



## RUSSIA'S NEW START SUSPENSION: DOES ARMS CONTROL MATTER?

*The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Russia’s New START Suspension: Does Arms Control Matter?” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on July 18, 2023. The symposium was based on an Information Series analysis by National Institute’s Research Scholar Dr. Michaela Dodge that explored the implications of Russia’s “suspension” of the New START Treaty and what Moscow’s actions mean for the future of arms control more broadly.*

### **David J. Trachtenberg**

***David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy and served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2017-2019.***

As I noted in the invitation to this webinar, this discussion will highlight a recent National Institute *Information Series* by my colleague Michaela Dodge, which argues that Russia’s “suspension” of its New START Treaty obligations is not a cause for concern but rather an indication that Moscow is not interested in improving relations with the United States and the West. Further, she notes that Russia has long used the arms control process to disadvantage the United States and to seek unilateral advantage for itself.

Indeed, Vladimir Putin has explicitly declared that Russia will not consider returning to compliance with New START unless and until the United States abandons its active support for Ukraine and fundamentally changes its attitude toward Russia. As Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov stated, “Until the United States changes its behavior, until we see signs of common sense in what they are doing in relation to Ukraine... we see no chance for the decision to suspend New START to be reviewed or re-examined.”<sup>1</sup>

Given Russia’s attitude, one must ask whether arms control even matters. In the United States, arms control is seen by some as essential to strategic stability, reduced tension, and greater predictability and transparency in the strategic relationship with Russia. In reality, the inflated expectations of arms control supporters have failed to be realized and the results have often been less than advertised.

Indeed, the New START Treaty allowed Russia to build up its nuclear weapons, contained poor verification measures, and produced little meaningful benefit for U.S. security. The prospect of arms control serving American national security interests is dubious at best when the political goals and strategic objectives our arms control partner are fundamentally at odds with our own.

Despite this reality, there are those who believe Russia’s disregard for treaty obligations requires the United States to redouble its arms control efforts and who see Russia’s nuclear threats as an indication that arms control is needed now more than ever. Indeed, President

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<sup>1</sup> “Russia will not rejoin nuclear treaty unless U.S. changes Ukraine stance - deputy foreign minister,” *Reuters*, March 1, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-will-not-rejoin-nuclear-treaty-unless-us-changes-ukraine-stance-deputy-2023-03-01/>.



Biden has stated that the United States is ready to seek a follow-on treaty to New START, provided Russia is willing to accommodate the U.S. desire to negotiate in good faith.<sup>2</sup> And just last week, the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security reportedly declared that the United States is “ready to have discussions with Russia” on arms control.<sup>3</sup> Yet, it seems such an approach is divorced from reality and is little more than wishful thinking.

In a forthcoming article, Keith Payne and I argue that in the contemporary threat context “it is a demonstrable mistake” to expect arms control to solve the problems of an adversary seeking to displace the United States as the dominant world power and that “preventing nuclear use now rests largely on strengthening deterrence to minimize the prospects for war.”<sup>4</sup>

So, rather than lament the demise of the New START Treaty, the United States should take this opportunity to reassess the role of arms control in U.S. national security strategy and should reconsider the adequacy of U.S. nuclear posture in light of Russia’s nuclear threats and apparent hostility toward meaningful arms reductions and China’s refusal to engage in any arms control discussions while it actively increases and enhances its own nuclear potential.

The current U.S. nuclear modernization program was initiated well over a decade ago, when the U.S. relationship with Russia and China was seen as relatively benign compared to today. In today’s more dangerous international environment, a re-evaluation of U.S. nuclear posture is long overdue.

Given the current international security situation, arms control may not matter at all. The United States can certainly defend its interests without signing paper agreements with opponents who treat them as disposable. But the prospect of any meaningful arms control agreement, if such an outcome is even possible, is non-existent without a strengthened nuclear deterrent to back up the U.S. negotiating posture.

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## **Michaela Dodge**

***Michaela Dodge is Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy.***

Thank you to the National Institute and to Dave for hosting this somewhat provocatively titled symposium. I am also grateful to my co-panelists and to attendees that you all could join us for what I promise to be an interesting discussion.

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<sup>2</sup> The White House, “President Biden Statement Ahead of the 10<sup>th</sup> Review Conference on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” August 1, 2022, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/01/president-biden-statement-ahead-of-the-10th-review-conference-of-the-treaty-on-the-non-proliferation-of-nuclear-weapons/>.

<sup>3</sup> “US Ready For New START Treaty Talks With Russia—Arms Control Under Secretary,” *Sputnik News*, July 11, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, “Arms Control in the Emerging Deterrence Context,” *Information Series*, No. 559, July 19, 2023, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/IS-559.pdf>.

In my remarks, I would like to make the following three points. One, we should not worry about Russia's New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) suspension. Two, we should worry about today's geopolitical environment. Three, we are better off without arms control if we cannot realistically appreciate the opponents' goals and how they use arms control to achieve them.

Recently, I published a piece making the case that Russia's New START suspension does not matter. I felt that it was an intellectually consistent position with the treaty's criticism that my colleagues and I put forth during the New START ratification debate. We criticized the treaty as effectively unverifiable, omitting tactical nuclear weapons in which the Russians maintain a significant advantage, limiting missile defense, and the fact that the United States had to make a majority of reductions while the Russians could build up in some treaty categories. We lost the argument.

The Biden Administration extended the Treaty without any preconditions in February 2021. It was spurned by Putin a year later when he suspended the Treaty's implementation. The intellectual inconsistency of some of New START's proponents has come into full light since. Whereby we were told that New START must be ratified during the lame duck session, they are suddenly telling us they "do not see that Russian suspension constitutes an extraordinary event that jeopardizes US supreme interests."<sup>5</sup> In the context of invading Ukraine the second time in less than 10 years, the Russians are literally telling us the treaty is done for now. The State Department cannot certify that Russia is in compliance with the treaty. And that is not an extraordinary event that jeopardizes U.S. supreme interests? To arms control proponents, process seems more important than substance and the substance does not appear to matter at all.

Let us now consider the geopolitical context in which the arms control process resides today. It wouldn't be a National Institute symposium without a Colin Gray quote: "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 control must fail..."<sup>6</sup>

And fail it must. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russians have issued an unprecedented number of nuclear threats. They think these threats are working in some ways. Medvedev recently reminded people that wars can be ended very quickly by signing a peace treaty or by nuking the other party.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 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/>.

<sup>6</sup> Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. X, 16-19.

<sup>7</sup> "Medvedev names options to stop war: Either negotiations or nuclear strike," *Ukrainska Pravda*, July 5, 2023, available at [https://finance.yahoo.com/news/medvedev-names-options-stop-war-122615769.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAJs0711oJk8Jm6uqXJ8TdCsHuzra91Z2SfxOP549lL41Y19vVLhDMWoDvCE0XBQcBfSSE0dHAIiTiO\\_wh5zpz3FbQb7lrtFdWUpOWzK\\_iuHOjGDhviMHbLeprml\\_ALQwCr5td4X2eBQNwz7jvGMG3NN3X7sqq7eLcfZrxoH7q9h90W](https://finance.yahoo.com/news/medvedev-names-options-stop-war-122615769.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAJs0711oJk8Jm6uqXJ8TdCsHuzra91Z2SfxOP549lL41Y19vVLhDMWoDvCE0XBQcBfSSE0dHAIiTiO_wh5zpz3FbQb7lrtFdWUpOWzK_iuHOjGDhviMHbLeprml_ALQwCr5td4X2eBQNwz7jvGMG3NN3X7sqq7eLcfZrxoH7q9h90W).

The Russians also tell us they value their nuclear superiority, quantitatively and qualitatively. Putin recently emphasized that “we have more such nuclear weapons than NATO countries. They know about it and never stop trying to persuade us to start nuclear reduction talks. Like hell we will, right? A popular phrase. Because, putting it in the dry language of economic essays, it is our competitive advantage.”<sup>8</sup> The list of similar Russian statements could go on and on.

While New START was a bilateral treaty, one cannot forget China’s “breathtaking” nuclear buildup.<sup>9</sup> U.S. adversaries are revisionist powers hostile to the U.S.-built and maintained world order—that is why their nuclear weapons are a problem. If one was comforted by the existence of New START at this particular juncture, I have a lovely seaside property to sell to you in the Czech Republic.

U.S. arms control proponents do not appear to recognize the importance of adversary goals harmful to the United States and how they use the arms control process to advance them. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said 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.”<sup>10</sup> Rose Gottemoeller, former Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, wrote that “America does not link nuclear arms limits to other issues: they are an existential necessity in their own right...”<sup>11</sup>

Far from being an “existential necessity” divorced from “anything else going on in the world or in our relationship,” arms control discussions will always be subjugated to politics. The problem is the aggressive revisionist intentions of those who possess arms, not arms per se. Arms control discussions will not matter at best and be hurtful at worst for as long as the United States separates the political context from negotiations.

My third, and perhaps most disputable, point is that unless the geopolitical environment changes, we are better off without arms control discussions of the kind we have pursued since the end of the Cold War. We have stopped paying attention to how others use arms control to advance their own objectives at U.S. expense. Having no arms control process would help us preserve programmatic and intellectual flexibility to assess what we need for credible deterrence in a new environment. We would avoid the temptation to limit systems preemptively, in the vain hope that doing so will entice our adversaries to agree with us at some point in the indeterminate future. We would save manpower and resources that could be better spent pursuing more productive endeavors. Perhaps it would take us less time to call out noncompliance and violations. One could say that we can do all those things during arms

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<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Putin, Remarks at the Plenary session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum,” June 16, 2023, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71445>.

<sup>9</sup> 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/>.

<sup>10</sup> 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/>.

<sup>11</sup> Rose Gottemoeller, “The west must act now to break Russia’s nuclear fever,” *The Financial Times*, June 15, 2023, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/91c51eb9-65df-44f0-977d-db922c3e97e9>.

control negotiations, but I am afraid history shows us that doing them becomes that much more difficult with vested interests and Russian propaganda hijacking the process.

Perhaps one could feel better about where matters stand had it not been for a history of terrible difficulties trying to get violators back into compliance with their treaty obligations. Not a single time has the United States been able to bring a violator back into compliance with an arms control agreement absent a significant change in political relations that had nothing to do with the agreement in question. A related problem is the limited U.S. ability to adjust to new international realities and stop pursuing policies that have outlived their usefulness.

Ideally, we would leverage the situation to increase uncertainty about our strategic planning in the adversaries' minds. We would influence them to channel their investments into defense or less productive (for them) areas of competition. That would be difficult to do in the nuclear area today, given the abysmal state of U.S. nuclear weapons infrastructure and anti-competitive nuclear weapons policies we've pursued since the end of the Cold War. But we ought to be intellectually free and serious in developing these pursuits.

What might make sense is what Kenneth Adelman called arms control without agreements. If arms control measures can reduce "the likelihood of war, the scope of war if it occurs, or its consequences,"<sup>12</sup> we ought to be open to them. These do not need to be synonymous with limitations or constraints.

Regrettably, it is difficult to make the case that arms control does not matter, given the continued emphasis on it within U.S. official circles. But an objective analysis of the historical record should make us much more comfortable with the idea of no arms control, at least for the foreseeable future.

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### **Robert G. Joseph**

***Robert G. Joseph is former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security and Special Envoy for Nonproliferation.***

David has asked that I talk about the future of arms control. But before I do that, let me first compliment Michaela on her article. It's a somewhat odd but very rewarding feeling for me when a former student of mine does a better job than I could in taking on conventional wisdom about arms control and national security—in exposing the fallacies and myths associated with arms control that have had a powerful, persistent, and pernicious effect on U.S. nuclear policy and force posture.

In her article, Michaela puts forth a cogent set of observations and arguments that make clear the fundamental disconnect between the practice of arms control and prevailing geostrategic realities over the course of many years across both Republican and Democrat

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

administrations. As she points out, this disconnect has come at a substantial cost to U.S. security.

In 2010, I testified against New START—pointing out the fatal flaws in what I thought was the most poorly negotiated treaty governing U.S. and Soviet, now Russian, nuclear forces. Under its terms, the United States needed to make significant reductions in its strategic forces while Russian forces rose in numbers. Some strategic systems, including future novel capabilities, were not covered under the treaty, giving Russia additional unilateral advantages. And verification was pathetically weak, also playing to Russia's favor—as we knew Moscow's unblemished record of cheating on previous treaties.

Perhaps most significant, the treaty was a fraud to begin with. Although sold to the Senate and public as a 1/3 reduction in deployed strategic warheads of both sides, it was nothing of the sort. The change in the bomber counting rule—and the accounting move from actual deployed to attributable warheads—meant that both the United States and Russia could deploy more warheads than was allowed in the previous treaty.

But the Obama Administration did a good job selling the treaty as an important step in resetting the U.S.-Russian relationship—and the seemingly unquenchable American thirst for arms control prevailed. The debate was less about facts or logic, it was more about arms control as an article of faith. The results are now in as Moscow has, in my view, achieved overall nuclear superiority which has contributed to its decision to invade its neighbor and to threaten NATO with the prospect of nuclear use. Quite the reset.

The Senate resolution of ratification did suggest that any further arms control negotiations should include so-called non-strategic nuclear forces—a category of weapons in which Russia has a massive advantage. It also called for Chinese forces to be included out of concern that Beijing might grow closer to Moscow and expand its own nuclear forces—both of which have happened.

So what about the future of arms control? Having reaped the benefits of New START, Moscow has walked away from the treaty and has rebuffed Biden Administration efforts to negotiate a follow-on treaty. Why—because it is in Moscow's interest to do so. It has the advantage and is determined to retain it.

As for non-strategic weapons, I remember speaking to Sergey Kislyak about the prospects for negotiating an agreement covering these systems. His response was that Moscow has no interest in doing so. He was delighted to point out that we had very few of these weapons left where Moscow had retained thousands—another arms control legacy.

So what about China? Beijing, like Moscow, has rejected repeated offers from the Biden administration to even discuss, let alone negotiate, arms control limitations. As Michaela notes, China embarked on what has been called a breathtaking expansion of its strategic nuclear forces—in addition to already possessing 95 percent of the world's INF missiles. It doesn't want any impediments to matching and then even possibly exceeding U.S. forces. It doesn't see arms control contributing to its security goals. Like Moscow, it is not seeking a better world but rather unilateral advantages.

And what about North Korea? Here arms control efforts have failed for over thirty years—as Pyongyang's arsenal has grown from a few weapons to 40-60 today, to perhaps according



to a recent RAND study, over 200 by 2027—accompanied by an ever-increasing missile capability. And the U.S. policy response is to call again for North Korea to denuclearize through negotiations—something it has flatly and repeatedly rejected. There is simply no sense of reality here.

Iran is seen by the Biden team as the most promising candidate for negotiating an arms control agreement. But this is absolute insanity—going from a position of seeking a longer and stronger JCPOA to what is reportedly being considered today — an unwritten agreement not to exceed 60 percent uranium enrichment. This craziness is a reflection of the inability of arms control practitioners to acknowledge failure and to design new approaches, new strategies to deal with growing problems.

Bill Graham, an old friend of mine, once referred to arms control as a problem masquerading as a solution. No matter how apparent the failure is, the proposed solution is to call for more arms control. And don't expect an end to the bad ideas or the negative security consequences that follow. Whether it's build-down, or no first use commitments, or any of the other stale chestnuts from the arms control cupboard, they are only recycled—they never go away.

Despite the resistance of Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, my take on the future is that arms control will continue to be a prominent fixture of American policy—never mind the failures of the past and the negative effects it has on American security policy. So, if others won't negotiate with us, who will we negotiate with? The answer is clear: we will negotiate with ourselves. It's more than virtue signaling and a distorted notion of leading by example, it's an ideology of a religious nature.

I will end with one example—the desire of the arms control community (and policy of the current administration) to use missile defenses as a bargaining chip—based on the decades old myth that defenses are destabilizing. While we should be focused on defending against rogue state threats and deterring Russian and Chinese coercive threats—to which advanced defenses could contribute significantly—the Biden Administration rules out developing missile defense capabilities to achieve these imperative security goals—all in the name of arms control.

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**Susan J. Koch**

***Susan J. Koch is former Director for Proliferation Strategy on the National Security Council Staff and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Threat Reduction Policy.***

In my view, the end to U.S.-Russian arms control—disguised by Russia as a suspension of New START provisions—might matter. But there is a major caveat.

In the 1990s, with the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, we had broad and deep access to Russian nuclear and strategic sites. With that gone, we had only the imperfect access of New START verification measures. In that area, I believe that something—New START—was better than nothing.

Further, Russia could well take advantage of an end to New START limits on deployed strategic forces. However, the odds of the United States doing so are slim to none.

The caveat is that the benefits from continuation of New START would be realized only if Russia complied with the Treaty. And that is improbable.

As for the future, there is virtually no near-term possibility for the kind of arms control agreement to which we have become accustomed since the Reagan-Gorbachev era—one which provides for intrusive verification and significant reductions in deployed forces.

The Biden Administration agrees that there is little to no foreseeable chance of a return to negotiated verifiable arms reductions. The November 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* emphasizes the administration's support for further negotiated arms reductions, but also the impossibility of achieving them without one or more willing, reliable partners. And right now, Russia and China are the antitheses of willing, reliable partners.

The chances may be better—not necessarily good, but better—for applying a broad definition of arms control that includes risk reduction. In important ways, that approach would return to the origins of U.S.-Soviet arms control.

The Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 taught both sides that, while they did not agree on much, they did share a vital interest in avoiding nuclear catastrophe. For that, they needed to find some common ground. That common ground was very limited during the 25 years between the Cuban Missile Crisis and the signature of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Nevertheless, the two sides could agree on a few arms control achievements during that period.

The first U.S.-Soviet arms control accord emerged directly from the Missile Crisis. The June 1963 Hotline Agreement established a direct communications link between the two capitals—a link whose absence was felt acutely during the crisis. The Hotline may not seem like a significant achievement, but it was created because both sides realized for the first time that they had a common interest in avoiding nuclear disaster, and for that, they needed to communicate.

Although the United States and Russia and the United States and China no longer need anything like the primitive Hotline, they do need to recognize the need to communicate. China might be inching there with the recent trips by Secretaries Blinken and Yellen. However, China still needs to accept the defense contacts and regularized political-military dialogues that it has long refused.

The situation may be even worse with Russia. During the 1990s, we had closer ties than we ever could have imagined. U.S.-Russian political-military contacts gradually dwindled over the Putin years until they reached a nadir with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Contacts with Russia may now be even harder to revive than those with China.

The year 1963 also saw quick U.S.-Soviet agreement on the Limited Test Ban Treaty, which banned all but underground nuclear testing. In 1968, they agreed on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty—showing their common interest in barring further entry into the nuclear weapons club.

In the early 1970s, the sides agreed on confidence-building measures to reduce the danger of incidents at sea and of nuclear accidents or miscalculation. We also concluded the



Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Interim Agreement on Strategic Offensive Arms (SALT I). Those last two just go to show that sometimes nothing is better than something.

Some would say that we are once again at a point where nothing is better than something regarding negotiated verifiable nuclear arms reductions. I disagree. Instead, my view is that future arms reduction agreements could carry some potential benefits. That is not to say that such agreements are possible in the foreseeable future, but that—if they ever do become possible—they might serve US security interests.

First, U.S. and allied security would benefit from a verifiable agreement that constrains short-range nuclear forces and the new kinds of strategic delivery vehicles that are not constrained by the New START Treaty.

Second, depending on the composition of the Congress, arms reductions—or at least the pursuit of same—might be a necessary price for continued legislative support for needed nuclear force improvements.

Third, agreed U.S. arms reductions with Russia and/or China may be important in reinforcing allied reassurance and removing a potential incentive for allied nuclear proliferation.

Finally, no past offensive nuclear arms reduction agreement prevented the United States from deploying forces that were both strategically necessary and politically feasible. The same is likely to be true for any future agreement. Even if the Executive Branch completed an agreement with Russia and/or China that unduly constrained the United States, there would be little likelihood of its winning Senate approval.

This paper mentions the potential benefits (or absence of costs) of future negotiated arms reductions only to urge that they not be dismissed out of hand, not because they might be realized any time soon. For the foreseeable future, verifiable arms reduction agreements with Russia or China are not achievable. The most that the United States can—and indeed, should—do is instead to pursue communications and transparency measures. That effort probably should start with China, which may be the more open of our two major adversaries, and then, when possible, with Russia.