



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 640

October 21, 2025

Putin's New START Offer: We Won't Get Fooled Again

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The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is set to finally expire in February 2026, after being extended for five years by the Biden Administration in 2021. Russian President Vladimir Putin recently offered to “continue adhering to the central numerical limits under the New START Treaty” for a year beyond the Treaty’s already-extended expiration date.¹ Putin’s offer should easily be recognized for the cynical ploy it is, given the undeniable truth that Russia ceased observing New START years ago, including closing down all the critical on-site verification measures. Nevertheless, some Americans seem tempted to take the bait cast by Putin.

Beyond the hypocrisy involved in Putin’s offer, further extending U.S. observance of New START now would constrain the low-cost U.S. option of adding to its nuclear deterrent in the near term via the uploading of existing weapons on existing platforms – as is now needed given the dramatically increased Russian and Chinese nuclear threats and cooperation that have developed since New START was signed in 2010.² Extending observance of New START again



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would leave the United States much worse off, while allowing the Treaty to expire naturally would not damage relations with Russia or China. The practical reality of arms control in general, and New START in particular, is that more often than not the process harms U.S. national security because Washington abides by the letter and “spirit” of agreements while authoritarian adversaries violate and subvert them – leaving the United States worse off with arms control treaties than without them. Despite the incessant hype behind arms control, this has been the reality for more than a century.

Accepting Putin’s offer to extend New START’s “central numerical limits” now would be a perfect setup for Moscow and a flouting of Ronald Reagan’s frequent admonition to “trust but verify.” Washington would continue to follow those limits scrupulously while Russia almost certainly would not. Given Moscow’s shutting down of on-site verification years ago, the United States very likely does not now know Russia’s force numbers and could not be confident of its future compliance. What more could Putin want beyond the continuation of force limits that the United States would reliably follow, while Russian compliance could not be adequately verified? His offer would be comical if not so serious.

For arms control proponents, the scheduled expiration of New START is something to be feared because it “would mean the end of the only remaining constraint on U.S. and Russian nuclear force levels.”³ That is true in a narrow legalistic sense, but the reality is that arms control has very little relevance to how Russia plans and structures its nuclear forces. When it is in Russia’s interest to comply with its arms control obligations, it does so. However, Moscow frequently simply violates or subverts them. Russia’s forces are driven not by arms control limits, but by Moscow’s nuclear strategy demands, and they are constrained by budgetary and technological limitations. The inconvenient truth is that many arms control proponents fear the expiration of New START not primarily because the treaty actually constrains Russian forces, but because it constrains U.S. forces – the minimization of which is ever their goal.

Arms Control: Irrelevant When One Needs It

The arms control process cannot, by its very limitations, accomplish for U.S. national security what its advocates advertise. The eminent strategist Colin Gray quipped many years ago that arms control is either “impossible or unimportant.”⁴ His observation was based on extensive study of arms control history. Arms control is a reflection of political relations among states; it has no innate power to improve them, as advocates of the process typically postulate.⁵ This truth has been demonstrated repeatedly over the past century.

“Arms control agreements,” Gray further added, “have the effect of focusing attention on the strategically irrelevant question of whether a tolerably even balance of forces has been negotiated. Save with isolated reference to the arms control process, the United States has no interest in achieving a tolerably even balance of forces [with the Soviet Union].”⁶ What mattered, Gray said, was “the net freedom of action permitted each side and of the implications of that judgment for conflict outcomes at all levels.”⁷ The U.S. freedom to defend distant allies ultimately is the basis for “stability,” and that freedom is dependent on the capability and



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credibility of U.S. nuclear deterrence. It is more important now than ever given Russian, Chinese and North Korean threats to U.S. allies. The United States, as a status quo power with a global alliance structure under threat, needs a nuclear deterrent that is adequate to prevent multiple-party attacks on itself and its allies – which may have little to do with some academic calculation of forces that are in “balance” with Chinese or Russian forces.⁸

During New START negotiations, Ambassador Steven Pifer argued 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 Such claims are now manifestly preposterous since Russia invaded Ukraine (the first time) just three years after New START entered into force, and again eight years later. How does one square the value of this supposed “improvement” with the reality of Moscow’s repeated criminal aggression, New START violation and subversion, and its expansion of nuclear forces? This is the actual legacy of the Obama Administration’s ramming a rather bad treaty through a “lame duck” session of Congress, with the support of some Republicans.

Yet, hope springs eternal. The 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) called arms control “the most effective, durable and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and prevent their use.”¹⁰ This is nonsense; the United States cannot expect that an agreement with a dedicated adversary, rather than the hard work of building U.S. forces commensurate to the threat, will solve U.S. national security problems.

Russia’s political goals are fundamentally at odds with those of the United States. Russia’s arms control goals have everything to do with preserving its power and freedom of action, and constraining U.S. power and freedom of action as much as possible. Moscow approaches arms control from an entirely pragmatic, power politics perspective that assumes a zero-sum game, while U.S. officials historically have imagined idealistic outcomes wholly divorced from reality. This is the enduring recipe for Washington’s continuing disappointment with the consequences of arms control agreements when they are (rarely) held up to serious scrutiny.¹¹ For decades, arms control treaties have served as a reliable source of adversarial leverage over the United States due to pathologies that are seemingly inherent in the U.S. approach to negotiations, including: giving authoritarian opponents the benefit of compliance doubts, assuming that they will aspire to follow model U.S. behavior, and expecting that arms control will be the dynamic that improves political relations among states.¹²

Fundamentally Flawed New START

The long-standing presumption regarding the connection between arms control negotiations and improved political relations leads to the pursuit of arms control for the sake of its expected political effect, while the detailed substance is considered secondary. New START brilliantly illustrates this logic – and leaves much to be desired from the perspective of the capacity of the U.S. Government to arrive at a reasonably useful arms control treaty.

Substantively, New START has been a deeply flawed agreement – beginning with a much-weakened verification regime compared to that of earlier agreements. In 2010, at the time of



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hearings on New START, then-Senator Christopher Bond (R-MO) stated that, “As the vice chairman of this committee [the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence], I have reviewed the key intelligence on our ability to monitor this treaty [New START] and heard from our intelligence professionals. There is no doubt in my mind that the United States cannot reliably verify the treaty’s 1,550 limit on deployed warheads.”¹³

In addition, New START required the United States to bear a majority of reductions in most categories the treaty defines, while permitting Russia to build up to the treaty limits.¹⁴ Then-Russian defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, was undoubtedly pleased when he said, following New START’s entry into force in February 2011, that Russia could build up to the treaty limits by 2028 (well past the treaty’s 2026 expiration date).¹⁵ During the Senate advice and consent considerations, the Obama Administration unsurprisingly did not acknowledge that the treaty required unilateral U.S. reductions.¹⁶ The enduring allure of arms control as the solution to security problems, unreasonably optimistic expectations regarding Russia, and political expediency won over a prudently skeptical treaty assessment, which should have resulted in the treaty’s rejection.

Many of the perpetrators of misleading and demonstrably mistaken narratives regarding New START, and arms control in general, continue their advocacy for the *next* arms control agreements with Russia (and China) based on the same flawed assumptions that got the United States into the current difficult position of trying to maintain nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis determined, well-armed, and cooperating adversaries with a strategic force structure set in 2010.¹⁷

Unwarranted U.S. Expectations Lead to Poor Results

When the Biden Administration extended New START in February 2021 with no preconditions,¹⁸ arms control advocates postulated that such an extension “would provide the new president with an early win and positive momentum, help restore U.S. credibility on arms control issues, and create the potential for more ambitious steps to reduce the nuclear danger and move us closer to a world without nuclear weapons.”¹⁹ Instead, Russia invaded Ukraine the second time in eight years in February 2022 in an attempt to subjugate the entire country, and issued a continuing series of explicit nuclear threats of a third world war to deter and delay Western help for Ukraine.²⁰ This tactic has been at least partially successful.

The Biden Administration’s New START extension was that much more nonsensical because, by 2021, the scale of China’s nuclear modernization and cooperation with Russia had become apparent. The U.S. force posture under New START presupposed that Russia would abide by the treaty limits and that it would not cheat, assumptions that defy historical experience, because Russia (and the Soviet Union before it) has violated almost every arms control agreement it has ever signed.²¹ Additionally, Washington apparently assumed that no other country would significantly expand its nuclear forces while New START remains in force. The historical reality since 2010 has revealed the breathtaking falsity of these basic U.S.



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presumptions—yet arms control proponents discuss New START now as if those deeply mistaken presumptions are valid.

By 2021, then-Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command Charles Richard referred to China's nuclear expansion as “breathtaking” and a “strategic breakout.”²² Perhaps even more worrisome has been Russia's and China's strategic cooperation aimed at disrupting the U.S. alliance system and redrawing national borders via “gray area” and military aggression, if necessary.²³ Never before has the United States had to worry about two cooperating nuclear-armed peer competitors, with both countries far superior to the United States at the regional nuclear force level.

Conclusion

Despite U.S. efforts to keep the arms control process alive, Russia ended up subverting, violating and then suspending New START. The Biden Administration's New START extension resulted in none of the promised advantages; the treaty continues to hamstring U.S. strategic forces, which is a very undesirable state given that they are taking on a greater regional deterrence burden. The continuation of this undesirable state is behind Putin's recent offer to extend the observance of New START limits past the treaty's already-extended expiration date. Such an extension would be an excellent deal for Russia, which even the Biden Administration found to be in violation of the treaty. U.S. agreement would mean forgoing the limited options Washington has to adapt its nuclear deterrence forces to new geopolitical threat realities in the near term—the most immediately available of these being the uploading of warheads on existing delivery systems.

During the New START debate in the U.S. Senate, the late Dr. John S. Foster Jr. wondered about the following: “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.”²⁴ Continuing to adhere to New START limits in today's deplorable geopolitical environment and with a full knowledge of Russia's cheating would be the height of folly. With a century of authoritarian arms control cheating and subversion, and 15 years of comparable experience with New START, Washington should know better; this history does repeat itself. Have any lessons been learned? Here is to hoping that we won't get fooled again.

¹ See Andrew Osborn, Vladimir Soldatkin and Jonathan Landay, “Putin offers Trump one-year extension to nuclear weapons treaty,” *Reuters*, September 23, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-offers-trump-temporary-nuclear-arms-control-deal-that-would-extend-status-2025-09-22/>.

² For a detailed study on the topic see, Mark B. Schneider and Keith B. Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 6 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 2025), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Vol.-5-No.-6.pdf>.



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³ Steven Pifer, “Responding to Putin’s Proposal to Extend New START,” *Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, October 2, 2025, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/responding-putins-proposal-extend-new-start>.

⁴ Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. X.

⁵ Jerome Wiesner, former Chairman of President Kennedy’s Science Advisory Committee, claimed in all seriousness that U.S. unilateral disarmament steps could “even start a peace race.” See *ABM, MIRV, SALT, and the Nuclear Arms Race: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Law and Organization of the Committee on Foreign Relations*, U.S. Senate, 91st Congress, 2nd Session (Committee on Foreign Affairs, 1970), [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b643705&view=1up&seq=7](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b643705&view=1up&seq=7).

⁶ Colin Gray, “The Strategic Implications of the Nuclear Balance and Arms Control,” in Richard Staar, ed., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), p. 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸ Bill Gertz, “China warhead arsenal to hit 1,500 in five years, Air Force chief nominee reveals,” *The Washington Times*, October 10, 2025, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2025/oct/10/china-warhead-arsenal-hit-1500-five-years-air-force-chief-nominee/>.

⁹ “The New START and Implications for National Security,” *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, June 17, July 15, 20, 27, and 29, 2010), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg65071/html/CHRG-111shrg65071.htm>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, 2022, p. 16, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/NPR/>.

¹¹ See Keith B. Payne, Michaela Dodge, Matthew Costlow and David Trachtenberg, *The Pernicious Effects of Arms Control Misconceptions on Extended Deterrence and Assurance, Occasional Paper, Vol. 4, No. 9* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2024).

¹² See a comprehensive examination of enduring U.S. arms control pathologies in, Michaela Dodge, *Enduring Myths of Arms Control: A Century of Experience, Occasional Paper*, forthcoming 2026.

¹³ Christopher Bond, “The New START Treaty,” *The Congressional Record*, November 18, 2010, <https://www.congress.gov/111/crec/2010/11/18/CREC-2010-11-18-pt1-PgS8093.pdf>.

¹⁴ 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, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/151981.htm>.

¹⁵ Keith B. Payne, “New START: From Russia with Glee,” *National Review*, June 13, 2011, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2011/06/new-start-russia-glee-keith-b-payne/>.

¹⁶ See Keith B. Payne, “Postscript on New START,” *National Review*, January 18, 2011, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2011/01/postscript-new-start-keith-b-payne/>.

¹⁷ See Keith B. Payne, “Nuclear Deterrence in Question: How We Got Here, and What to Do,” *Information Series*, No. 639, October 6, 2025, https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-nuclear-deterrence-in-question-how-we-got-here-and-what-to-do-no-639-october-6-2025/#_edn10.

¹⁸ The 10-year treaty provided an option for a five-year extension, on which both countries agreed in 2021.

¹⁹ Daryl G. Kimball, “Biden’s First Challenge: Extend New START,” Arms Control Association, January/February 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-01/focus/bidens-first-challenge-extend-new-start>.

²⁰ Michaela Dodge, “Next Steps in Arms Control? Lessons from Moscow’s New START Violations,” *Information Series*, No. 619 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 4, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/michaela-dodge-next-steps-in-arms-control-lessons-from-moscows-new-start-violations-no-618-march-4-2025/.

²¹ “The New START and Implications for National Security,” *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress*, op. cit.



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²² John Vandiver, “‘Breathtaking expansion’: US Strategic Command leader expects further revelations of China’s nuclear weapons advancement,” *Stars and Stripes*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/europe/2021-10-18/china-us-russia-nuclear-weapons-hypersonics-stratcom-3283272.html>.

²³ Peppino DeBiaso, “The Rise of a New Axis: Great Power Struggle and the Future of Conflict,” *Information Series*, No. 622 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 8, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/peppino-debiaso-the-rise-of-a-new-axis-great-power-struggle-and-the-future-of-conflict-no-622-april-8-2025/.

²⁴ “The New START and Implications for National Security,” *Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress*, op. cit.

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