Prospects for U.S.-Russian arms control look dim. Even extension of the New Strategic Arms
Reduction Treaty (New START), which is due to expire in February 2021, is in question. If the treaty
reaches its end date with nothing to take its place, there will be no mutually agreed, verifiable
limitations on strategic nuclear systems between the two countries whose arsenals make up more
than 90 percent of the global total.

With the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty dead by U.S. hands, the Conventional Armed Forces in
Europe (CFE) Treaty rendered a shell of itself by Russia, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces
(INF) Treaty teetering on the brink, the infrastructure of nuclear and conventional arms control
appears to be crumbling. President Donald Trump, meanwhile, has argued for a need to “strengthen
and expand” the U.S. arsenal, suggested that the United States has somehow “fallen behind” in
nuclear capability (a claim difficult to explain or support), and said that New START favors Russia
over the United States.¹

In this
dynamic and worrisome atmosphere, it is in Russia’s interests to maintain and bolster the
infrastructure of arms control agreements developed over the decades. Indeed, with the United
States potentially less interested and engaged—Trump reportedly voiced his doubts about New
START to Russian President Vladimir Putin when the latter inquired about prospects for its
extension²—it is Moscow that faces an imperative to find resolutions to existing arms control
challenges, including those of its own making. It must do this not just to keep from losing what it has
today, but to give itself a real chance to attain greater security in the future.

Arms Control Framework
Disarmament talks have long been a pillar of the bilateral relationship between the United States and Russia and, before it, the Soviet Union. The ability to negotiate such agreements is unique to those two countries. Although early talks and treaties were focused on checking escalating arms races, arms control more recently has been seen as a way to bring Moscow and Washington together for dialogue and concrete action when they agree on little else.¹

These accords have been good for both countries, even if not in the ways each imagined. As Russian analyst Alexey Arbatov recently wrote, the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia have always approached arms control, deterrence, and nuclear posture from very different perspectives. Yet, as he notes, the very process of negotiations helped the two sides clarify positions and interests, which otherwise were often misread.²

For Russia, strategic nuclear arms talks have been key to ensuring that it could maintain parity with the United States, particularly in the post-Cold War period. By negotiating treaties that forced both sides’ numbers down, Russia could build a force it could afford while maintaining deterrence against the United States and status as its equal as a nuclear superpower. Arms control also made possible a Russian voice in how the United States built and deployed its forces and provided a forum in which it could articulate its preferences and concerns, even if it did not always attain all of its aims. Moreover, arms control was not limited to the nuclear dimension, also enabling conventional force limits.

Arms control treaties have combined over the years into a framework that is more than the sum of its parts. Like all international treaties, they are law—but international law. Like most international law, they suffer from the fact that only the parties can enforce them and enforcement capacity usually is limited because states remain sovereign. Thus, treaties rarely commit states to do what they do not want to do. Instead, they codify things that states have agreed are in their interests but that may be difficult to arrange and implement without the treaty. Usually, they also include provisions for withdrawal, should interests change.

Although each side gains more from some treaties and thus values these treaties differently, the complex as a whole now has value in and of itself. Maintaining it indicates a willingness to keep the process going and a history of comparable durability that makes new agreements possible. Thus, it becomes not just the individual treaties that codify things both sides want done, but the combination of them. This makes each treaty more valuable than it might otherwise be, that is, even if other factors make it seem advantageous to change or reject treaties, the treaties’ role in the broader edifice creates strong incentives to maintain them.

This model was challenged by the George W. Bush administration in the United States, which expressed doubts about the benefits of arms control and, in 2002, formally withdrew from the ABM Treaty. It also sought and attained the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) with Russia, which was a break with past agreements in its flexible provisions and lack of verification. Russia, for its part, declared itself no longer bound by the second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II) in response to the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.

Since then, Russia has voiced complaints about a range of the treaties making up the framework, but has avoided formal withdrawal. Instead, it suspended implementation of the CFE Treaty in 2007–2008 and, more recently, ceased participating in related decision making. The United States now assesses Russia to have moved ahead with the development and deployment of a ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) in violation of the INF Treaty, although Moscow insists that it remains in compliance.

A decade ago, Russia took the actions it did most likely because it hoped to pressure NATO allies to ratify changes to the CFE Treaty that Moscow felt better met its interests. Its actions in relation to the INF Treaty are more difficult to explain. Yet, Moscow’s avoidance of formal withdrawal suggests that it continues to see value in the framework as a whole and a recognition that the treaties are interdependent and that withdrawal from one can damage the overall infrastructure, as the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM accord set in motion the demise of START II.
A key question is whether Russia becomes more or less invested in the arms control architecture if the United States loses interest. The answer depends on whether Russia has more to gain or lose from maintaining the system or letting it collapse because, without Russian effort, current conditions could well bury it all but entirely. There are certainly those in Russia who believe the United States cannot be trusted and that arms control is a loser’s business as a result.\[^5\]

The experience of the Bush years is not encouraging from a historical perspective. Russia did not defend the framework then, other than rhetorically, when the United States decided to weaken it, but this experience was not a win for Russia. Moscow regained its capacity to develop land-based ballistic missiles with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs), but it lost constraints on U.S. missile defenses, something the Kremlin continues to bemoan. Moreover, Russia had very little capacity to prevent U.S. action at that time. So, although one possible lesson for Russia is that the framework does not serve it well, another is that when Russia has the ability to strengthen it, it will have a far better shot at attaining the results it seeks.

Some of Russia’s possible gains and losses in three areas are assessed below: strategic nuclear systems and New START, intermediate-range forces and the INF Treaty, and other Russian interests and prospects for future agreements.

**The Future of New START**

Trump has suggested that New START, the treaty that currently limits U.S. and Russian strategic systems, is better for Russia than for the United States. The treaty’s Russian detractors, however, see it as placing unfair constraints on their country and thus benefiting the United States. Russia’s current missile development plans suggest that Russia may not be only replacing its older delivery systems, but anticipating the possible demise of New START. Assuming that new systems are deployed as planned and old systems retired, the numbers for the force envisioned by the mid-2020s, when all old systems are due to be retired, add up quickly.

Russia’s newest class of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), the Boreis, equipped with Bulava missiles, are meant to comprise its entire fleet by the late 2020s. Current deployment and loading plans—three Project 955 Boreis (16 missiles each) and five Project 955A Boreis (16 or 20 missiles each)—call for six warheads per missile. In that case, the armament of the Boreis would account for 768 to 888 of Russia’s New START allocated limit of 1,550 warheads.\[^6\] Russian bombers, thanks to New START counting rules, only account for one warhead allocation apiece, so their impact on total numbers is comparatively small, even if new bombers are built. Current plans call for 50 new Tu-160s and a new Tupolev Pak-DA stealth bomber, still under development, but the total is unlikely to exceed 100 in the 10-year time frame.
For intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), Russia is deploying the MIRV-capable RS-24 Yars ballistic missile in mobile and silo versions. It is not clear what the total count will be, but as of December 2016, there were 78 mobile and 18 silo-based Yars deployed. Each is reported for purposes of New START as carrying four warheads. The deployment of the RS-26 Rubezh, said to be based partially on the Yars and with little additional information available, has been postponed several times. Deployment is now expected sometime this year. Yars and Rubezh missiles are expected to replace Topol-M and Topol missiles as those models leave service. It seems unlikely that they will replace all of them, but there is potential for quite large numbers. Russia also continues to develop the Sarmat, often touted as a follow-on to the SS-18 missile and described consistently as carrying 10 warheads per missile, with 46 missiles planned (replacing the SS-18s in their silos). Finally, the Defense Ministry has announced plans for five regiments of Barguzin rail-mobile missiles, which will each comprise six missiles with six warheads apiece.

This admittedly rough analysis indicates that Russia should have no trouble staying below New START launcher limits but that its current development plans easily put it above the warhead limit. If New START were to be extended by five years as Putin reportedly has suggested, Russia would have to do one of three things to maintain compliance with treaty limits: cancel some ICBM systems, deploy each system in very small numbers, or not load the full number of warheads onto each missile. Russian rhetoric does not indicate plans to deploy at lower loading levels. An intent to do so, however, even if not publicized, would be in line with another long-term Russian goal. Lower warhead loads would give Russia something it has envied for quite some time: so-called upload potential. The United States does not put all of the warheads it can on a number of its systems. This gives the Pentagon the option of uploading, that is, adding warheads, when it deems it necessary. If Russia “downloads” some of its systems, it will have this capacity as well because New START places no limits on warheads that are not deployed.
Yet, even with smaller numbers of warheads, Russia would have a difficult time supporting the logic of producing such a broad range of ICBM systems. There is little to be gained in developing small numbers of varied systems—certainly no economies of scale, although most of the ICBM systems, Sarmat excepted, appear to be based to varying extents on the Yars. This means that there is another potential benefit of New START extension and perhaps a follow-on: the ability to constrain the military-industrial complex and the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces through legal means to avoid building an economically infeasible and inefficient assortment of weaponry at a time of economic scarcity. Russia may have little interest in dropping its strategic nuclear force numbers below New START limits for fear of losing some of the clear nuclear pre-eminence it now shares with the United States over all other nuclear powers. Yet, Russia’s plans to build so many missiles obscure the reality that it can only do so much. Without treaty limits and with a tense bilateral relationship, an arms race with the United States becomes a real threat. Moscow knows from experience how costly, as well as how dangerous, this could prove. Indeed, Russian writing about the nuclear balance consistently evidences fear of U.S. plans and intentions.11

Some of Russia’s planning for all these new systems may be a form of posturing for negotiations to ensure it has something to give away. Certainly, Russians make the argument that their systems have to truly threaten the United States in order to incentivize future negotiations.12 In the meantime, however, design bureaus and production lines are gearing up and counting on funding, creating substantial lobbies to build more ICBMs. Checking them will require rapid action. Putin’s language on nuclear weapons is encouraging in that he speaks of improving, not increasing, the force.11 Putin’s question to Trump about a New START extension suggests an interest in keeping the agreement going at least until 2026—right around the time Russia’s all-modern force can be expected to come into being.

**INF Treaty**

The INF Treaty, signed in 1987, bans ballistic and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) (nuclear or conventional) with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers and their launchers. U.S. officials claim that Russia has begun deploying a prohibited new GLCM system. Russia has denied any such violation.14 If Russia is blatantly violating the treaty, its actions raise real questions about Moscow’s commitment to arms control treaties and international agreements more broadly. If Russia is violating the INF Treaty, why should it be trusted to comply with anything else? In light of Russia’s recent violations of its less binding but still on record commitment to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty in accordance with the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, this concern becomes even more salient.15

Good arguments can be made that the INF Treaty is out of date and could benefit from some revision.16 Russians have long and consistently complained about the treaty, and Putin noted last October that Russia is surrounded by neighbors who have intermediate-range missile capabilities.17 The treaty has U.S. detractors as well.18 If Russia wants changes, renegotiation should be its goal in the near term, with withdrawal as a backup option should renegotiation fail. Renegotiation would offer the opportunity to constrain the United States and possibly others if the treaty is broadened, while withdrawal sets the stage for an arms race, as does noncompliance very probably.19

It is possible, if not particularly likely, that Moscow somehow misjudged the scale of its own violation and the U.S. response. A number of things are odd about this deployment. As the United States has stopped short of providing details, there has been substantial speculation on just what specifically is at issue. Still, it is difficult to make a strong military case for an intermediate-range Russian GLCM. Simply put, there is nothing that Russia might be able to do with it that it cannot do with existing, treaty-compliant systems, including sea-based ones. One can argue, as former U.S. Department of State official Frank Rose told Congress, that Russia bolsters its capabilities in the European theater with a ground-based system.20 Certainly, it increases the amount of firepower that could be brought to bear, and this should make European states nervous.21 Yet, Rose and others note that the GLCM would be an army system, rather than a navy one.22 Moreover, this system was in development for some time. Therefore, deployment may involve bureaucratic wrangling between services, influence by the military industry, and other complications of this sort, which are far from unique to Russia.
Regardless of speculation, a violation of a long-standing treaty is very serious, and this deployment should not have happened. Yet, Russia’s choice of deployment, rather than withdrawal from the treaty, is an important statement in and of itself. If it is a statement of rejection of the broader system, this has serious and dangerous repercussions, starting with the likely development of such systems by the United States and including increased difficulty with New START and other Russian goals vis-à-vis the United States. If it is an ill-conceived way of improving a negotiating position, it is up to Russia to fix its errors. It can do this quietly, simply removing the systems in question without comment. It can do it a bit more publicly, arguing that although the systems are compliant, it is interested in showing good faith and expects the same from the United States. It can also move forward together with the United States on a variety of technical mechanisms geared to resolve the question of compliance, and it can look for ways to update and modernize the treaty itself, including by linking INF Treaty questions to others in a broader negotiating framework.

Whatever path it chooses, clear Russian actions indicating the intent to move forward to build on the INF Treaty, rather than undermine it, would be an important step toward demonstrating its commitment to arms control frameworks, making them more survivable and more viable for the future.

Prospects for Future Accords

If Russia sticks with the overall arms control framework, which includes resolving the INF Treaty violation concern, and convinces the United States to go along, it will make prospects for a New START extension substantially better. This would not be the only benefit to Russia.

One of the most critical things that Russia can attain only through a bolstering of the arms control framework is progress on renewed limits on missile defenses. Moscow has pointed to the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002 as proof that Washington does not take the arms control framework seriously. Western analysts may argue that Russia accepted the U.S. withdrawal, but from the time it became plausible that the United States would withdraw, Russian plans for START II were predicated on continued U.S. adherence to the ABM Treaty. Once the United States withdrew, Russia announced that, as it had promised, it would consider START II no longer binding. Although it took some time to implement plans for MIRVed ICBM systems, those followed. Indeed, Russia’s argument for the need for MIRV capability is tied explicitly and consistently to U.S. missile defenses. Russia also touts its new systems as having maneuverable warheads, again to counter missile defenses.
Attitudes toward missile defenses are one of the clearest examples of a disconnect between U.S. and Russian public postures and perceptions. There is an element of faith in both sets of arguments. The United States and NATO have claimed that missile defense systems deployed in Europe are intended to defend against “missile proliferation emanating from outside the Euro-Atlantic area,” mainly Iran—capabilities that do not yet exist but are expected to evolve. Russians, however, have long held that the system over time will be sufficient to significantly mitigate if not eliminate a Russian strategic nuclear second strike, thus its deterrent capacity. Russia’s fear is of a future defense capability, even as NATO’s planning is directed against a future non-Russian threat. As analyst Pavel Podvig has quipped, “[M]issile defense only works against missiles that don’t exist,” but Russian fears of missile defenses remain a driver of their policy.

If Russia truly wants controls on U.S. missile defenses, it must realize that the only means at its disposal to achieve them is arms control. True, this has been a difficult point on which to get Washington to budge, with congressional pressure particularly trenchant. Yet historically, Russia has been able to make some progress, including the statement in New START regarding the relationship between offensive and defensive strategic weapons. Indeed, missile defense limits may be sold to Congress in the context of a broader agreement or package of agreements, which trades constraints on these programs for U.S. gains in other areas. This will only be possible if the White House, convinced of the need for arms control, can make the case that Russia is a reliable partner for such agreements.

Missile defense systems are not the only area where Russia has long-standing goals that likely can be attained only through arms control. A similar argument pertains to Russian desire to limit the United States in its conventional strategic capability and its desire to constrain Western conventional forces in Europe more generally. Moscow’s proposal of nearly a decade ago for a new European security arrangement was flummoxed in large part by a lack of clarity in the Russian approach, but the atmosphere today may be more favorable. Indeed, with Russian-NATO relations where they are, there is a strong argument for new agreements and arrangements, which has been noted by other prospective parties, because the conventional balance in Europe obviously could not be decided bilaterally.

For such agreements to be appealing, however, all involved would need to see Russia as a reliable negotiating partner. If European capitals were confident of this, they could be strong assets in convincing the United States. Russian support for the broader framework of arms control would again be crucial.

This is true not just for Europeans and not just for conventional systems. Russian officials and analysts have argued that other countries’ nuclear arsenals need to be included in future arms control arrangements. Specifically, Russia has sought to limit French and UK arsenals. It has also talked of including other nuclear powers in any talks that might be held on nonstrategic nuclear forces and strategic forces once numbers drop lower than New START limits. Again, future talks with other parties will be more successful if a good record can be established with the agreements already in place. Whether limits on nonstrategic nuclear weapons are possible is another question. The United States has long sought to address these systems through the arms control process. Russia has been unenthusiastic, although until very recently this did not appear to be because it placed particular value on such systems. For all appearances, Russia had been fulfilling the unilateral commitments made by Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin and dismantling a broad range of nonstrategic systems. In more recent years, however, Russia has been deploying more systems that are overtly dual capable, including Iskander and Kalibr missiles, and seemingly seeking to leverage that for political gain. If the United States remains interested in such agreements, Russia may have room to negotiate for other interests. One interesting proposal for ways forward in the nonstrategic space has recently been developed by Pavel Podvig and Javier Serrat. They propose taking advantage of the tendency to store weapons away from delivery systems and negotiate this practice into a binding and verified constraint. It is easy to see how such an arrangement might contribute to stability, and the concept can be a starting point at least for discussion.

Similarly, as so-called hypersonic weapons are developed, the logic of finding ways to limit these capabilities and avoid arms races becomes increasingly convincing. Russia and China are concerned
about U.S. capabilities, and their programs are at least in part responsive. Meanwhile, the details of
the systems are unclear. Negotiations could help limit misunderstanding, assuage concerns, and
mitigate developments perceived as particularly dangerous.28

Russia may also benefit from bringing a variety of other issues to the arms control table, whether in the context
of renegotiating existing agreements or developing new ones. For example, it may be interested in
limits on drone development, deployment, and use. New limits on nuclear cruise missiles have also
been discussed and could resolve some of the current INF Treaty-related impasse.29 Furthermore,
although Russia has recently backed away from some of the nonproliferation cooperation it has
enjoyed with the United States and others, this agenda has also served it well in the past and aligns
with its stated global goals and interests.

Conclusion

Russia, like all countries, is likely to abide by treaties that are in its interests and to try to find ways
out of treaties that are not. Russia being a responsible participant in the treaties it has already
signed is certainly in the interest of its treaty partners and a wide range of other states. It is also
very much in Russia's interest. As a result, Moscow faces an imperative to prove its intentions to the
broad range of other interested countries, given the doubts that have now arisen.

This is not to ignore Russia's reasons to be frustrated and unsatisfied with the arms control
framework as it stands today. In the past, it has lacked the capacity to effectively use its leverage to
attain goals vis-à-vis the United States and has gotten far less than it sought. Yet, something is still
better than nothing. There is little doubt that, without the arms control framework, Russia would be
worse off. It would be doomed to unaffordable and unstable arms races with no way to affect the
U.S. calculus other than by efforts at coercion, which could easily backfire. Moreover, although it is
tempting to jettison components of the framework that are particularly inconvenient, the
infrastructure as a whole is now sufficiently fragile that this is a dangerous game. If Russia wants to
make arms control work for itself, as it must for near- and long-term Russian security, it must find
ways to strengthen what exists, which includes resolving current impasses.

Russia also must think creatively about paths forward, particularly if U.S. adherence to these
regimes remains uncertain. Just as the framework in totality is greater than the sum of its parts,
Russia may be best served by linked negotiations incorporating a range of issues to enable trade-
offs. Moscow has attempted this in the past with limited success. Today, the range of issues that
connect and divide Moscow and Washington is sufficiently complex that there may be more room for more explicit linkages between agreements that are already interdependent, if not grand arms control bargains.

Endnotes


3. The United States and Russia are bound by another treaty, the multilateral nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, to work toward a goal of nuclear disarmament. Each successive nuclear treaty is progress toward this goal.


6. A 20-missile load for the 955A Boreis had been reported, but more recent reports have suggested 16 missiles instead. See Dmitrii Boltenkov, “Vydat’s ‘Bulavoi’” [Issue with ‘Bulava’], Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kur’er, February 8, 2017. Previous reports had also suggested that Russia would build a total of 10 Boreis, which would raise the higher number to 1,128.


8. Ibid.

9. Recently, Russia’s Strategic Rocket Forces commander did not mention the rail mobile plans. Oleg Falichev, “Traektoriia Sderzhivaniia” [The trajectory of deterrence], Voenno-Promyshlennyi Kur’er, January 25, 2017.

10. Cancellation of the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine program seems unlikely.


15. The Budapest Memorandum is not a ratified treaty and holds less force.

16. See Kühn and Péczeli, “Russia, NATO, and the INF Treaty.”


19. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty Preservation Act, introduced in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives in February 2017, calls on the United States to begin development of intermediate-range missiles, ostensibly to convince Russia to comply with the INF Treaty.


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