



ASSESSMENT OF US-RUSSIA ARMS CONTROL POST HELSINKI

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



US-Russia relations have been deteriorating for the last few years. The state of the bilateral arms control has also come under threat as a result of their increasingly adversarial relations, especially the landmark arms control treaties like the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) Treaty and the New START. There were expectations from the US-Russia Summit held in Helsinki, Finland on July 16, 2018 of progress on bilateral relations, as well as on arms control.

There were positive signs of progress on the two main arms control treaties in place in the run up to the Summit, where US President Donald Trump said that he would discuss reductions to their nuclear weapons when he meets Russian President Vladimir Putin. President Putin also said at the press conference after the Summit that his administration had given Americans a note with a specific number of suggestions on strategic stability and global security and non-proliferation and expressed a desire to work together on nuclear issues. This is absolutely vital in order to put some checks on the new nuclear arms race that both Russia and the US are all set to embark on.

The details of what was actually discussed at the one on one meeting between President Trump and President Putin vis a vis arms control are sketchy. However, President Putin gave an interview to *Fox News* after the Summit and newspaper leaks from a note that President Putin gave to the US side sheds some light on discussions. During the interview, he specifically talked about the arms control treaties. Talking about News START, he said that "Russia stands ready to extend this treaty, to prolong it, but we have to agree on the specifics at first because we have some questions to our American partners. We think that they are not fully compliant with the Treaty, but this is for experts

to decide."¹ This was probably a reference to Russian concerns about US reconfiguring some submarines and bombers to carry conventional weapons. Russian concerns are regarding verifiability that the systems can no longer deliver nuclear weapons.² The Russian foreign ministry said it does not have a way to confirm that the reconfigured hardware was rendered incapable of carrying nuclear weapons.

The New START Treaty was signed in 2010. It limited the deployable nuclear warheads and bombs to no more than 1,550, the number of deployed missiles and bombers at 700, and the total number of deployed and non-deployed launchers at 800. Both US and Russia declared in February 2018 that they had reached the requisite limits. The Treaty is set to expire in February 2021, but can be extended for a further 5 years with mutual agreement.

Status of Arms Reduction under New START

Category of Data	United States of America	Russian Federation
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	1350	1444
Deployed and Non-deployed Launchers of ICBMs, Deployed and Non-deployed Launchers of SLBMs, and Deployed and Non-deployed Heavy Bombers	800	779

Source: "New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms," Factsheet Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, July 6, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/newstart/284121.htm>

Earlier, in January 2017, Russia offered to begin extension talks which were rejected by President Trump partly due to domestic politics, and also because it was seen as a legacy of his predecessor, US President Obama.

In his interview, President Putin also specifically said that new Russian weapons are being developed in response to US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty), "They were not born out of nowhere. They were born as a response to the unilateral withdrawal of the United

¹ Chris Wallace interviews Russian President Vladimir Putin, *Fox News*, July 16, 2018, <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2018/07/16/chris-wallace-interviews-russian-president-vladimir-putin.html>

² "Russia says it met nuclear limits, questions US Compliance," *VOA*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-nuclear-limits-us-treaty-compliance/4240224.html>

States from the ABM Treaty."³ He further said that, "Moscow is hopeful that Russia and the United States will be able to find an acceptable solution for both countries with regards to strategic stability, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF)."⁴

The 1987 INF is a treaty that was considered to be the cornerstone for European security. It prohibits US or Russia from possessing ground-based ballistic or cruise missiles with ranges from 500 km to 5500 km. However, the Treaty has been under threat since both sides have accused each other of violating the terms of the Treaty. Since 2014, the US has been accusing Russia of testing and possibly deploying a prohibited ground-launched cruise missile. Russia, on the other hand, also accused the US of violating the Treaty by placing missile defense interceptors in Poland and Romania which, they argue, can easily be modified through minor software changes to act as offensive systems.⁵ According to the leak from Russian note, President Putin proposed a joint US-Russia statement in order to reaffirm the two countries' commitment to the INF Treaty.⁶

There seems to be willingness and initiative on Russian side to maintain and strengthen both the arms control treaties. The US side, however, seems more hesitant. Post Helsinki Summit, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo while testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said that the administration is "currently undertaking a "holistic" review of the New START and INF treaties and has yet to make a decision as to whether the preservation of these two agreements serves the interests of the US."⁷ This is a very dangerous approach by the current US administration. There is no doubt that INF was fundamental to arms control structure that US and Russia build during the Cold War. It served to check the arms race between the two rivals and eliminated an entire category of weapons which thereby secured Europe from possible nuclear strikes. Similarly, New START has been called "an arms control gold star."⁸ It helped significantly reduce the massive nuclear buildup of the Cold War era, introduced a measure of trust into US-Russia relations and helped manage the risk of miscalculation by opening up their respective arsenals to monitoring.⁹

³ Chris Wallace interviews Russian President Vladimir Putin, *Fox News*, July 16, 2018, <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2018/07/16/chris-wallace-interviews-russian-president-vladimir-putin.html>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ulrich Kuhn, "Nuclear Arms Control Shaken By New Instability," *International Politics and Society*, June 12, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/06/12/nuclear-arms-control-shaken-by-new-instability-pub-76593>

⁶ James Cameron, "US-Russia Arms Control measures After Helsinki," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/08/u-s-russia-arms-control-measures-after-helsinki/>
⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Maggie Tennis and Strobe Talbott, "Another arms race? No and nyet," *Brookings*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/20/another-arms-race-no-and-nyet/>

⁹ Ibid.

This has helped to keep a check on a nuclear arms race between the two powers for over three decades.

With the deterioration in US-Russia relations over the last few years, both countries seem all poised to slide back into an unchecked nuclear arms race. This was evident from the US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) revealed in February 2018 which proposed a new tactical sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM) and a low yield nuclear warhead for its ballistic missile submarines, and research and development of a new ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) that would violate the terms of the INF.¹⁰ In response, Russia has unveiled several systems of its own. These included a new supersonic missile that can reach any point in the world and cannot be tracked by missile defense systems, another system is a cruise missile with unlimited range and that cannot be defeated by any missile defense system; and a nuclear capable underwater drone.¹¹

Post Helsinki, there is willingness on the part of Russia to extend the New START till 2026 and willingness to work out any disputes regarding the INF treaty. The US seems more reticent. However, it would be a mistake to let the New START lapse or do away with the INF. It took years of hard work to negotiate these treaties, in the case of INF it was done during a time when relations between the two countries were more strained than they are now. Decision makers on both sides need to understand the importance of these bilateral arms control arrangements and seize the opportunity to uphold, extend and improve the bilateral arms control arrangements. Russian willingness to cooperate and resolve arms control issues may not last forever. The US side needs to check and overcome any opposition to these treaties within its ranks. Here is the opportunity to reverse the nuclear arms competition that US and Russia are all set to embark on. Both countries need to extend the New START to 2026. They need to take measures to allay any Russian verification concerns with New START. The two countries need to come up with proposals to resolve compliance issues with the INF, perhaps by allowing inspections of the disputed systems.

US and Russia need to make moves beyond just the preservation of the existing arms control structure. They need to work together to halt development of systems that do not come under the purview of the existing treaties. The US can stop development of the new cruise missiles and Russia can forswear its underwater drone. These systems are not only costly, but also increase uncertainty during times of crises. They also need to negotiate and eliminate any intercontinental ballistic missiles with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV). It is imperative to halt the

¹⁰ "Nuclear Posture Review," February 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>

¹¹ "Russia's Putin unveils 'invincible' nuclear weapons," *BBC News*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43239331>

new arms race in its infancy in order to preserve and stabilize the existing deterrence relations and strategic stability.