



NEW START: EXTENSION AND BEYOND

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Moscow and Washington agreed to extend the 2010 bilateral arms control treaty, New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) on January 26, 2021 for another five years after a telephone call between newly elected US president Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹ For months, the fate of the New START treaty had seemed uncertain. The extension has been welcomed by Russia and arms control proponents across the world. New START, signed in 2010 between Russia and the US put limits on the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 and deployed strategic delivery systems to 700 for each state. The treaty was set to expire on February 5, 2021, unless both sides agreed to extend it for a further five years.

While Russia had time again offered to extend the treaty without conditionalities, the Trump Administration refused to do so putting conditionalities on its extension. The extension of New START is of immense importance and its implications must be examined. What were the factors impeding the extension of the treaty? How will the extension proceed and what lies beyond? How will it affect the non-proliferation regime? These are vital questions that will set the tone for US-Russia bilateral arms control and perhaps the non-proliferation regime.

¹ "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," *White House*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/26/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia/>

The extension of the treaty comes at a time when bilateral and multilateral arms control was in shambles due to the policies of the Trump administration. The biggest casualty was the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty between the US and Russia that prohibited the deployment of intermediate-range missiles by both the countries. The US withdrew from it in 2019 and Russia followed. The US also withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the deal that was negotiated to impose curbs on Iran's nuclear program in 2018. Trump also chose to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty that allowed member states to conduct unarmed observation flights over each other's territory. Also, Trump's engagement with North Korea despite summits and handshakes failed to make any progress on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. He renewed the focus on developing nuclear weapons, initiated a new nuclear arms race, and eroded the norms against the use of nuclear weapons. His administration even talked about resuming nuclear testing.

New START, a landmark treaty between US and Russia is vital because it is the last remaining arms control treaty between the US and Russia. If it was allowed to expire in February 2021, there would have been no limits on the development and deployment of strategic weapons in the decades ahead. Letting the treaty expire would have allowed both sides to deploy an unlimited number of nuclear-armed submarines, bombers, and missiles. This would have fueled a nuclear arms race between the US and Russia and further exacerbated relations.

During the last few years, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, had stated on several occasions that he is ready to extend the treaty without conditions or changes. In the months leading up to the US elections, both sides engaged in negotiations. The former US President Trump believed that the provisions under New START should have been widened to include further verification measures and that China should also be included, and the treaty should be negotiated as a trilateral one. China refused to be drawn into any such treaty due to its small nuclear arsenal that did not compare with the US or Russian arsenal. Russia wanted the treaty to be extended in its present form. The Trump administration also proposed extending New START for just one year and also sought to expand it to include limits on battlefield nuclear weapons. While Moscow expressed agreement with a US proposal to freeze all nuclear warheads for one year, it rejected additional verification demands. The US demands, thus, proved to be too unrealistic and the negotiations on treaty extension did not make any progress during 2020.

The agreement for an extension of the treaty has fast-tracked the ratification process. Both houses of the Russian parliament voted unanimously to extend the New START on January 27 just a day after the two presidents spoke. Moscow fast-tracked the extension which was expected to take

weeks.²As a next step, President Putin signed the relevant bill into law on January 29. The US confirmed the extension of the treaty on February 3, 2021, since it did not require congressional approval. The treaty extension will be validated by exchanging diplomatic notes between the two countries. Both sides are eager to extend the treaty in its present form. The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, said that Russia will count its Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle along with other Russian nuclear weapons under the treaty limits. This is an encouraging development since hypersonic missiles are relatively new and as yet unregulated under any treaty arrangements.

For the US under President Biden, the extension of New START is seen as a first step in the right direction. President Biden was strongly against former President Trump's multiple withdrawals from nuclear treaties. Joseph Biden had, in the run-up to the US elections, pledged to pursue the extension of New START and called it, "an anchor of strategic stability between the United States and Russia, and use that as a foundation for new arms control arrangements."³ During their telephone conversation, the US and Russian presidents also agreed to explore strategic stability discussions on a range of arms control and emerging security issues. These are good signs that need to be built upon. Also, President Putin speaking at the World Economic Forum's virtual meeting termed the extension of New START, "a step in the right direction," but at the same time warned of rising global rivalries and threats of new conflicts.⁴

President Biden sees the extension of New START as the beginning of US return to global leadership, a role which had diminished greatly under former President Trump. In his first few weeks in the Oval Office, President Biden has already renewed the US commitment to its global leadership role by re-joining the Paris Climate Agreement and World Health Organization. This can perhaps be a harbinger of the US return to the forefront of the global arms control regime. President Biden himself had stated before elections, "As a President, I will restore American leadership on arms control and non-proliferation as a central pillar of US global leadership."⁵ This is a positive development for the global non-proliferation regime.

There is certainly a need to step back from the unabated race for new nuclear arms that major powers have been pursuing for the last few years. The global nuclear arms control regime has been

² Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russian parliament OKs New START nuclear treaty extension," *AP News*, January 27, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-vladimir-putin-russia-4b150a750b5b64378cc449481405beba>

³ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>

⁴ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russian parliament OKs New START nuclear treaty extension,"

⁵ "US Presidential Candidate Biden Vows to Work Towards Nuke-free World," *Kyodo News*, August 7, 2020, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/08/fde0f299de44-us-presidential-candidate-biden-vows-towork-toward-nuke-free-world.html>

faltering for many years now. According to the SIPRI Yearbook 2020, despite an overall decrease in the number of nuclear warheads in 2019, all nuclear-weapon states continue to modernize their nuclear arsenals.⁶ According to ICAN, a record US\$73 billion was spent on nuclear weapons in 2019, a 10% increase from 2018.⁷ Powerful states are also investing more resources towards emerging technologies such as hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, and autonomous weapons systems, to name a few. This combination of nuclear modernization, increase in nuclear spending, and investment in emerging technologies could easily get out of hand.

The extension of New START is a step forward for international cooperation towards nuclear arms control. This was a move that was supported internationally, including by China and NATO. There is, of course, a long way back from the divisiveness between major nuclear powers in recent years. But New START could lead to further multilateral dialogue and cooperation, something which is sorely needed to break the current trend of nuclear and missile developments. The possible US return to key international nuclear pacts, such as the JCPOA, Open Skies Treaty and, and meaningful negotiations for North Korean de-nuclearization would encourage states that were put off by the US unilateralism under the former President Trump.

Under Trump, unilateralism and disregard for arms control, and a move towards the development of new nuclear weapons had started to become the norm. This norm was giving the wrong signal to the rest of the world where increasingly states were pursuing military buildups and pursuing arms races. This increasingly threatened global and regional security. President Biden's move to extend the New START may signal a return to multilateralism and arms control norms, which would be a welcome move for many states. To what extent this positive momentum is carried forward remains to be seen.

There is much more that needs to be done. Today's security environment is increasingly complex and dynamic. There is a broad range of emerging technologies in outer space, cyberspace, artificial intelligence (AI), and robotics that are affecting nuclear deterrence and strategic calculations. Commingling of nuclear and conventional forces also represents a challenge.⁸ With the demise of

⁶ "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/nuclearweapon-modernization-continues-outlook-arms-control-bleak-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>

⁷ "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

⁸ Rebecca Hersman and Suzanne Claeys, "Arms Control Strategies for a New Administration," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 4, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/arms-control-strategies-new-administration>

the INF there is no ban on developing and deploying intermediate-range missiles. There is a race brewing in hypersonic missile developments that will further destabilize nuclear deterrence. Developments in the realm of missile defense also affect strategic stability. This is a complex set of challenges that the US and other great powers need to take on. For that, they need to move beyond New START and work on regulating and tackling these emerging challenges. Arms control will remain essential to preventing arms racing and promoting strategic stability.

The extension of New START represents a continuum of arms control that is welcome around the world. It is a beginning that can be built upon to reverse the harm done in the last few years. President Biden's pre-election statements on nuclear non-proliferation, JCPOA, and Open Skies Treaty give hope that the US will move towards multilateral arms control. The regional and international security landscape is rapidly evolving. A race in hypersonic missiles, AI, emerging technologies, and space-based systems are eroding security and nuclear deterrence that must be regulated through arms control agreements. There are multiple arms races brewing beyond the nuclear arms race, these must be avoided at all costs.