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No Extension of the New START Treaty? Trump Made the Right Decision

Dr. Mark B. Schneider

Dr. Mark Schneider is a Senior Analyst with the National Institute for Public Policy. Dr. Schneider previously served in DoD as Principal Director for Forces Policy, Principal Director for Strategic Defense, Space and Verification Policy, Director for Strategic Arms Control Policy and Representative of the Secretary of Defense to the Nuclear Arms Control Implementation Commission. He also served in the senior Foreign Service as a Member of the State Department Policy Planning Staff.

Vladimir Putin offered to extend the force limits of New START Treaty, an agreement Russia has been violating for years. In 2022, Moscow denied the United States Treaty-mandated on-site inspections rights and then illegally “suspended” the entire Treaty in 2023.¹ Putin’s offer was without *any* verification regime since his formulation was that “...Russia is prepared to continue observing the treaty’s central quantitative restrictions for one year after February 5, 2026.”² He made no reference to restoring the New START Treaty verification regime. This offer was reportedly initially under consideration by the Trump Administration.³

President Trump ultimately decided against the extension of the New START Treaty. He stated, “Rather than extend ‘NEW START’ (A badly negotiated deal by the United States that, aside from everything else, is being grossly violated), we should have our Nuclear Experts work on a new, improved, and modernized Treaty that can last long into the future.”⁴

Secretary of State Marco Rubio observed:

Everything has its season though and yesterday, New START expired. Arms control advocates and many voices in the media have tried to cast the expiration as a sign that the United States is initiating a new nuclear arms race. These concerns ignore that Russia ceased implementing the New START treaty in 2023, after flouting its terms for



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years. A treaty requires at least two parties, and the choice before the United States was to bind itself unilaterally or to recognize that a new era requires a new approach. Not the same old START, but something new. A treaty that reflects that the United States could soon face not one, but two, nuclear peers in Russia and China.⁵

Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Thomas DiNanno pointed out:

Even if we could have legally extended the treaty, it would not have been beneficial for the United States—or the world—to do so. New START was signed in 2010 and its limits on warheads and launchers are no longer relevant in 2026 when one nuclear power is expanding its arsenal at a scale and pace not seen in over half a century and another continues to maintain and develop a vast range of nuclear systems unconstrained by New START's terms. An arms control architecture designed nearly two decades ago for New START does not allow the United States to credibly uphold both our strategic deterrence commitments to the American people and our extended deterrence commitments to our allies.⁶

The New START Treaty contained few limitations. In reality, despite what is often stated in the press, there were no “central qualitative restrictions” in the New START Treaty. There were only three limits in the entire New START Treaty—deployed warheads, deployed delivery vehicles and deployed and non-deployed delivery vehicles.⁷ In 2017, President Trump reportedly “...told Putin the treaty was one of several bad deals negotiated by the Obama administration, saying that New START favored Russia.”⁸ He was correct. New START was the worst arms control treaty negotiated since the Reagan Administration.⁹ As former Vice Chairman of the Russian Duma Defense Committee Aleksey Arbatov observed, “[New START] is essentially a treaty on limiting the American strategic forces.”¹⁰ The only reduction in *deployed* strategic forces that existed when New START went into effect in February 2011 was made by the United States since the number of deployed Russian strategic nuclear warheads and deployed strategic delivery vehicles was under the New START Treaty limits when the Treaty went into effect in February 2011.¹¹ Since then, Russia has expanded its nuclear capabilities significantly.

Russian violations of arms control treaties are the norm. The bipartisan Congressional Strategic Posture Commission pointed out that, “Over the past 20 years, Russia has either violated or has failed to comply with nearly every major arms control treaty or agreement to which the United States is or was a party.”¹² Arms control without verification is exactly what Putin wants. While providing the veneer that Russia is a responsible nuclear power, Russia can cheat with little risk of consequences, while the United States abides by Treaty constraints. Extending New START: 1) would have rewarded Russia for its many arms control violations; 2) would have increased the risk of Russian nuclear weapons use in a European War, and 3) would certainly have been exploited by Putin to work against U.S. deployment of the Golden Dome missile defense system. When Putin made his offer to extend New START he said, “Particular attention must be directed towards Trump Administration plans to expand



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strategic components of its missile defence system, including preparations for the deployment of interceptors in outer space. We believe that the practical implementation of such destabilising measures could nullify our efforts to maintain the status quo in the field of strategic offensive arms. We will respond appropriately in this case.”¹³

An additional worrisome concern had to be considered in any decision to extend the New START Treaty. Extension of New START would have increased the risk of a Chinese war against Taiwan. Extension of New START would have both reduced the U.S. ability to deter the conflict and result in the real possibility of Chinese nuclear escalation if the attack failed.¹⁴ An invasion of Taiwan is a very difficult military undertaking and an invasion attempt just might fail, precipitating Chinese nuclear escalation.

China’s nuclear forces are not limited by any arms control treaty and China has consistently refused to participate in nuclear arms control negotiations. This position has just been reiterated.¹⁵ When the first Trump Administration decided to pursue nuclear arms control bilaterally with Russia in 2018, China was assessed to have only 200 nuclear weapons and was (inaccurately) assessed not to plan on a major nuclear weapons expansion.¹⁶ Today, this situation has completely changed because of the massive Chinese nuclear buildup.

Since 2022, China has been assessed by the Department of Defense (DoD-now the Department of War), as achieving near parity with the United States in the number of Chinese nuclear weapons (1,500) by 2035.¹⁷ Russia is already numerically ahead of the United States.¹⁸ Extending New START would have been even more foolish in light of the revised assessment of China’s nuclear capability that was made public by President Trump. In his October 2025 address at Quantico to American Generals and Admirals, President Trump revealed that in “five years they’ll [the Chinese] be equal” in nuclear weapons.¹⁹ This represents a striking increase from the Biden Administration’s estimate of 1,000+ Chinese operational nuclear weapons in 2030 which was not revised since 2022 despite consistent annual underestimates of the growth of the Chinese nuclear inventory.²⁰ The new assessment implies that the growth rate of Chinese nuclear forces has about doubled (i.e., from 100 to 200 warheads per year).

This revised assessment is very important. It means that *every* previous assessment that relied on the Pentagon numbers was too low. Indeed, in 2025, before the new assessment, Dr. Keith Payne and this author pointed out that, “A straight-line projection of its [the Pentagon] estimates of Chinese nuclear warheads growth over the last several years (~100 a year) would result in 900+ Chinese nuclear warheads in mid-2027.”²¹ The newly released information suggests that the 900+ number should be increased by perhaps 200-300 nuclear warheads. Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) has pointed out that “...given the Pentagon’s consistent underestimates in the past, it’s fair to assume that China will move even faster.”²²

As this author has pointed out in previous analyses:

For the December 2024 DoD estimate of Chinese nuclear weapons to be correct *all* of the following assumptions would have to be true, which seems highly unlikely:

- All MIRVed Chinese missiles are deployed with only one warhead.



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- China is building ICBM launchers faster than it is building missiles and building missiles faster than warheads.
- Less capable DF-31 ICBMs are being deployed in China's new silos.
- China has only a handful of air-delivered nuclear warheads, no nuclear-capable cruise missiles and no nuclear-capable H-6K bombers.
- China lacks nuclear-capable short-range ballistic missiles.
- China has only a small number of non-strategic nuclear warheads.²³

For the revised 2030 estimate to be accurate, almost all of these dubious assumptions would still have to be true. Some MIRVing of Chinese strategic missile missiles would be possible but the number of warheads per missile would have to be lower than most estimates of their capacity. Moreover, this does not even take into account the projected growth in the number of Chinese nuclear-armed and nuclear-capable theater missiles over the next decade. The May 2025 Defense Intelligence Agency's Golden Dome threat assessment (really a briefing slide) projects an increase of 220 Chinese deployed ICBMs, at least 60 deployed SLBMs, and thousands each of nuclear-capable hypersonic and cruise missiles by 2035.²⁴ The Golden Dome threat assessment was incomplete since it provided no information about the Chinese nuclear-capable bomber force and theater-range ballistic missiles. Hence, at least some and probably much of the projected growth will happen by 2030. If history is precedent, Chinese and Russian nuclear forces will likely continue to grow beyond 2030 or even 2035.

The 2025 Heritage Foundation report by Robert Peters on "The U.S. Nuclear Arsenal of 2050: A Proposal for American Survival" uses the flawed Federation of American Scientists and the Biden Administration's estimates for the total Chinese nuclear force. Even so, he writes, "Russia and China combined by 2035 will maintain numerically more nuclear weapons than they have today and more than the United States will field for the foreseeable future.... This is not to say that the United States needs to field a strategic nuclear arsenal that is larger than the current combined arsenal of Russia and China, which should be roughly 3,100 operationally deployed strategic weapons and 5,100 total operationally deployed non-strategic weapons by 2035."²⁵ In light of the revised assessment of Chinese nuclear weapons numbers, Peters' analysis has been overtaken by events. Unfortunately, Chinese and Russian nuclear forces are growing so quickly that underestimates are a common occurrence even with the best threat assessments. In its last months in office, the Biden Administration finally recognized that Russia, China, and North Korea "...are all expanding and diversifying their nuclear arsenals at a breakneck pace—showing little or no interest in arms control."²⁶ However, it enacted no apparent policies to address this growing threat.

Peters' recommendation that the United States increase its nuclear warhead number to "a rough total of 4,625 operationally deployed weapons by 2050"²⁷ is a good one. However, it is likely to be closer to the number that the United States needs right now rather than what will be adequate in 2050. A 2012 Heritage Foundation study by Rebecca Heinrichs (a member of the Congressional Strategic Posture Commission) and Baker Spring concluded that the United States needed approximately 2,700-3,000 deployed *strategic* nuclear warheads because of the



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requirement to hold at risk adversary “...hardened and mobile targets with high confidence...”²⁸ This assessment was made nearly a decade before China’s massive nuclear missile buildup was discovered.

If the New START Treaty had been extended, irrespective of whether the United States needs 4,625 warheads or any number even close to it, it would be impossible to achieve this numerical objective. The Biden program for the nuclear weapons complex did not support 4,625 weapons. Even if it had, the maximum number of strategic nuclear warheads that would be deployable under New START would have been about 2,200.²⁹ Pranay Vaddi, who served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation at the National Security Council under the Biden Administration, since leaving the White House has confirmed reports that the United States has only around 200 non-strategic nuclear weapons.³⁰ Worse yet, they are all bombs delivered by fighters that have limited range and little likely survivability against pre-emptive nuclear attack because they are not normally kept on alert.

What the United States needs is a non-strategic nuclear Triad. Under the current U.S. program of record, the United States will not have one. The Trump Administration has substantially increased funding for the nuclear ship-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N), but this system will not be operational until 2034.³¹ Even then, it would only result in a Dyad. Moreover, the number of SLCM-N the Navy plans to procure is likely to be small. There is no program for any ground-launched nuclear-capable missile. As Keith Payne and I pointed out, “There are no U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in the Indo-Pacific region, giving Russia, China and North Korea dangerous coercive leverage as they expand, diversify and improve their nuclear capabilities.”³²

In the short- to mid-term, only the upload of more U.S. strategic nuclear missile weapons can significantly increase U.S. nuclear capability.³³ The available studies have concluded that upload would provide the United States with a numerical advantage in strategic nuclear forces.³⁴ For example, the Federation of American Scientist (FAS) analysis credits the United States with an upload capability, absent New START constraints, to 3,570 vs. 2,475 for Russia.³⁵ Pranay Vaddi writes, “The US also could deploy more warheads on these [strategic] delivery systems – roughly 3,700 to Russia’s 2,800....”³⁶ In contrast, a National Institute for Public Policy study by Keith Payne and this author concluded that:

If not constrained by New START, with uploading, the [U.S.] Trident SLBM force reportedly could increase from ~960 to ~1,626 deployed warheads and the Minuteman ICBM force could increase from about 400 to ~1,000 deployed warheads, for a deployed strategic ballistic missile force of ~2,626 warheads. The number of warheads could be somewhat higher or lower than these estimates depending upon decisions related to necessary missile range and the required number of single warhead missiles. Additionally, there will be several hundred bomber weapons which could be somewhat increased via uploading.³⁷



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In reality, even upload will not likely give the United States any advantage in deployed strategic warheads. Rather, more likely, it would only close the dangerous gap in Russia's favor that has been allowed to develop. The FAS estimate of Russia's warhead number is likely an undercount based upon the questionable assumption that the new Russian missiles are no more capable than the Soviet-era missiles they are replacing.³⁸ Russian strategic forces could be as much as 2,000 warheads higher than the FAS estimate.³⁹

The cost of U.S. strategic force upload would be very low. An August 2020 report of the Congressional Budget Office concluded that the cost of uploading U.S. strategic forces to 3,500 nuclear warheads would be only \$100 million dollars.⁴⁰ Moreover, this would be spent over several years.

Because of the Covid epidemic followed by Russian refusal to allow treaty-required inspections, the United States had not conducted a New START Treaty inspection since March 2020 which means that Russia could already have covertly uploaded much of its strategic nuclear forces.⁴¹ This is not hyperbole. Even with the entire New START Treaty verification regime, verification was problematical. In 2010, then-Senator Christopher Bond noted the serious problems with the New START verification regime. He stated that, "The Select Committee on Intelligence has been looking at this issue closely over the past several months. As the vice chairman of this committee, I have reviewed the key intelligence on our ability to monitor this treaty 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."⁴² The New START Treaty verification regime, such as it was, was highly dependent upon on-site inspections. Indeed, in 2020, former Under Secretary of State and chief New START Treaty negotiator Rose Gottemoeller said "...we discarded the counting rules in favor of confirming declared warheads on the front of missiles through reciprocal inspections; in fact, we did not need telemetry measures to confirm compliance with the warhead limits in the new treaty."⁴³ This was a mistake.

As previously noted, in its last months in office, the Biden Administration recognized that, "Russia, the PRC and North Korea are all expanding and diversifying their nuclear arsenals at a breakneck pace—showing little or no interest in arms control."⁴⁴ This is unlikely to change. The 2020 Trump Administration's nuclear arms control negotiation with Russia was well conducted but Putin blocked any progress. He is likely to do the same in any new negotiation. It took almost a decade to negotiate the original START Treaty. President Obama did not sustain some of the most important previously-established verification provisions in the poorly conducted New START Treaty negotiation.⁴⁵ Putin could easily draw out any new strategic arms control negotiation *ad infinitum* by refusing to agree to reductions and serious verification provisions.

Thus, had the United States decided to extend the New START limits (by Executive fiat, without the advice and consent of the Senate) without any serious verification regime, the United States could have seriously degraded the U.S. deterrence position, thereby setting the stage for wars that could result from a simultaneous Chinese attack against Taiwan and a



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Russian attack against one or more NATO states.⁴⁶ This could be either coordinated or opportunistic.⁴⁷

Today, there is an enormous disconnect between the increasing perceptions of the Russian and Chinese nuclear threats and the ideological devotion to illusory arms control. If Russia has covertly uploaded some or all its nuclear forces in violation of the New START Treaty, as is likely, when the crisis hits, the United States could easily face a combined Russia and Chinese nuclear threat at least two times larger than the combined United States, British and French nuclear deterrent. It might even be twice that. This could result in war and encourage nuclear escalation by Russia, China or both, with catastrophic consequences.

President Trump made the right decision when he rejected any extension of the fatally flawed and ill-conceived New START Treaty which was repeatedly violated by Russia and which has, since its inception, ill-served the national security interests of the United States and allies. As Secretary Rubio stated, "... arms control can no longer be a bilateral issue between the United States and Russia. As the President has made clear, other countries have a responsibility to help ensure strategic stability, none more so than China. Second, we will not accept terms that harm the United States or ignore noncompliance in the pursuit of a future agreement."⁴⁸ The Trump Administration advocates policies based upon "peace through strength," common sense, and policies that do not adversely affect U.S. interests. Extending the New START Treaty met none of these criteria.

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² "Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council," *Kremlin.ru*, September 22, 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78051>.

³ Pranay Vaddi, "Beware Russia Bearing Arms Control Gifts," *Royal United Services Institute*, October 3, 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/beware-russia-bearing-arms-control-gifts>.

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¹² Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), p. 84, <https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/a/am/americas-strategic-posture>.

¹³ “Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council,” op. cit.

¹⁴ 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>.

¹⁵ “China says trilateral nuclear disarmament talks with US, Russia ‘unreasonable’,” *Reuters*, August 27, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-says-trilateral-nuclear-disarmament-talks-with-us-russia-unreasonable-2025-08-27/>.

¹⁶ Defense Intelligence Agency, *Nuclear Challenges - The Growing Capabilities of Strategic Competitors and Regional Rivals*, 2024, p. IX, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Nuclear_Challenges_2024.pdf.

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²² Senator Tom Cotton, *Seven Things You Can’t Say About China*, (New York: Harber Collins Publishers, 2025), p. 52.

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³⁷ Schneider and Payne, *Tailored Deterrence and Low-Cost Nuclear Weapons Upload*, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

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