

Arms Control Strategies for a New Administration

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The last remaining bilateral arms control treaty between the United States and Russia—the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START)—will now be [extended](#) without preconditions for a maximum of five years, ahead of the looming expiration deadline of February 5, 2021. However, any meaningful progress by the new administration on further arms control and nuclear risk reduction measures will require sustained efforts in the midst of a crowded foreign policy agenda and increasingly tense relations with Russia.

Q1: Why does the New START extension matter, and what comes next?

A1: Following a [phone call](#) between U.S. president Joseph Biden and Russian president Vladimir Putin on January 26, 2021, the two countries verbally agreed to extend New START for the full five years without preconditions. Russia took the extension back to the Duma, where it was quickly [approved](#) in both houses of parliament on January 27, 2021, and [signed into law](#) on January 29, 2021. On February 3, 2021, the United States [confirmed](#) the extension of New START, a move that did not require congressional approval. The treaty [limits](#) the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 per country and the number of deployed strategic delivery systems to 700. It also provides critically important transparency and confidence-building measures, including on-site inspections, [data exchanges](#), and limits on encryption levels for flight test data.

While New START's extension is broadly supported, full and unconditional extension is not without some measure of controversy—especially given Russia's large and unregulated stockpile of nonstrategic nuclear weapons. Some say the Biden administration should have picked up where the Trump administration left off in terms of negotiations on a verifiable cap or freeze on total stockpile numbers. How close that deal was to completion, however, appears to be a very open question and with only days between the start of Biden's term, and the expiration of the deal, a clean extension was the only realistic option.

But simply extending the treaty is not enough. Equally important is safely resuming bilateral inspections to ensure New START compliance, as well as ensuring the Bilateral Consultative Commission can safely meet to sustain technical interactions—both of which were halted due to the [Covid-19 pandemic](#).

Q2: Looking beyond New START, what will be the most complex arms control issue for the new administration?

A2: While treaties based on transparency, parity, and reciprocity have historically been a common goal for arms control agreements, they may no longer be as effective or achievable in managing contemporary stresses on strategic stability. Further numerical reductions on strategic nuclear arms and delivery systems may prove elusive, especially if the imbalance in nonstrategic nuclear arms is not addressed. Moreover, such approaches are insufficient, given the

complex regional dynamics and the broader range of technologies—space, cyber, artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and more—driving strategic stability concerns. Nevertheless, the fundamental interests of promoting risk reduction and preventing arms racing will persist, and the tools and approaches of arms control remain essential.

On arms control with Russia, the new administration will have to address Moscow’s disturbing pattern of skirting treaty obligations. Russia’s sustained noncompliance in several arms control agreements—including the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty](#) and the [Open Skies Treaty](#), as well as the [Chemical Weapons Convention](#)—contributed to U.S. withdrawal decisions and the collapse of two of those treaties. At the same time, Russia has continued to [modernize](#) its nuclear forces and is developing novel nuclear weapons systems—including hypersonic glide vehicles, long-range nuclear-capable torpedoes, and dual-capable long-range precision strike systems—some of which lie outside of current arms control agreements. Future agreements with Russia, therefore, will have to factor in Russia’s spotty record of compliance when designing verification and dispute resolution measures, as well as addressing the new nonstrategic nuclear weapons and advanced delivery systems Russia is developing.

Developing more effective ways to engage Russia in strategic stability talks that produce meaningful progress in terms of nuclear risk reduction is also a top arms control priority for the Biden administration. However, Russia’s behavior on the world stage—including the Novichok poisoning and subsequent arrest of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny—greatly complicates efforts to forge a more cooperative path forward on arms control and risk reduction efforts. In the new security environment, arms control sits in the gray zone between competition and cooperation. As such, trust and cooperation will be difficult, but progress based upon clear-eyed interests can be achieved.

The new administration will also have to address what risk management—including arms control, confidence-building measures, and strategic stability talks—looks like with China. China will remain reluctant to come to the negotiating table, especially if it entails participation in an existing U.S.-Russia framework. China’s ability to deflect and avoid bilateral and multilateral arms control efforts will grow increasingly problematic as its nuclear arsenal grows quantitatively and qualitatively, and as its strategic weapons systems further diversify. While multilateralizing strategic arms control efforts may ultimately have merit, direct bilateral engagement with China on a modest and well-scoped agenda might be the only realistic path for now. Moreover, China is not the only country raising concerns about the premature multilateralization of strategic arms control. France and the United Kingdom—with arsenals smaller than China’s—are voicing serious concerns about getting pulled into this process. This is one more area in which the new administration will need to regroup and recommit to close consultation and coordination with our closest allies and fellow P5 members.

Q3: What about arms control efforts beyond the nuclear arena?

A3: The new administration will also have to consider alternative structures, modalities, and participation models for arms control to account for rapidly changing technologies and a toxic information environment. The advancement of technology—including remote sensing, AI, and hypersonic vehicles—is transforming the precision, lethality, and survivability of conventional tools of warfare in ways that will challenge traditional notions of stability and blur thresholds and firebreaks between conventional and strategic conflict. In addition, increased commingling of nuclear and conventional forces, as well as increasingly complex interactions between space, cyber, and conventional systems, are transforming the strategic landscape. As a result, nuclear stability may be better reinforced through arms

control efforts in other domains rather than exclusively through more traditional nuclear arms limitation or disarmament models.

This complex landscape may call for breaking down technical stovepipes and considering asymmetrical ways to conceptualize participation, whether by considering new ways to engage—e.g., globally, regionally, multilaterally, and bilaterally—and by exploring new incentives, scoping options, and verification procedures in future agreements. Failure to adapt to this new reality may further undermine the prospects and utility of arms control now and in the future.

Q4: What problems may not be on the administration’s radar when it comes to emerging arms control and strategic stability challenges?

A4: Successful and durable arms control in this time of renewed competition requires new thinking about ensuring verification and compliance in the face of a rapidly evolving and increasingly weaponized information environment. Today, arms control exists in a post-truth, conspiracy-minded world in which disinformation is rampant, verifiable facts are elusive, and credible information is under sustained and systematic attack. Deep fakes, weaponized social media, and information sabotage can be used to undermine the arms control process. Such tactics can target not only governments but also nongovernmental entities and individuals with the intention of shaping and manipulating information more than “stealing” it. By promoting false narratives, flooding the information zone with conflicting data points, manipulating social and economic institutions, and instigating general or targeted social unrest, potential adversaries can undercut confidence in U.S. and allied institutions. At the same time, weaponized information can be leveraged to increase distrust and confusion and coerce adversaries’ desired outcomes—all with potentially deleterious outcomes for the success of arms control agreements. Future agreements will need to inoculate organizations responsible for verification and compliance against disinformation as well as harden reputable information sources against cyberattacks and spoofing.

Moreover, the explosion of international open-source intelligence (OSINT) analysis means the days of proprietary, private, official sources and processes as a primary means of verification—particularly in the form of national intelligence—may be over. The arms control community has reaped benefits from the independent, publicly available information provided by OSINT analysts. Credible information outside of national government control can provide for greater transparency and independence, especially in matters of compliance. However, leveraging OSINT for verification is not without its challenges. The possibility of bad actors inserting disinformation into data and skewing OSINT analysis is a major concern. Efforts to protect and validate sources have struggled to keep up with the rapid growth of OSINT, leaving the community with no national or international guidelines or even best practices for policing the analysis.

Q5: What can the new administration do next for arms control?

A5: *Resume Bilateral Inspections and the Bilateral Consultative Commission.* Commit to the immediate resumption of bilateral inspections and functioning of the Bilateral Consultative Commission under New START. Virtual meetings can address some concerns while the parties develop appropriate Covid-19 safety measures to enable the resumption of meaningful data exchanges.

Negotiate a Follow-On Treaty. New START extension is just the opening move—and in many ways the easiest move—not the endgame. Now that the extension is in place, the United States and Russia should begin negotiations for a follow-on treaty. This treaty should not focus on further numerical reductions of strategic systems. Rather, it should address challenges presented by nonstrategic nuclear weapons and advanced delivery systems.

Engage in Strategic Stability Talks. In addition to the negotiation of a new treaty, the United States and Russia should engage in strategic stability talks to address a range of issues, including noncompliance in international agreements and increased Russian gray-zone activities—specifically Russia’s deployment of disinformation campaigns, election interference, and poisoning of political dissenters, as well as aggressive posturing in space and widespread cyberattacks—all of which have implications for conflict and escalation. The aim of strategic stability talks is not to return to “business as usual” with Russia; instead, they offer an avenue to de-escalate military tensions and address crisis management.

The United States should also engage in strategic stability talks, to the degree possible, with China. These risk reduction and confidence-building measures could be achieved in a bilateral or P5 forum to address the challenges of new and emerging technologies. Furthermore, the United States could engage China in nuclear verification activities to promote technical cooperation and transparency.

Plan for New Challenges in Arms Control and Strategic Stability. Future arms control agreements will need to adapt to the new security environment to develop beyond the overly rigid, stove-piped approaches. Today’s challenges require negotiators to incorporate alternative structures and modalities that encompass advanced technologies, cross-domain challenges, and innovation in participation and inclusion of stakeholders and participants. This will require new thinking on how to resolve disputes of compliance without treaty collapse, how to adjudicate the credibility of information, and how to inoculate the people and institutions involved in the arms control process against disinformation.

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