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Next Steps in Arms Control? Lessons from Moscow's New START Violations

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"I don't understand why we go to the trouble of negotiating with a potential adversary with the understanding that the adversary is going to cheat."

- Dr. John S. Foster¹

The contrast between the veracity with which treaty advocates defended the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) during the Senate's advice and consent process and their subsequent silence regarding Russia's violations of the treaty is striking. The episode calls into question the Biden Administration's and particularly the State Department's assessment of treaty compliance and is a sad commentary on Russia's treaty compliance record and America's inability to compel Moscow's adherence to treaty obligations. It also calls into question the U.S. ability and political willingness to respond to other countries' violations in a timely manner. Until the government can become more realistic about arms control, more serious about enforcing compliance and punishing noncompliance, the country would be better off if it did not pursue arms control at all, despite President Trump's recent calls for "denuclearization" among Russia, China, and the United States.²

Russia's New START Suspension

In February 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that the Russian Federation would suspend New START's implementation.³ Upon Russia taking this step, former State



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Department officials that participated in the treaty negotiations Rose Gottemoeller and Marshall L. Brown, Jr., stated that “We do not see that Russian suspension constitutes an extraordinary event that jeopardizes US supreme interests.”⁴ This statement is absurd given the importance that the Obama Administration attributed to the treaty during the Senate’s advice and consent process, including ramming New START through the Senate during the lame-duck session of Congress. Either the treaty is significant, or it is not—it cannot be significant when being pushed on the Senate, but insignificant upon Russia’s suspension of it. If the treaties are important, then so are violations.

In retaliation for Russia’s suspension, the United States revoked the visas of Russian nuclear inspectors, denied pending applications for new monitors, cancelled standard clearances for Russian aircraft to enter U.S. airspace, and stopped sharing information on the status or locations of missiles and telemetry data on test launches.⁵ The last step did not matter at all; New START permitted each party to encrypt telemetry, making the exchange of the telemetry information pointless. It seems extremely unlikely the Russians cared about the other steps. The treaty verification regime’s flaws made it unlikely the United States would be able to detect cheating if the Russians tried to hide it.⁶ As former Arms Control and Disarmament Agency official Amron Katz once noted wryly about the Soviet Union, “We have never found anything the Soviets have successfully hidden.”⁷

The fact that the Russians chose to violate New START’s provisions despite the treaty’s relatively lax verification regime reflects their approach to political relations with Washington—they are not interested in mutually beneficial cooperation on arms control issues (or many other issues for that matter). As Colin Gray brilliantly exposed, treaties reflect political relations; they do not have an independent power to improve them.⁸ Yet, some of New START’s advocates argued during the Senate’s deliberations that “The relationship [between the United States and Russia] has improved substantially since then [the treaty negotiations started], and New START has been a major driver of that improvement.”⁹

This was obvious nonsense. In 2007, Putin delivered a speech that today is widely regarded as a declaration of hostility against the West.¹⁰ Russia showed its imperialist ambitions by invading Georgia in 2008 (and would go on to invade Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022). In November 2023, Russia rescinded its ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.¹¹ To their credit, even the most ardent arms control supporters would not make the case that relations between the United States and Russia are faring well these days, but that does not stop them from misguidedly calling for more arms control as a solution to the problem.¹²

From Bad to Worse: The State Department’s Report on New START Compliance Issues

The State Department’s treatment of New START compliance issues illustrates why those who negotiate arms control agreements and those who are responsible for assessing their implementation should not be housed in one government agency. General Kevin Chilton, then-Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, stated that “any secret Russian deployments of any



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ballistic missiles or warheads in violation of New START treaty provisions would concern me due to the political significance of deliberate Russian cheating.”¹³ Yet, the State Department tends to avoid any focus on Russia’s cheating until compelled to do so by inconvenient realities. That level of honesty, of course, would cast doubt on its perpetually sanguine arms control narrative.

The State Department’s 2023 *Annual Compliance Report* noted that Russia’s denial of U.S. inspections to monitor compliance constituted a specific violation and that “the United States cannot certify the Russian Federation to be in compliance with the terms of the New START Treaty.”¹⁴ Despite this report issued by her own bureau, Bonnie Jenkins, then-U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control, stated that “we’re not seeing any evidence that Russia is in noncompliance.”¹⁵ Such a claim is wholly misleading if the United States cannot monitor compliance. Implausibly confident proclamations only delay more substantive actions the United States should be taking against the Russian Federation, and not only in the arms control context. Despite arms control advocates’ opposition to placing arms control within the broader context of political relationship, the United States and its allies would be better off if its responses contributed to Russia’s defeat in Ukraine rather than proceeding as if sustaining a failed arms control agreement is the priority.¹⁶

The State Department’s *Report to Congress on the Implementation of the New START Treaty* issued in January 2025 stated that “Russia continued to violate several New START Treaty provisions in 2024” between January 1, 2024, and December 31, 2024, and that Russia “may have exceeded the deployed warhead limit by a small number during portions of 2024.”¹⁷ The grudging acknowledgement of “a small number” is obvious gaslighting if the U.S. can no longer monitor compliance. What would Russia actually have to do for the State Department to actually announce a significant violation of a treaty when it is not enough for Russia to violate several of the treaty’s provisions for years and the central limits of the treaty for at least some of the time?

Regarding Russia’s cheating and the U.S. ability to detect and respond to it, during the Senate’s deliberations, the State Department stated that “The costs and risks of Russian cheating or breakout, on the other hand, would likely be very significant. In addition to the financial and international political costs of such an action, any Russian leader considering cheating or breakout from the New START treaty would have to consider that the United States will retain the ability to upload large numbers of additional nuclear warheads on both bombers and missiles under the New START, which would provide the ability for a timely and very significant U.S. response.”¹⁸

Similarly, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that “Russia will not be able to achieve militarily significant cheating or breakout under New START, due to both the New START verification regime and the inherent survivability and flexibility of the planned U.S. strategic force structure.”¹⁹ Yet, that verification regime has not operated for years and the “planned U.S. force structure” has been delayed. Nevertheless, senior State Department officials continue to assert that there is little to be concerned about. Contrast former Secretary Gates’ confident words with reality and the Biden Administration’s lax approach to enforcing



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Russia's compliance after it extended the treaty with no preconditions in 2021. The Trump Administration has much to improve upon.

In addition to the verification regime being gone, the rationale for U.S. force posture reductions under New START *assumed* that Russia would not cheat and that there would be no additional demands on U.S. nuclear forces (e.g., China would not massively increase its nuclear forces *as it has been doing* over the past several years).²⁰ None of these assumptions holds true, yet the United States has proceeded in a business-as-usual manner and its nuclear weapon modernization program is tardy and limited. This is a classic U.S. problem, famously articulated in Fred Iklé's 1961 *Foreign Affairs* article "After Detection--What?"²¹ In the article, Iklé said: "What counts are the political and military consequences of a violation once it has been detected, since these alone will determine whether or not the violator stands to gain in the end." So far, Vladimir Putin likely judges himself to be extraordinarily successful thanks to willful U.S. folly.

Time to Bring Political Context Back to Arms Control

The Trump Administration ought to impose significant costs on Russia for its New START cheating and it should devise these steps in a way that undermine Russia's ability to wage its aggressive brutal war in Ukraine, not just stay confined within the arms control framework.²² Moscow certainly is sending a broader political message and challenge with their New START cheating, i.e., it can cheat and misbehave with impunity. That is a belief that must be quashed. The United States should respond with the broad international context in play. Senator Kit Bond was prescient when he made the case that "the administration's New START Treaty has been oversold and overhyped."²³ The Trump Administration would be wise to learn from history.

¹ Government Printing Office, "The New START and Implications for National Security," *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress*, June 17, July 15, 20, 27, and 29, 2010, available at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg65071/html/CHRG-111shrg65071.htm>.

² Laura Kelly, "Trump wants nuclear reduction talks with China, Russia," *The Hill Online*, January 23, 2025, available at <https://thehill.com/homenews/5102798-trump-urges-nuclear-talks-russia-china/>.

³ Mark Trevelyan, "Putin: Russia suspends participation in last remaining nuclear treaty with U.S.," *Reuters*, February 21, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-russia-suspends-participation-last-remaining-nuclear-treaty-with-us-2023-02-21/>.

⁴ 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/>



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⁵ 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>.

⁶ 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>.

⁷ Cited in Samuel T. Cohen and Joseph D. Douglass, Jr., "Selective Targeting and Soviet Deception," *Armed Forces Journal International*, September 1983, available at <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86B00885R000600970062-7.pdf>.

⁸ Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. X, 16-19.

⁹ Steven Pifer, quoted in Government Printing Office, "The New START and Implications for National Security," *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress*, June 17, July 15, 20, 27, and 29, 2010, available at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg65071/html/CHRG-111shrg65071.htm>.

¹⁰ For the text of the speech, see Vladimir Putin, "Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," *Washington Post*, February 12, 2007, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>; for an expression of the latter thought see Daniel Fried and Kurt Volker, "The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was," *Politico*, February 18, 2022, available at <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>.

¹¹ Andrew Osborn, "Putin revokes Russian ratification of global nuclear test ban treaty," *Reuters*, November 2, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-revokes-russias-ratification-nuclear-test-ban-treaty-2023-11-02/>.

¹² 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; and 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>.

¹³ Government Printing Office, "The New START and Implications for National Security," op. cit.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty*, 2023, p. 5, available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2022-New-START-Implementation-Report.pdf>.

¹⁵ 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=AQAAAJs0711oJK8Jm6uqXJ8TdCsHuzra91Z2SfxOP549lL41Y19vVLhDMWoDvCEOXBQcBfSSE0dHAiTIO_wh5zzp3FbQb7lrtFdWUpOWzK_iuHOjGDhvIMHbLepm_ALQwCr5td4X2eBQNwz7jvGMG3NN3X7sq7eLcfZrxoH7q9h9OW.

¹⁶ For an excellent list of such potential actions, see Marek Menkiszak, "Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West's Counter-Strategy towards Moscow," *OSW Report*, October 2024, pp. 89-92, available at https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW-Report_Winning%20the%20war%20with%20Russia%20is%20still%20possible_net.pdf.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, "2024 Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty," January 17, 2025.

¹⁸ Government Printing Office, "The New START and Implications for National Security," op. cit.



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¹⁹ Government Printing Office, “The New START and Implications for National Security,” *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress*, op. cit.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Fred Charles Iklé, “After Detection--What?” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 39, No. 2, (January 1961), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1961-01-01/after-detection-what>.

²² For a list of solid recommendations, see Marek Menkiszak, “Winning the War with Russia (Is Still Possible). The West’s Counter-Strategy towards Moscow,” *OSW Report*, October 2024, pp. 89-92, available at https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW-Report_Winning%20the%20war%20with%20Russia%20is%20still%20possible_net.pdf.

²³ U.S. Department of State, “A Rebuttal to Sen. Kit Bond’s November 18, 2010 Floor Speech in the U.S. Senate on the New START Treaty,” November 24, 2010, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/151981.htm>.

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