



BRIEFING PAPER

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Prospects for US-Russian nuclear arms control

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Summary

Bilateral talks aimed at restricting the nuclear arsenals of the Soviet Union and the United States began during the late 1960s as concern mounted over the rapid expansion in the number of warheads and delivery systems. Over the decades that followed a series of arms control regimes emerged. Of those only the New START treaty, concluded in 2010, remains in force after the US officially withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty on 2 August 2019.

Under the terms of New START the US and Russia committed to a limit of 1,550 strategic operationally deployable warheads and a combined limit of 800 deployed and non-deployed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launchers, submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM) launchers and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments. The treaty also establishes a verification regime that combines various elements of the original START verification regime and measures that are tailored to the current treaty.

Both countries are in compliance with the Treaty and it will remain in force until February 2021, unless it is superseded by a subsequent agreement, or extended for no more than five years.

What next for arms control?

The US and Russian Presidents have the opportunity to either extend the treaty up to 2026, negotiate a successor agreement, achieving further reductions in their nuclear arsenals, or to let the New START treaty lapse. If the New START treaty expires in February 2021, and is not replaced by a successor treaty, there will be no limits on the strategic nuclear forces of the two largest nuclear weapon states for the first time since 1972. That scenario has prompted fears of a quantitative nuclear arms race. It will also leave the US and Russia with fewer tools with which to verify the size and composition of each other's nuclear arsenals.

Observers have also pointed out that it will leave both countries in violation of their disarmament obligations under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Prospects.

While Russia has expressed its unconditional support for extending the New START treaty and agreed to discuss potential future arms control, the US has continued to keep its options open.

For the longer term, President Trump has stated his desire to see a "grand bargain" in future arms control that would move beyond the traditional bilateral approach to nuclear reductions and include China. It would also encompass a wider variety of nuclear weapons capabilities, including Russia's arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons and the new weapons systems it has under development. The US administration has linked progress on such issues with any agreement on extension.

The latest round of US-Russian strategic stability talks took place on 22 June 2020. While no agreement on New START was reached, both sides agreed to establish working groups on several key issues, with a view to a further round of dialogue in August 2020.

Concerns have been expressed, however, at how much can be achieved in the next six months before New START expires. Russia is unlikely to agree any curbs on its non-strategic nuclear capabilities, or the new systems it has under development unless the US places missile defence and US non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe on the table for discussion. China has also declined the invitation to participate in talks, highlighting the huge disparity between its nuclear stockpile (320 warheads) and that of Russia and the US.

Extending the treaty, while arms control negotiators pursue a new multilateral agreement, is widely favoured as an option. This is supported by Russia, NATO allies and many members of Congress and the US military. But much will depend on how the US administration views progress on these issues in the next few months, and whether President Trump wins a second term in November 2020.

If President Trump is re-elected and the treaty is allowed to lapse, without arms control progress elsewhere, then he will be the first sitting US President since Richard Nixon not to have engaged in, or agreed to, meaningful arms control restrictions with Russia. If the Democrats win the election in November 2020 they will have little more than two weeks after the inauguration of the new President in late January 2021, in which to change course.

Box 1: Suggested Library reading

This paper forms part of a wider series of Library briefing papers on nuclear issues:

- CBP8634, [Demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#)
- CBP7986, [A Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#)
- CBP8941, [Replacing the UK's nuclear deterrent: the long-awaited warhead decision](#)
- CBP 8010, [Replacing the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent: progress of the Dreadnought class](#)
- CBP8166, [The cost of the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent](#)
- CBP 7990, [President Trump: the nuclear question](#)
- CBP7566, [Nuclear weapons: country comparisons](#)
- CBP7353, [Replacing the UK's 'Trident' nuclear deterrent](#)
- CBP7542, [Nuclear Convoys](#)
- CBP4079, [The French Nuclear Deterrent](#)
- CBP7634, [Nuclear weapons: disarmament and non-proliferation regimes](#)

1. A brief history of bilateral arms control agreements

Bilateral talks aimed at restricting the nuclear arsenals of the Soviet Union and the United States began during the late 1960s as concern mounted over the rapid expansion in the number of warheads and delivery systems. Over the decades that followed a series of bilateral and multilateral arms control regimes emerged.¹

Among the most significant bilateral agreements were:

- **Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I and II)** - The first round of talks took place between November 1969 and May 1972. At the conclusion of the talks the Soviet Union and the United States signed a treaty restricting the construction of Anti-Ballistic Missile defences (the ABM Treaty)² and an [Interim Agreement](#) limiting strategic offensive arms.

Under [SALT II](#), the Soviet Union and the US sought to replace the Interim Agreement with a longer-term treaty that would provide broad limits on strategic offensive weapons systems. Negotiations began in 1972, but it was not until June 1979 that agreement was reached, and the treaty was signed.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 prevented the treaty's ratification by the US Senate and therefore SALT II never entered into force. Nevertheless, both sides undertook to abide by the treaty's provisions. This situation lasted until 1984 when President Reagan accused the Soviet Union of violating its political commitment to respect the treaty.³

- **[Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\)](#)** – signed in December 1987, both sides agreed to eliminate all nuclear-armed ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500km, their transporter/ launcher mechanisms and any associated infrastructure. The treaty also prevented the production and flight testing of any missiles which fell within its parameters.

Within three years both countries had met their obligations, resulting in the withdrawal of an entire class of nuclear weapons from their respective nuclear arsenals,⁴ and ending a nuclear stand-off in Europe.⁵

In February 2019, however, the US announced the suspension of its obligations under the treaty, in response to allegations of Russian non-compliance. The Russian government consistently

¹ Various multilateral arms control agreements were agreed, including the Partial Test Ban treaty 1963, the Outer Space treaty 1967 and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty 1968, which entered force in 1970.

² The United States withdrew from the ABM treaty in 2002 and as such the treaty is no longer in force.

³ The treaty had been intended to remain in force until 31 December 1985.

⁴ 2,692 intermediate-range missiles were destroyed as a result of the accord.

⁵ Out of range of the continental United States, with the exception of Alaska, Soviet missiles destroyed under the terms of the treaty were primarily aimed at European NATO states.

refuted the allegations; while at the same time accusing the US itself of breaching the terms of the treaty.

On 2 August 2019 that stand-off, and the unwillingness of either party to engage in substantive discussions to resolve each Parties' concerns led to the treaty's collapse after more than 30 years in place.

- **[Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty \(START I\)](#)** - On 31 July 1991 START I was signed, after almost ten years of negotiations. Under the treaty, both sides undertook to cut their active stockpiles of strategic nuclear warheads to 6,000 each by 2001⁶ and reduce the number of strategic nuclear delivery vehicles to 1,600. A comprehensive monitoring and verification regime were put in place to ensure compliance.

Within five months of the treaty's signing, the Soviet Union was dissolved, leaving nuclear weapons on the territory of four of the newly independent former Soviet republics – Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus. In May 1992 the Lisbon protocol was signed under which all four states became parties to the START treaty, although Russia was to remain the only nuclear weapon state. The process of ratification, coupled with the requirement that Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus accede to the *Non-Proliferation Treaty* as non-nuclear weapon states, delayed the treaty's entry into force until 5 December 1994.

The provisions of START I, including its inspection provisions, remained in force under Article II of the *Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty* which was concluded in 2002 (see below), although that treaty subsequently expired on 5 December 2009.

- **START II** - On 3 January 1993 the US and the Russian Federation signed a second treaty ([START II](#)) that provided for further reductions in their strategic nuclear arsenals. These were to occur in two phases: initially reducing to a ceiling of between 3,800 and 4,250 strategic warheads, and then down to 3,000 - 3,500. The treaty also provided for the elimination of all ICBMs capable of carrying Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles (multiple warheads or MIRVs).

Under a 1997 protocol the original deadline for implementation of December 2000 was extended to December 2007 as a result of delays in the ratification process. The US Senate had ratified the treaty in 1996, but opposition in the Russian parliament delayed ratification until April 2000. The Duma added a caveat to its approval allowing the Russian president to abrogate all arms control treaties if the US pulled out of the ABM Treaty and deployed a national missile defence system. In the event, START II did not enter into force, and on 14 June 2002 Russia declared that it would no longer be bound by the treaty, following the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. The move was seen as essentially symbolic, however, given that START II had been

⁶ At the time, the Soviet Union had around 11,000 strategic warheads and the US around 13,000.

effectively superseded by the SORT treaty, which had been signed a few weeks earlier.⁷

- **Moscow Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions (SORT) -** On 24 May 2002 the US and Russia signed the [Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions](#) (SORT or Moscow Treaty) at a ceremony in the Kremlin. It stipulated that by 31 December 2012 the number of operationally deployable strategic nuclear warheads deployed by the two sides would not exceed 1,700-2,200 each, considerably less than that which had been envisaged under START II.

However, under the terms of the treaty, surplus warheads withdrawn from deployment could be placed in storage and would not have to be destroyed. The treaty also did not place further limitations on the number of nuclear delivery vehicles held by each side; while the verification and inspection provisions for SORT were based on those set down in the previous START I treaty.

The treaty entered into force on 1 June 2003, following ratification by both parties. SORT expired when the New START treaty (see below) entered into force.

A series of Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNI) were also concluded between the US and Russia in 1991 which sought to limit and reduce both countries' tactical nuclear weapons stockpiles. However, the PNI were not established on a treaty basis, were non-verifiable, and the lack of transparency regarding the implementation of the PNI has made any assessment of their success relatively difficult. Nevertheless, the Nuclear Threat Initiative has estimated that, if the PNI have been fully implemented, it has "led to perhaps 17,000 TNWs [tactical nuclear weapons] being withdrawn from service, the deepest reductions in nuclear arsenals to date".⁸

Library briefing paper CBP7634, [Nuclear weapons: disarmament and non-proliferation regimes](#), examines all of these agreements in greater detail.

⁷ See Wade Boese, "[Russia Declares Itself No Longer Bound by START II](#)", *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2002

⁸ "Presidential Nuclear Initiatives: an alternative paradigm for arms control", *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, March 2004

2. New START

While still in office, Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin committed themselves to the negotiation of a “legally binding post-START arrangement”.⁹ Talks only got underway, however, after a change of administration in both countries. At their first meeting in London in April 2009, Presidents Obama and Medvedev announced that they were opening negotiations on “new and verifiable reductions” in their strategic offensive nuclear arsenals, beginning with a “new, legally-binding treaty” to replace START I which would be agreed by the end of 2009 when START I was due to expire.¹⁰ Those talks got underway in May 2009.

Despite predictions that a new agreement would be reached before the START I treaty expired in December 2009, negotiations became mired in technical issues over compliance, and in particular access to unencrypted technical data from nuclear capable missile tests, and toward the latter end of negotiations, over disagreements regarding the US’s revised missile defence plans in Eastern Europe. The US consistently refused to link negotiations on the treaty with its missile defence plans, commenting that “the START agreement will in no way affect our deployment of missile defence assets in Europe”.¹¹ Agreement on the successor treaty was reached on 26 March 2010, with Presidents Obama and Medvedev signing the [new treaty](#) on 8 April 2010.

2.1 Main provisions of the treaty

Under the terms of that treaty, its protocols and technical annexes, the US and Russia have committed to the following disarmament measures:

- A limit of 1,550 strategic operationally deployable warheads,¹² including all warheads on deployed ICBMs and SLBMs. Each deployed heavy bomber equipped for nuclear armaments counts as one warhead towards this limit.¹³
- A combined limit of 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, SLBM launchers and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments. Non-deployed systems also include those assigned to testing and training. Within that overall limit is a separate limit of 700 deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments; which represents a limit less than half of that established under the

⁹ “US-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration”, Sochi, 6 April 2008

¹⁰ Joint Statement by President Dmitry Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Barack Obama of the United States of America, 1 April 2009

¹¹ “US rules out missile defense link to treaty”, *Washington Times*, 12 February 2010

¹² a 30% reduction on the maximum limit of deployed strategic warheads agreed under SORT.

¹³ START I adopted a ‘type attribution’ counting rule whereby each ballistic missile type was assigned a number of warheads, regardless of the number it actually carried. This is similar to the approach being adopted for heavy bombers while ballistic missiles will be subject to an ‘actual load’ counting rule, supported by on-site inspections.

original START treaty.¹⁴ This implies a reserve of 100 non-deployed launchers and heavy bombers as provided for under the combined limit.

- The treaty establishes a verification regime that combines various elements of the original START verification regime and measures that are tailored to the current treaty. Verification measures under the new treaty include on-site inspections of both deployed and non-deployed systems; exhibitions to demonstrate the technical characteristics of new systems; six-month data exchanges and notifications relating to strategic offensive arms and facilities covered by the treaty; and provisions to facilitate the use of national technical means for treaty monitoring. The treaty also provides for the exchange of telemetry between both States Parties on up to five missile launches a year as part of measures to enhance transparency, despite an acknowledgement that telemetry is no longer required in order to monitor compliance.¹⁵
- Under the treaty each party has the ability to choose its own force structure and composition, within the overall set limits.
- Reductions were to be achieved within seven years of the treaty entering into force.

Despite previous reported disagreements during the negotiation stage over the US's revised missile defence plans, the new START treaty does not contain any provisions which limit the testing, development or deployment of any missile defence programmes. Nor does it constrain the testing, development and deployment of any current or planned long-range strike capabilities.

The treaty will remain in force until 2021, unless superseded by a subsequent agreement, and may be extended for no more than five years. The treaty also contains an option to withdraw with three months' notice if either state decides that extraordinary events related to the treaty have jeopardised its national interests. The *Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty* (SORT) was terminated upon the entry into force of this new treaty.

On 22 December 2010 the US Senate ratified the new treaty (by 71 to 26 votes); just over a year after the START I treaty expired.¹⁶ On the final day of debate Senators proposed two amendments to the resolution of ratification. Those amendments reiterated that the Preamble to the treaty is non-binding and affirmed US disagreement with the Russian unilateral statement on missile defence. They also called for more rapid funding for modernisation of the US nuclear weapons complex.

On 25 January 2011 the Russian State Duma approved ratification of the treaty; while the Russian Federation Council approved ratification a day later. Both houses of the Russian parliament adopted

¹⁴ The strategic offensive reductions Treaty (SORT) did not address the issue of nuclear delivery systems.

¹⁵ [Key Facts about the New START Treaty](#), 26 March 2010 and [Announcement of the New START Treaty](#), 26 March 2010

¹⁶ The START successor treaty, its protocols and annexes were presented to the US Congress for ratification on 13 May 2010. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved ratification of the treaty on 16 September 2010 by 14 to 4 votes.

supplementary statements to their respective ratification bills stating that Russia could withdraw from the agreement if the scale of the US missile defence system was a perceived threat to Russian security. Like the US amendments, those supplementary statements are non-binding and do not require amendment of the treaty. On 28 January 2011 Russian President Dmitry Medvedev subsequently signed new legislation ratifying the treaty.¹⁷

On 5 February 2011 instruments of ratification were exchanged between the US and Russia, signifying the treaty's official entry into force.

2.2 Commentary

On the surface, the 30 percent cut in warhead numbers announced by Obama and Medvedev appeared significant. However, some analysts argued that they were less dramatic when compared to the commitments already made by the two sides in the 2002 SORT Treaty which required the US and Russia to cut their nuclear arsenals to between 2,200 and 1,700 by 2012 – potentially just 150 more than the maximum allowed under the new agreement.

Questions over the “counting rules” applied to the new treaty with respect to delivery systems were also raised. The intention to count a heavy bomber, which may be capable of carrying multiple nuclear-armed bombs or missiles, as one single warhead led many to conclude that in practice each side could actually maintain an operationally deployable stockpile of more than the 1,550 limit.¹⁸ However, in the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review*, the US administration defended this approach commenting that “this counting rule was adopted in recognition of the facts that heavy bombers do not pose a first-strike threat to either side, and on a day-to-day basis few or no bombers are loaded with nuclear weapons”.¹⁹

Several analysts also noted that there are no limits on the number of warheads, bombers and missiles that either side may keep in storage;²⁰ while others have pointed to the increasing obsolescence of some of Russia's nuclear capabilities, arguing that the cuts suggested under the new treaty therefore amounted to little more than unilateral concessions by the United States.²¹ The limitations that have been placed on the number of nuclear delivery vehicles, for example, have been regarded as modest and significantly in Russia's favour given that

¹⁷ The treaty was presented to the Russian Parliament for ratification on 28 May 2010. The Defense committee of the Duma subsequently endorsed ratification of the treaty in early July.

¹⁸ “Nuclear milestone on a long, long road”, *BBC News Online*, 8 April 2010

¹⁹ *United States Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, p.21. The counting rule adopted for heavy bombers was also used for this type of delivery vehicle in START I.

²⁰ See “Barack Obama's nuclear reset: mutual destruction is still assured but it's a START”, *NATO Watch Briefing Paper No.8*, April 2010 and “New START provides for significant arms cuts”, *Strategic Comments*, April 2010

²¹ “Son of START”, *Armed Forces Journal*, October 2009

Russia only possessed just over 800 deployed nuclear delivery systems; while the United States had 1,188 at the time.²²

Daryl Kimball, Executive Director of the Arms Control Association, agreed that the planned cuts were “modest” but highlighted that the US-Russian agreement is “vitally important” because it maintains “a system for verification and regulation of the world’s two largest arsenals”.²³ A *BBC News Online* article also argued:

Numbers here are not hugely important though in the sense that these arsenals are still far in excess of what might be needed to deter each other or, for that matter, any other potential nuclear competitor.

This agreement really is a starting benchmark; a formal treaty that sets the scene for much more significant reductions in the future.²⁴

However, the extent of the US and Russia’s current nuclear modernisation programmes led many to question whether the cuts envisaged under new START treaty are anything more than a political statement as planned upgrades to existing capabilities, including more flexible delivery systems, would still allow both states to achieve the same nuclear objectives in the future even with a smaller nuclear arsenal.²⁵

2.3 Are both State Parties in compliance?

Under the treaty agreed reductions in warhead numbers and delivery systems were to be achieved within seven years (5 February 2018).

New START data exchanged between the US and Russia on 5 February 2018 showed that both countries had reached the agreed treaty limits:

NEW START TREATY AGGREGATE NUMBERS OF STRATEGIC OFFENSIVE ARMS

CATEGORY	USA	RUSSIA
Deployed ICBMs, Deployed SLBMs, and Deployed Heavy Bombers	652	527
Warheads on Deployed ICBMs, on Deployed SLBMs, and Nuclear Warheads Counted for Deployed Heavy Bombers	1,350	1,444
Deployed and Non-deployed Launchers of ICBMs, Deployed and Non-deployed Launchers of SLBMs, and Deployed and Non-deployed Heavy Bombers	800	779

Source: US State Department Bureau of Arms Control Verification and Compliance, New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms, 22 February 2018

²² United States Bureau of verification, Compliance and Implementation, *START Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms*, 1 October 2009

²³ “U.S. and Russia to Reduce Arsenals”, *Washington Post*, 7 July 2009

²⁴ “Nuclear milestone on a long, long road”, *BBC News Online*, 8 April 2010

²⁵ The modernisation programmes of both countries are outlined in Library briefing paper CBP7566, [Nuclear weapons – country comparisons](#).

Data released by the US State Department in September 2017 revealed that the US had reached the agreed treaty limits four months ahead of schedule.²⁶

The most recent compliance data was published on [1 March 2020](#).

²⁶ US State Department Bureau of Arms Control Verification and Compliance, [New START treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms](#), 12 January 2018

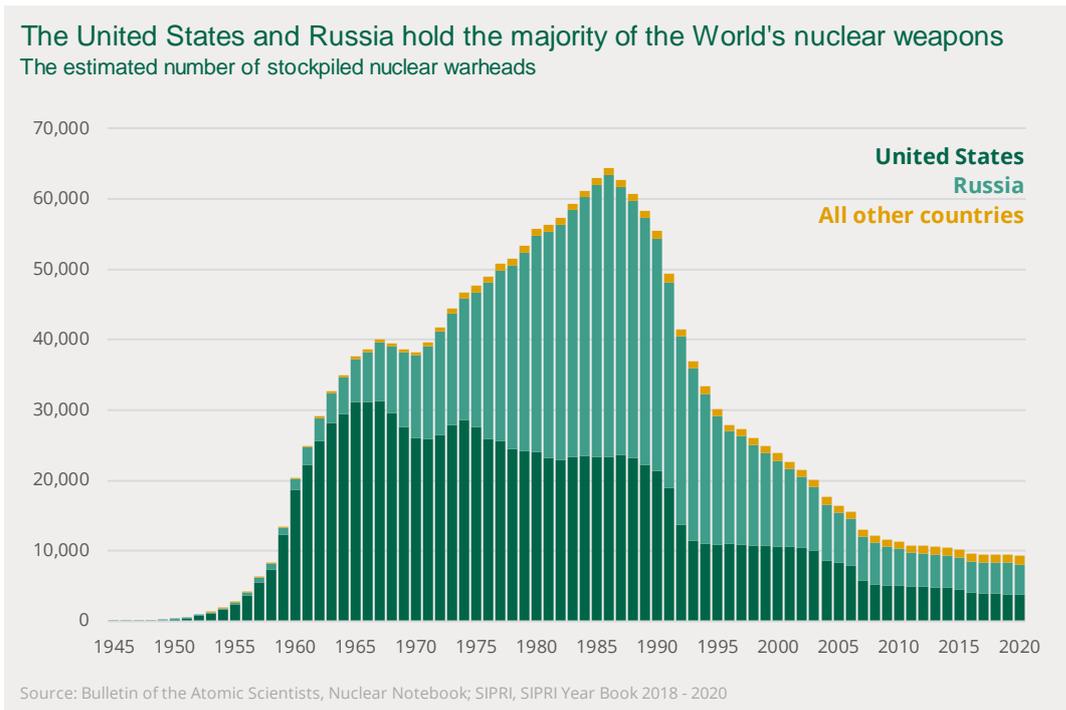
3. What next for New START: are we heading for Cold War 2.0?

In 2013 President Obama called for negotiations with Russia on a further one-third cut in strategic forces. This was an offer which the US State Department reportedly continued to make during the rest of the Obama administration's term in office. Russia refused to engage in discussions at the time, however, and made clear that it would not negotiate further nuclear reductions unless the US withdrew its non-strategic nuclear forces based in Europe.

With both State Parties reaching the agreed treaty ceilings of New START by the February 2018 deadline, attention subsequently shifted toward the future and whether Presidents Trump and Putin would agree to extend the treaty out to 2026,²⁷ and/or negotiate a successor to the New START treaty, achieving further reductions in their nuclear arsenals.

At the beginning of 2020, the US had an estimated 3,800 operational nuclear warheads (strategic, non-strategic and reserve) and Russia had 4,315.

A further 2,000 US and 2,060 Russian warheads are awaiting dismantlement.



Complicating the issue, however, has been the wider political relationship between the US and Russia, and what some have argued is the increasing disregard for the international arms control architecture.²⁸

²⁷ Under section XIV of New START both Presidents could, by personal agreement, extend the treaty without the need for ratification by the US Senate or the Russian Duma.

²⁸ In August 2019 the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty collapsed (see [CBP8634, Demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces \(INF\) Treaty](#)). In May 2020 the US also officially gave 6-months' notice of its intention to [withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty](#). The NPT regime is also considered to be under threat amidst the nuclear modernisation plans of the existing nuclear states, the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the refusal of North Korea to pursue denuclearisation

Both sides have also adopted radically different approaches to the future of New START. While Russia has repeatedly expressed its willingness to extend New START and begin negotiations on a successor treaty, the US administration has kept its options open. Openly critical of the treaty, the US administration has been largely unwilling to engage in substantive discussions. President Trump has instead expressed determination that China should be brought into a “grand bargain” on multilateral arms control, signalling a shift in focus that could place the New START treaty in danger.

With little more than six months before the treaty expires, experts fear that time is running out to negotiate either an extension to New START or a successor agreement. The US and Russia have held strategic stability talks on three occasions within the last year, with little progress made on New START.²⁹

If the treaty is allowed to lapse in 2021 there will be no limits on the US and Russia’s strategic nuclear forces for the first time in nearly 50 years, prompting fears of a quantitative arms race.³⁰ It will also leave the US and Russia with no access to each other’s strategic facilities and fewer tools with which to verify the size and composition of each other’s nuclear arsenals. Over the life of New START thus far, Russian and US experts have inspected each other’s nuclear weapons facilities 328 times³¹ and there have been more than 20,236 notifications, in which both Parties have exchanged data.³²

Observers have also pointed out that it will leave both countries in violation of their obligations under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament...”.³³

If the New START treaty lapses in 2021, there will be no limits on US and Russian strategic nuclear forces for the first time since 1972.

3.1 The US position

Early on in his Presidency Donald Trump was dismissive of the New START treaty, reportedly calling it “one-sided” in favour of Russia and failing to respond positively to a suggestion allegedly put forward by President Putin that the deal should be extended.³⁴

In its February 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*, the United States clearly identified Russia as a strategic competitor and one of the main threats

despite international sanctions. The moratorium on nuclear testing is also facing increasing pressures from a number of states, notably Russia and the United States.

²⁹ July 2019 and January 2020. The most recent talks were held on 22 June 2020 (see below). The US have increasingly referred to the dialogue as strategic security talks.

³⁰ Both the US and Russia have significant numbers of nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles held in reserve or awaiting dismantlement which could be “uploaded” to achieve operational status relatively quickly.

³¹ [US State Department](#), correct as of 18 June 2020

³² [US State Department](#), correct as of 18 June 2020

³³ [Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, Article VI](#)

³⁴ [“Trump wants to make sure US nuclear arsenal at top of the pack”](#), *Reuters*, 24 February 2017 and “A President in need of a Russia policy”, *Arms Control Today*, March 2017

driving the assumptions and conclusions of that review.³⁵ It also clearly linked progress in future arms control, including New START, to Russian compliance with existing international agreements.³⁶

This heavily caveated approach to future arms control drew considerable criticism from commentators who accused the US administration of abdicating global leadership on disarmament and non-proliferation issues.

An interagency review

In May 2018 the US Government announced that it would conduct an interagency review which would examine “whether to extend, replace or jettison New START or to pursue a different type of approach such as the 2002 SORT treaty”.³⁷

The review was initially led by former National Security Adviser John Bolton, a long-standing arms control critic and opponent of New START. As such, the outcome of the review was considered by many experts to be a foregone conclusion.

Bolton’s subsequent departure as NSA in September 2019 is considered to have had little effect on the potential outcome of the review, given the approach of the Trump administration to bilateral arms control and treaties in general.

Indeed, the US administration has increasingly turned its attention to delivering President Trump’s vision of a ‘grand bargain’ on nuclear reductions that would include both Russia and China and expand any agreement to cover a wider range of nuclear capabilities, including those which Russia has under development.³⁸

A new arms control grand bargain?

In its statement on withdrawal from the INF treaty on 2 August 2019, the US State Department gave some insight into the US administration’s future priorities, which is not bilateral US-Russia agreements:

The United States remains committed to effective arms control that advances U.S., allied, and partner security; is verifiable and enforceable; and includes partners that comply responsibly with their obligations. President Trump has charged this Administration with beginning a new chapter by seeking a new era of arms control that moves beyond the bilateral treaties of the

³⁵ Further detail of the US 2018 Nuclear Posture Review is available in Library Briefing Paper [CBP7990, President Trump: The Nuclear Question](#)

³⁶ US Nuclear Posture Review, p.73. In June 2020 the US State Department published a [paper](#) examining Russian compliance with its arms control agreements between 1984 and 2020.

³⁷ “No arms control advances in US-Russian talks”, *Arms Control Today*, September 2018

³⁸ In March 2018 President Putin stated that Russia had several new nuclear weapons systems under development: a hypersonic ground-launched missile (Kinzhal), the Avangard hypersonic boost glide vehicle which will initially be deployed on the SS-19 ICBM, the Sarmat ICBM, a hypersonic cruise missile (Tsirkon), a nuclear powered torpedo (Kanyon/ Posiedon) and the Burevestnik (Skyfall) nuclear-powered cruise missile. Only two of those systems, the Avangard and the Sarmat ICBM would potentially be constrained by New START. The remaining systems beyond 2025, and therefore potentially outside the timeframe of New START, even if it is extended.

past. Going forward, the United States calls upon Russia and China to join us in this opportunity to deliver real security results to our nations and the entire world.³⁹

That sentiment was echoed in a [paper published by the US State Department](#) in April 2020. That paper identified four challenges for any future agreement on arms control:

- It needs to account for strategic nuclear weapons that are currently constrained by New START.
- Russia's non-strategic arsenal needs to be addressed.
- It needs to address Russia's new strategic delivery systems that fall outside the parameters of New START.
- China's nuclear build up needs to be constrained.

That paper did not address the future of New START.

In an interview with *The Washington Times* in May 2020, President Trump's newly appointed Special Envoy for Arms Control,⁴⁰ Marshal Billingslea, stated that any potential extension of the US' existing obligations must be tied to progress towards a new era of arms control and that the US was not interested in "arms control for arms controls sake".⁴¹

While the idea of broadening talks on nuclear reductions has been welcomed, this attempt at a "grand bargain", and more specifically the timing of it, has largely been met with scepticism. Commentators and arms control experts alike, have expressed concern that all the proposal offers is an opportunity for the US administration to jettison New START while pursuing a politically unattainable goal, at least in the short to medium term.

Advocates have therefore called for New START to be extended, in order to "provide a foundation for a more ambitious successor agreement".⁴² Indeed, in May 2019 US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo acknowledged that a "grand bargain" between the three nuclear powers may be "too ambitious" and that with "just a couple of years left before New START expires...It may be that we have to do that on a bilateral basis".⁴³

The extension of New START as an interim option is widely supported within the US military, Congress, academia and among US allies.⁴⁴

³⁹ US Department of State, [US withdrawal from the INF treaty](#), 2 August 2019

⁴⁰ Mr Billingslea's appointment has been met with criticism as Senate-confirmed appointments within the State Department have historically led arms control negotiations (see: [Statement by Senator Bob Menendez, Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#)).

⁴¹ ["Envoy says China is key to new arms deal with Russia"](#), *The Washington Times*, 7 May 2020

⁴² "Bolton's attempt to sabotage New START", *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2019

⁴³ "New START must be extended, with or without China", *The National Interest*, 27 May 2019

⁴⁴ The British Government has expressed support for a treaty extension, with a view to pursuing a trilateral arms control agreement in the longer term ([HL4880, 8 June 2020](#)). In February 2020 President Macron stated that it was "critical" that new START be extended in a speech on defence and deterrence. In an [interview on 23](#)

Senate and House Democratic committee leaders sent a letter to the President at the beginning of June 2019 praising the efforts of the administration to broaden arms control talks, but also stressed that given “the challenges inherent to reaching new agreements with Russia and China, we strongly believe the limitations and verification measures of New START must remain in place while any such negotiation occurs”.⁴⁵

In May 2019 Senator Robert Menendez, Ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee also expressed his support:

Given the challenges inherent in reaching new agreements with Russia and China, I strongly believe the limitations and verification measures of new START must remain in place while any such negotiation occurs. Any new initiative must not serve as an excuse for suddenly withdrawing from another international agreement.⁴⁶

More recently he introduced [legislation](#) into the Senate which calls for an immediate extension of New START and restricts the President from taking any immediate action in contravention of the treaty if no decision on extension is made. Specifically, it prevents the President from taking any action that would violate the treaty until 1 March 2021.⁴⁷

Several Democrats within Congress have, in the past, also suggested that their continued support for investment in modernisation of the US nuclear arsenal hinged on the administration’s support for arms control, including extension of New START.⁴⁸

Former Head of US Strategic Command, and now Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Hyten, has also stated his support for the continuation of New START, albeit in the longer term advocating the expansion of it to include all nuclear weapons. Giving testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2019 he said:

So no treaty is perfect, and New START is certainly not perfect. But what it gives me at STRATCOM, it gives me two very important things. Number one, it puts a limit on the basics of their strategic force. So I understand what the limits are and I can position my force accordingly so I can always be ready to respond. And maybe as important, it also gives me insight through the verification process of exactly what they are doing and what those pieces are. Having that insight through my forces and our partners is unbelievably important for me to understand what Russia is doing [...]

It is still my view. I have said it multiple times. I am a big supporter of the New START agreement. I want ideally in my view all nuclear

[June 2020](#) the NATO Secretary General expressed support for extending New START in order to provide time to negotiate a multilateral arms control agreement, including China.

⁴⁵ “Bolton declares new START extension ‘unlikely’”, *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2019

⁴⁶ US-Russian nuclear arms control watch, *Arms Control Today*, May 2019

⁴⁷ In tandem Senator Menendez introduced a [second bill](#) which calls for arms control dialogue with China. Several other pieces of legislation calling for the extension of New START have also been introduced in Congress, for example the [Act to Maintain Limits on Russia’s Nuclear Forces \(HR. 2529\)](#).

⁴⁸ “Republican Senators back New START”, *Arms Control Today*, October 2018

weapons to be part of the next phase of New START and not just the identified weapons that are in the New START treaty now.⁴⁹

On 22 May 2020 the [Bulletin Science and Security Board](#), which is comprised of eminent experts in the field of nuclear risk, also published a [statement](#) calling on the US and Russia to immediately extend New START, stating that it would “provide additional time and a stable foundation for further negotiations with Russia (and potentially China) on new and more ambitious arms control arrangements”.

Yet, the treaty equally has its critics, and particularly within the Republican Party in Congress. In May 2019 Senators Tom Cotton and John Cornyn introduced [legislation](#) aimed at blocking funding for any extension of New START unless it is expanded to include China and the entirety of Russia’s nuclear arsenal, including non-strategic weapons. Republican Representative Liz Cheney also introduced companion legislation in the House of Representatives suggesting that “America deserves better than a mere New START extension”.⁵⁰

3.2 Russian views

Although Russia was initially unwilling to engage in discussions on further nuclear reductions, in recent years President Putin has repeatedly expressed his desire to extend New START and signalled Moscow’s preparedness to engage in talks to achieve further nuclear reductions.

At the Helsinki summit in July 2018 Russia reportedly presented the Trump administration with several proposals “to work together further to interact on the disarmament agenda, military and technical cooperation”. Included in those proposals were discussions on extending New START and resuming dialogue on Russian concerns about the US’ missile defence plans. Russia also proposed to resume strategic stability talks as a forum to discuss these issues.⁵¹

Russia has consistently remained open to negotiations on New START and in December 2019 President Putin indicated Russia’s willingness to renew the treaty “without any preconditions”.⁵² This in itself has been viewed as somewhat of a compromise on Russia’s part, after initially accusing the US of only reaching the agreed reductions under New START “through the illegal and unilateral reclassification of about a hundred strategic offensive systems”, and suggesting that it is “a serious problem, which must be settled before any discussions on the extension of the treaty are held”.⁵³ At the end of 2019 Russia also confirmed that two of the new nuclear systems currently under development: the Avangard hypersonic boost glide vehicle (initially

⁴⁹ Testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, 26 February 2019

⁵⁰ [“What does the demise of the INF treaty mean for nuclear arms control?”](#), Foreign Policy, 2 August 2019

⁵¹ “Can Putin and Trump head off a new nuclear arms race”, *Arms Control Today*, August 2018

⁵² Lee Willett, “A New START?”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 29 January 2020

⁵³ “US-Russian nuclear arms control watch”, Arms Control Association, March 20 2019

deployed on the SS-19 ICBM)⁵⁴ and the Sarmat ICBM would fall under the remit of New START.

The extension of the treaty has also been acknowledged by Moscow as “an opportunity to discuss the prospects of bilateral and multilateral arms control” within an environment of “strategic predictability”.⁵⁵ On the issue of the multilateralisation of arms control, Sergei Ryabkov, Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister had suggested that Moscow’s response would depend upon the nature of any US proposals, although it is widely accepted that discussions on missile defence would be a prerequisite.⁵⁶ President Putin has also expressed his personal belief that any multilateral arms control negotiations should involve all nuclear countries, including the UK and France, unofficial countries Pakistan, India, Israel and potentially North Korea. Speaking to reporters in June 2019 he stated:

Talking only with the officially recognised nuclear powers and leaving out the unofficial countries means they will continue to develop nuclear weapons. In the end, this process will grind to a halt even between the official nuclear states. So, by and large, we need to create a broad platform for discussion and decision-making.⁵⁷

In March 2020 the Russian Ambassador to the US reiterated this view in an [interview with Arms Control Today](#). However, he went on to caution that:

We believe that this “obsession” with the trilateral format can become a serious obstacle to the development of the Russian-US strategic dialogue, in particular, in terms of preserving existing treaties and developing possible new bilateral agreements. There is no doubt that the Russian-US bilateral arms control agenda remains relevant.⁵⁸

He also confirmed that Russia was willing to discuss, as part of bilateral strategic dialogue, the nuclear capabilities which it currently has under development that would not be covered by the New START treaty.⁵⁹

3.3 Prospects

A third round of strategic stability talks were held in Vienna on 22 June 2020. As part of that dialogue both sides agreed to “talk about [their] respective concerns and objectives and find a way forward to begin negotiations on a new arms control agreement”.⁶⁰

Despite both sides recognising the importance of continued dialogue, the talks yielded little progress on new START. In a briefing on 24 June 2020, Ambassador Billingslea confirmed that the US was “leaving all

⁵⁴ On 27 December 2019 the Russian Ministry of Defence stated that the first SS-19 missile regiment deploying Avangard had become operational (Lee Willett, “A New START?”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 29 January 2020)

⁵⁵ [Interview with Ambassador Anatoly Antonov](#), Arms Control Today, April 2020

⁵⁶ “US seeks broader nuclear arms pact”, *Arms Control Today*, May 2019

⁵⁷ President of Russia, [Meeting with Heads of International News Agencies](#), 6 June 2019

⁵⁸ [Interview with Ambassador Anatoly Antonov](#), Arms Control Today, April 2020

⁵⁹ [Interview with Ambassador Anatoly Antonov](#), Arms Control Today, April 2020.

⁶⁰ “US Russian to meet on arms control”, *Arms Control Today*, June 2020

options available” on the future of the treaty and that the US was “willing to contemplate an extension of that agreement but only under select circumstances”.⁶¹

Those circumstances are understood to include making progress towards a new trilateral arms control agreement including China, one that covers all nuclear warheads including Russia’s arsenal of nonstrategic nuclear weapons and new weaponry and imposes a stronger verification regime than at present.⁶²

Both parties agreed to form technical working groups to discuss key issues, with a view to a further round of talks in August 2020. China will be invited to attend future talks, although is widely expected not to attend.

Concerns have been expressed, however, at how much can be achieved in the next six months before New START expires, warranting the US to agree to an extension.

It is widely accepted that negotiation of any new multilateral arms control agreement will be complex, and time consuming. In turn for discussion on Russia’s non-strategic arsenal and any new weaponry it has under development, Russia will want to address US non-strategic nuclear weapons based in Europe and US missile defence. This is a scenario that former Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Policy at the Department of Defense Brian P. McKeon, has previously described as “fanciful”.⁶³ Questions also remain over what the US expects from China in terms of arms control. As many experts have acknowledged, to include China in an agreement implies that parity in nuclear numbers would need to be achieved. To do so would require either the US and Russia to reduce their nuclear arsenals down to the level of China, or to allow China to expand its stockpile. Both options are considered politically untenable.⁶⁴ Indeed, on 8 July 2020, Fu Cong, the head of arms control in China’s Foreign Ministry indicated that China would “be happy” to participate in trilateral arms control negotiations, but only if the US was willing to reduce its nuclear stockpile to China’s level. A course of action that Mr Cong suggested was “not going to happen”.⁶⁵

Discussions on limiting China’s nuclear missile capabilities is also considered unlikely given its regional interests, and in light of suggestions by the US that it could use the demise of the INF treaty as

China has argued against its participation in nuclear arms control talks due to the disparity in stockpile numbers. China has approximately 320 warheads, compared to the 3,800 and 4,300 *operational* warheads held by the US and Russia respectively (SIPRI Yearbook 2020).

⁶¹ [Online press briefing with Ambassador Marshall Billingslea, Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control, and Lieutenant General Thomas Bussiere Deputy Commander, United States Strategic Command](#), 24 June 2020

⁶² A discussion of the merits of the New START verification regime was published by the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) on 21 May 2020, following criticism of the existing system by Ambassador Billingslea in his interview with *The Washington Times*.

⁶³ [Testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee: Russia and Arms Control: Extending new START or starting over?](#), 25 July 2019

⁶⁴ All the smaller nuclear powers, including the UK, have stated that there needs to be significant reductions in the nuclear arsenals of the US and Russia before discussions on multilateral nuclear reductions could take place. Library Briefing CBP7566, [Nuclear weapons: country comparisons](#) examines these views in more detail.

⁶⁵ [“China challenges US to cut nuclear arsenal to matching level”](#), Reuters, 8 July 2020

an opportunity to deploy conventional (non-nuclear) intermediate-range missiles in Asia.⁶⁶

None of these issues will be easy to resolve and as Thomas Countryman of the Arms Control Association has observed:

Even under ideal conditions, a bilateral negotiation on a single topic takes years. Even if Russia and China were willing to discuss the proposed Trump agenda, a trilateral discussion of multiple topics would inevitably take considerably longer, even if it were pursued by an administration committed to the topic and with successful experience in negotiations. This is not such an administration, which features officials long opposed to New START, combined with a nearly complete absence of experienced officials in the US Department of State.⁶⁷

A number of commentators, including Daryl Kimball, Executive Director of the Arms Control, have also continued to argue that US insistence on Chinese involvement⁶⁶ is merely a ruse for abandoning the treaty. Mr Kimball commented:

The only conclusion I can come to is that Marshall Billingslea and the Trump administration do not intend to extend New START and are seeking to display China's disinterest in trilateral arms control talks as a cynical excuse to allow New START to expire.⁶⁸

Extending the treaty, while arms control negotiators pursue a new multilateral agreement, is widely favoured as an interim option. This is a position which is supported by Russia, NATO allies and many members of Congress and the US military. But much will depend on how the US administration views progress on these issues in the next few months, and indeed whether President Trump wins a second term in November 2020.

If President Trump remains in office and New START is allowed to lapse in February 2021 with no progress having been made in realising his nuclear weapons "grand bargain", he will be the first sitting US President since Richard Nixon⁶⁹ not to have negotiated, or agreed, meaningful arms control restrictions with Russia.

If the Democrats win the election in November 2020 they will have little more than two weeks after the inauguration of the new President in January 2021 before New START expires.⁷⁰ The extension of the treaty

⁶⁶ "Pentagon chief in favour of deploying missiles to Asia", *The New York Times*, 3 August 2019

⁶⁷ Thomas Countryman, "Russia, China, arms control and the value of New START", *Arms Control Today*, November 2019

⁶⁸ "Opening nuclear talks with Russia, US may also be ending them", *The Moscow Times*, 20 June 2020

⁶⁹ Richard Nixon: Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Interim Agreement 1972, Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty 1972; Gerald Ford: negotiation of SALT II; Jimmy Carter: SALT II 1979; Reagan: INF Treaty 1987; George Bush Snr: START I 1991 (although negotiations began under Reagan), Presidential Nuclear Initiatives 1991, START II 1993 (although the treaty never entered into force); Bill Clinton: agreed a framework for negotiations on START III, although those negotiations never happened; George W. Bush: SORT 2002; Barack Obama: New START 2010.

⁷⁰ President Trump's term of office ends on 20 January 2021. New START expires on 5 February 2021.

could be achieved relatively quickly, however, as it does not require ratification by the Senate.⁷¹

⁷¹ By an exchange of diplomatic letters for example.

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