



Forum for American Leadership

Memo: How the Biden Administration Can Turn the Risky “Strategic Stability” Talks with Russia into a Success

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On July 28th, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman led an [interagency delegation to Geneva](#) to meet with Russian counterparts to focus on topics related to nuclear deterrence and arms control. “Strategic *stability*” dialogues are nothing new. The [Trump Administration](#) held “strategic *security*” dialogues, and the [Obama Administration](#) held its own “strategic *stability*” dialogues.

As ever with the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin’s regime, the question in any dialogue is whether the U.S. will agree to make unilateral concessions (as President Biden did when he agreed to extend New START for five years) to improve the bilateral relationship. The testing has already begun: just hours after Deputy Secretary Sherman left Geneva, the Russians began [making demands](#) (despite the rosy picture painted in the [State Department’s readout](#)). Congress and the Biden Administration must be careful not to fall into Putin’s negotiating traps.

Background - Russia has long prized strategic stability talks with the United States:

- Russia uses these talks to discover what weapon systems (nuclear forces, missile defense, or even conventional forces) the United States is willing to negotiate away. Additionally, Putin values the prestige he believes Russia gains by negotiating with the United States and appearing to be its equal.
- Once Moscow knows the areas where the United States is willing to negotiate, Russia will protect those areas in which it is superior (non-strategic nuclear weapons) and demand the United States concede in areas where the U.S. is superior (missile defense and conventional forces).
- Russia will likely [seek to influence](#) U.S. and European domestic opinion that U.S. weapon systems are uniquely destabilizing and an impediment to further arms control progress. Russia hopes “peace movement” and pro-nuclear disarmament groups will pressure Western democracies to make nuclear reductions or restrict missile defenses as a way to “save” the nuclear arms control process.
- As long as American officials understand the history of these talks, Russia’s goals, and defend American interests – like U.S. freedom of action to deploy missile defenses, conventional forces, and space capabilities as appropriate for its national security interests – these talks can do little harm and might actually improve mutual understanding of U.S. and Russian policies and goals.

Background - U.S. policy approaches from Reagan to Obama to Trump:

The Trump Administration was willing to hold such talks with Russia but took a different approach from previous administrations from the outset. It rebranded the talks as about “strategic security” as opposed to “strategic stability” for one key reason: it wanted to finally break the Cold War paradigm of allowing Russia to blame every irritant of the bilateral nuclear deterrence relationship on U.S. missile defenses. A secondary, but important reason, is that what appears “stable” to Russia is quite different from what the United States considers “stable.”

- The U.S., since Reagan and Gorbachev met in Reykjavik in 1986, hasn’t worried about Russian missile defense deployments. Even today, we don’t demand restrictions on the [68 nuclear armed missile defense interceptors](#) protecting Moscow and the central military district (compared to only 44 conventionally-armed ground-based interceptors in the U.S. homeland defense system) nor Russia’s [S-500 missile defense system in development](#).
- While the Obama Administration approached bilateral talks as a way to enhance cooperation with Russia, the Trump Administration sought to address the imbalances in nuclear forces with Russia that have worsened since New START was signed in 2010. Rather than attempt another round of strategic arms reductions, the Trump Administration tried to limit Russia’s unconstrained, non-strategic arsenal of nuclear weapons, a category by which it [outnumbers](#) the U.S. at least 10 to 1.
- The Trump Administration made significant progress with this new approach. It refused to get bogged down in empty Russian maneuvers about U.S. missile defenses and secured an agreement in principle to freeze all nuclear weapons, regardless of range or type.
- The Trump Administration also stressed the imperative to include China in any strategic stability talks, recognizing the joint U.S.-Russian interest in transparency into China’s rapidly advancing nuclear forces and secretive nuclear doctrine.
- Russia since reneged on that agreement, and the Biden Administration lost significant leverage over Putin it had been provided when it extended New START.

The risks of Biden’s new approach, and how to make it work:

In the [State Department readout](#) of Deputy Secretary Sherman’s delegation, additional rounds of these dialogues were promised, as were expert-level working groups. But, the Russian side apparently had a different view of what was discussed and [its readout suggested there may not even have been a commitment to meet again](#) until Russia is assured the U.S. is willing to discuss limiting its missile defenses and conventional weapons deployments.

The Biden Administration has already acceded to Russian demands on the extension of New START, which will lock in Russia’s overall nuclear force advantage through 2026, and agreed to Russia’s demand for a reaffirmation of the 1985 [Reagan-Gorbachev statement](#) on nuclear war (a statement which flies directly in the face of [Russian military doctrine](#)).

Now, the Biden Administration must guard against the impression it has created in Russia that the United States will make further one-sided concessions to improve the bilateral relationship,

and that Russia doesn't have to change any of its behaviors. Congress can play a key oversight role by pressuring the Biden Administration to make that very clear by stating the following policy at the outset of any future "strategic stability" dialogue meeting it agrees to:

1. The foundation for any future arms control negotiation between Russia and the United States is the agreement-in-principle reached during the previous Administration to freeze all nuclear warheads regardless of range or type.
2. The United States will pursue the robust deployment of its missile defenses (regional and homeland) and will recommit to the bipartisan Obama-Trump modernization of its nuclear deterrent.
3. The massive and unprecedented nuclear force expansion of the Chinese Communist Party's military is a threat to both Russia and the United States. We must cooperate to bring Beijing to the arms control table, consistent with its [Article VI negotiation commitments](#) as a nuclear weapons state under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

For additional reading on "strategic stability" or "strategic security" dialogues, FAL recommends the following resources:

- [*Keith B. Payne and Michaela Dodge, "The Strategic Stability Dialogue: Think Before You Speak." National Institute for Public Policy. July 8, 2021.*](#)
- [*Franklin C. Miller, "Talking About Strategic Stability." Real Clear Defense. July 8, 2021.*](#)

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