Russia and the Big Chill

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Since the 2014 ouster of the pro-Russian president of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s persistent effort to annex and destabilize parts of Ukraine has undermined European security and the rules-based international order. The Ukraine crisis has sent already chilly relations between Moscow and the West to the lowest point in more than a quarter century.

U.S.-Russian cooperation in the sensitive arena of nuclear weapons has not yet been seriously affected, but it is at risk, and further progress is on hold. In July, the United States formally accused Russia of testing a ground-launched cruise missile in violation of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The dispute has made what is left of the bilateral U.S.-Russian nuclear dialogue even more difficult.

The Kremlin continues to say “nyet” to U.S. President Barack Obama’s 2013 proposal for a further one-third cut in U.S. and Russian deployed strategic warheads and delivery systems. Moscow argues that deeper cuts in strategic nuclear stockpiles must take into account U.S. strategic ballistic missile interceptors, conventional prompt-strike weapons, and the nuclear arsenals of other states.

Both sides continue to implement the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and recognize their disarmament commitments under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), but there is no serious dialogue on follow-on measures.

A further escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine could set back the nuclear relationship still further. Mikhail Ulyanov of the Russian Foreign Ministry told RIA Novosti in January that Russia could revise its commitment to New START in response to “unfriendly” U.S. actions.

Some members of the U.S. Congress have already threatened to halt funding for implementation of New START to send a message to Moscow. Others want to accelerate costly U.S. nuclear force modernization plans and explore new types of nuclear weapons.

In a January letter to the Pentagon, two House Armed Services Committee leaders, Reps. Mike Rogers (R-Ala.) and Michael Turner (R-Ohio), even called for the possible deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in NATO states on Russia’s border.

Rather than protect Ukraine or NATO, these radical steps would further undermine strategic stability and international security. Given the potential for a direct conflict between Russia and NATO, neither side should use nuclear weapons to send political messages or lower the threshold for nuclear weapons use.

Moscow’s actions in Ukraine require a unified response involving diplomacy, sanctions, and NATO conventional deterrence. But the new Russian challenge cannot be resolved with nuclear weapons or the buildup of U.S. nuclear capabilities.

Russia and the United States no longer are in the type of ideological competition they had during the Cold War, but they remain locked in a relationship of mutual assured destruction. The world’s daily
survival still depends on the stability of nuclear command and control on both sides, mutual restraint, and effective government-to-government communication.

As Rose Gottemoeller, U.S. undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, said in a Feb. 18 address, “It is [in] times like these that arms control proves its worth. Arms control measures provide stability and predictability even when other things fall into disarray.”

New U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control measures are not coming soon, but it is in both sides’ interests to resume active discussions on new, creative proposals to reduce the size and enormous cost of their excess strategic and tactical nuclear arsenals and to resolve disagreements about missile defenses. Both countries deploy nuclear forces that are ready for prompt launch and in numbers that far exceed any common-sense deterrence “requirements.”

To begin, the two sides should jointly declare at the 2015 NPT Review Conference that they will begin formal negotiations within one year on a follow-on to New START, which expires in 2021. A follow-on agreement should aim to cut each side’s strategic deployed arsenals to fewer than 1,100 warheads and 500 launchers, including any conventional prompt-strike weapons.

Such talks can and should explore a wider range of issues, including transparency and confidence-building steps on tactical nuclear weapons and joint understandings on missile defense capabilities and deployments.

To build momentum, the two sides also could announce they will, in parallel, accelerate New START implementation to meet the treaty’s limits of 1,550 deployed warheads and 700 strategic launchers ahead of the 2018 deadline.

The two sides also should reiterate their commitment not to test, produce, or deploy missile systems prohibited by the INF Treaty—that is, those with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers—and agree to special inspections to resolve compliance concerns. Russia and the United States also could work together to engage other states in talks on limiting and eventually phasing out all nuclear-armed cruise missile systems. This would allow the two countries to forgo expensive modernization programs for such missiles and head off dangerous cruise missile buildups around the globe.

Today, as during the Cold War, effective, persistent nuclear arms control leadership is in the best interests of Russia, the United States, and the world.

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