

I. Russian–United States nuclear arms control and disarmament

PETR TOPYCHKANOV

In 2020 the Russian–United States nuclear arms control and disarmament agenda seemed to be slowly collapsing and was close to losing its last key pillar. By the end of 2020, Russia and the United States had still not agreed to extend the 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START), which was due to expire on 5 February 2021. Indeed, negotiations on extending this agreement had not even started. Instead, all the exchanges about this issue were channelled through the Strategic Security Dialogue consultations and in other less formal ways.

The developments of 2020 prolonged the trend of 2019: deterioration of the arms control architecture signified by the collapse of the 1987 Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-range and Shorter-range Missiles (INF Treaty) and growing disagreements on New START.¹ Despite mostly positive developments in implementing New START, it was not possible in 2020 to sustain this progress by negotiating deeper reductions in deployed strategic nuclear forces. Russia continued to disagree with the USA's demand to include China in the nuclear arms control framework. China also refused to accept the US invitation. This section describes these developments concerning New START and the Strategic Security Dialogue between Russia and the USA in 2020.

New START implementation and possible extension

Russia and the USA continued to implement the bilateral 2010 New START in 2020. Under the treaty, the two parties agreed to limit the number of their deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1550 each and to limit the number of their deployed strategic missile launchers and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments to 700 each (see table 11.1).² The USA and Russia officially confirmed that they had achieved the New START limits in August 2017 and February 2018, respectively.³

¹ On developments in 2019 see Topychkanov, P. and Davis, I., 'Russian–United States nuclear arms control and disarmament', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 399–409. For a summary and other details of the INF Treaty see annex A, section III, in this volume.

² For a summary and other details of New START see annex A, section III, in this volume.

³ US Department of State, 'New START Treaty central limits take effect', Press statement, 5 Feb. 2018; and Yermakov, V. I., Head of Russian Delegation, Statement to the First Committee, 73rd session of the United Nations, General Assembly, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 9 Oct. 2018.

Table 11.1. Russian and United States aggregate numbers of strategic offensive arms under New START, as of 5 February 2011, 1 March and 1 September 2020

Category of data	Russia				United States		
	Treaty limits	Feb. 2011	Mar. 2020	Sep. 2020	Feb. 2011	Mar. 2020	Sep. 2020
Deployed ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers	700	521	485	510	882	655	675
Warheads on deployed ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers ^a	1 550	1 537	1 326	1 447	1 800	1 373 ^b	1 457
Deployed and non-deployed launchers of ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers	800	865	754	764	1 124	800	800

ICBM = intercontinental ballistic missile; SLBM = submarine-launched ballistic missile.

Notes: The treaty entered into force on 5 Feb. 2011. The treaty limits had to be reached by 5 Feb. 2018.

^a Each heavy bomber, whether equipped with cruise missiles or gravity bombs, is counted as carrying only 1 warhead, even though the aircraft can carry larger weapon payloads.

^b The figure 1373 appears in the first public release of aggregate data by the US Department of State on 1 Mar. 2020. In subsequent data releases, the figure 1372 appears instead.

Source: US Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, 'New START Treaty aggregate numbers of strategic offensive arms', Fact sheets, 1 June 2011; 1 July 2020; and 1 Dec. 2020.

New START contains transparency and verification measures—such as biannual data exchanges, notifications and up to 18 on-site inspections annually—that have helped to build mutual confidence between the parties about the size and composition of their respective strategic nuclear forces.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia and the USA each conducted only 2 of the 18 on-site inspections allocated in 2020. In March the Russian deputy foreign minister, Sergey Ryabkov, confirmed that the two countries' mutual decision was to halt the on-site inspections until 1 May 2020.⁴ However, the suspension continued after that date. The Covid-19 pandemic also prevented the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC)—which oversees New START implementation—from meeting in 2020 (it had met twice in 2019). However, both sides indicated that these meetings and on-site inspections would resume once the health risks had been mitigated.⁵ They exchanged New START-related information and notifications through regular diplomatic channels instead of BCC meetings.⁶ As of 17 December 2020 Russia and the

⁴ 'Decision on halting inspections under New START made upon mutual agreement—diplomat', TASS, 29 Mar. 2020.

⁵ Reif, K. and Bugos, S., 'US shifts arms control strategy with Russia', Arms Control Now blog, Arms Control Association, 17 Sep. 2020.

⁶ Schaad, L. and Kimball, D. G., 'Covid-19 delays security meetings, treaty inspections', *Arms Control Today*, vol. 50, no. 3 (Apr. 2020).

USA had exchanged 21 293 notifications over the 10 years since the treaty entered into force.⁷

The biannual treaty data exchanges in March and September 2020 showed that both Russian and US holdings were within the final treaty limits. However, between March and September the combined total number of strategic launchers increased by 45 items and deployed nuclear warheads increased by 205 items. These changes reflected launchers moving in and out of the maintenance or upgrade within the New START limits.⁸

Based on US data from 2019, the USA certified that Russia was in compliance with New START.⁹ However, it also raised implementation-related questions through diplomatic channels, especially in relation to new weapons under development in Russia.¹⁰ This issue was discussed in a telephone conversation between the US secretary of state, Michael R. Pompeo, and the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, on 17 April 2020, and in other Russian–US communications during 2020. During the exchange, Lavrov confirmed that New START could cover two of Russia’s new weapon systems.¹¹ Ryabkov clarified the same day that these systems were the Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle.¹²

During the conversation with Pompeo, Lavrov also stressed that Russia was interested in extending the agreement for five years and simultaneously ready to discuss a new arms control agreement.¹³

During 2020 Russia also reiterated questions about US compliance that it had previously raised. These included the allegation that the USA continued to exceed the New START aggregate limits for deployed and non-deployed ICBM and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) launchers and deployed and non-deployed heavy bombers by 101 units.¹⁴

However, the leading Russian complaint about New START during 2020 was not about US compliance, but rather focused on the lack of US interest

⁷ US Department of State, ‘New START Treaty’, 17 Dec. 2020.

⁸ Kristensen, H. M., ‘At 11th hour, New START data reaffirms importance of extending treaty’, Federation of American Scientists, 1 Oct. 2020. On US and Russian nuclear forces see chapter 10, sections I and II, in this volume.

⁹ US Department of State, ‘Annual report on implementation of the New START treaty’, Jan. 2020.

¹⁰ US Department of State (note 9).

¹¹ Isachenkov, V., ‘Top US and Russian diplomats discuss arms control’, AP News, 18 Apr. 2020; and Gronlund, L., ‘US should extend the New START nuclear weapons treaty to make us all safer’, All Things Nuclear, Union of Concerned Scientists, 22 Apr. 2020.

¹² AP News, ‘Russia shows willingness to include new nuke, hypersonic weapon in arms control pact’, *Defense News*, 17 Apr. 2020.

¹³ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s telephone conversation with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’, 17 Apr. 2020.

¹⁴ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Comment by the Information and Press Department on the United States’ report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments (ACNPD)’, 4 July 2020.

in discussing the treaty's extension.¹⁵ The Russian side interpreted the US proposal to have a trilateral arms control agreement with China instead of extending the bilateral New START as a policy designed to end the last Russian–US nuclear arms control agreement.¹⁶

In sum, Russia and the USA managed to use some of the treaty's verification mechanisms, despite Covid-19 restrictions; both sides were relatively satisfied with each other's compliance, but they could not launch the New START negotiations because of their different approaches towards the document extension. Instead, Russia and the USA used the Strategic Security Dialogue framework to address this particular issue among other strategic challenges of mutual concern, as discussed next.

The Strategic Security Dialogue

Despite the cancellation of the New START BCC meetings due to the Covid-19 pandemic, several rounds of bilateral consultations on strategic issues took place during 2020.

On 16 January 2020 Russian and US delegations met in Vienna to discuss nuclear doctrines and arsenals, crisis and arms race stability, and the future of arms control, including its potential expansion beyond the bilateral format. They agreed to establish working groups to discuss particular issues under the Strategic Security Dialogue, an informal forum for talks between Russia and the USA.¹⁷

At the following meeting, in Vienna on 22–23 June, the two sides discussed the future of arms control—including extending New START and maintaining stability and predictability after the termination of the INF Treaty in 2019—and other international security problems.¹⁸ They also agreed on the specific working groups for the next round of the Strategic Security Dialogue, including a group on nuclear arsenals and doctrines. Russian and US sources disagreed on the latter group's focus: Russia argued

¹⁵ Meyer, H., 'Russia says US shows no readiness to extend key nuclear pact', Bloomberg, 14 May 2020.

¹⁶ Medvedev, D., 'Failing to extend New START could have extremely serious consequences', TASS, 8 Apr. 2020.

¹⁷ Initially established in 1993 as the US-Russian Strategic Stability Group, since 2019 the US State Department has called the forum the Strategic Security Dialogue, while Russia uses various terms to describe it. Talbot, I., 'Unfinished business: Russia and missile defense under Clinton', *Arms Control Today*, vol. 32, no. 5 (June 2002); US Department of State, 'US–Russia Strategic Security Dialogue', Media note, 16 Jan. 2020; and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Press release on Russian–US consultations on strategic matters', 16 Jan. 2020.

¹⁸ US National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), 'NNSA hosts special presidential envoy for arms control', 14 Sep. 2020; and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Press release on Russian–US consultations on strategic issues', 22 June 2020.

that it would only cover nuclear doctrines, whereas the USA insisted that nuclear arsenals were also included.¹⁹

For this June meeting, the US Department of State attempted to convince Chinese representatives to join the dialogue. China declined to attend, noting ‘the huge gap between the nuclear arsenal of China and those of the US and Russia’.²⁰ The USA issued a picture of Chinese flags placed at empty seats around the table, which China dismissed as ‘performance art’ and Russia as ‘staged’.²¹ In short, the trilateral dialogue that the USA sought clearly had no chance of success.²²

Nevertheless, Russia and the USA were relatively satisfied by the outcomes in Vienna, as were some US allies. For example, Jens Stoltenberg, secretary general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), was generally supportive of the ‘constructive’ June talks. He also stressed the need for China to join Russian–US arms control efforts.²³

The US representative described the outcomes of the consultations in June as ‘very positive’ with the potential for agreement at the next bilateral meeting.²⁴ However, the Vienna discussions included non-strategic nuclear weapons, which are not covered by New START.²⁵ It was thus unclear whether the US aspiration was for an extension of New START or a broader document to cover a range of weapons never previously included in a single Russian–US agreement. Russia welcomed the affirmation of the mutual

¹⁹ ‘Russia, US agree to meeting of experts on military doctrines’, TASS, 25 June 2020; and US Department of State, ‘Online press briefing with Ambassador Marshall Billingslea, special presidential envoy for arms control, and Lieutenant General Thomas A. Bussiere, deputy commander, United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM)’, 24 June 2020.

²⁰ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s regular press conference on June 9, 2020’, 9 June 2020; and Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Department of Arms Control and Disarmament holds briefing for international arms control and disarmament issues’, 8 July 2020. On the respective nuclear arsenals see chapter 10, sections I, II and V, in this volume.

²¹ Murphy, F., ‘“Performance art?”: China rebukes US envoy for photo stunt at talks with Russia’, Reuters, 22 June 2020; and Kostiv, M., [Envoy described the US photo at the consultations with Russia in Vienna as staged], RIA Novosti, 22 June 2020 (in Russian).

²² For official Chinese, Russian and US reactions and explanations see also Billingslea, M., US Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control (@USArmsControl), ‘Vienna talks about to start. China is a no-show. Beijing still hiding behind #GreatWallofSecrecy on its crash nuclear build-up, and so many other things. We will proceed with #Russia, notwithstanding.’, Twitter, 22 June 2020; Chernenko, E., [The third is not superfluous], *Kommersant*, 22 June 2020 (in Russian); US Department of State (note 19); and Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s regular press conference on June 23, 2020’, 23 June 2020.

²³ Stoltenberg, J., NATO Secretary General, Remarks at the Brussels Forum, 23 June 2020.

²⁴ Billingslea, M., US Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control (@USArmsControl), ‘First round of Vienna talks very positive. Detailed discussions on full-range of nuclear topics. Technical working groups launched. Agreement in principle on second round. @MFA_Austria @mfa_russia’, Twitter, 22 June 2020.

²⁵ ‘Tactical nuclear arms among issues discussed by Russia, US in Vienna—Pentagon official’, TASS, 25 June 2020.

‘interest in continuing the security, stability and arms control dialogue’, while remaining cautious on the outcomes of the consultations.²⁶

The follow-up expert group meeting on 27–30 July, which the USA described as ‘trilateral arms control’, was a de facto bilateral meeting between Russian and US experts representing various agencies from both sides. The focus of the expert discussions was nuclear doctrines and capabilities, transparency and verification measures. Separately, on 27 July they held a space-related track, titled ‘US–Russia Space Security Exchange’.²⁷ According to official statements from both sides, there were no consultations on the New START extension.²⁸

On 17–18 August the Russian and US delegations met again in Vienna. Unlike the previous expert group meeting, this time they discussed the extension of New START. According to the US official statements after the consultations, both sides were ready to reach a consensus on extending New START before the end of 2020.²⁹ However, US statements also stressed the ‘significant verification deficiencies’ in New START, as well as the omission of China.³⁰ Several US officials also expressed the view that it was time for Russia to respond to the US suggestions.³¹

However, the Russian position seemed to remain unchanged: it was ready to agree on the treaty’s unconditional extension but not at any price.³² It also continued to regard the treaty as bilateral despite US pressure to engage China.

As the year progressed, despite these seemingly promising Strategic Security Dialogue discussions, the underlying tensions in the different fundamental positions of the two sides began to resurface. In an interview with a Russian newspaper in September, the US special presidential envoy for arms control, Marshall Billingslea, who had led the US delegation in the discussions, threatened to change the ‘price of admission’ for Russia to have an arms control agreement with the USA if it did not agree with the

²⁶ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, June 25, 2020’, 25 June 2020; and Borger, J., ‘US–Russia nuclear envoys make guarded comments as talks begin in Vienna’, *The Guardian*, 22 June 2020.

²⁷ US Department of State, ‘The United States and Russia hold Space Security exchange’, Media note, 28 July 2020.

²⁸ US Embassy and Consulates in Russia, ‘Meeting of US–Russia expert groups on trilateral arms control and for the space security exchange’, 24 July 2020; and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [On the meeting in the framework of the US–Russian strategic dialogue], Press release, 30 July 2020 (in Russian).

²⁹ ‘“Ball is in Russia’s court” on nuclear arms deal, US says’, Reuters, 18 Aug. 2020.

³⁰ Reif, K. and Bugos, S., ‘US modifies arms control aims with Russia’, *Arms Control Today*, vol. 50, no. 7 (Sep. 2020).

³¹ ‘US–Russia non-proliferation talks going well, says Trump’, TASS, 5 Sep. 2020.

³² Ulyanov, M., Russian Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna (@Amb_Ulyanov), ‘S. Ryabkov: Russia stands for an extension [sic] of the START Treaty, but is not ready to pay any price for that.’, Twitter, 18 Aug. 2020.

US suggestions.³³ The Russian representative at the talks, the deputy foreign minister, Sergey Ryabkov, called on the USA to stop making ultimatums and to start substantial negotiations.³⁴

The final round of the Strategic Security Dialogue consultations took place on 5 October in Helsinki, focusing on New START. According to US diplomatic sources, for the first time Russia made constructive suggestions that signalled that a one-year extension of New START might be possible, as well as a nuclear freeze of all strategic stockpiles—not only those covered by New START.³⁵ However, Russian officials were more guarded, suggesting that the negotiations were relatively close to reaching an agreement, but not on the nuclear freeze issue.³⁶ Russian President Vladimir Putin also implicitly endorsed the idea of a one-year extension during a meeting of the Russian Security Council on 16 October 2020.³⁷ However, the USA quickly dismissed this idea as a ‘non-starter’ without an accompanying nuclear freeze.³⁸

Russia relayed Putin’s proposal to the USA on the same date but, in the absence of an official response, on 20 October it made a statement repeating the one-year extension suggestion and extending an invitation to the USA to jointly ‘undertake a political commitment to “freeze” for the above-mentioned period the number of nuclear warheads that each side possesses’.³⁹ Russian diplomats highlighted that this proposed political commitment would not involve any additional transparency and verification measures.

Initially, the USA welcomed this statement and began preparing to finalize a verifiable agreement with Russia.⁴⁰ However, Russia gave out mixed messages. On the one hand, the Russian president’s spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, confirmed on 23 October that in the coming days the US and Russian expert teams would meet to negotiate the New START extension and the additional suggestions recently made by both sides.⁴¹ On the other hand,

³³ Chernenko, E., [‘If Russia does not accept our offer before the election, the price of admission will go up’], *Kommersant*, 21 Sep. 2020 (in Russian).

³⁴ Sonne, P. and Hudson, J., ‘US scrambles to do nuclear deal with Russia before election, issuing ultimatum’, *Washington Post*, 23 Sep. 2020.

³⁵ ‘Progress in arms control talks with Russian senior diplomat, US representative says’, TASS, 6 Oct. 2020; and Gordon, M. R., ‘US, Russia move toward outline of nuclear deal, administration says’, *Wall Street Journal*, 5 Oct. 2020.

³⁶ ‘No “ironclad” agreements on freezing nuclear arsenals between Russia, US—Kremlin’, TASS, 14 Oct. 2020; and ‘Russian senior diplomat rejects US proposal to freeze nuclear arsenals, extend New START’, TASS, 13 Oct. 2020.

³⁷ President of Russia, ‘Meeting with permanent members of the Security Council’, 16 Oct. 2020.

³⁸ Cohen, Z., Crawford, J. and Atwood, K., ‘Trump’s national security adviser calls Putin response to arms control talks a “non-starter”’, CNN, 16 Oct. 2020.

³⁹ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Foreign Ministry statement on New START treaty extension’, 20 Oct. 2020.

⁴⁰ US Department of State, ‘Progress on New START’, Press statement, 20 Oct. 2020.

⁴¹ ‘Russian, US experts to hold talks on extending New START in coming days—Kremlin’, TASS, 23 Oct. 2020.

Ryabkov on the same day indicated that there would be no new meetings unless the US side accepted the Russian proposal, as articulated in the statement of 20 October. He also expressed doubts about the US intention to extend New START.⁴²

Despite comments in December by Billingslea, the chance for a breakthrough had seemingly passed as the US presidential election took centre stage. He continued to hope for new meetings with his Russian counterparts to ‘define what we are freezing’ and the capability levels, to start verification talks, and to continue the exchange of documents about the proposals between the two sides.⁴³ However, by the end of the year, the doubts about the feasibility of reaching agreement in 2020 had become a reality.⁴⁴

Conclusions

The collapse of the Russian–US arms control agenda was linked to changes in the international security environment and military technological developments in recent years and to further deteriorating Russian–Western political and security relations more generally. In 2020, in addition to the lack of progress in Russian–US nuclear arms control consultations, this deterioration encompassed the USA’s withdrawal from the 1992 Open Skies Treaty and its deployment of a new low-yield SLBM warhead.⁴⁵ The growing capabilities of other nuclear-armed countries—primarily, but not only, China—and technological developments in hypersonic missiles, ballistic missile defence, the militarization of outer space and autonomy in strategic weapons have created new problems for existing nuclear arms control agreements.⁴⁶

The future of the last-remaining Russian–US bilateral nuclear arms control agreement—New START—remained in the balance. Instead of a specific negotiating track for dealing with New START, the issue was combined in the broader framework of the Strategic Security Dialogue, which covered

⁴² ‘No plans to unilaterally freeze nuclear warhead stockpile, senior Russian diplomat says’, TASS, 23 Oct. 2020.

⁴³ ‘US response to Putin may close door to more arms control talks under Trump’, Reuters, 17 Dec. 2020; and ‘Russia continues dialogue with US on New START extension’, TASS, 27 Oct. 2020.

⁴⁴ US Embassy and Consulates in Russia, ‘Ambassador John J. Sullivan interview with Konstantin Remchukov of Nezavisimaya Gazeta’, 18 Dec. 2020; and President of Russia, ‘Meeting with senior Defence Ministry officials, heads of federal agencies and defence industry executives’, 10 Nov. 2020.

⁴⁵ On Russia’s relations with the West see chapter 5, section I, in this volume. On the deteriorating international security environment see chapter 1 in this volume. On the US withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty see chapter 13, section V, in this volume. On the US deployment of a new low-yield SLBM see chapter 10, section I, in this volume.

⁴⁶ On the modernization programmes of the nuclear-armed states see chapter 10 in this volume. On militarization of outer space see chapter 13, section IV, in this volume. On autonomy in strategic weapons see Boulanin, V. et al., *Artificial Intelligence, Strategic Stability and Nuclear Risk* (SIPRI: Stockholm, June 2020).

the full spectrum of strategic issues of mutual concern. More importantly, neither side had the same goals for New START-related consultations. Russia focused on preserving the treaty for the next five years, while the USA sought to convince China to join the agreement and make it more comprehensive in terms of the weapons covered and the verification measures imposed.

These differences explained why progress proved to be impossible. The Covid-19 pandemic created additional obstacles for diplomatic efforts, making such negotiation even less feasible.

The incoming US administration of Joe Biden offered a fresh opportunity to preserve the treaty in 2021—the President-elect had indicated that he would support a five-year extension.⁴⁷ Russia had also signalled its readiness to negotiate the New START extension with the new US administration, without changing its previously stated conditions.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Gordon, M. R., 'Biden to review US nuclear-weapons programs, with eye toward cuts', *Wall Street Journal*, 24 Dec. 2020.

⁴⁸ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with TASS News Agency', 30 Dec. 2020.