



PUTIN-BIDEN SUMMIT: WHAT NEXT FOR NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL?

By
Ghazala Yasmin Jalil
Research Fellow

Arms Control & Disarmament Centre (ACDC), ISSI

Edited by
Malik Qasim Mustafa

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



The US President, Joe Biden, and Russian President, Vladimir Putin, met on June 16, 2021, in Geneva for the first time since the new US administration took over. The Biden-Putin summit comes at a time when relations between the two countries are at their lowest. There were low expectations from the summit but both presidents were expected to pursue issues related to nuclear arms control and move things beyond New START renewal. It is imperative to discuss what needs to be done by the two countries to strengthen arms control and uptake matters that are of concern to both and negatively impact strategic stability. Discussions on nuclear arms control are increasingly important given the drive for nuclear weapons modernisation, the pursuit of new nuclear weapons and the pursuit of ballistic missile defence and hypersonic weapons by major powers.

During the summit, both presidents made some pledges that are a good start for the arms control road ahead. They said in a joint statement that “recent extension of the New START Treaty exemplifies our commitment to nuclear arms control. Today, we reaffirm the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” They also pledged that they will “embark together on an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue in the near future that will be deliberate and robust. Through this Dialogue, we seek to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk

reduction measures.”¹ President Putin said that the two countries share the responsibility for nuclear stability and would also hold talks on possible changes to the New START. While President Biden said that the strategic stability dialogue is a way to get “our military experts and our diplomats together to work on a mechanism that can lead to the control of new and dangerous and sophisticated weapons that are coming on the scene now that reduce the times of response, that raise the prospects of accidental war.”² It is certainly a step in the right direction. However, the dialogue needs to be frequent, comprehensive and meaningful.

The US and Russia must put serious efforts into nuclear arms control. Nuclear non-proliferation has gone under considerable decline in the last decade. There has been an increasing trend of withdrawing from formal treaties and a move towards informal non-proliferation arrangements. A move from multilateralism to unilateralism. The US-Russia bilateral arms control has also decayed considerably. The biggest casualty has been the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. New START, the last remaining US-Russia treaty, almost became a casualty. The Trump administration refused to seriously pursue the renewal of New START that was set to expire on February 21, 2021. It was renewed just days before its expiry once the Biden administration took over. However, it will expire in February 2026. Thus, there is a need for both US and Russia to work on bilateral and multilateral arms control arrangements to check a new nuclear arms race in the global arena.

Together Russia and the US possess over 90 per cent of the world nuclear weapons. According to SIPRI estimates, while the overall number of weapons has declined from 13400 in 2020 to 13080 in 2021, the estimated number of nuclear weapons currently deployed with operational forces have increased to 3825, from 3720 in 2020. Of these 2000 are kept in a high state of readiness. Both countries are estimated to have had around 50 more nuclear warheads in operational deployment at the start of 2021 than a year earlier.³ Moreover, they have been pursuing extensive programmes to replace and modernise their nuclear warheads, missile and aircraft delivery systems. The US is pursuing nuclear modernisation across all three of its legs. While Russia has pursued hypersonic missiles and a nuclear-powered torpedo in addition to nuclear modernisation. What is more, is that Russia and the US appear to be increasing the role and importance of nuclear weapons in their national security strategies. The pursuit of missile defence systems, hypersonic missiles promise to

¹ The White House, *US-Russia Presidential Joint Statement on Strategic Stability*, White House, June 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/16/u-s-russia-presidential-joint-statement-on-strategic-stability/>

² Jacqueline Feldscher “Russia, US Will Launch Arms Control Talks to Avoid ‘Accidental War,’” *Defence One*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2021/06/russia-us-will-launch-arms-control-talks-avoid-accidental-war/174788/>

³ “Global Nuclear Arsenals Grow as States Continue to Modernize—New SIPRI Yearbook out now,” SIPRI, June 14, 2021, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/global-nuclear-arsenals-grow-states-continue-modernize-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>

destabilise deterrence. The new weapons systems like hypersonic missiles and torpedoes are not covered under any arms control arrangements and need to be regulated if the US and Russia are to avoid the path to an unchecked nuclear arms race.

World Nuclear Forces, January 2021

Country	Deployed warheads	Other warheads	Total 2021	Total 2020
USA	1 800	3 750	5 550	5 800
Russia	1 625	4 630	6 255	6 375
UK	120	105	225	215
France	280	10	290	290
China		350	350	320
India		156	156	150
Pakistan		165	165	160
Israel		90	90	90
North Korea	...	[40–50]	[40–50]	[30–40]
Total	3 825	9 255	13 080	13 400

Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2021

Several issues would be needed to be discussed. The US has argued for the inclusion of tactical nuclear weapons in New START and is concerned with Russia's new "exotic strategic weapons," that include nuclear-powered torpedo and a developmental nuclear-armed, nuclear-powered cruise missile and hypersonic missiles like Sarmat and Avangard.⁴ While Russia wants limits on the conventional long-range precision strike weapons that the US has been developing that could threaten Russian nuclear forces. Russia has also long been concerned over defensive technologies, especially the US missile defence systems. The US has refused to negotiate missile defence since it withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 2002. The US has also been trying to draw China into arms control negotiations. The two countries can also discuss the possibility of reviving the INF treaty or a similar arrangement that would put limits on intermediate-range weapons. Moreover, New START which is the last remaining arms control treaty between the two powers will expire in February 2026. Thus, negotiations for a follow-on treaty have to be initiated now since treaty negotiations are a long and arduous process. Officials can also hold discussions on including new nuclear weapons like torpedos, hypersonic missiles and emerging technologies in the follow-on treaty. This does seem like a lot of issues that the US and Russia need to work on as the next steps in nuclear arms control.

⁴ James Acton, "How Will US-Russia Arms Control Affect the Geneva Summit?," Carnegie, Russia, June 14, 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84754>

There is a lot that needs to be done in the arms control arena by the two countries. However, given their increasing deterioration in relations in the better part of the last decade, a realistic, pragmatic approach is needed towards arms control negotiations. As a starting point, a list of issues to be discussed is imperative. There is always the danger of conducting negotiations with a vague agenda that is likely to yield no results. The details of the next steps for the negotiations between the US and Russia are yet to be worked out. However, the initial pointers are positive. President Putin said that the State Department would be meeting with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the next steps. The strategic stability dialogue will have to follow a phased approach to negotiations. It will have to start with small concrete agenda and build up to more difficult and contentious issues. Both sides can work on near-term confidence-building and transparency measures that will contribute to building strategic stability. They can set short, medium and long-term arms control goals to be achieved.

Geneva summit between Putin and Biden can be seen as a pivotal opportunity to begin to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict, enhance stability and reduce their nuclear stockpiles. The US and Russian arms control interests are increasingly asymmetric. There is a lot that needs to be negotiated in the realms of nuclear weapons, artificial intelligence, cyber, emerging technologies and space technologies that have an impact on nuclear deterrence. A phased step by step approach needs to be followed. It will be an arduous road to arms control but the silver lining is that both countries want to avoid a nuclear war. This can be the common ground that they should work from. It is imperative to step back from the dangerous path to unchecked arms and nuclear race that the two countries seem to have embarked upon. How the US and Russia handle arms control is important because as great powers they set the global trends in arms control and disarmament that the rest of the world follows. As Joe Biden, as a senator in 1979 said that “pursuing arms control is not a luxury or a sign of weakness, but an international responsibility and a national necessity.”⁵ This holds very much true more than four decades on.

⁵ “Will Biden and Putin Restart Talks on Strategic Stability & Arms Control?,” June 14, 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/2021-06/biden-putin-restart-talks-strategic-stability-arms-control>