>.

¹² Rose Gottemoeller and Marshall L. Brown, Jr., “Legal aspects of Russia’s New START suspension provide opportunities for US policy makers,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, March 2, 2023, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2023/03/legal-aspects-of-russias-new-start-suspension-provide-opportunities-for-us-policy-makers/>

¹³ Rose Gottemoeller, “The Role of U.S. Diplomacy in Countering Russia’s Nuclear Threats and Misbehavior,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 6, Issue 2 (Spring 2023), available at https://tnsr.org/2023/03/the-role-of-u-s-diplomacy-in-countering-russias-nuclear-threats-and-misbehavior/#_ftnref15.

¹⁴ Dana Struckman, “Russia’s Suspension of New START Is No Reason for America to Do the Same,” *The National Interest*, April 14, 2023, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/russia%E2%80%99s-suspension-new-start-no-reason-america-do-same-206401>.

¹⁵ Matthew Lee, “US retaliates for Russia’s suspension of New START treaty by revoking visas of nuclear inspectors,” *Associated Press*, June 2, 2023, available at <https://apnews.com/article/us-russia-new-start-nuclear-16285354fcdc4f6a8ef18367620707e3>.

¹⁶ Charles Richard, *Remarks at the Space and Missile Defense Symposium*, August 12, 2021, available at <https://www.stratcom.mil/Media/Speeches/Article/2742875/space-and-missile-defense-symposium/>.

¹⁷ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, April 2010, p. iv, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

¹⁸ Richard, *Remarks at the Space and Missile Defense Symposium*, op. cit.

¹⁹ Gottemoeller, “The Role of U.S. Diplomacy in Countering Russia’s Nuclear Threats and Misbehavior,” op. cit.

²⁰ Schneider, *New START: The Anatomy of a Failed Negotiation*, op. cit.

²¹ Jamey Keaten and Jim Heintz, “US calls on Russia to stay with nuclear weapons treaty,” *Associated Press*, February 27, 2023, available at https://sports.yahoo.com/us-calls-russia-stay-nuclear-170314165.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAJs0711oJK8Jm6uqXJ8TdCsHuzra91Z2SfxOP549lL41Y19vVLhDMWoDvCEOXBQcBfSSE0dHAIiTIO_wh5zzp3FbQb7lrtFdWUpOWzK_iuHOjGDhvIMHbLepm_ALQwCr5td4X2eBQNwz7jvGMG3NN3X7sq7eLcfZrxoH7q9h9OW.

²² U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty*, 2023, p. 5, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2022-New-START-Implementation-Report.pdf>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press,” February 21, 2023, available at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-7/>.

²⁵ Alex Gangitano, “Biden calls Putin’s New START suspension a ‘big mistake,’” *The Hill*, February 22, 2023, available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/3869107-biden-calls-putins-new-start-withdrawal-a-big-mistake/>.

²⁶ Office of the White House, “President Biden Statement Ahead of the 10th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” August 1, 2022, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing->



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²⁷ For a comprehensive expert analysis, see Keith Payne (eds.), “Expert Commentary on the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review,” *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/OP-Vol.-3-No.-3.pdf>.

²⁸ For a more detailed analysis of this point, see Keith Payne and Michaela Dodge, “Stable Deterrence and Arms Control in a New Era,” *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 9, September 2021, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Payne-Dodge-OP-9.pdf>.

²⁹ George Kennan, *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 22.

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