



CRITICAL FACTORS FOR THE NEW START EXTENSION¹

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In the current circumstances, the preservation of the New START treaty, signed by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and US President Barack Obama in Prague on April 8, 2010, is probably the only realistic chance to ensure an acceptable level of strategic stability in US-Russian relations in the immediate term. The stabilizing influence of this Treaty is obvious because the ceilings on strategic offensive weapons and the transparency measures agreed under New START limit Russian-US rivalry in the area of strategic nuclear arms, when tensions between Moscow and Washington are running high.³ Cooperation in the framework of the New START verification mechanisms, including on-site inspections, has become even more important because following the collapse of the INF Treaty on August 2, 2019, mutual trust is severely undermined. Without an extension, New START is currently due to expire on February 5, 2021. Under the terms of Article XIV of the Treaty, should the parties agree to an extension, such an extension cannot be longer than 5 years. Do the two parties to the Treaty have any motivation to preserve it by means of extension? I believe the answer is yes, for both Russia and the United States.

Russia seeks to limit Washington's freedom to ramp up the US strategic nuclear arsenal so as not to be dragged into another unrestrained nuclear arms race. If the United States were no longer bound by the terms of New START, it would be able rapidly to increase the number of its nuclear warheads installed on deployed ICBMs from the current 400 to 800 thanks to its existing upload potential. It would also be able to increase the number of warheads on the deployed SLBMs from the current 900 to 1,920. The Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces would be unable to respond commensurately to such a massive increase in the US strategic offensive capability.

As for the United States, the benefits of preserving New START would also be significant. They were described last February during a hearing at the Senate Armed Services Committee by US Gen. John Hyten, who led the US Strategic Command at the

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³ Under the terms of Article II of the New START treaty, each party was given seven years from the document's entry into force (until February 5, 2018) to reduce its arsenals to no more than 700 deployed ICBM, deployed SLBM, and deployed heavy bombers carrying no more than 1,550 warheads, as well as no more than 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, deployed and non-deployed SLBM launchers, and deployed and non-deployed heavy bombers.



time. According to the general, keeping New START alive would enable the United States to have a much clearer idea of Russia's plans in terms of strategic nuclear weapons, which is extremely important to Washington. Gen. Hyten is absolutely right because in 2021, Russia is expected to launch mass production and deliveries to the armed forces of such new strategic offensive weapons as *Avangard* and *Sarmat* ICBM, the new *Borei-A* class nuclear-powered missile submarines, and deeply upgraded Tu-160M2 heavy bombers armed with new weapons. These strategic nuclear systems fall under the scope of New START, and are therefore subject to on-site verification measures by US inspection groups. Additionally, the United States has no plans of deploying any new strategic nuclear systems in the period to 2026 (when the extension would run out), which makes such an extension an even more attractive proposition for the Pentagon.

Finally, keeping New START alive would enable Russia and the United States to demonstrate to the international community their commitment to nuclear disarmament in the framework of Article VI of the NPT. This is an important consideration in view of the Tenth NPT Review Conference scheduled for April-May 2020. Neither would a five-year extension pose any risks for Russian or US national security because under Article XIV of New START, each party has the right to withdraw at any time should it decide that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of the Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests.

All that being said, there are, however, several obstacles to an extension of the New START Treaty.

The ongoing discussions about the treaty in the Trump administration are fairly negative. There are two prevailing views. One is that New START in its current form should be abandoned, and a new agreement should be negotiated with Russia to include all new Russian nuclear weapons systems (not just the *Avangard* and *Sarmat* ICBM but also the *Burevestnik* nuclear-powered cruise missile and even the *Kinzhal* air-launched missile, which is not even categorized as a strategic weapons system). The other view is that New START should be replaced by a new treaty, to be signed between the United States, Russia and China, and covering all their nuclear weapons systems. The proponents of that view seem to ignore China's categorical refusal to participate in any such negotiations. There are no senior voices in the White House advocating an extension of New START in its current form before attempting to launch a dialogue on a new nuclear-weapons treaty with Russia and China – even though that would seem the more rational approach.

Meanwhile, Russia has invited the United States to discuss a New START extension in earnest – but it has also put forward a precondition for launching such negotiations. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov put it in March 2019, before the parties can begin serious discussions on extending the New START treaty, the United States should fulfill all its existing obligations under that treaty. More specifically, Minister Lavrov referred to Washington's unilateral decision not to count the systems the Americans have



declared as “converted” towards the New START ceilings; Russia has so far been unable to verify that the weapons in question have in fact been converted, as the provisions of the Treaty require. Minister Lavrov added that this serious problem could be resolved by means of procedures stipulated in the text of the Treaty itself,⁴ and that it was only a matter of political will on Washington’s part.

Speaking of Russia’s grievances about Washington’s compliance, Lavrov meant the conversion of 41 B-52H US heavy bombers to carry only conventional weapons and the rendering of four launch silos on each of the US Navy’s 14 Ohio-type nuclear-missile submarines unable to launch Trident II SLBMs. As part of its inspection activities, Russia has not yet verified that the modified B-52H bombers are genuinely unable to carry nuclear weapons, or that the modified launchers of the Ohio-type submarines are no longer able to fire Trident II missiles.

But at the same time, neither Russia nor the United States have voiced any complaints about the other party’s compliance with the New START requirements regarding the limitations of the numbers of deployed and non-deployed strategic offensive weapons. Both parties have met the stipulated February 5, 2018 deadline for reducing their strategic offensive weapons numbers to the levels agreed in the Treaty. They are now in strict compliance with the limitations imposed by New START. That is clearly a key testimony to the fact that the Treaty is viable. The technical issues about the conversion of nuclear weapons delivery systems can certainly be resolved at the level of experts in the framework of the Bilateral Consultative Commission set up under Article XII of the New START Treaty. I believe these issues do not merit making their resolution a precondition for launching negotiations on a New START extension. After all, so long as the United States remains bound by the Treaty, it won’t be able to make use of the potential advantages cited by Minister Lavrov.

After meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Osaka, Japan in June 2019, Presidents Putin and Trump instructed their foreign ministers to launch consultations on the New START treaty. But the parties have since been unable to begin constructive dialogue on the issue because of the subsequent upsurge in Russian-US tensions. That upsurge was caused by such factors as the collapse of the INF Treaty, compounded by Washington’s rejection of the Russian initiative to announce a moratorium on Russian and US deployment of land-based shorter- and medium-range missiles. Another aggravating factor was the flight testing on August 18 of an upgraded *Tomahawk* cruise missile using a land version of an Mk-41 ship-based launcher to a range greater than 500km. There is no clarity as to when the dialogue on a New START extension might begin. Meanwhile, the time for such dialogue is running out. There is a real risk that even if Russia and the United States eventually launch such talks (which are bound to be

⁴ The procedure of conversion of strategic offensive weapons in order to remove them from the scope of the New START treaty is stipulated in a Protocol to that Treaty (Article III. Procedures Governing the Conversion or Elimination).



difficult), they will be unable to reach an agreement before the current term of the New START treaty expires.

For all these reasons, our only hope is that Presidents Putin and Trump realize the importance of keeping New START alive for the preservation of strategic stability in Russian-US relations, and that this realization will prevail over the obstacles described in this article. My hope is that once these obstacles have been dealt with, the two parties will exchange diplomatic notes on a five-year extension of the Treaty before it expires. To do that, they will not require the consent of their legislatures because, as already mentioned, the possibility of such an extension is stipulated in Article XIV of the Treaty. All that is necessary is the political will of the Russian and US presidents.