



President Obama signing The New START Treaty. Photo courtesy of: whitehouse.gov

Arms Control in the COVID-19 Era: No Next Step without New START

By Peter Zwack

While the world's attention is riveted on the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, another urgent existential threat is quietly growing in the background: the steady termination of nuclear arms control treaties between the United States and the Russian Federation and the absence of new arms control negotiations. The robust programs and treaties that emerged in the decades following the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis have fallen by the wayside, leaving us with only one treaty limiting nuclear weapon stockpiles. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is scheduled to expire on February 5, 2021. If New START is allowed to expire without extension, revision, or replacement, we will

suddenly find ourselves at risk of a new arms race in an uncertain post-COVID-19 world order that could prove even more dangerous than the depths of the Cold War.

Our most experienced thinkers are trying to raise the alarm. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists recently pegged its macabre global Doomsday Clock to just 100 seconds from midnight. This is the closest to world destruction that this renowned assemblage of retired world leaders, Nobel laureates, and scientists has assessed since it began gauging the state of the world in 1947.¹ In December, the respected Dartmouth Conference, an annual gathering since 1960 of U.S., Soviet, and Russian thought leaders, issued its first

public appeal in its 60-year history entitled “Don’t Let START Stop,” urging extension of New START, our one remaining nuclear weapons treaty.²

Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, co-architect with President Ronald Reagan of the now-extinct 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, told the BBC bluntly last November that the world is in “colossal danger” from nuclear weapons.³ Other experienced leaders are also trying to rouse the world out of its dangerous complacency. “Right now, the most important thing to do is extend New START,” wrote Madeleine K. Albright, respected Secretary of State under President Bill Clinton, together with former Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, in a joint *New York Times* opinion piece published in February.⁴ The pair highlighted an opportunity to “head off even more instability” by taking swift action, writing, “the treaty’s agreed limits on nuclear arsenals are too important to be put at risk in a game of nuclear chicken.”⁵

Arguments against New START renewal

Russian President Vladimir Putin likewise appears concerned, offering on December 5, 2019 an unconditional extension of New START:⁶ “Russia is willing to immediately, as soon as possible, before this year is out, renew this treaty without any preconditions.”⁷ This followed his statement to his annual assembly of over 1,000 Russian journalists in December 2018:

The danger of the situation is being downplayed....It now seems to be impossible, something without crucial importance, but at the same time if

something like this would happen this would lead to the collapse of the entire civilization and maybe our planet. So this is an important question. Unfortunately, we have this trend to underestimate the current situation. There are dangers, there are risks in our day-to-day lives. What are those risks? First and foremost, the collapse of the international system of arms control, of moving away from an arms race.⁸

For some, President Putin’s offer to renew the treaty without condition provides a strong argument against doing so. Perhaps, according to this thinking, Putin remembers that the 1980s arms race helped break the Soviet Cold War economy and wants to avoid repeating the experience. Moreover, a New START extension could provide Russia with the time and resources to continue developing its highly publicized new, asymmetric military capabilities and test platforms.⁹

Others argue that it would be irresponsible to extend New START when other rising nuclear powers are not constrained by an arms control treaty. Why extend New START and leave China free to increase its stockpile? Better to scrap the old, and negotiate a new treaty that will help constrain Russia and other American adversaries as well. In this vein, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo repeated his demand to include China during a recent conversation with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.¹⁰

Another frequent criticism of New START, and treaties with Russia in general, is that Russia cheats. The U.S. withdrew from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty in August 2019 in response to alleged persistent Russian treaty violations. But unlike the INF example, both sides

appear for now to be heeding the terms of New START. In congressional testimony on December 19, 2019, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Non-Proliferation Christopher Ford stated, “we assess that Russia does still remain in compliance with its New START obligations, but its behavior in connection with most other arms control agreements—and not merely the ill-fated INF Treaty—has been nothing short of appalling.”¹¹

What these arguments fail to recognize is the degree to which New START represents the foundation for any future arms control.

Last treaty standing

The New START Treaty, signed in 2010 by American President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, entered into force on February 5, 2011. It reduced the number of strategic nuclear launchers and warheads to the following levels:

- 700 deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), deployed submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments
- 1,550 nuclear warheads on deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments (each such heavy bomber is counted as one warhead toward this limit)
- 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, SLBM launchers, and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments¹²

The treaty led to major cuts to both nations’ stockpiles—a testament to its effectiveness. Perhaps of equal importance today, the New START also provides the last major nuclear arms control verification mechanism between the U.S. and Russian Federation.

Unknown to most, the treaty annually gives both sides 18 short-notice on-site inspections of select deployed and non-deployed nuclear systems. Those inspections are no small event. They build trust and confidence between our nations. If we lose these verification opportunities, we lose our ability to mutually manage these civilization-ending strategic nuclear weapons and their delivery systems—an unbelievably dangerous scenario in the current threat environment. President Reagan premised his arms control policies on the Russian proverb “trust but verify.” Allowing New START to expire will eliminate our ability to do the latter at a time when we have precious little of the former between the two sides.



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Building towards the future of arms control

Important as New START is, other programs we have already lost are perhaps even more critical when taken as a whole. Conventional and nuclear-focused limitation and verification treaties, ranging from the INF and Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) to Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) are suspended or ended. With those programs gone, critical U.S.-Russian personal “contact points” also disappeared, eliminating the near daily eye-to-eye discussions between teams of political, technical, and military interlocutors from both countries.

Those contacts helped the two nations demystify and “de-demonize” one another, built trust (even with disagreement during the heart of the Cold War), and laid the foundations for major breakthroughs in mutual understanding. Building an environment of trust and expectations between the two adversaries may sound more aspirational than strategic, but history proves otherwise.

Trust between the Soviet Union and the United States was in very short supply in 1983. The Soviet Union had shot down Korean Air Lines flight 007 on September 1, and earlier that year Reagan had made his first public reference to the Soviet Union as an evil empire. Yet arms control talks were still in place when Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov, a Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces officer, was faced with a signal on September 26 from an electronic sensor that indicated an imminent major U.S. nuclear strike. Relying on a “gut instinct” that the instrumentation was wrong, Petrov opted not to alert headquarters that the USSR appeared to be under attack. It turns out that Soviet sensors

had picked up a freak solar reflection off clouds that triggered the alert.¹³ This close call came just after the major Allied exercise “Able Archer” had Soviet leadership particularly on edge.¹⁴ Petrov’s experience and calm thinking saved the world from a near-guaranteed Soviet “second-strike” salvo of strategic nuclear missiles.¹⁵ That December, the Soviets would go on to walk out of arms control negotiations in Geneva. Colonel Petrov’s gut instinct may have gone a different way without the modicum of trust that the still-active negotiations engendered at the time.

Our scant remaining confidence-building verification measures are also now at risk, especially those linked to New START and to the connective 34-nation Open Skies program. The latter maintains a more conventional overflight verification program, while the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CBCT), and OSCE’s Vienna Document retain inspection and confidence-building programs in which 57 nations participate.¹⁶

Next-generation threats

Complicating an already dangerous situation are new and urgent concerns. Modernization of arsenals inevitably means increasingly efficient modes and levels of transit and lethality. Cyber and other complex technologies are being developed, especially in the artificial intelligence and quantum fields, that can enable, disrupt, or both.¹⁷ Already a proven threat to nuclear power and research entities, cyber interference needs to be factored into the potential employment and storage of nuclear weapons and their critical command and control.¹⁸ Adding to this complex mix are new long-range conventional precision weapons that are

difficult to detect and counter. Space increasingly looks to be a potential battleground, with new threats emerging against vital and vulnerable satellites.¹⁹ Furthermore, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threats, including chemical and biological warfare, gain traction, enabled by rapid advances in delivery systems.²⁰ Meanwhile, disruptive conflict in the gray zone of today's 24/7 information space is only increasing over time.²¹

And, of course, there are the human and political components of the equation, as well as the growing power of nuclear states that lack structured international control measures. These nuclear players include large nations (China, India, Pakistan), undeclared Israel, and potential newcomers and aspirants (North Korea and Iran). How does one bring these countries into the arms control fold, especially when they are witnessing the established nuclear powers backing away from existing arms control agreements? We cannot expect them to embrace arms control if we are not setting an example.

The overall withering away of important arms reduction, verification, and confidence-building initiatives—based mostly on “trust but verify” measures—has set relations between the United States and the Russian Federation on a dangerous path. We risk returning to the balance of terror that threatened our nations during the Cold War. The clash of ideologies might be missing today, but also missing is a certain seriousness about the increased risk among those who casually dismiss the importance of arms control in general and New START in particular.²²

Negotiating “strategic stability”

Fortunately, the national (and international) conversation on arms control now includes the concept of “strategic stability” in response to the threats above.²³ Broadly defined, strategic stability refers to a perceived balance of power, where nations are confident that potential adversaries would not be able to undermine their nuclear deterrent capability. It addresses the balance and corresponding capabilities of current and

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modernizing nuclear missile arrays and warheads, missile defense, and the growing proliferation of long-range precision conventional weapons that could be used as part of a decapitating first strike.²⁴ The logic of strategic stability is essentially the same as the traditional Cold War framework of mutually assured destruction: if nuclear deterrence capabilities are safe and secure from being destroyed by a first strike, nuclear powers will not be driven to build up their strategic arsenals or feel compelled to preemptively “launch or lose” their missiles during a crisis, real or imagined.²⁵

Beyond this underlying logic, however, strategic stability requires addressing new questions about disruptive threats including cyberattacks and technologically advanced weaponry. These new

challenges seem daunting, but if the distrustful Cold War leaders managed to grind through the nuances of SALT I agreement and ABM treaty signed in 1972, these issues are not insurmountable. With sufficient political will and the careful building up of trust, the world's leadership can tackle them, just as has been done in decades past.

Serious progress in building strategic stability must include several interdependent tranches, beyond purely technological considerations or expanding negotiations to include new nations. The importance of the foundation that New START provides, with its mechanisms for inspection and exchange and its record of success, is clear. To reinvent this wheel would not only waste time and effort, it would throw the prospects for successfully negotiating complex issues of strategic stability into serious doubt.

Elements for success

It all starts with the United States and the Russian Federation:

The world is watching what we do and how we work together or fail to do so. Renewing New START and restoring an actionable level of trust is only the first essential step to restarting a longer bilateral arms control conversation.

Keep what we already have:

It is particularly important during this period of intense distrust to preserve existing bilateral and multi-national agreements and treaties such as New START and Open Skies that include mutual verification, inspection, and confidence-building measures. Even if imperfect, these promote essential transparency between all signatories.

Before canceling or suspending programs due to alleged non-compliance, every realistic measure must be taken to address issues of concern.

Start talking to each other!

To get to "trust but verify," we need to rebuild some degree of trust, and that trust cannot be built through arms control negotiations alone. Despite major disagreements, it is long past time for the U.S. and Russia to enhance diplomatic engagement. A sensible starting point would be issues of immediate mutual concern, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

And start listening to each other!

If we should succeed in restarting a framework of arms control that includes aspects of strategic stability, all sides will need to actually listen to each other. Russians will need to understand our concerns on proliferation and next-generation capacities like hypersonic weapons and destabilizing cyber capabilities. We, in turn, need to hear their concerns on issues such as missile defense and long-range conventional precision weapons. Care must be taken on both sides not to relitigate past grievances or descend into "what-about-ism."

What's Next?

Those under 40 years have little recollection of the Cold War. Many in both Russia and the U.S. take arms control for granted and assume that their leaders are maintaining a decades-old status quo that keeps the world safe. Younger generations need to understand the dangers of allowing what may seem like esoteric relics of a past age like New START unravel.

Those who can sound the alarm already are doing so. Veterans of the Cold War from the military, Foreign Service, and politics have all tried to raise awareness.²⁶ The Doomsday Clock is already closer to midnight than ever before. Having more thinkers and influencers step forward is welcome, but perhaps insufficient. Our cultures will need to change as well, and the first step is to recognize that the building blocks of negotiation and exchange are in fact the cornerstone of our security as a nation and as individuals. If our cultures instead focus on suspicion rather than striving to build credible trust, that cornerstone will crumble.

For the time being, Russia and the U.S. remain the preeminent nuclear powers in the world. But a more complex and dangerous new world is emerging. The trust deficit between our nations, already burdened by high levels of suspicions and discord, widens as new players and technologies complicate a wounded world scrambled by coronavirus. Both nations have a core interest in how increasingly assertive China's rapidly growing and diversified arsenal evolves. Without the ongoing contact and transparency that accompanies implementation of various treaties, agreements, and associated dialogues, the potential for lethal misunderstanding greatly escalates. The U.S. and Russia, both experienced nuclear practitioner nations, must find a way *together* to limit and mitigate these emerging threats. We succeeded in doing this during the Cold War. We need to do it again, with even more purpose and determination.

We should all support firm, forward-thinking leadership from both the United States and the Russian Federation in sending the hands of the proverbial doomsday clock back. Extending New START is an essential first step. We may now be



absorbed by COVID-19's fast shifting societal challenges and 2020 electioneering, yet we must somehow find the time to do so well before New START expires in February, just two weeks after the next U.S. presidential inauguration.

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

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