The era of traditional U.S.-Russian arms control appears to be ending. The latest casualty of the crisis in relations between the two nuclear powers, the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, was suspended in February when Washington declared it would withdraw from the pact because of alleged Russian noncompliance. Moscow made no great effort to resist U.S. intentions, and with surprisingly little fanfare, the treaty expired in early August.

This leaves just one bilateral arms control agreement in place, the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which is itself due to expire in 2021. The treaty could be easily extended for up to five years, thus ensuring a vital degree of transparency and stability in U.S.-Russian relations, but the Trump administration has shown little outward enthusiasm for this step. If the clock is allowed to run out on this crucial element of strategic stability, it will mark the first time that the United States and Russia have not had an arms control treaty in place or under negotiation in nearly five decades.
Risky Business: Four Ways to Ease U.S.-Russian Nuclear Tension
Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)

The potential lack of treaty constraints on nuclear arms increases the need for other tools to minimize misunderstandings, avoid accidents, and build confidence between the United States and Russia. Such risk reduction measures have contributed to maintaining stability in the past, and they are needed now more than ever as U.S.-Russian arms control falters.

Arms Control in Trouble

The depth of the demise was illustrated in January 2019 when the P5—the five nuclear powers recognized under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)—convened in Beijing for the eighth meeting of the P5 process. China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States identified three measures to strengthen their coordination and safeguard the NPT, but they could not agree to endorse the simple motto established in 1985 by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev: “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” What should have been a relatively easy lift, delivering a joint statement capturing this sentiment, was torpedoed when only China was prepared to endorse it. In a climate where agreeing to this most basic principle is no longer tenable, it is not surprising that more ambitious actions required to sustain bilateral arms control now appear to be out of reach.

These circumstances make a return to nuclear arms racing more likely not only by established nuclear powers, but also by nations that have forsworn such weapons. Although Moscow and Washington worked closely to prevent new parties from acquiring a nuclear capability during the darkest days of the Cold War, these joint efforts have all but halted. Their disengagement has contributed to the turmoil within the nonproliferation regime, where past commitments are left unfulfilled and the way forward is far from clear.
The degree to which the United States and Russia are now at odds in this domain has been impossible to ignore during the run-up to next year’s NPT review conference. Russia has accused the United States of violating the NPT through its NATO nuclear-sharing arrangement, while the United States has lambasted Russia for undermining the norm against the non-use of weapons of mass destruction and allegedly violating the INF Treaty. The two sides certainly have not seen eye to eye on all nonproliferation issues in the past, but they placed such a premium on presenting a united front to the other NPT states that they were often accused of “superpower collusion.” Today, however, there seems to be little interest in maintaining even the pretense of alignment on key
issues. This development is revealing of the state of the bilateral relationship today, and it does not portend well for global security.

A less visible consequence of the collapse of U.S.-Russian nuclear engagement is the precipitous decline in opportunities for routine interaction between diplomats and policymakers from the two countries. The result is an erosion of trust that could make accidents, miscommunications, or misinterpretations more likely to escalate into nuclear use because there is no assumption of benign intent on either side. This development is especially problematic when reviewing the litany of close nuclear calls in U.S. and Soviet/Russian history.

That these have not culminated in nuclear use in the past is, in many cases, thanks to human decision-makers who determined, for example, that automatic missile warning systems were giving false alerts. This past January marked 25 years since one such scenario, in which Russia’s early-warning system misidentified a research rocket launched off the coast of Norway as a U.S. Trident II submarine-launched ballistic missile. Russian nuclear attack response procedures were reportedly triggered, but Russian President Boris Yeltsin ruled out the likelihood of a surprise U.S. nuclear strike and decided not to retaliate. Were there to be a replay of this incident today, is it realistic to assume that decision-makers on either side would act in a similar fashion? It is only a matter of time before this hypothetical is put to the test.

In the absence of cooperation on arms control and nonproliferation and faced with urgent crises that require U.S.-Russian efforts, the challenge for the nuclear policymaking community today is twofold. It must find and support feasible opportunities for U.S.-Russian engagement on nuclear issues so that more ambitious efforts to shore up strategic stability and the nonproliferation regime are possible in the future. It must also actively pursue steps to prevent a nuclear catastrophe while the two sides get their relationship in this domain back on track. Fortunately, these two goals are mutually reinforcing and served by a renewed focus on nuclear risk reduction.

Practical Steps to Reduce Nuclear Risk

The United States and Russia could pursue at least four meaningful risk reduction measures that would contribute to these efforts. Even more significant steps than these are needed, but this menu comprises points of entry that may be feasible under the current circumstances.

A Parallel Risk Assessment

U.S. and Russian officials could engage in a parallel risk assessment, where both sides would identify independently the technologies, behaviors, and past and future scenarios they believe are most likely to lead to nuclear use and then compare their answers. This exercise would lay the groundwork for determining what types of risk reduction efforts are most needed. It could also serve as an opportunity to clear up misconceptions about the other’s capabilities or practices, including with respect to the alleged Russian policy of “escalate to deescalate.” The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review report states that Russia might conduct a limited nuclear first strike to end a conventional conflict on its terms, but this strategy is not described in any official Russian documents pertaining to its nuclear doctrine. Determining conclusively that this policy is not part of Russian strategy would free up both sides to focus on mitigating actual, rather than assumed, nuclear risks.

The P5 process presents a useful forum to operationalize this recommendation, at least initially. Not only is it already in place, but conducting a parallel risk assessment in this setting would contribute to the nuclear-weapon states’ attempts to better understand each other’s nuclear doctrines. The fact that all five delegations committed to making the “utmost efforts” to prevent nuclear risks at their 2019 Beijing meeting suggests that this recommendation might be welcomed as a concrete first step. Furthermore, this exercise could appeal to states with different perceptions of risk because its focus would be on identifying similarities and differences in their views, rather than on a preordained list of concerns with which all states might not agree.

Revive Consultations on Nuclear Risk Reduction

While many channels for U.S.-Russian nuclear engagement have now shut down, recent strategic security meetings held by Russian and U.S. officials raise the prospect of renewed high-level dialogue on arms control, nonproliferation, and related topics. Washington and Moscow should
capitalizing on this opening to initiate regular consultations on nuclear risk reduction. The United States and Russia are destined to cooperate on this issue by virtue of their vast nuclear arsenals. Their shared responsibilities are even greater under the present circumstances, in which mutual suspicion, acrimony, and instability in their bilateral relationship increase the likelihood of nuclear use, intentionally or by mistake.

Bilateral dialogue has always been recognized as a key component of risk reduction. It is mandated in the 1971 USSR-U.S. Agreements to Reduce Risk of Nuclear War, which obliges the two sides to “hold consultations, as mutually agreed, to consider questions relating to implementation of the provisions of this agreement, as well as to discuss possible amendments thereto aimed at further implementation of the purposes of this agreement.”

Reviving these consultations would contribute to international security while paving the way for more routinized and wide-ranging dialogue in the future. Not only would they provide a forum for officials to interact, which could itself reduce the likelihood of nuclear use, but they would also facilitate discussions on risks associated with emerging technologies, which have significant implications for the future of strategic stability. Given this orientation, these consultations would benefit from the involvement of scientific and technical experts, as well as policymakers and government officials. Cooperation on technical issues can flourish even during difficult moments in the bilateral relationship. Emphasizing this dimension of these consultations could increase the likelihood that they would generate meaningful results.

The initial agenda for these consultations could focus on reviewing Cold War-era nuclear risk reduction measures and identifying ways to update and multilateralize them. Aside from the 1971 USSR-U.S. Agreements to Reduce Risk of Nuclear War, other relevant agreements include the 1972 U.S.-USSR Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents on the High Seas, the 1973 U.S.-USSR Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War, and the 1987 Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Establishment of Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers. They could also meaningfully include risk reduction measures that were considered in the past but never formalized or adopted, such as this recommendation itself, which was borrowed from a similar proposal put forward by the Soviet delegation to the UN General Assembly in October 1977.

Updating and multilateralizing U.S.-Soviet risk reduction agreements could open the door to engaging other nuclear-armed states in these efforts, particularly China. Doing so could introduce greater stability and predictability into the trilateral relationship while reducing the likelihood that nuclear entanglement in the three countries will escalate into nuclear exchange. Although Beijing has established its own crisis hotlines with Moscow and Washington, a host of other risk reduction measures are part of past agreements and could be meaningfully implemented today. Exploring opportunities to do so would represent a more realistic way to deliver President Donald Trump’s desire to include Beijing in a future arms control agreement with Moscow, which is unlikely to come to fruition anytime soon.

Despite these advantages, revisiting U.S.-Soviet proposals carries risks of its own, which include the potential for past points of contention to resurface with detrimental outcomes. For example, Russia could reprise failed Soviet calls for the United States to remove forward-deployed nuclear weapons from Europe in the name of preventing their accidental or unauthorized use. Although U.S. experts have made similar proposals in recent years, Washington may suspect Moscow of using risk reduction to advance its national interests, which could cause talks to fail. Similarly, efforts to multilateralize past agreements could falter if Russia and China press for limits on U.S. ballistic missile defense as a step toward reducing the risk of nuclear use. Avoiding these pitfalls will require thoughtful compartmentalization, where participants find ways to work around larger strategic stability concerns without dismissing them as illegitimate in the process.

Ban on Cyberattacks on C3 Systems
The United States and Russia could conclude an agreement that cyberattacks on nuclear command, control, and communications (C3) systems are off-limits. Such an agreement would be consistent with recent Russian and U.S.-sponsored UN General Assembly resolutions that emphasize the need for rules to govern state behavior in cyberspace. Although Russia’s interference in the 2016
presidential elections has made cooperation in the cyber domain exceptionally difficult in recent years, the potential risks posed by the cyber vulnerabilities of nuclear systems are significant enough to warrant treatment in a separate category. An agreement not to exploit these vulnerabilities would contribute significantly to reducing nuclear risk while complementing ongoing efforts to articulate and codify cyber norms in other areas of international security.20

Concluding such an agreement could be complicated by the reliance of many C3 systems on at least some dual-use assets. Because early-warning satellites are used to detect nuclear and non-nuclear missile launches, for instance, a cyberattack intended to limit an adversary’s ability to defend against a conventional strike would also constitute an attack on its nuclear C3 system.21 The United States and Russia would need to determine how to disentangle these assets in a way that still addressed their potential to precipitate nuclear escalation. In this process, the two sides should consider how best to make use of the cyber hotline, which was installed in the U.S. and Russian Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers in 2013. The hotline was designed to allow both sides to “make inquiries about cybersecurity incidents of national concern.”22 It could provide invaluable crisis stability during a cyberattack without requiring significant changes to existing infrastructure.

Joint Statement at the 2020 NPT Review Conference on Risk Reduction
The United States, Russia, and potentially the other nuclear-weapon states should issue a joint statement at the 2020 NPT Review Conference reaffirming the importance of nuclear risk reduction and reporting on any concrete measures they have adopted during the review cycle. Considering that the five countries will likely have little progress to report on nuclear disarmament, doing so would demonstrate some progress toward fulfilling the commitments they made at the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

A particular selling point of this recommendation is the importance of nuclear risk reduction in avoiding the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from nuclear use. From this vantage, nuclear risk reduction may constitute one of only a small handful of issues on which nuclear-weapon states, proponents of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and supporters of the humanitarian initiative could agree. The nuclear-weapon states would need to be careful not to frame risk reduction as a substitute for nuclear disarmament in the NPT setting, but if they succeed, this issue could represent an opportunity to find common ground at a time when few others exist.
focus on risk reduction would also align with the NPT preambular language, which recognizes the “devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war.” Reaffirming the shared assumptions that underpin the NPT would be appropriate at the 50th anniversary of its entry into force.

**Little Risk in Risk Reduction**

These recommendations represent four steps that the United States and Russia could take to reduce nuclear risks today. They appear to align with both countries’ national security interests, which should increase their appeal among policymakers and may make it possible to implement them in spite of the current crisis in relations. In Washington, at least, these proposals may benefit from the lack of constraints they would place on U.S. military flexibility. Their narrow scope could help them gain traction with the current U.S. administration when more far-reaching and effective measures such as the defunct INF Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and New START have not.

If these recommendations nevertheless prove too ambitious, the United States and Russia could take a host of other, more modest steps to reduce the risk of nuclear use. Indeed, because bilateral relations are in such a deep state of crisis, virtually any activity that fosters dialogue or lends predictability to the two countries’ interactions would likely hit this mark. Moreover, risk reduction, unlike arms control, can take many different forms, from treaties to confidence-building measures to the installation of dedicated crisis-management infrastructure. This flexibility provides scalable options that may appeal to decisionmakers in both Moscow and Washington.

The latitude afforded by nuclear risk reduction may help explain why some U.S.-Russian engagement in this domain continues, albeit on an insufficient scale. The National Risk Reduction Centers in Washington and Moscow still operate 24 hours a day, providing an uninterrupted channel for crisis communication as they have for the last three decades. Likewise, the United States and Russia continue to co-chair the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, where they have overseen efforts to prevent unauthorized nuclear use for more than 15 years. These operational channels reinforce the notion that, if expanded, risk reduction measures could preserve what is left of the bilateral relationship while laying the groundwork for closer cooperation. In a quickly deteriorating environment with few other alternatives, this argument is as good as any for seeing where these efforts could lead.

ENDNOTES


4. For examples of cooperation, see William C. Potter and Sarah Bidgood, eds., *Once and Future Partners: The United States, Russia, and Nuclear Non-Proliferation* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2018).


9. Song, “Briefing on P5 Beijing Conference.”


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