

## Prospects for Arms Control in the Next Decade

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With the INF Treaty dead, the longevity of New START in doubt, and the possible unraveling of other elements of the international arms control regime, there are plenty of grounds for pessimism about prospects for U.S.-Russian arms control in the next decade. But while a new legally binding, START-like agreement requiring further reductions is very unlikely during that period, it would be wrong to dismiss the contribution that less formal, less comprehensive, and less quantitative measures can make to promoting strategic stability and reducing nuclear dangers. And it would even be wrong to discount altogether the possibility of another formal U.S.-Russian strategic arms agreement that would follow New START.

The main reason for pessimism about prospects for arms control is the sharp deterioration of relations between Washington and Moscow, with mutual mistrust reaching Cold War levels, communications channels almost entirely shut down, and each side interpreting the strategic intentions and capabilities of the other in highly threatening terms.

In Washington, Russia's violation of the INF Treaty, its aggression in Ukraine, and its interference in U.S. elections have eroded the already narrow domestic base of support for arms control, aiding those in the Trump Administration who favor walking away from existing agreements and erecting a high barrier to Congressional approval of future ones.

But even if the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship had not declined so precipitously, the outlook for arms control would be clouded by other factors. With the development of new technologies and new systems – including non-nuclear capabilities with potentially destabilizing effects (e.g., advanced missile defenses, conventional prompt strike, offensive cyber, counterspace, hypersonics) -- strategic stability between the United States and Russia is no longer simply a function of the interaction between three kinds of long-range nuclear delivery vehicles. And with the growing capabilities of other nuclear-armed states, the absence of constraints on the strategic programs of those states cannot be ignored, especially in the case of China.

In these circumstances – and with widespread concern that the likelihood of nuclear war has increased significantly in recent years – the top priority for U.S.-Russian arms control should not be further nuclear reductions, although the reduction agenda (and even the elimination agenda) must not be abandoned altogether. Instead, the principal objectives of arms control in the near term should be reducing the risk of armed conflict that could escalate to the nuclear level, promoting strategic transparency and predictability, avoiding a destabilizing arms competition, and developing a revised conceptual framework for arms control and strategic stability that takes into account emerging technologies and additional strategic actors.

China and other nuclear-armed states must be brought into international arms control efforts. But a trilateral U.S.-Russia-China arms limitation agreement – as advocated by the

Trump Administration – is not feasible, in large part due to Beijing’s unwillingness to participate. And given the huge disparity between China’s current nuclear capabilities and the nuclear arsenals possessed by the United States and Russia, it is not strategically necessary, at least at this stage. There is much that Moscow and Washington can still do, and should do, on their own.

This is not to say the United States can afford to put off strategic engagement with China. As Beijing proceeds with its ambitious nuclear and conventional modernization programs, threatens U.S. regional allies and forces with large numbers of medium- and intermediate-range missiles, and pursues sophisticated counterspace and offensive cyber capabilities, there is a pressing need for the United States to address China’s efforts to tilt the military balance in the Western Pacific in its favor. Washington can do that by maintaining a sizable military presence in the region, strengthening alliance conventional capabilities (including regional missile defenses), and reinforcing the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. But it can also do that by seeking high-level, bilateral strategic stability talks with the Chinese aimed at gaining a better mutual understanding of each other’s strategic intentions and capabilities, avoiding misperceptions and miscalculations that could lead to armed conflict, and exploring confidence-building, risk-reduction, and perhaps even regional arms limitation arrangements.

The United States has called for a serious U.S.-Chinese strategic dialogue for years, but China has resisted. Washington should continue to give high priority to getting such a dialogue underway. But even if strategic talks with China remain elusive, the United States should make a determined effort to restart bilateral strategic engagement with Russia, America’s only real peer competitor in the nuclear weapons realm.

The extension of New START would provide the most promising context for strategic re-engagement between Moscow and Washington. Of course, even with New START extension, the poisonous state of bilateral relations, mutual recriminations about arms control violations, and suspicions about each other’s new weapons programs would pose formidable challenges to pursuing a constructive arms control dialogue. But allowing New START to expire in February 2021 – or worse, terminating it before then – would significantly exacerbate those challenges. Given the real possibility that the treaty will not be extended, consideration should be given now to how a modicum of strategic stability and predictability can be preserved in the absence of formal arms control commitments.

The place to begin in resurrecting U.S.-Russian arms control is to recreate serious bilateral strategic stability talks – not episodic, one-off sessions in which delegations exchange familiar talking points on a narrow range of current topics but regular meetings between high-level interagency teams (including senior military officers) in which frank, detailed, interactive discussions across a broad strategic agenda can take place. It would be a forum where each side could raise concerns about the other’s strategic intentions and capabilities and provide authoritative explanations regarding its own policies, doctrine, and programs. While it would not

be expected to alleviate all concerns, it could provide a valuable window into each other's strategic policies and perhaps minimize misconceptions and reduce worst-case thinking.

In addition to fostering greater strategic clarity, such bilateral talks could explore specific measures to address particular concerns and promote more stable strategic relations. In this respect, it could function as a kind of bilateral steering group, identifying potentially worthwhile steps and setting in motion efforts by experts to develop them.

A high priority would be transparency and predictability. If New START is allowed to expire, the two sides could decide to continue on a voluntary basis the treaty's data exchange, notification, and perhaps even inspection arrangements, including those applicable to the retirement or conversion of strategic systems (which would be especially important given the modernization programs of both sides).

In the period ahead, it will also be important to focus on conventional military capabilities, deployments, and operations. Since the use of nuclear weapons would almost certainly be initiated not out of the blue but in the course of a conventional armed conflict, the objective of preventing nuclear war could best be served by reducing the likelihood of conventional hostilities that could escalate to the nuclear level. Steps should therefore be taken to reduce prospects of armed conflict, inadvertent or intentional, between Russia and NATO, especially in the Baltic region. Such steps could include measures to avoid incidents between forces operating in close proximity on the seas or in the air, strengthened Vienna Document-type confidence-building arrangements governing military movements and exercises, and even Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE)-type constraints limiting the size and geographic disposition of forces on either side of the NATO-Russia border. Although such arrangements would be negotiated and implemented multilaterally, the United States, in close consultations with its NATO allies, could explore the need for them in its bilateral talks with Russia.

Missile defenses would figure prominently in future bilateral strategic stability talks. Although Moscow might be expected to continue pressing for legally binding limitations, domestic opposition in the United States would make such limits exceedingly unlikely. As an alternative, consideration could be given to a 2013 U.S. proposal for missile defense transparency, which was rejected at the time by Moscow. Under the proposal, the two sides would exchange declarations each year regarding their missile defense plans for the following 10 years, including numbers of key components (e.g., interceptors and sensors) and key technical parameters. The goal would be to provide sufficient information so that each side would recognize that the other's missile defenses did not threaten its strategic offensive forces or, at a minimum, would have years of warning during which it could act if it saw a threat emerging.

Although Russia has been concerned about potential U.S. advantages in missile defenses, the United States has been concerned about the substantial Russian lead – in terms of numbers, diversity, and delivery means – in non-strategy nuclear weapons (often called “tactical” or “theater” nuclear weapons). And while Washington has opposed limitations on missile defenses,

Moscow has refused to address non-strategic nuclear weapons, maintaining that U.S. nuclear gravity bombs deployed in several NATO countries must first be withdrawn from Europe before it will discuss the subject. While proposals have been made outside government circles for limiting non-strategic nuclear weapons – including by adopting a single aggregate limit covering all Russian and U.S. nuclear weapons, whether strategic or non-strategic, deployed or non-deployed – such an aggregate stands little chance of being adopted, at least at the present time. Perhaps less formal arrangements could be considered, such as geographical restrictions (e.g., no deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in “new” NATO countries in exchange for no Russian deployments within a certain range of NATO territory).

Even less restrictive would be a data exchange that would cover the number of each side’s non-strategic nuclear weapons as well as their delivery systems. Given asymmetries between U.S. and Russian interest in constraining missile defenses and U.S. and Russian interest in constraining non-strategic nuclear weapons, perhaps transparency arrangements on missile defense and non-strategic nuclear weapons could be paired.

Another focus of the U.S.-Russian strategic dialogue would be potential threats to strategic stability in the cyber and space domains, including threats to early warning and nuclear command and control. In light of rapidly evolving technologies, complications arising from dual-capable systems and networks, and serious verification challenges, classic arms control solutions are unlikely to be applicable in those domains. Ensuring the resiliency of cyber networks and space assets against attack will therefore largely be a national responsibility. But the United States and Russia can explore whether unilateral efforts to protect cyber and space assets can usefully be complemented by developing and promoting normative standards (i.e., codes of conduct or “rules of the road”), such as a rule that cyber means would not be used to target an adversary’s nuclear command and control system. While normative standards should ideally be adopted by a large number of states, Washington and Moscow can help pave the way by formulating such standards in their bilateral discussions and working together to promote wide international acceptance.

Bilateral strategic stability talks would also be an opportunity to address new kinds of systems, such as hypersonic glide vehicles, undersea autonomous nuclear delivery vehicles (i.e., the Russian Poseidon), nuclear-powered cruise missiles (i.e., the Russian Burevestnik), and U.S. missile defense directed-energy programs. Although there would obviously be limits to how much information both sides would be willing to share about the technical characteristics of their planned systems, they could seek to address each other’s concerns about the numerical size and military role of their new programs, exchange information about testing, production, and deployment schedules, and perhaps in some cases discuss bans or limitations on certain novel systems (e.g., a ban on arming autonomous systems with nuclear weapons). Even before they are willing or ready to proceed with a follow-on to New START, they might discuss whether and how new kinds of systems could be captured in a new strategic arms agreement – and they might consider how to avoid proceeding with deployment or basing arrangements that could preclude or complicate future arms control agreements.

The foregoing discussion suggests that, even if we assume optimistically that Russia and the United States will be willing to set aside the acrimonious elements of their current relationship and pursue constructive strategic talks, the future of U.S.-Russian arms control will look very different from the bilateral engagement that took place during the heyday of U.S.-Russian arms negotiations. In coming years, the priority will be stability over reductions, informal restraint over formal, legally binding agreements, transparency, confidence-building, and risk reduction measures over numerical limits, and narrowly focused arrangements over inclusive, comprehensive deals.

But even as the two sides pursue what many will regard as much too modest an agenda, they should explore the possibility of a new bilateral, formal, and comprehensive arms control agreement that would succeed New START, whether it ends in 2021 or 2026. By its own terms or in conjunction with separate, less formal arrangements, such an agreement would need to address concerns of one side or the other about missile defenses, conventional strike systems, non-strategic nuclear weapons, offensive cyber and counterspace capabilities, and new kind of systems. Although other nuclear-armed states would not be parties to such an agreement, Washington and perhaps Moscow would wish to pursue separate arrangements with third-countries, such as China in the case of the United States. And while a new U.S.-Russian agreement might not call for significant reductions, it could provide a platform for further reductions should future conditions warrant.

A new comprehensive agreement along these lines would be a tall order, especially given the current state of U.S.-Russian relations. It would require a significant re-conceptualization of strategic stability and arms control. It may well prove too difficult, especially if the early termination of New START resulted in an unconstrained arms competition. But it would be a serious mistake to give up on the kind of formal bilateral arms control measures that have helped promote international security for decades. Today, maintaining stability and predictability is the first order of business for arms control. But eventually we need to get back on the track of further limitations and reductions.