

Urgent Steps to Avoid a New Nuclear Arms Race and Dangerous Miscalculation

Statement of the Deep Cuts Commission¹

For decades, U.S. and Russian leaders have recognized the value of bilateral nuclear arms control agreements to manage the risk of nuclear confrontation and to maintain strategic stability while reducing excess nuclear weapons arsenals. They have pursued dialogue and negotiations under difficult circumstances during and after the end of the Cold War. These efforts have reduced the nuclear danger and advanced the security interests of both nations, of Europe, and of the international community.

Today, particularly with relations between Washington, Moscow and Europe at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War, it is even more vital to contain nuclear risks and tensions and prevent a new nuclear arms race. It is therefore of major concern that the achievement of further reductions in excess nuclear stockpiles is difficult in the near term, and existing nuclear arms control agreements are at risk. Both sides are pursuing costly programs to replace and upgrade their Cold War-era strategic nuclear arsenals, each of which exceed reasonable deterrence requirements. Both sides are also pursuing new nuclear weapons capabilities. A compliance dispute threatens the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) will expire in 2021 unless extended by agreement of the U.S. and Russian presidents or replaced by a follow-on agreement.

In the light of these challenging circumstances, the members of the Deep Cuts Commission, along with many of our expert colleagues, are convinced that in accordance with the March 20 telephone conversation between Presidents Trump and Putin, the two sides should discuss and pursue—on a priority basis—effective steps to reduce nuclear risks and tensions, and to avoid a renewed nuclear arms race.

¹ This statement emerged from a meeting of the Deep Cuts Commission in Brussels, 18-19 March 2018. The German-Russian-U.S. Deep Cuts Commission was established in 2013 to develop proposals to overcome obstacles to sensible arms control agreements and further reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear arms beyond those mandated by the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). Of late, its work has focused on preservation of the existing nuclear arms control regime.

Pursuing such measures does not mean a restoration of “business as usual” between the United States, Europe, and Russia, which will require resolution of other political problems. Nevertheless, it remains in the vital interests of the United States, Europe, and Russia to contain nuclear tensions and prevent a new nuclear arms race.

The Deep Cuts Commission, along with other security leaders, urges that the United States, NATO, and Russia take the following steps as soon as possible:

Immediate Extension of New START Treaty. On February 5, 2018, the United States and Russia each announced that it had met the central limits of the New START Treaty, which took full effect on that date. The treaty imposes important bounds on the strategic nuclear competition between the two nuclear superpowers. The treaty will by its terms expire on February 5, 2021 but can be extended by up to five years by agreement by the sides. Extending the treaty until February 2026 would preserve its significant security advantages—both the limits and the transparency that is provided by the treaty’s verification measures (including data exchanges, notifications and inspections).

Russian officials suggested in 2017 a dialogue on extension of New START, but U.S. officials were unready to engage on the question until they saw whether the treaty’s limits were achieved in February 2018 and until after completion of the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review. Those two conditions have been met.

In a March interview with NBC news, President Putin declared the readiness of Russia not only to prolong the present conditions of START, but to reduce further the number of warheads and launchers.

Now is the time for the United States and Russia to agree to extend New START until 2026. That would give the sides additional time to discuss what other arms control steps might be appropriate, perhaps in the condition of an improved political atmosphere. Agreement on extension would provide a positive achievement on the U.S.-Russian

agenda and would help to fulfill their disarmament commitments under Article VI of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Without a positive decision to extend New START, and if the INF Treaty comes to an end (see below), there would be no legally-binding limits on the world's two largest nuclear superpowers for the first time since 1972, and the risk of unconstrained U.S.-Russian nuclear competition would grow.

Intensified Efforts to Resolve INF Treaty Compliance Questions. The Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty made a major contribution to European and global security by eliminating all U.S. and Soviet ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. Unfortunately, the treaty is now at risk, with the United States and Russia exchanging charges of treaty violations, and the U.S. government stating that it will not allow Russia to gain a military advantage through its violation. Currently, no meetings are scheduled to address the issue. A resolution of the dispute requires high-level leadership from the White House and the Kremlin.

The collapse of the INF Treaty would end a landmark arms reduction agreement, open the door to a U.S.-Russian arms race in intermediate-range missiles, further complicate relations between the United States, Europe, and Russia, and have negative repercussions for the whole arms control agenda. U.S. and Russian officials should intensify their efforts to resolve compliance questions. They might consider whether exhibitions and technical briefings could provide a means to answer questions about the range of the Russian 9M729 (SSC-8) ground-launched cruise missile and the ability of Mk-41 launchers at the Aegis Ashore missile defense sites in Romania and Poland to hold missiles other than SM-3 missile interceptors. Additionally, inspections could verify the compliance of the disputed systems with the terms of the INF Treaty.

Maintaining a Regular Dialogue on Strategic Stability. U.S. and Russian officials held a round of strategic stability talks in September 2017 and postponed a follow-up round that was to be held earlier this year. They should make that dialogue a continuing and regular part of the U.S.-Russian agenda.

Given the transforming nature of strategic stability, maintaining stability today is a more complex question than during the Cold War. Whereas strategic stability during the Cold War focused on U.S. and Russian strategic offensive nuclear forces, with some attention to ballistic missile defense, today's stability model must take account of third-country actors, and consider not just strategic offensive nuclear forces and missile defense but precision-guided conventional strike systems and actions in the cyber and space domains.

This dialogue should also discuss U.S., NATO and Russian military issues, with a view to enhancing understanding and avoiding misperceptions. One topic should be the so-called "escalate to deescalate" doctrine. Russians deny this is an official doctrine, but the Pentagon and NATO are adjusting their nuclear postures on the assumption that something like this has been adopted by the Russian military, and that was reflected in the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review. It would be good to clarify this. It is not in the interest of Russia, the United States, or Europe for NATO to believe that Moscow has lowered its threshold for nuclear use if that is not true; on the other hand, if true, it would be useful for Russian officials to hear how the United States and NATO will respond.

U.S. and Russian diplomatic and military officials should pursue a broad, systematic, and continuing dialogue on these matters, with a view to understanding the other's concerns, clarifying misperceptions about key issues—including each side's nuclear use doctrine—and at some point defining mandates for negotiations on specific issues.

Sustained Military-to-Military Dialogue on Key Issues. Over the past five years, the instances of U.S. and NATO military aircraft and warships and Russian military aircraft and warships operating in close proximity to one another have increased dramatically. NATO has deployed ground forces to the Baltic states and Poland, putting them in closer proximity to Russian ground forces in Russia and Kaliningrad. These raise the prospect of accidents and miscalculations that would be in neither side's interest and that could escalate to a full-fledged armed conflict, especially in the Baltic region or the Black Sea. NATO and Russian officials should launch a sustained military-to-military dialogue on how to prevent such accidents and miscalculations and reduce the risk of hazardous

military activities, drawing on past arrangements such as the prevention of incidents at sea and prevention of dangerous military incidents agreements. Such steps, as well as other transparency and confidence-building measures, can enhance security, particularly in the European region.

Leaders in Washington and Moscow cannot afford to ignore their legal and political commitments on nuclear arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament. Nor can they afford to neglect opportunities for serious dialogue to reduce and eliminate nuclear risk, especially now.

We call on President Trump and President Putin to reaffirm the statement of Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev of 1985 that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” and to redouble efforts to maintain strategic stability, take practical steps to avoid accidents and miscalculation, preserve the INF Treaty, and agree—as soon as possible—to extend the New START agreement beyond 2021, regardless of whether or not the INF Treaty issue is resolved in advance.

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