



THE FUTURE OF NEW START: IS THE WORLD AT RISK OF ANOTHER NUCLEAR ARMS RACE?

By
Shayan Jamy
Intern

Arms Control & Disarmament Centre (ACDC), ISSI

Edited by
Najam Rafique

September 21, 2020

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



The US and Russian delegations are currently meeting in Vienna, Austria for the second round of nuclear disarmament talks. A major part of these talks deal with the future of New START, which is currently the only legally binding nuclear arms control deal between the two countries. New START is set to expire in February 2021. A possible expiration of the treaty would leave the global nuclear arms control regime in uncharted territory and the future of nuclear arms proliferation uncertain.

The US and Russian nuclear arms control talks go back decades when the two states signed the monumental SALT-I treaty, which marked the beginning of bilateral nuclear arms negotiations between the two. Since SALT-I was implemented in 1972, there has always been at least one agreement in place to limit the production and deployment of nuclear arms. However, this could all be brought into question with the expiration of New START. The New START, which came into force in February 2011, limits both the US and Russia to 1550 deployed warheads, 700 deployed missiles and heavy bombers, 800 missile launchers and bombers and also has an agreed-upon extensive inspection regime.¹ The agreement contains a provision which allows for the extension of the treaty by 5 years. Given the significance of the treaty, the current negotiations in Vienna could prove to be of paramount importance for the future of the global nuclear arms control regime.

¹ "New START Treaty," US Department of State, accessed September 2, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/new-start/>

The first round of talks closed in June 2020, with both the US and Russia failing to find any significant common ground. Should the two fail to find common ground before February 2021, there could be a wide array of consequences. The US President, Donald Trump, has already expressed his desire to build up the country's nuclear arsenal. Earlier in 2018, he said, regarding nuclear weapons, "We will always be number one in that category...we're going to be far, far in excess of anybody else."² Such statements, coupled with the US withdrawal from the INF treaty in 2019 and a potential resumption of nuclear testing seem to indicate where the US is moving in terms of its nuclear policy. Indeed, the Trump administration's fiscal year 2021 budget request called for a 19% increase (\$7.3 billion more than last year's \$37.2 billion budget) from 2020 to modernize its nuclear arsenal.³

After the US withdrawal from the INF treaty, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, responded by saying that, "if Russia obtains reliable information that the US has finished developing these systems and starts to produce them, Russia will have no option other than to engage in a full-scale effort to develop similar missiles."⁴ According to the SIPRI Yearbook 2020, "Both countries (US and Russia) have also given new or expanded roles to nuclear weapons in the military plans and documents." The US and Russia seem to be moving further away in terms of nuclear policy, and the only thing keeping them together is New START.

For many years now, however, the global nuclear arms control regime has been faltering. According to the SIPRI Yearbook 2020, despite an overall decrease in the number of nuclear warheads in 2019 (down to 13400 from 13865), all nuclear-weapon possessing states continue to modernize their nuclear arsenals.⁵ Indeed, nuclear-capable states have been moving towards nuclear and military modernization. According to a report by ICAN, the 9 nuclear-armed nations spent a record \$73 billion on nuclear weapons in 2019, a 10% increase from 2018. The top spenders in 2019 were USA (\$35.4 billion), China (\$10.4 billion), the UK (\$8.9 billion) and Russia (\$8.5 billion), with the US, Russia and China all increasing their nuclear spending from 2018.⁶ The US, Russia, China and other nuclear states are simultaneously modernizing their nuclear warheads, missile delivery systems and nuclear

² Emily Shugerman, "Donald Trump said he will Expand US Nuclear Arsenal 'far in excess of anybody else'" *Independent*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-nuclear-arsenal-force-us-military-weapon-a8207586.html>

³ "Surging US Nuclear Weapons Budget a Growing Danger," *Arms Control Association*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2020-03/surging-us-nuclear-weapons-budget-growing-danger>

⁴ Andrew Osborn and Polina Devitt, "Putin to Trump: We'll Develop New Nuclear Missiles if you do," *Reuters*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-arms-putin/putin-to-trump-well-develop-new-nuclear-missiles-if-you-do-idUSKCN1UV1GV>

⁵ "Nuclear Weapon Modernization Continues but the Outlook for Arms Control is Bleak: New SIPRI Yearbook out now," *SIPRI*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/nuclear-weapon-modernization-continues-outlook-arms-control-bleak-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>

⁶ "Enough is Enough: Global Nuclear Weapons Spending 2019," International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, accessed September 3, 2020, https://www.icanw.org/report_73_billion_nuclear_weapons_spending_2020

production facilities. These facts do not bode well for the future of the global nuclear arms control regime.

It's no surprise then, that so many people are worried about the future of the global nuclear weapon situation. The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, in a speech commemorating the 75th anniversary of the World War-II nuclear bombings of Japan, said: "The web of arms control, transparency and confidence-building instruments established during the Cold War and its aftermath is fraying." Expressing further concern, he went on to say, "Division, distrust and a lack of dialogue threaten to return the world to the unrestrained strategic nuclear competition."⁷ Without a stable nuclear arms control regime, we could see a return to the intense political and military tension experienced at the height of the Cold War.

Although President Trump has made clear his desire for China to join the nuclear talks with Russia, China has so far rejected any invitations. Mr. Fu Cong, head of the arms control department of the Chinese foreign ministry, said of the New START talks, "The real purpose is to get rid of all restrictions and have a free hand in seeking military superiority over any adversary, real or imagined."⁸ Such a statement paints a clear picture of existing tensions between the US and China regarding nuclear arms talks. With a few months left until New START expires, an extension of the treaty could prove to be vital. This would not only stabilize the US-Russian nuclear relations, for the time being, it would also give the US 5 years to negotiate a nuclear arms control deal with China. Russia has stated time and again that it wishes to extend the deal. President Putin said recently, "We stand ready until the end of the year to extend the existing New START as it is."⁹ An extension of New START for another 5 years seems like the ideal outcome for both parties, as well as for global stability.

The effects of the possible failure of the current US-Russia nuclear disarmament talks would be felt around the world. Without any checks on the US and Russian nuclear capabilities, the world could very well see the start of a new nuclear arms race. Many would argue that this new arms race has already begun, with powerful states such as the US, China, Russia, India and others seeing an increase in their nuclear and military spending and capabilities. Indeed, according to the SIPRI April 2020 Fact Sheet, global military expenditure was estimated to be around \$1917 billion in 2019, the

⁷ "Dialogue, Arsenal Reduction Vital to Prevent Return of Unrestrained Nuclear Competition..." United Nations, August 6, 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20199.doc.htm>

⁸ Yew Lun Tian, "China 'Happy' to Join Arms Control Talks with US and Russia-if US cuts its Nuclear Arsenal own to China's level," *Business Insider*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-join-new-start-talks-if-us-cuts-nuclear-arsenal-2020-7>

⁹ Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos, "Putin Invites US to Extend New START," *Arms Control Association*, January/February 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-01/news/putin-invites-us-extend-new-start>

highest level since 1988. This was 3.6% higher than in 2018 and 7.2% higher than in 2010.¹⁰ The US and Russia are already in possession of more than 90% of the world's nuclear weapons. China, and other powerful states would feel compelled to catch up. This could very easily accelerate the rate of weapons and military technology development. A modern nuclear arms race is the last thing the world needs right now. It would destabilize the nuclear arms control regime, take valuable resources and attention away from global societal problems and could ultimately lead to mass-scale destruction.

A modern arms race would certainly be more dangerous than during the Cold War, due to the presence of multiple world powers and the current state of military technology. The world is seeing a new phase of the technological revolution, and it will not be long until we see ground-breaking military technology being used on the battlefield. With the current advances being made in artificial intelligence, hypersonic missiles and autonomous weapons systems, to name a few, states will be moving at a rapid pace to gain a military advantage over their rivals. Failure to extend New START would only accelerate the advancements already being made. This would be a big blow to the global nuclear arms proliferation regime, which took so many years to develop during the Cold War.

The possible failure of the US-Russian talks would have widespread consequences, perhaps most importantly in South Asia. The current volatile situation between India and Pakistan could be made even worse by the introduction of a modern nuclear arms race. India has already made its intentions clear with its aggressive unilateral actions and military modernisation. Currently, India has the 2nd largest military in the world and is the world's 2nd largest arms importer. In 2019, the Indian government finalized a road map to spend the US\$130 billion in the next five to seven years to modernize their armed forces and military capabilities.¹¹ Military deals signed with the US, Russia, Israel and others have made more than clear India's intentions moving forward. Adding a nuclear arms race to the region would only increase tensions.

It will be left up to Pakistan, once again, to respond to the growing military might of India. Since 1998, Pakistan has adopted a credible minimum deterrence doctrine. Pakistan ensures that it is well within its rights to counter any aggressive steps that India takes. Should India modernize its military further and expand its nuclear program, Pakistan would be forced to maintain strategic stability. Such a delicate situation could easily escalate into a regional nuclear arms race, which would have

¹⁰ Nan Tian, et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2019," SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2020, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/fs_2020_04_milex_0_0.pdf

¹¹ PK Chakravorty, "Modernisation of the Indian Army," *India Strategic*, January 2020, <https://www.indiastrategic.in/2020/01/11/modernisation-of-the-indian-army/#:~:text=In%20September%202019%20the%20Indian,the%20challenges%20from%20the%20adversaries.>

far-reaching effects. Global world powers need to ensure that such a conflict is not ignited and, in turn, the threat of proliferation of conventional and nuclear arms is also reduced.

With the February 2021 deadline for the extension of New START fast approaching, an agreement needs to be reached between the US and Russia. An extension of the treaty for another 5 years seems like the best option as it delays any global nuclear arms race for the time being. However, an extension does not remove the threat altogether. Further multilateral dialogue and cooperation must be initiated which should involve all the major nuclear powers. The number of nuclear weapons simply cannot be allowed to increase further as once this trend starts it will be difficult to reverse. Furthermore, new multilateral treaties must also be signed which deal with the threat of emerging technologies. The decisions made by global powers in the upcoming decades regarding arms control will have long-lasting implications. A modern nuclear arms race must be avoided at all costs.