

I. Nuclear arms control involving China, Russia and the United States

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Bilateral and multilateral engagement on nuclear arms control involving China, the Russian Federation and the United States made few forward steps in 2023 and suffered a significant setback.

The Russia–Ukraine war continued to impede the resumption of bilateral strategic stability dialogue between Russia and the USA.¹ This in turn hindered negotiations on a potential follow-on framework to their 2010 Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START), which is set to expire in February 2026. A US determination that Russia was not in compliance with specific clauses of the treaty precipitated Russia's suspension of the treaty in February 2023.

Parallel diplomatic overtures made by the USA later in the year to both Russia and China aimed to compartmentalize arms control and strategic stability from other geopolitical and security issues. China and the USA held a dialogue on a variety of nuclear issues in November 2023, the first since 2018—although it featured no concrete outcomes.

At the multilateral level, in August 2023 Russia took over as chair of the process that brings together the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the P5)—which, in addition to China, Russia and the USA, also includes France and the United Kingdom. The P5 are also the five states recognized as nuclear weapon states under the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This followed a contentious first session of the preparatory committee to the 2026 NPT Review Conference. Russia facilitated expert-level engagement as part of the P5 process but did not convene further meetings in 2023.²

This section covers these developments, first looking at bilateral nuclear arms control involving Russia and the USA, then that involving China and the USA. It concludes by analysing prospects for progress on any of these fronts.

Russia–United States nuclear arms control

Suspension of New START

New START is the last treaty to set limits on the size and composition of the Russian and US nuclear arsenals, the largest in the world.³ Despite the

¹ On the Russia–Ukraine war and the effect on Russia–US relations see chapter 1, chapter 2, section I, and chapter 10, sections II and III, in this volume.

² 'Russia, as chair of Big Five nuclear powers, pushes meetings into 2024—deputy minister', Reuters, 28 Nov. 2023.

³ For a summary and other details of New START see annex A, section III, in this volume. On the nuclear forces of the USA and Russia see chapter 7, sections I and II, in this volume.

downturn in diplomatic relations linked to the ongoing war in Ukraine, both Russia and the United States had expressed their continued commitment to the treaty's limits.⁴ However, the conversation around the treaty changed in January 2023 when the US Department of State, in its annual report to the US Congress on New START implementation, concluded that it 'cannot certify the Russian Federation to be in compliance' with certain terms of the treaty.⁵

The report cited Russia's refusal to permit inspections on its territory through what was characterized as 'an invalid invocation of the "temporary exemption" provision'.⁶ On-site inspections had been paused since March 2020 by mutual agreement because of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, after the USA transmitted a notification of intent to conduct an inspection in August 2022, Russia notified the USA that it was temporarily suspending on-site inspections. In doing so, it cited US restrictions linked to the war in Ukraine that closed airspace to Russian inspectors and raised difficulties in the visa process, challenging 'principles of parity and equality of the parties'.⁷ In addition to referencing this denial of inspections, the US report observed that Russia 'failed to comply with the obligation to convene a session of the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC)' in a timely manner.⁸ This followed Russia's indefinite postponement of a scheduled session of the BCC in November 2022.⁹

The US State Department also expressed concern in its report about Russian compliance with the New START limit of 1550 deployed warheads, due to incomplete verification.¹⁰ However, it assessed that Russia 'did not engage in significant activity above the Treaty limits' and its stockpile size 'was likely under the New START warhead limit at the end of 2022'.¹¹ Overall, the report determined that Russia's non-compliance, centred on inspections and the BCC, did not threaten the national security interests of the USA and concluded that 'Russia's resumption of facilitating US inspections activities, in accordance with the terms of the Treaty, would bring Russia back into compliance with these provisions and remedy the noncompliance'.¹²

Russia rejected these allegations. In a public statement issued by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on 8 February, it reiterated claims that US sanctions prevented on-site inspections on US territory, creating 'obvious

⁴ Wan, W., 'Bilateral and multilateral nuclear arms control involving China, Russia and the United States', *SIPRI Yearbook 2023*, p. 345.

⁵ US Department of State, 'Report to Congress on implementation of the New START Treaty', 31 Jan. 2023, p. 5.

⁶ US Department of State (note 5), p. 5.

⁷ Russia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement on New START, 8 Aug. 2022.

⁸ US Department of State (note 5), p. 5.

⁹ Wan (note 4), p. 345.

¹⁰ US Department of State (note 5), p. 6.

¹¹ US Department of State (note 5), p. 16.

¹² US Department of State (note 5), p. 7.

unilateral advantages' for the USA.¹³ While Russia reaffirmed an 'unwavering commitment' to New START, it also observed that the wider context rendered it impossible to conduct 'business as usual'. The statement specifically referenced transfers of arms to Ukraine from the USA and other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and accused the USA of launching a 'total hybrid war' against Russia. It also noted that the growth in the number of US ballistic missile defence (BMD) systems undermined the treaty's viability. Finally, the statement recalled Russia's doubts about long-standing claims by the USA that it has converted redundant heavy bomber and submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) launch tubes; Russia claims that this constitutes a means of 'illegitimate exclusion [of those systems] from the counting rules' of New START.¹⁴

In his annual speech to the Russian Federal Assembly on 21 February 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia was 'suspending its membership' of New START.¹⁵ He made clear that this was not a withdrawal from the treaty; an MFA statement released the same day observed that Russia would 'continue to strictly comply with the quantitative restrictions' for strategic offensive arms under New START, and that it would 'continue to exchange notifications of [intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)] and SLBM launches' in line with a 1988 agreement.¹⁶ The statement also accused the USA of being 'in material breach' of the treaty's quantitative restrictions, repeating the claim that the USA had not adequately allowed verification of its conversion procedures.¹⁷ In his speech Putin partly justified the suspension by again claiming that the USA was seeking to 'inflict a strategic defeat on Russia'.¹⁸ He also issued an instruction for preparations to conduct nuclear tests but observed that Russia would 'not be the first to proceed' (see section II). He then suggested that, prior to discussing the future of New START, there was a need to account for the strategic arsenals of France and the United Kingdom—or NATO's 'combined offensive capabilities', described by the MFA as 'forming a single whole'.¹⁹ Following ratification by both

¹³ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement on New START, 8 Feb. 2023.

¹⁴ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (note 13). On the Russian doubts see Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement, 5 Feb. 2018.

¹⁵ Putin, V., Russian president, Presidential address to Federal Assembly, 21 Feb. 2023.

¹⁶ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement in connection with Russia suspending New START, 21 Feb. 2023; and Soviet-US Agreement on Notifications of Launches of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles and Submarine-launched Ballistic Missiles, signed and entered into force 31 May 1988.

¹⁷ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (note 16).

¹⁸ Putin (note 15).

¹⁹ Putin (note 15); and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (note 16). On the nuclear forces of the UK and France see chapter 7, sections III and IV, in this volume.

houses of the Russian Federal Assembly, Putin signed the Federal Law on the Suspension of New START on 28 February.²⁰

In March 2023 Russia did not engage in the biannual exchange of data on treaty-accountable facilities and nuclear forces required by New START. At the Conference on Disarmament, Russia also accused the US of assisting Ukraine in attacking ‘Russian strategic facilities declared under’ the Treaty, as means to ‘probe’ their security—referring to the December 2022 strikes on the Dyagilevo and Engels air bases.²¹ Later that month, the USA declared Russia’s suspension of the treaty as ‘legally invalid’.²² The US National Security Council invoked international law in implementing what it characterized as ‘proportionate and reversible countermeasures’. These included the USA withholding its own data during the scheduled 30 March exchange, although it publicly released aggregate data on its strategic nuclear forces in May and said that it would continue to ‘provide all required notifications’ other than the biannual data exchange.²³ However, on 1 June the USA decided to withhold other notifications required under the treaty (including updates on the status or location of items such as missiles and launchers), refrain from facilitating inspection activities on US territory, and withhold telemetric information on its launches of ICBMs and SLBMs (the specific numbers of which are agreed upon within the BCC).²⁴

Attempts to restart diplomacy

The following day, the US national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, attempted to provide an opening for diplomacy in a speech at the Arms Control Association annual forum.²⁵ Sullivan argued for new strategies to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict, including by advancing arms control and risk-reduction measures, and by compartmentalizing such issues of strategic stability from broader geopolitical issues. He stated that the USA intended to adhere to the central limits under New START ‘as long as Russia does’ and noted the ‘reversible’ nature of the earlier announced countermeasures. Moreover, he expressed a renewed US ‘willingness to engage in bilateral arms control

²⁰ Russian Federal Law no. 38-ФЗ ‘On the suspension by the Russian Federation of the Treaty between the Russian Federation and the United States of America on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms’, signed into law 28 Feb. 2023 (in Russian).

²¹ Statement by Sergey Ryabkov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the High Level Segment of the Conference on Disarmament, 2 Mar. 2023

²² Kirby, J., US National Security Council spokesperson, quoted in Holland, S. and Mohammed, A., ‘US to stop exchanging nuclear data with Russia after Moscow’s treaty suspension’, Reuters, 28 Mar. 2023.

²³ US Department of State, ‘New START Treaty aggregate numbers of strategic offensive arms’, Fact sheet, 12 May 2023; and Holland and Mohammed (note 22).

²⁴ US Department of State, ‘US countermeasures in response to Russia’s violations of the New START treaty’, Fact sheet, 1 June 2023.

²⁵ Sullivan, J., US national security advisor, Remarks at the Arms Control Association annual forum, 2 June 2023.

discussions with Russia and with China without preconditions’, and a readiness to work immediately to ‘develop a post-2026 arms control framework’ with Russia. He also expressed US support for ‘new multilateral arms control efforts’ through the P5.²⁶

Sullivan’s remarks received a tepid response from Russia. Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesperson, described the comments as ‘important and positive’ but expressed the expectation for it ‘to be supported with steps . . . made . . . through diplomatic channels’.²⁷ However, there was consistent pushback against the suggestion of compartmentalization. Maria Zakharova, spokesperson for the Russian MFA, observed that disconnecting arms control from the general political context was ‘not an option’.²⁸ The deputy foreign minister, Sergey Ryabkov, expressed a similar sentiment and suggested that the situation had not changed; he stated that the USA would have to abandon its ‘fundamentally hostile policy’ towards Russia to restore the full functioning of New START.²⁹ Russia made similar comments in the first session of the preparatory committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference, in August 2023, stating that the arms control process ‘cannot be isolated from the international security situation and the military-strategic context’ (see section II).³⁰

In October the USA is reported to have sent Russia an informal paper on managing nuclear risks.³¹ On the basis of Sullivan’s earlier remarks, the paper was also intended to initiate a conversation on a post-New START arms control framework. Russia confirmed that it had received the document and was assessing the proposal, but as of the end of 2023 it had not responded further.³²

China–United States engagement on nuclear arms control

US perceptions that China is building up its nuclear forces contributed to continued strained relations between the countries as 2023 began.³³ During

²⁶ Sullivan (note 25).

²⁷ Peskov, D., Kremlin spokesperson, quoted in Bugos, S., ‘Russia to consider US arms control proposal’, *Arms Control Today*, vol. 23, no. 6 (July/Aug. 2023).

²⁸ Zakharova, M., Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Answer to a media question in connection with the remarks by the US national security advisor, 3 June 2023.

²⁹ Ryabkov, S., Russian deputy foreign minister, quoted in Camut, N., ‘Moscow could return to nuclear arms treaty if US gives up “hostile policy”’, Russian official says’, *Politico*, 3 June 2023.

³⁰ 2026 NPT Review Conference, Preparatory committee, Statement by the Russian Delegation, 3 Aug. 2023.

³¹ Gordon, M. R., ‘China, US to meet for rare nuclear arms-control talks’, *Wall Street Journal*, 1 Nov. 2023.

³² ‘Russia assessing informal US proposals on strategic stability, senior diplomat says’, TASS, 25 Oct. 2023; and Bugos, S., ‘Russia mulls US arms control proposal’, *Arms Control Today*, vol. 53, no. 10 (Dec. 2023).

³³ US Department of Defense (DOD), *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2022*, Annual report to Congress (DOD: Washington, DC, Nov. 2022), p. 94.

the year there were few indications that China had changed its stance on arms control processes and would engage in bilateral or multilateral negotiations on nuclear arms reduction before Russia and the United States significantly reduced their stockpiles.³⁴

In May the leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) large economies called, in their Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament, for China (and Russia) to ‘engage substantively in relevant multilateral and bilateral forums’.³⁵ In response, the Chinese MFA rejected the ‘finger-pointing’ and ‘false narrative’ about China’s accelerating nuclear build-up. It also called attention to the USA’s nuclear modernization plans and its withdrawal from two bilateral treaties with Russia: the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.³⁶ China’s initial public response to the US national security advisor’s offer in June for arms control discussions without preconditions (see above) was in the same vein. As a spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, DC, observed, as a result of the discrepancy in ‘nuclear strength’ between China on one side and Russia and the USA on the other, ‘the time is not ready yet for [China] to join the nuclear arms control negotiations proposed by some’.³⁷

The US Secretary of State’s visit to China

The US secretary of state, Antony J. Blinken, had planned to visit China in February to address what the USA characterized as the ‘most consequential bilateral relationship in the world’.³⁸ However, tensions increased when, in what was described as an ‘unacceptable violation of US sovereignty’, a high-altitude balloon originating from China flew over US airspace in late January and early February.³⁹ The USA shot down what it called a ‘Chinese surveillance balloon’ but China claimed was a weather balloon blown off course.⁴⁰ The incident led to the cancellation of Blinken’s visit.

³⁴ Wan (note 4), p. 347.

³⁵ Group of Seven (G7), G7 Leaders’ Hiroshima Vision on Nuclear Disarmament, Hiroshima Summit, 19 May 2023. For a brief description and list of members of the G7 see annex B, section I, in this volume.

³⁶ Mao, N., Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Regular press conference, 22 May 2023. On US nuclear modernization see chapter 7, section I, in this volume. For a summary and other details of the ABM and INF treaties see annex A, section III, in this volume. On the US withdrawals see Kile, S. N., ‘Nuclear arms control, non-proliferation and ballistic missile defence’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2003*, pp. 603–604; and Topychkanov, P. and Davis, I., ‘Russian–United States nuclear arms control and disarmament’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 399–405.

³⁷ Liu, P., quoted in Solomon, J., ‘China rejects nuclear talks with the US as it looks to strengthen its own arsenal’, *Semafor*, 9 June 2023.

³⁸ Kirby, J., US National Security Council spokesperson, quoted in *Kyodo News*, ‘Blinken to raise war in Ukraine during upcoming trip to China’, 1 Feb. 2023.

³⁹ Garamone, J., ‘F-22 safely shoots down Chinese spy balloon off South Carolina coast’, US Department of Defense, 4 Feb. 2023.

⁴⁰ Garamone (note 39).

Blinken's rescheduled visit to Beijing in June seemed to provide an opening for both sides to address a relationship that had reached 'the lowest point since its establishment' according to the Chinese foreign minister, Qin Gang.⁴¹ Blinken's discussions with top Chinese officials—including Qin, Wang Yi (China's top diplomat and a former foreign minister) and President Xi Jinping—were characterized as candid and constructive by both sides.⁴² They recalled common understandings on the need for strategic communication and regular consultations that Xi and US President Joe Biden reached in their first in-person meeting as leaders, in Bali in November 2022.⁴³ The discussions in Beijing emphasized the importance of a stable China–USA relationship.⁴⁴ Blinken's visit opened the door for follow-on engagements between the two sides.

Continuing cautious diplomacy

In October 2023, Wang—reinstated as Chinese foreign minister—reciprocated with a visit to Washington, DC, where he held talks with Blinken, Sullivan and President Biden. These conversations encompassed a wide range of global and regional issues, including the ongoing Israel– Hamas war.⁴⁵ At the same time, the officials expressed a desire to set the stage for 'additional engagements and consultations, to include arms control', among other issues, in the coming weeks.⁴⁶ This facilitated a November 2023 meeting in Washington, DC, between Mallory Stewart, the US assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, and Sun Xiaobo, the director-general of the Department of Arms Control of the Chinese MFA.

In the intervening period, however, the USA had continued to express concerns about the Chinese nuclear programme. An October report from a bipartisan congressional commission called for the USA to modify its strategic nuclear force posture to simultaneously deter both Russia and China, on the basis that 'US strategy should no longer treat China's nuclear forces as

⁴¹ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Qin Gang holds talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken', 18 June 2023.

⁴² Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (note 41); and US Department of State, 'Secretary Blinken's visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC)', 19 June 2023.

⁴³ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'President Xi Jinping meets with US President Joe Biden in Bali', 14 Nov. 2022; and White House, Readout of President Joe Biden's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, 14 Nov. 2022.

⁴⁴ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'President Xi Jinping meets with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken', 19 June 2023.

⁴⁵ On the Israel– Hamas war see chapter 1, chapter 2, section I, and chapter 10, section II, in this volume.

⁴⁶ US Department of State, 'Secretary Blinken's meeting with People's Republic of China Director of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Foreign Affairs Commission and Foreign Minister Wang Yi', 27 Oct. 2023; and Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Wang Yi holds talks with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken', 28 Oct. 2023.

a “lesser included” threat’.⁴⁷ It also observed that China was building up its nuclear forces ‘on a scale and pace unseen since the US–Soviet nuclear arms race’.⁴⁸ In addition, in October a report by the US Department of Defense assessed that China had more than 500 operational warheads as of May 2023—far more than expert estimates—and was ‘on track to exceed previous projections’.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, both states described the November meeting between Stewart and Sun as constructive. The USA observed the need to ‘avert an unconstrained arms race’, while China said that both sides should ‘remain committed to safeguarding the international system of arms control and non-proliferation’.⁵⁰ There did not seem to be agreement on concrete next steps, although both sides situated the discussion in continuing engagements. Moreover, later in the same month presidents Biden and Xi met on the margins of the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco, USA. While readouts indicated that the discussions covered a wide range of topics, the two sides did agree to resume military-to-military communication and to strengthen dialogue and cooperation on artificial intelligence (AI), maritime issues and other key security areas, including arms control and non-proliferation.⁵¹

Conclusions

Despite modestly positive steps in the China–United States relationship, prospects for new bilateral or multilateral nuclear arms control agreements do not appear to have improved during 2023. China continues to express support for and engagement in the broader ‘international nuclear arms control process’, although its view on its own role in these processes remains fundamentally unchanged.⁵² In its nuclear posture, it continues to espouse a ‘no first use’ policy and minimal nuclear deterrence as its contributions

⁴⁷ Congressional Commission on the US Strategic Posture, *America’s Strategic Posture*, Final report (US Congress: Washington, DC, Oct. 2023), p. 96.

⁴⁸ Congressional Commission on the US Strategic Posture (note 47), p. 8.

⁴⁹ US Department of Defense (DOD), *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2023*, Annual report to Congress (DOD: Washington, DC, Oct. 2023), p. viii. On China’s nuclear forces see chapter 7, section V, in this volume.

⁵⁰ US Department of State, ‘Assistant Secretary Mallory Stewart’s meeting with the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General of Arms Control Sun Xiaobo’, 7 Nov. 2023; and Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘China and the United States hold consultations on arms control and non-proliferation’, 8 Nov. 2023.

⁵¹ White House, Readout of US President Joe Biden’s meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, 15 Nov. 2023; and Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘President Xi Jinping meets with US President Joe Biden’, 16 Nov. 2023.

⁵² 2026 NPT Review Conference, Preparatory committee, 1st session, Remarks by Ambassador Li Song on nuclear disarmament, 3 Aug. 2023, p. 3.

to strategic stability: China ‘does not participate in any form of arms race’.⁵³ The fact that many in the US defence community anticipate rapid expansion of China’s nuclear forces, through efforts that ‘dwarf previous attempts in both scale and complexity’, and are responding by calling for corresponding modification to the US force posture in both ‘sizing and composition’, seems like a clear barrier to progress even if diplomatic openings continue to appear.⁵⁴

Meanwhile, the US desire to restart discussions on issues of arms control and strategic stability with Russia is contrasted by Russia’s resolute refusal to compartmentalize those issues from broader security circumstances, specifically its war in Ukraine. Russia’s suspension of New START and the USA’s countermeasures have further undermined transparency between the two states on their strategic nuclear forces. A further obstacle to restoring the treaty to full implementation is Russia’s expressed stance that British, French and US nuclear capabilities must be treated together. Efforts to discuss multi-lateral arms control are also not immune from the wider security context, as seen in the stagnation in the P5 process.

For now, both Russia and the USA have expressed their commitment to adhere to the quantitative limits of New START. But, as seen with the treaty’s other provisions, there is no guarantee that this will hold much longer. Given its impending expiration in February 2026 and the lack of progress towards even the initiation of discussions on a follow-up framework, arms control appears to be headed towards a dangerous new phase.

⁵³ 2026 NPT Review Conference, Preparatory committee, 1st session, ‘Upholding the authority of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, serving international security and development’, Statement by Sun Xiaobo, director-general of the Department of Arms Control of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Aug. 2023.

⁵⁴ US Department of Defense (note 49), p. viii; and Congressional Commission on the US Strategic Posture (note 47), p. 96.