These are dark days for strategic arms control. Events in Ukraine have brought U.S.-Russian relations to a post-Cold War low point, and Russia increasingly relies on its nuclear arsenal for signaling and prestige. Yet, if Russia hopes to achieve its aim of being a great power or at least being perceived and treated as one, arms control is a status symbol and cost savings mechanism that it cannot afford to waste.

Perhaps Leon Trotsky would direct one of his vitriolic outbursts at today’s supporters of arms control: “You are pitiful, isolated individuals! You are bankrupts. Your role is played out. Go where you belong from now on – into the dustbin of history!”

Russia appears to be on the verge of sending arms control to the dustbin of history given its reliance on nuclear weapons. After years of modernization and investment, there now appears to be little incentive for Russia to limit its arsenal.

Russia’s “nuclear sabre-rattling” certainly suggests it is no longer interested in engagement with the West. It insists further arms control is not possible unless any future agreement incorporates missile defense and long-range precision conventional weapons or is expanded to include other nuclear possessor states. In a June 21, 2015, interview with the Financial Times, Sergey Ivanov, an adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin, observed, “To be frank, there are practically no channels for interaction left” with the United States. Russia went so far as to threaten suspending verification
of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in response to Western sanctions, and talks on a New START follow-on agreement and on missile defense collapsed in 2012.

From the U.S. perspective, alleged Russian violations of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty undermine trust between the two countries. From the Russian perspective, there is no political expediency to arms control at present. Moscow’s interests lie elsewhere, and any overtures at dialogue would undermine its desired impression of standing up to the West and promoting a more multipolar world. Arms control is dead and no longer a priority for Russia. At least, that is the dominant narrative.

There is an alternative story line, namely that Russia needs arms control more than the United States. Verification under New START expires in 2021, with a possible five-year extension. At that time, Russia will face the prospect of losing insight into the U.S. nuclear arsenal, the symbolic value of a treaty legally binding it to parity with the United States, and a venue for it to showcase its nuclear weapons and portray itself as a great power. This narrative is far less prominent, but leads to a more useful approach of examining the arms control landscape two, five, and 10 years from now. From this perspective, it is not only conceivable but actually quite likely that well before New START verification expires, Russia will be more open to further arms control.

**Stutter Steps in Arms Control**

Arms control has never been easy, but today, many claim it truly is on its last legs. In his classic 1961 treatise on the subject, international relations scholar Hedley Bull defined arms control as “restraint internationally exercised upon armaments policy, whether in respect of the level of armaments, their character, or deployment of use.” Above all, arms control is a management and confidence-building tool. It does not always seek to reduce the size of arsenals but rather to reduce risks by promoting transparency and dialogue about existing weapons.

Past instances of U.S.-Russian arms control were inspired by various factors that changed the strategic balance. In the case of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, technological developments in delivery vehicles and defensive measures, namely missile defense, brought Americans and Soviets to the negotiating table. Oversized arsenals and costly excesses in defense procurement were among the shifts that inspired the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). A change in bilateral relations and the geopolitical climate resulted in the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty. Other examples include the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which had intrusive inspections that laid the groundwork for the 1991 START, and the 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, which were at first unilateral steps taken by Washington and shortly thereafter reciprocated by Moscow with no formal verification measures.

The most recent example of U.S.-Russian arms control is New START, which requires Russia and the United States each to reduce their forces to 1,550 operationally deployed strategic weapons, 700 delivery vehicles, and 800 launchers by 2018. Yet, New START was a harbinger of challenges to come. Negotiations nearly broke down on numerous occasions over Russian insistence that meaningful limits on missile defense be included. The eventual compromise included vague language in the treaty’s preamble recognizing the interrelationship between strategic offense and defense. An additional challenge came from the U.S. Senate, where some Republicans expressed skepticism about arms control and its post-Cold War utility. In some cases, the skepticism appeared to be genuine, but in others, it appeared to be part of an attempt to make arms control a political football in the bitter partisan wars of 2010.

Russian behavior also suggests the beginnings of an arms control death spiral. First, Russian hardliners are questioning their country’s participation in New START, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Second, defense was the only sector excluded from recent, across-the-board 10 percent cuts in the Russian federal budget. Finally, Russian nuclear saber-rattling, such as threats to deploy nuclear weapons to Kaliningrad and Crimea, demonstrates Russia’s continued reliance on nuclear weapons as part of a hybrid warfare strategy that draws on conventional and nonconventional capabilities. Within its hybrid strategy, nuclear weapons also serve a symbolic function. As Steven Pifer of the Brookings Institution recently observed, “The Kremlin seeks to project the image of a Russian superpower; its oversized nuclear
arsenal provides the sole basis for its claim to such status.”

From the Russian perspective, any decline in arms control is primarily the fault of the United States. In a presentation at the 2015 NPT Review Conference, the PIR Center, an independent Russian think tank, outlined and analyzed this perspective: missile defense remains the most sensitive issue in further bilateral strategic arms control, and the United States has consistently insisted that its plans for missile defense in Europe are directed at threats from the southeast, namely Iran, rather than at Russia. Despite the recent nuclear agreement with Iran, however, the United States has shown no inclination to roll back these plans. Missile defense is not the only factor jeopardizing strategic stability as the United States also continues to develop advanced conventional weapons. Russia is following suit in modernizing its nuclear and conventional arsenals but purely to catch up. Moreover, although Russia may be questioning its participation in some arms control agreements, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, has not ratified the CTBT, and remains opposed to the Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat of Force Against Outer Space Objects.

Russian reliance on nuclear weapons and current skepticism of arms control, by this logic, are based on decisions made in Washington rather than in Moscow. According to Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia’s senior arms control negotiator, “While the U.S. continues to strengthen its national security methods, which reduce the level of Russia’s national security, to speak of future nuclear disarmament is hardly possible.” So why does Russia need arms control?

**The Need for Arms Control**

Russia needs arms control over the long term to promote strategic stability, thereby decreasing its need for more weapons, and to reduce military investments. More importantly, Russia needs arms control in the short term to feed its great-power narrative, which is a crucial domestic political tool and a foundation of Putin’s leadership. As paradoxical as it may seem, reducing weapons has the potential to increase Russia’s credibility as an international leader and make it more secure in at least three ways.

**Prestige.** Putin’s great-power message relies on parity with other great powers and a sense of continuity from previous Russian and Soviet empires. This message is directed at domestic and international audiences. At the domestic level, according to a recent poll by the Levada Center, Putin’s greatest overall achievement was “strengthening Russia’s position in the international arena.” Putin’s narrative consists of re-establishing Russia’s sphere of influence in its region—for example, by reunifying Crimea with the Russian state—and overcoming the shame associated with the loss of the Soviet empire and the subsequent economic and military collapse of the 1990s.

Arms control, like the weapons it manages, is a status symbol for Russia. To be sure, for many Russians, arms control and the reduced size of the nuclear arsenal contribute to a sense of shame. Arguably, this shame in arms control is largely associated with the 1997 START II, which banned the use of multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles and would eventually have limited each side to 3,000 to 3,500 operational deployed strategic weapons over the course of two phases. From the Russian perspective, the treaty took advantage of Moscow’s weakness following the collapse of the Soviet Union and was imbalanced in favor of the United States because Russia would have to “make significant financial expenditures” for destruction of its weapons and would actually have to build up its forces in order to reach the treaty’s limits. Nevertheless, neither distrust of U.S. intentions as a result of START II nor U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty prevented Russia from participating in arms control negotiations and agreements. Negotiations for New START, for example, began in 2009 with the Obama administration’s “reset” of U.S. relations with Russia.

Arms control continues to be closely linked to Russia’s great-power narrative. Equality as an international player is essential to Russian prestige, and arms control enshrines strategic parity with the United States, at least numerically in nuclear weapons. Putin also relies on a sense of history and continuity in portraying himself as the guardian of the Russian state as it has evolved through imperial and Soviet eras. For Putin, Russian history flows as a continuous thread rather than in fits and starts. Therefore, just as arms control was prominent at the height of the Soviet military era in securing parity with the United States—the 1972 Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) treaty is a
prime example—it can hold an important place in the revamped Russia of the 2010s.

Beyond bilateral strategic agreements with the United States, arms control has also been a source of prestige for Russia in managing Syrian chemical weapons and the recent Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the product of negotiations in which Russia joined with five other world powers to reach agreement with Iran on rolling back that country’s nuclear program. In these cases, Russia was expected to demonstrate preference for its allies in Syria and Iran. Yet, the final agreements proved Russia to be a credible and fair broker. These agreements showcased Russia as a diplomatic power, not just a military one.

Russia’s interest in arms control is enshrined in its national policy. A great deal has been written about the bellicose nature of Russia’s 2014 statement of its military doctrine, but an often overlooked component of the document commits Russia to “compliance with international treaties of the Russian Federation for the reduction and limitation of nuclear missile weapons.” Its 2013 “Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” goes even further in portraying Russia as an advocate for further arms control and nonproliferation efforts, whereby Russia will encourage “elaborating and concluding new agreements in [arms control] that meet its national interests and take into account each and every factor influencing strategic stability, building on the principles of equality and indivisibility of security.” Russian interest in arms control and nonproliferation is not purely a matter of prestige, but also contributes to strategic stability and the reduction of military risks.

Strategic stability. In a 1961 treatise, nuclear strategists Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin said the objective of arms control was to establish strategic stability. Arms control is intended to avoid arms races and establish a balance of military power between peers, adversaries, or both. This was the primary role of arms control during the Cold War, particularly with the SALT Interim Agreement when the Soviet Union and the United States attempted to slow the arms race and pursue parity. In Henry Kissinger’s famous 1974 rhetorical question, “What in God’s name is strategic superiority?”

Strategic stability affords Russia breathing room to focus on domestic stability rather than becoming embroiled in a costly arms race. Strategic stability reduces uncertainty in dealing with peers, such as the United States and China. In a 2014 op-ed in The New York Times, Sergey Rogov, head of the prestigious Institute for the U.S. and Canadian Studies in Moscow, wrote, “If the Russian-American arms control collapses, it will be difficult to develop strategic stability in a polycentric world. The new unrestricted arms race will be multilateral and include not only nuclear but also conventional weapons.”

Russia cannot afford an arms race at this time or in the foreseeable future. Its 2013 foreign policy concept document explicitly speaks to the contribution of arms control in establishing stability “through bilateral and multilateral cooperation,” particularly with regard to nuclear weapons, “for the purpose of ensuring common security in the spirit of strategic openness.” Arms control has the potential to place limits on U.S. capabilities, obviously in exchange for some concession on the part of Russia. At present, Russia’s primary bargaining chips are its warheads and delivery vehicles, tactical and strategic, which are reaching the end of their lifespans faster than they can be replaced. Russia’s best hope for engaging the United States in a dialogue about missile defense and advanced conventional weapons. Whether or not this dialogue results in reductions or changes in U.S. posture will depend on context and what Russia has to offer, but it is the first step.

Military investment. Perhaps one of the strongest signals of waning Russian interest in arms control is its increased investment in nuclear forces, despite the resurgence of its conventional forces as demonstrated in Ukraine. Russia is projected to spend 88.3 billion on defense in 2015, with research and development as the main area of investment in order to continue boosting the share of modern weaponry across the services to reach 70 percent by 2020, with the bigger projects yet to come. Its 2016 national budget has been described as a “stagnation budget” of “militarism and inaction.” Defense remains one of the only sectors with increased spending, particularly in new technologies, and the government is waiting for oil and gas prices to rise again in order to make further investments in defense.
This suggests a major commitment to improving conventional forces, but nuclear modernization has seemingly accelerated at the same time. Putin recently announced Russia would be introducing 30 new missiles to its arsenal of strategic delivery vehicles, and it recently deployed the new Borei-class submarine armed with the Bulava missile. Modernization elsewhere in the strategic forces includes updating cruise missiles and replacing the 59-year-old Tu-95 Bear bomber. In the 1990s, Russia claimed to rely on nuclear weapons while it rebuilt conventional forces. If Russia has now achieved a sufficiently strong conventional force, why is it more reliant on nuclear weapons than ever since the end of the Cold War?

There are three possible explanations for this continued reliance on nuclear forces, all of which suggest Russia will need arms control for financial reasons to lower defense costs in the coming years. First, Russia’s conventional forces remain weak. The swift and effective military operations carried out in Crimea were by Russia’s elite Southern Military District, the best equipped and trained of the Russian forces. They are not indicative of the overall Russian military, in which investment is largely going toward technology rather than training and people. Most of the newer capabilities and investments have yet to be introduced, so in real terms, Russia’s conventional military is not yet as tough as it seems and will continue to receive attention and investment while it is rebuilt. One risk is that Russia will pursue a conventional arms race, which may already have started, according to Russian nuclear expert Alexey Arbatov: Russian research on long-range, high-precision weapon systems is absorbing a disproportionate amount of defense spending.

Second, improvements in nuclear delivery vehicles in particular have been in the works for decades and are now becoming operational. Although Russia has increased the rate at which it introduces new missiles, it has slowed the pace of retirement so as to give the impression of a growing force. According to Eugene Miasnikov, director of the Russian Center for Arms Control, Energy, and Environmental Studies, the service life of Russian missiles have been “extended by factors of two to three,” and any further extensions are “impossible.” As a result, Russia’s arsenal is growing quantitatively but not necessarily qualitatively. In reality, much of this force may be inactive and slated for retirement. For example, early in the New START talks, Russia was amenable to deeper reductions on its delivery vehicles that were reaching the end of their service lives.

Third, military modernization is a domestic political issue. Military investment is particularly complicated because of its links to bureaucratic politics in Moscow, similar to the Cold War days of the Soviet Military-Industrial Commission. Many of Russia’s most powerful politicians and those advising Putin, the siloviki, have personal investments in the military-industrial complex. Any Russian defense investments should not immediately be viewed as posturing vis-à-vis the West or as symbolizing a more aggressive Russia, as they often are part of a domestic political narrative. This may present a challenge to further cuts, as is currently being demonstrated. On the other hand, Moscow is having debates similar to those in Washington and London as to whether investments in conventional forces are preferable to those in nuclear forces. With currency reserves running low, oil prices staying down, and defense spending demands on the rise, Russian investment in its nuclear forces is one obvious area for cuts. Rather than unilaterally reducing its arsenal, Russia can explore the possibility of reciprocation from the United States through an arms control agreement.

Preparing for Optimism
Russia may still need arms control, but one of the biggest remaining questions is whether Washington still has an appetite for it. To skeptics, nuclear arms control is a Cold War legacy and places undue limits on U.S. capabilities. Moreover, the skeptics argue, no verification system can guarantee compliance, as was most recently argued in congressional debates about the Iran nuclear deal. It is difficult to discern how much these objections are sincere and how much they are politically motivated, but Obama administration policy statements have affirmed that arms control is in the national interest. For example, in 2013 the administration declared, “The U.S. intent is to seek negotiated cuts with Russia so that we can continue to move beyond Cold War nuclear postures.” From the U.S. perspective, arms control provides transparency into Russia’s arsenal and reduces excessive weapons and their associated costs on both sides, which in turn reduces nuclear risks.

Arms control is arguably more complicated for the United States than for Russia because of the United States’ role as a security provider to its allies in Europe and Asia. Further arms control with Russia will entail difficult discussions about missile defense and tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. For the United States, these discussions will have to incorporate the security concerns of U.S. allies in NATO, some of which are reluctant to see any change in the U.S. strategic posture in Europe given Russian aggression in Ukraine. What the United States wants to see in further arms control, therefore, is a reduction in the numbers of Russian tactical nuclear weapons and compliance with all existing agreements, along with a deeper reduction of strategic weapons and delivery vehicles.

Russia claims to want some combination of a reduction in U.S. missile defense in Europe, a reduction in conventional forces, and an expansion of the arms control process to include other nuclear possessors, such as China. From this perspective, Russian and U.S. demands of arms control are incompatible: any reduction in U.S. tactical nuclear weapons or missile defenses would be unacceptable to a large number of U.S. allies, and tactical nuclear weapons are Russia’s only bargaining chip to obtain the reductions that Moscow wants. Other nuclear possessor states have said they will not engage in multilateral arms control until Russian and U.S. arsenals come down further.
As discussed above, however, Russia’s goals are broader: great-power status, strategic stability on its borders, and cost savings. By the time New START verification expires in 2021 or 2026 (depending on whether or not the United States and Russia decide to extend the treaty), arms control may be a readily available option for pursuing these interests. Ultimately, whether in two, five, or 10 years, Russia may return to arms control.

There are at least three steps the United States can take now to lay the groundwork for these discussions. First, if it is willing to work toward resolution of Crimea’s status in parallel with, rather than prior to, arms control talks, one possible starting point is to set a goal of returning to 2012. That would mean returning to discussions about missile defense transparency measures and re-establishing NATO-Russian dialogue as they existed before the Ukraine crisis. That would be a nonbinding first step back to the negotiating table and would give attention to Russia’s primary issue of missile defense. At the same time, however, the United States would have to offer some means of reassurance to its allies that it is not indicating acceptance of Russian aggression. This could include continuing to deploy U.S. nuclear weapons in NATO member states, refusing to acknowledge Crimea as part of Russia, or increasing the size of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force.

Second, despite the Ukraine crisis and claims of INF Treaty violations, New START continues to be implemented. Its Bilateral Consultative Commission continues to meet, most recently on October 20, 2015. The priority should remain on implementing New START and, as 2018 approaches, using the commission as a forum for exploring follow-on options and taking advantage of the five-year extension on verification.

Finally, the credibility of the INF Treaty must be restored. Russia and the United States can work toward that goal now so as to prevent it from poisoning the waters of a New START follow-on agreement when the time comes. Russian withdrawal from the INF Treaty under Article XV would complicate further arms control talks by undermining trust and providing fodder, in different ways, to arms control skeptics in the Duma and Congress. Restoring full compliance with the INF Treaty must be a priority and can potentially be achieved by playing to Russia’s desired role as a leader in arms control and its stated policy commitment to “compliance with international treaties.”

U.S. policy states that arms control is in the country’s continued interest, but further opportunities for arms control successes may test the limits of what the United States is willing to compromise to achieve them. For example, if Russia and the United States did negotiate further arms control agreements, the United States would likely take measures to reassure its NATO allies that by no means is it accepting of Russian aggression. Yet, these means of reassurance, particularly an increased U.S. military presence in Europe, could backfire and cause Russia to question the U.S. commitment to any agreement. Moscow may perceive it as trading one form of strategic imbalance for another.
Arms control pessimists are not short on evidence these days, particularly when it comes to the INF Treaty. Nevertheless, there is cause for optimism that Russia and the United States can continue to make reciprocal reductions in their strategic arsenals while applying transparency and confidence-building measures. Russia, in particular, has an interest in further arms control as an element of the great-power narrative that continues to drive Putin’s policies at home and abroad. As the deadline for New START reductions approaches in 2018, followed by the expiration of verification in 2021, followed by the conclusion of a possible five-year extension of verification in 2026, there will be numerous opportunities to take further steps in strategic arms control. Indeed, before analysts relegate arms control to the dustbin of history, Russia might be the one to revive it.

ENDNOTES


27. Arbatov presentation.


31. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty is of unlimited duration, but section 2 of Article XV states that “[e]ach Party shall, in exercising its national sovereignty, have the right to withdraw from this Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests. It shall give notice of its decision to withdraw to the other Party six months prior to withdrawal from this Treaty. Such notice shall include a statement of the extraordinary events the notifying Party regards as having jeopardized its supreme interests.”

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