

## NEW START: THE NEXT ARMS CONTROL CASUALTY?

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



In February 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that it is suspending Russia's participation in the New START treaty. The New START treaty, the last remaining arms control treaty between Russia and US, negotiated in 2010, puts a cap on the number of deployed warheads and delivery systems by both countries. This bodes ill for the last remaining US-Russia bilateral arms control and global arms control regime. At a time when arms control regime is unravelling, suspension and perhaps the demise of New START could provide a further blow. It is important to examine what the Russian suspension means for New START and how has the US responded to this development. Could this mean that the demise of the last remaining strategic arms control treaty between the US and Russia is already upon us? What would this mean for global arms control regime?

President Vladimir Putin during his state of the nation address declared that he was suspending Russia's participation in the treaty. President Putin said: "[Russia] is not withdrawing from the treaty, no, but merely suspending its participation."<sup>1</sup> He further said that "Russia will return to the treaty as soon as it understands how the arsenals of not only the United States but also other nuclear powers of NATO - the United Kingdom and France, will be taken into account."<sup>2</sup> Russia maintains that it

<sup>1</sup> "Russia's New START suspension, special op and economic measures," *Tass News*, February 21, 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1579793>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

could not accept US inspections while Washington and its NATO allies have openly declared Moscow's defeat in Ukraine as their goal.

Later in March 2023, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov clarified Russian position that although Moscow had stopped all information exchanges with Washington envisioned under the New START treaty including missile test warnings, it will continue to give the US advance notice on missiles it tests in line with a 1988 US-Soviet Union agreement.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Moscow has emphasised that it has not withdrawn from New START altogether and would continue to respect the caps on nuclear weapons under the treaty.

Tensions on New Start had been brewing for a while. Both sides have alleged that the other has been in breach of the treaty. Russia's concerns include its years-long allegation that the US did not modify or convert 56 Trident submarine-launched ballistic missile launchers and 41 B-52H Stratofortress bombers from nuclear to conventional roles, in order to fall within the treaty's limits, in a verifiable way.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Russian Foreign Ministry alleged in February 2023, the "United States is in material breach of New START". Earlier in August 2022, Russia informed the US that it would prohibit inspections of its nuclear weapons-related facilities after the US sent notification of plans to conduct an inspection under New START stipulation. In February 2023, the US announced that Russia has failed to comply with New START. This was followed on February 21, 2023 by Russian President's declared suspension of the treaty.

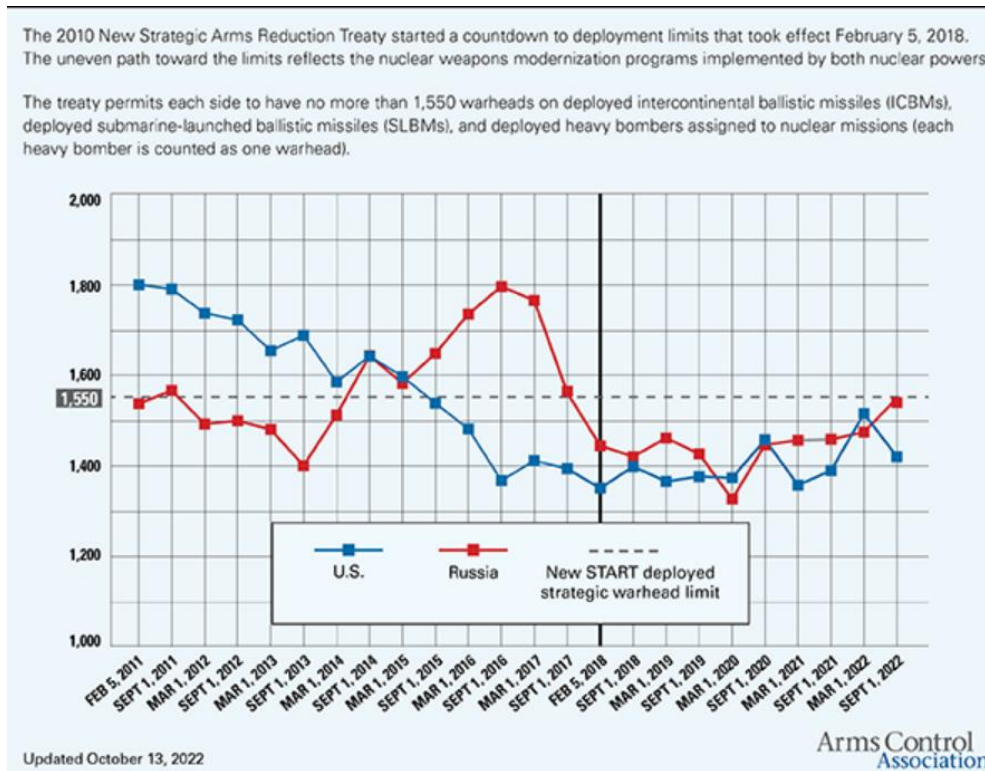
The New START treaty was signed in 2010 by US President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and limits both countries to no more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed missiles and bombers. These limits were reached by February 5, 2018. The agreement has provisions for sweeping on-site inspections to verify compliance. Both countries have the right to make 18 visits to each other's weapons sites in a year. Russia has claimed that the US sanctions-based travel restrictions have made it difficult for Russian inspectors to get to US sites. It has, thus, refused to allow US inspectors to Russian sites.

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia to keep missile test notices under Cold War-era deal," *AP News*, March 30, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-us-nuclear-start-treaty-test-warnings-5e7efae0ab2d52ece5d5e1e8609152b0>

<sup>4</sup> Shannon Bugos, "Understanding the Dispute Over New START," *Arms Control Today*, April 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-04/news/understanding-dispute-over-new-start>

## Timeline of US and Russia Strategic Arms Reduction Under New START



The New START suspension is ultimately about the Ukraine war that has been going on for over a year. In the Ukraine conflict, Russia is pitted against Ukraine backed by the US and NATO assistance. In such a scenario, Russia has called US requests to conduct inspections of Russian facilities under New START as “insane” given that Ukraine has tried to strike those same facilities “with the United States’ obvious military-technical, information, and intelligence assistance.”<sup>5</sup> The effects of a protracted Ukraine conflict can be dangerous. Russia has signaled for Western assistance and support to back off from Ukraine conflict. Also, Russia has reportedly said that it will station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Russia’s suspension of New START should also be seen in the context of the Ukraine conflict. Although Russia would continue to adhere to the New START caps on deployed warheads and delivery systems, this could be the beginning of the demise of the treaty. Until and unless both sides de-escalate tensions and the war is brought to a conclusion, the last remaining bilateral arms control treaty would become the next casualty.

Demise of New START will not be in the interest of either the US or Russia or the non-proliferation regime. Without any arms control arrangements in place a deadly arms race may ensue. It would allow both sides to deploy an unlimited number of nuclear-armed submarines, bombers, and missiles. This would fuel a nuclear arms race between the US and Russia and further exacerbate

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

relations. According to one estimate, without the New START caps in place, the strategic arsenals of US and Russia could nearly double.<sup>6</sup>

## Estimates of US Strategic Forces



### Currently deployed under New START

	Launchers	Warheads
ICBMs	400	400
SLBMs	220	970
Bombers	45	300*
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>665</b>	<b>1670</b>

### Possible upload without follow-on treaty

	Launchers	Warheads
ICBMs	450	950
SLBMs	220	1920
Bombers	45	700
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>715</b>	<b>3570</b>

\*Deployed warheads attributed to bombers are higher than those counted under New START because the treaty artificially counts only one warhead per deployed bomber. This number instead counts warheads stored at bomber bases.

**Source:** Matt Korda and Hans Kristensen "If Arms Control Collapses, US and Russian Strategic Nuclear Arsenals Could Double In Size," Federation of American Scientists, February 7, 2023, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2023/02/if-arms-control-collapses-us-and-russian-strategic-nuclear-arsenals-could-double-in-size/>

## Estimates of Russian Strategic Forces



### Currently deployed under New START

	Launchers	Warheads
ICBMs	321	834
SLBMs	160	640
Bombers	52	200*
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>533</b>	<b>1674</b>

### Possible upload without follow-on treaty

	Launchers	Warheads
ICBMs	321	1197
SLBMs	160	832
Bombers	52	600
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>533</b>	<b>2629</b>

\*Deployed warheads attributed to bombers are higher than those counted under New START because the treaty artificially counts only one warhead per deployed bomber. This number instead counts warheads stored at bomber bases.

**Source:** Matt Korda and Hans Kristensen "If Arms Control Collapses, US and Russian Strategic Nuclear Arsenals Could Double In Size," Federation of American Scientists, February 7, 2023, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2023/02/if-arms-control-collapses-us-and-russian-strategic-nuclear-arsenals-could-double-in-size/>

<sup>6</sup> Source: Matt Korda and Hans Kristensen "If Arms Control Collapses, US and Russian Strategic Nuclear Arsenals Could Double In Size," Federation of American Scientists, February 7, 2023, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2023/02/if-arms-control-collapses-us-and-russian-strategic-nuclear-arsenals-could-double-in-size/>

It could also have spill-over effects to global non-proliferation regime. It would affect European security as well as South Asian security. The norm against development and use of nuclear weapons would be further weakened ultimately affecting global security. Many countries like India would be encouraged and emboldened to pursue arms development. India is already developing and modernizing a triad of nuclear forces, pursuing hypersonic missiles, developing and acquiring missile defence systems, fast building its military space capabilities, as well as pursuing naval buildup. This sets the stage for destabilizing South Asia. Thus, demise of New START could set new arms races at global level and may also encourage regional arms races.

The crisis of New START treaty comes at a time when bilateral and multilateral arms control is in shambles due to great-power policies and a renewed emphasis on developing nuclear arms. The biggest arms control casualty in recent years 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 (accusing Russia of breach) and Russia followed. In 2018, the US also withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which put caps on fissile material enrichment on Iran's nuclear program in 2018. The Trump Administration also chose to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty that allowed member states to conduct unarmed observation flights over each other's territory. US nuclear diplomacy and engagement with North Korea on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula has also fallen through. Instead there has been a renewed focus on developing nuclear weapons, leading to new nuclear arms race. The Trump Administration even talked about resuming nuclear testing. While there were hopes of arms control revival under the Biden Administration, they have not come to fruition as it failed to revive arms control agreements including JCPOA, or revival of diplomacy on denuclearizing North Korea. This is continuation of a trend in the last decade or so to dispense with formal arms control treaties, a refusal to negotiate any new meaningful treaties and to replace them with "normative" approach manifested in initiatives like Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative, launched by the US in 2019.<sup>7</sup> It focused on creating conditions where states' relations are not driven by competition but are cooperative and free from conflict. It also promotes best practices and creates awareness of issues instead of following hard rules codified by international treaties.

This has been accompanied by a renewed focus by great powers on developing nuclear weapons, a race in hypersonic missile development, Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications in arms development, emerging technologies, and a race in space-based offensive systems which are eroding security and

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Meyer, "Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament: Striding Forward or Stepping Back?," *Arms Control Today*, April 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-04/features/creating-environment-nuclear-disarmament-striding-forward-stepping-back>

nuclear deterrence. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data, despite a marginal decrease in the number of nuclear warheads in 2021, nuclear arsenals are expected to grow over the coming decade. Russia and the US together possess over 90 per cent of all nuclear weapons;<sup>8</sup> with no arms control arrangements in place these stockpiles would grow. A nuclear arms race, combined with hypersonic missile race, AI race, and a space weapons race would have devastating effects on global security. This is a time when arms control arrangements must be promoted rather than abrogating existing treaties.

Pakistan has always been a responsible nuclear power and has promoted the idea of nuclear non-proliferation. It has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and advocated for global nuclear disarmament. Pakistan was one of the founding members of IAEA and ardently promotes peaceful uses of nuclear technology. In South Asian context, Pakistan had proposed a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone and later a strategic restraint regime as a means to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict on several occasions which has been rejected by India. In sum, the demise of US-Russia bilateral arms control, or weakening of global non-proliferation, is detrimental to global and regional security. Demise of a major treaty would promote nuclear arms race between US and Russia and could have a domino effect around the world whereby other states may pursue unchecked development of weapons. There are multiple arms races brewing beyond the nuclear arms race, including race in dominance of emerging technologies, AI, hypersonic missiles, race for dominance of cyber domain, and a space weapons race which erode security and nuclear deterrence. Arms races ultimately do not bring security to any state and must be avoided at all costs. The New START – as last remaining arms control treaty between US and Russia, must not be allowed to fall. In fact, the two countries must work on extension of the treaty beyond February 2026.

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<sup>8</sup> “Global nuclear arsenals are expected to grow as states continue to modernize,” SIPRI, June 13, 2022, <https://sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/global-nuclear-arsenals-are-expected-grow-states-continue-modernize-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>