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Strategic Stability beyond New START: Russian Policies and Interests in Nuclear Arms Control

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Abstract

Following the end of the INF treaty on August 2, 2019, nuclear arms control is in a state of deep crisis. The erosion of the nuclear arms control regime, however, had already begun before this treaty's termination. In the event that New START, the final remaining U.S.–Russian treaty limiting “strategic” nuclear weapons, also expires in February 2021, (perceived) U.S.–Russian strategic equality will have to be redefined and codified. Aware of the risks and imponderables involved in this process, the Kremlin has called for an extension of New START. Thus, gaining time is deemed a preferable policy to witnessing the demise of yet another arms control treaty, despite Moscow's concerns about new developments affecting “strategic stability” that would ideally require treaty modifications.

The End of the INF Treaty and the Role of China in Russia's Discourse on Nuclear Arms Control

In 2014, the US began to accuse Russia of having developed and flight tested a ground-launched cruise missile in violation of INF treaty provisions, which ban the production, possession, and flight testing of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF). Russia reacted with stonewalling and was initially not inclined to refute the accusation by way of cooperative verification. Instead, Moscow made a counter-accusation about alleged U.S. treaty breaches. Russia only admitted the existence of the controversial cruise missile 9M729 (SSC-8 according to NATO classification) after the US disclosed it, yet continued to claim its range was below 500 km.

In its communiqué of July 2018, NATO was likewise skeptical of the Russian claim not to have developed or tested weapons in breach of the INF treaty. By December of the same year, all member states shared the assessment that Russia had indeed developed and fielded a missile system that violates the INF treaty. On February 2, 2019, the U.S. government announced its withdrawal from the treaty, which became effective on August 2, 2019. With this, a chapter in arms control that began in 1987 with an agreement between the US and the Soviet Union—an agreement that would serve as a key pillar of the post-Cold War European security architecture—drew to a close. In the treaty, both parties had agreed to destroy all ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 500 to 5,500 km.

The Russian government publicly laments this development. In the past, however, Moscow itself had threatened to withdraw from the treaty against the backdrop of U.S. missile defence system deployment in Europe. Russia has been calling for a multilateralization of the INF treaty since the mid-2000s. The reason given by

the Russian leadership was that Russia is more exposed to proliferation risks on its southern and eastern borders than, for example, the US, which is geographically protected by two oceans. A ban on short- to intermediate-range deployment only for Russia and the US, the Russian argument went, therefore does not keep pace with the reality that other states are still allowed to develop and deploy medium-range land-based missiles.

Since October 2018, the U.S. administration under President Trump has taken the position that the treaty is unbalanced, which is why it demands that China become involved as a signatory. Beijing, however, refuses to take part in trilateral arms control talks because China has few nuclear warheads (presumably fewer than 300) and over 90 percent of its land-based missiles are medium-range weapons within the INF-relevant range. Russian observers therefore suspect that the U.S. administration used Russia's allegedly non-compliant deployment of medium-range missiles as a pretext to terminate the INF treaty; the real reason, they suspect, was China.

Russian officials stress that Moscow is not fundamentally opposed to including Beijing in future arms control treaties. They add, however, that Russia understands the Chinese position and will not act as a mediator between the US and China. If China is to be involved in new disarmament formats, the Russian leadership holds, so too should France and the United Kingdom be. Beyond this public rhetoric, however, Russian defence politicians should have an interest in China's participation in future arms control efforts even if Moscow publicly emphasizes deepening strategic cooperation with Beijing. This is because in recent years, China has invested heavily in so-called anti-access/anti-denial land-based missiles, which are geographically relevant for Russia as China's northern neighbour.

At the same time, Russian experts argue that Russia's cooperation with China falls into the areas of strategic

missile defence and air and naval exercises. Moscow is particularly interested in increased cooperation in these areas, as they are directed against U.S. military capabilities. This, in turn, would explain Russia's ambivalent position toward China's involvement in arms control talks. Moscow, according to this line of thinking, has genuine motivation to forge a Sino–Russian convergence of interests—that is, as preparation for a scenario in which the previously existing U.S.–Russian arms control were to completely fall apart.

In this vein, President Putin announced at the Valdai discussion forum in early October 2019 that Russia would help China develop an early-warning system for missile detection. Such a level of cooperation in high technology would be an expression of a strategic shift because it would demonstrate Russia's gradual alienation from the West at a technical level and complicate a reversal thereof politically. This context may also help shed light on the motivations for Putin's proposal of February 2019 to impose a moratorium on the deployment of intermediate-range or shorter-range weapons if the US will not deploy these in “corresponding regions of the world.” Europe, which is particularly affected by the end of the INF treaty, is implied here, but so is the Asia-Pacific region.

Finally, however, it is questionable whether the Russian and U.S. governments really view the end of the INF Treaty as a disadvantage from a military standpoint. After all, both states have developed numerous air- and sea-based medium-range missiles that could be legally put into service in parallel with the land-based variants covered by the INF treaty. Russia, for example, demonstrated its ability to deploy sea-based cruise missiles from ships in the Caspian Sea during its military operation in Syria. Military implications notwithstanding, the demise of the INF treaty carries political significance because arms control remains an important instrument for reducing risk perception. The mutual exchange of information and verification promotes transparency and is thus security-enhancing.

The Future of New START

As the ABM treaty was terminated following U.S. withdrawal in 2002, New START is now the only remaining U.S.–Russian treaty that seeks to limit the number of nuclear weapons categorized as “strategic.” New START caps accountable deployed strategic nuclear warheads and bombs at 1,550 and imposes ceilings on the number of deployed and non-deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and heavy bombers. If New START is not extended (it is set to expire on February 5, 2021), new treaty provisions will be required that cover not only medium-range (i.e., INF-range) missiles, but also strategic nuclear weapons.

Nuclear arms control would also have to be comprehensively redesigned due to new technological possibilities and the existence of nuclear powers that are not party to existing treaties. In a New START successor, the term “strategic stability” would have to be expanded beyond numerical targets and counting rules for nuclear warheads.

While Russia had threatened to withdraw from New START between 2011 and 2016 if U.S. missile defence development outside of this treaty were to continue, the Russian position was readjusted after 2016. Russia now emphasizes its wish to retain New START. At the same time, Moscow develops new nuclear systems outside the scope of the treaty. According to Moscow, the hypersonic glide missile “Avangard” (which can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads) and the intercontinental ballistic missile “Sarmat” are accountable under New START regulations and could therefore be inspected on site. Among the new Russian systems, the bigger bone of contention is the development of systems not covered by New START, namely the Russian Kinzhal missile system; the nuclear-powered Burevestnik cruise missile; and the long-range Poseidon torpedo, which is also nuclear-powered. The development of such systems, which are *not* categorized as strategic nuclear weapons, can be interpreted as an attempt to create new facts that require new arms control talks.

Initially, however, it was Moscow that had placed conditions on a possible extension of New START. For example, Foreign Minister Lavrov stated in March 2019 that it had not yet been verified that the U.S. government had actually converted certain weapon categories to New START-compliant systems. Such preconditions have not been repeated in public. At the beginning of December 2019, and most recently again in October 2020, President Putin even proposed extending New START “without preconditions.” With its statements of intent to save New START, made at the highest political level, Russia presents itself as the guardian of this last remaining bilateral arms control treaty. In light of a widespread perception that the Trump administration's foreign policy is disruptive, Russia also positions itself (as a precautionary measure) on the “right” side of history in the event of a non-extension.

Trump's obstructive discourse and the U.S. withdrawal from other international agreements such as the nuclear agreement with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) of July 2015 are adding to the Russian narrative that Moscow is working around the clock to save the global arms control architecture in the face of U.S. resistance. The U.S. government's withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty, which was announced in May 2020, has fanned the flames of the crisis in arms control.

Russia's interest in maintaining New START is fed by political and military considerations. The former

relates to a level of strategic equity: the treaty codifies U.S.–Russian nuclear parity. From the Russian point of view, it thus reconfirms the country’s great power status, placing it on a par with the US. In terms of military strategy, New START serves to maintain the Russian second-strike capability. The development of new strategic and sub-strategic nuclear weapons may in part be a consequence of a threat perception that U.S. missile shields and conventional military superiority undermine this second-strike capability. In terms of the overall foreign policy result, however, such a perception primarily upgrades the role of nuclear weapons as guarantors of great power status.

This finding illustrates the classic trade-off in security policy between disarmament efforts, on the one hand, and the idea of deterrence, on the other. Russia’s Nuclear Deterrence Guidelines (Decree No. 355), published on June 2, 2020, likewise operate within this context. With the decree, the Kremlin publicized the foundations of its nuclear deterrence policy for the first time. The document summarizes Russian threat perceptions and resulting nuclear deployment options. The latter are linked to an implicit warning to countries, organizations, and coalitions (read: NATO) that view Russia as a “potential opponent.”

New Technologies, Old Ambivalence

However, an “escalate to de-escalate” approach cannot be found in Russia’s military doctrine and its nuclear deployment policy. In the assessment of the U.S. government, Russia is pursuing such an approach, according to which it allegedly considers the possible use of small nuclear warheads as a deterrent in order to impose “escalation dominance” in regional conflicts with NATO. Washington, in its 2018 *US Nuclear Posture Review*, draws the conclusion that “escalation dominance” must be restored. The Trump administration therefore intends to make its nuclear arsenal more flexible and create the illusion that a military confrontation with accurate, low-explosive nuclear warheads (so-called “mini nukes”) is feasible. Such an assumption, however, makes it difficult to distinguish between strategic and sub-strategic systems and could lower the “nuclear threshold.” In essence, it could do exactly what the Russian leadership is accused of.

Such a mutual threat perception, which has also been laid down in successive strategy papers, limits policy options and negatively affects arms control dialogue. While Washington is interested in including non-strategic Russian nuclear systems (not only the above-mentioned Burevestnik, Kinzhal and Poseidon systems, but also tactical Russian nuclear weapons) in future arms control negotiations, Moscow would like to see a dia-

logue on non-nuclear strategic weapon systems. From the Russian point of view, regulating the latter is particularly pertinent in the areas of missile defense; the U.S. Prompt Global Strike system, with its capacity for conventional strikes of global range; and satellite technology, which Moscow believes can contribute to the militarization of outer space. Against this background, Russian non-strategic nuclear weapon systems such as Kinzhal, Burevestnik or Poseidon can serve as bargaining chips that could be used to extract concessions from the US in other areas factoring into the concept of “strategic stability.”

This implied willingness to offset different weapons categories against each other can be explained by the fact that Russia is striving for status recognition through arms control negotiations. Nothing supports Russia’s perceived great power status on a par with the US as clearly as the possession of nuclear weapons. The US and Russia still possess around 90 percent of the 14,000 nuclear weapons worldwide. As long as nuclear weapons remain so central to the self-perception of Russian foreign policy, a politico-technological path dependency exists that makes far-reaching concessions unlikely while simultaneously providing the foundation for a principled dialogue on arms control.

However, “status” does not only imply (political) reputation. Readiness to talk also always serves an even higher military priority: to regulate U.S. offensive weapons in order to maintain Russian second-strike capability. Like the US, Russia pursues a policy of renouncing a nuclear first strike because both sides have viable nuclear weapons (the nuclear triad) that can respond to a first strike with an equally devastating counterstrike (second strike). Treaty regulations are therefore important because they ensure predictability.

A further complicating factor is the emergence of new technological capabilities in the areas of lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), cyber warfare, and the militarization of space. Moreover, some existing systems have not yet been legally accounted for. Examples fall within the areas of sub-strategic nuclear weapons, conventional weapons with strategic effects, and sea- and air-based medium-range missiles. For these reasons, new approaches to arms control are more urgent than ever in order to prevent future qualitative arms races.

In November, once the 2020 U.S. presidential election campaign is no longer tying up political resources and capital, talks will have to pick up speed, with a view not only to addressing the quickly closing window of opportunity to extend New START, but also to discussing the numerous unresolved issues alluded to here.

See overleaf for information about the author.

About the Author

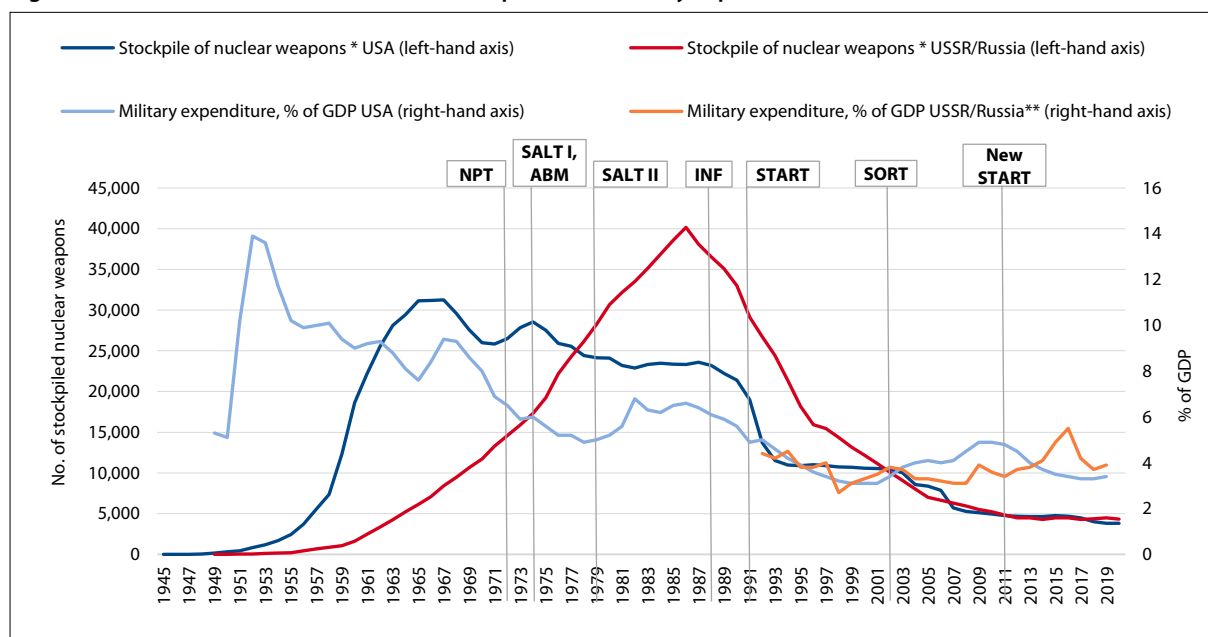
Dr. Moritz Pieper joined the German foreign service in July 2020. Prior to that, he was an Associate in the Eastern Europe and Eurasia Research Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP). He holds a PhD from the University of Kent and is the author of *Hegemony and Resistance around the Iranian Nuclear Programme* (Routledge, 2017). He is currently working on a new monograph on Sino–Russian interaction in Eurasia in the wake of the Belt and Road Initiative (contracted, I.B. Tauris). The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone.

A comprehensive analysis of the topics presented here can be accessed in the form of an SWP Research Paper (in German) (2020/S 12, June 2020): <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/russland-und-die-nukleare-ruestungskontrolle/>.

STATISTICS

Arms Control Treaties, Nuclear Weapons, and Military Expenditure 1945–2020

Figure 1: Arms Control Treaties, Nuclear Weapons, and Military Expenditure 1945–2020



Year	Stockpile of nuclear weapons*		Military expenditure, % of GDP		Treaty
	USA	USSR/Russia	USA	USSR/ Russia**	
1945	2				
1946	9				
1947	13				
1948	50				
1949	170	1	5.3		
1950	299	5	5.1		
1951	438	25	10.2		
1952	841	50	13.9		
1953	1,169	120	13.6		
1954	1,703	150	11.7		

Continued overleaf.