



Forum for American Leadership

Putin's New START Suspension: A Welcome Wake-up Call

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On February 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would suspend its participation in the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which limits the number of strategic warheads and launchers that can be deployed by the U.S. and Russia. This is the last remaining arms control treaty between the U.S. and Russia, a consequence of violations by Moscow of every other accord to limit nuclear weapons.

While it is certainly a sign of Putin's desperation to suspend New START, as the treaty was only ever a limit on U.S. nuclear weapons, the U.S. should not chase Russia back into compliance and should use Russia's suspension as a wake-up call to get serious about the coming trilateral nuclear competition (in which Russia and China have already demonstrated how seriously they believe in the power of nuclear weapons).

Background:

In 2021, President Biden agreed to [extend New START](#) through 2026 despite the treaty's many [flaws](#), including its failure to constrain Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons, and [despite the Trump Administration's progress in pursuing an improved deal](#) with Russia that would also have brought pressure on the People's Republic of China.

After more than 12 years, it's clear the treaty did nothing to constrain Russia's nuclear weapons. Indeed, Russia may have been violating the central limits of the treaty's prohibition on deployment of strategic nuclear weapons, [according to the leaders of the three national security committees](#) in the House of Representatives.

While some so-called experts will lament the loss of data exchanges and inspections made possible by the treaty (which Russia had been [blocking for two years](#)), it's worth remembering that the U.S. intelligence community likely has tremendous insights into Russia's nuclear weapons complex, as it does [Russia's conventional military and plans](#). In other words, the U.S. is unlikely to lose visibility into Moscow's capabilities.

The unilateral nature of New START also meant that the [Russians could actually grow their strategic nuclear force](#) to reach the central limits of the treaty (up to 1550 strategic deployed nuclear warheads and up to 700 deployed strategic delivery vehicles) while only the U.S. was obligated to reduce its nuclear forces.

Likewise, it became clear during the initial ten years of the treaty that Russia had been able to exempt from New START the bulk of its nuclear modernization program. According to a [May 2019 public statement](#) from the U.S. Intelligence Community, Russia had built up an enormous capability of non-deployed strategic nuclear warheads, which are completely exempt from treaty

limits and can deploy whenever Moscow chooses, and Russia “possesses up to 2,000 such non-strategic nuclear warheads not covered by the New Start Treaty.”

Indeed, 10 years after New START was ratified, Russia’s advantage under the treaty was so profound that, [according to then Secretary of State Pompeo](#) “[o]nly 45 percent of Russia’s nuclear arsenal is subject to numerical limits...[m]eanwhile, that agreement restricts 92 percent of America’s arsenal” because of the “[dozens...already deployed or in development](#)” so-called “non-strategic”, or “tactical”, nuclear weapons exempted from the treaty.

And for the first time, a nuclear breakout involves two peer rivals, not just one. The most recent annual [China military power report](#) of the Department of Defense was replete with alarm concerning that country’s nuclear weapons breakout. For example:

- If China continues the pace of its nuclear expansion, it will likely field a stockpile of about 1500 warheads by its 2035 timeline.
- By 2030, DoD estimates that the PRC will have about 1,000 operational nuclear warheads, most of which will be fielded on systems capable of ranging the continental United States.
- China, [according to U.S. Strategic Command](#), already fields more ICBM launchers than the U.S., meaning it’s a matter of time before it fields more land-based missiles (and possibly warheads) as well.
- The PRC probably intends to develop new nuclear warheads and delivery platforms that at least equal the effectiveness, reliability, and/or survivability of some of the warheads and delivery platforms currently under development by the United States and/or Russia.

The Needed Wake-up Call

Russia’s decision confirms the axiom that arms control isn’t needed when you can get it, and when you need it, you can’t get it. In response to Putin’s latest provocation, which was apparently coupled with [a failed launch of Putin's latest multi-warhead heavy ICBM](#), the Sarmat, the U.S. must focus on strengthening its nuclear deterrent and preparing to compete with Russia, if necessary, as well as China. The United States should take the following steps.

- **Increase the National Defense budget:** President Biden must release a defense budget large enough to rebuild needed capacity, capability, and readiness in the U.S. military, including its nuclear weapons complex. Russia’s willingness to flout arms control as it continues to wage war in Ukraine and [threaten the use of nuclear weapons](#) highlights the need for a growing U.S. military in response to the worsening threat environment.
- **Expand U.S. nuclear capabilities**
 - While the Biden Administration spent almost two years debating new restrictions on the U.S. nuclear force— including changes to its declaratory policy and cancellation of the Sea-launch Cruise Missile (SLCM-N)—it is time for the Administration to get serious about the U.S. nuclear force. The Administration can start by acknowledging that Congress rejected the SLCM-N cancellation on a bipartisan basis and include funding for that system in its FY24 budget submission.
 - The Biden Administration should direct the Secretary of Defense and the U.S. Strategic Command Commander, Gen. Tony Cotton, USAF, to begin “uploading” U.S. ICBMs and SLBMs on submarines now that Russia has suspended the New

- START treaty. This would increase the number of deployed U.S. warheads on deployed U.S. ballistic missiles and strengthen our nuclear deterrent.
- o The FY24 defense budget should include resources to dramatically expand the number of follow-on nuclear weapons delivery systems, like the Long-Range Stand-Off (LRSO) cruise missile, the Columbia class SSBN, the B-21 stealth bomber, and the Sentinel ICBM modernization program, being procured, given that the current programs of record were set before Russia’s suspension of New START and the Chinese nuclear weapons breakout.
 - o Such investments will not only be needed to compete with the Russian nuclear force and the unconstrained Chinese nuclear force, but also to deter and defend against the possibility that the two powers may cooperate against the United States; moreover, it may be the only way to convince both powers that arms control is in their best interest.
- **Fix the U.S. nuclear weapons complex:** The demise of New START must be a wake-up call for the President to fix the long-broken nuclear weapons complex.
 - o During the FY23 budget cycle, the [Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration \(NNSA\)](#), the part of the Department of Energy responsible for maintaining U.S. nuclear weapons, testified that there was “no path” to build the triggers of our nuclear weapons— plutonium “pits”— fast enough to meet the required timelines, regardless of the budget available.
 - o In the dawn of a trilateral nuclear competition with Russia and China, in which the U.S. has not even begun to compete, the head of the U.S. nuclear weapons agency told Congress that we can’t build the required parts of our nuclear deterrent, which we originally invented. Pakistan and North Korea can build plutonium pits for their nuclear weapons, but the United States has not built a plutonium pit for its stockpile [since 1989](#).
 - o This fact should be a scandal and a wake-up call for the United States. The Biden Administration must act now to fix what’s broken in the U.S. nuclear weapons complex.

The temptation will be for the United States to seek to convince Russia to return to compliance with the New START treaty. The United States cannot want Russian compliance more than Russia does. The appropriate response is for the United States to confront the world as it is and make the tough calls to be positioned to compete at the dawn of a three-way nuclear competition.

There is something worse than the United States lagging behind the respective nuclear forces of Russia and China: the United States lagging behind the cooperating nuclear forces of Russia and China.

This paper is a product of the Forum for American Leadership’s [Arms Control and Counterproliferation](#) Working Group.

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