



# INFORMATION SERIES

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## Arms Control in the Emerging Deterrence Context<sup>1</sup>

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Colin S. Gray frequently remarked that arms control works best when least needed, i.e., arms control works best when the parties involved do not have inimical goals that create hostilities among them and there are few pressures for competitive armament.<sup>2</sup> However, as has been made abundantly clear by Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine and China's many threats to Taiwan, Russia, China, and the United States do not share the same goals and have inimical foreign policy objectives. While the United States seeks continuation of a classically liberal world order, Russia and China seek to overturn a world order that they believe has been unfairly dominated by the United States and the West.

In this new deterrence environment, characterized by such diametrically opposed world views, the prospects for meaningful arms control agreements appear bleak. Over the past half century, the U.S. commitment to arms control as a means to reduce the relevance of nuclear weapons has not produced the desired results—the divergence between U.S. goals and the actions of potential adversaries, particularly including Russia and China, has been stark.

Nevertheless, President Biden has emphasized U.S. readiness to resume negotiations,<sup>3</sup> and some commentators contend that arms control is essential now more than ever. For example,



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one analyst has written that the war in Ukraine means that “nuclear arms control must be strengthened and not further dismembered” and that the “strategic stability dialogue” between Washington and Moscow must be resumed.<sup>4</sup> Others have concluded that Russia’s actions in Ukraine—including threats of nuclear war—highlight the growing dangers of nuclear weapons and lend credence to the view that because nuclear deterrence appears increasingly fragile, “The only way to eliminate the danger is to reinforce the norm against nuclear use and pursue a more sustainable path toward their elimination.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed the Biden Administration’s *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) states that arms control is the “most effective” way to prevent nuclear use and that, “The United States will pursue a comprehensive and balanced approach that places a renewed emphasis on arms control...Mutual, verifiable nuclear arms control offers the most effective, durable and responsible path to achieving a key goal: reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy.”<sup>6</sup>

There is every reason to work to strengthen the “norm against nuclear use.” In the emerging threat context, however, there is little doubt that doing so rests largely on strengthening deterrence to minimize the prospects for war. Over the past half century, the actual results of arms control negotiations have often been the reverse of U.S. hopes and expectations.<sup>7</sup> As a 2020 Joint Chiefs of Staff publication states: “Despite concerted US efforts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in international affairs and to negotiate reductions in the number of nuclear weapons, since 2010 no potential adversary has reduced either the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy or the number of nuclear weapons it fields. Rather, they have moved decidedly in the opposite direction.”<sup>8</sup>

Russia’s promotion of and reliance on nuclear weapons, its use of arms control negotiations to codify unilateral advantages, extensive record of arms control violations, and refusal to negotiate limits on non-strategic nuclear weapons suggest that Moscow sees arms control as a “zero-sum game,” achieving successes at America’s expense. Moreover, Moscow’s stark violation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum—in which Russia pledged “to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine”<sup>9</sup>—suggests that Vladimir Putin places greater importance on territorial aggrandizement than on adherence to international agreements and the rule of law. This hardly bodes well for future arms control efforts with Russia.

In addition, despite U.S. efforts to encourage participation by China in arms control talks, Beijing has consistently refused to take part in any arms control negotiations. The lack of transparency on China’s part makes traditional forms of arms control exceedingly difficult. Moreover, Russia’s and China’s actions are governed by their own perceptions of national security requirements and their own foreign policy goals and objectives; they are not simply mechanistically fashioned to be in line with U.S. requirements and goals—however self-evidently reasonable Washington believes its own policies and goals to be.<sup>10</sup>

The New START Treaty, which the Biden Administration extended for five years in 2021 and which the administration has formally acknowledged Russia is violating,<sup>11</sup> locks the United States into ceilings on deployed strategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems until 2026. Despite Russia’s “suspension” of its participation and refusal to resume on-site



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inspections mandated by the treaty,<sup>12</sup> the United States has no plans to move beyond New START's limits in response to Moscow's actions.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the treaty does not limit non-strategic or "tactical" nuclear forces where Russia maintains a significant quantitative advantage, perhaps greater than 10 to 1.<sup>14</sup> As a former Commander of U.S. Strategic Command concluded, "because of the difficulties and our lack of leverage in expanding treaty negotiations to include tactical nuclear forces and production capability, if we jointly agree to reduce our strategic forces to even lower levels, the asymmetries in our respective stockpiles will become even more pronounced."<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, New START is a bilateral agreement between the United States and Russia and imposes no constraints on any of China's nuclear modernization programs. Given the need to hedge against unprecedented deterrence challenges and uncertainties in the new international environment, greater U.S. flexibility to deter two great nuclear adversaries—potentially operating in concert—is likely a necessary approach to minimize the chances of deterrence failure and to strengthen the norm against nuclear use.

In addition, Russia and China increasingly appear to be forming an anti-American quasi alliance. Should Russia and China coordinate their actions as part of an anti-American coalition, their combined nuclear capabilities would far exceed those of the United States. This could call into question the deterrence adequacy of current U.S. nuclear force levels and the prudence of New START limitations that were agreed to in a bilateral deterrence context much less harsh than today's.

Consequently, the United States may need to reassess a deterrence force posture constrained by New START ceilings to provide an effective and credible deterrent against a Sino-Russian military consortium, especially in light of Russia's non-compliance with New START and its aggressive buildup of novel nuclear weapons systems unaccountable under the treaty. In particular, a deterrent force with great resilience and flexible options may help to offset the combined numerical advantages and greater diversity of nuclear forces possessed by Russia and China. This certainly is not to say that U.S. nuclear forces must mimic or match Russian and Chinese forces one-for-one. But they must be adequate to hedge against the unprecedented deterrence challenges of an increasingly dangerous trilateral context.

Importantly, any agreement that establishes ostensibly "equal" limits on the strategic forces of the United States, Russia, and China, could undermine U.S. deterrence goals given the significant Russian and Chinese advantages in non-strategic nuclear weapons and the prospective need for the United States to maintain sufficient capabilities to deter coordinated Sino-Russian aggression. In addition, establishing strict numerical force limits in any arms control agreement and locking in those limits for a period of years likely is incompatible with the flexibility and range of options that may be needed to hedge against the uncertainties of the new threat context and changing circumstances. Any future arms control agreement that does not ensure that needed flexibility correspondingly may undermine "stability." The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty ("Treaty of Moscow") signed in 2002 by President George W. Bush provided for a range of operationally deployed strategic nuclear weapons<sup>16</sup>—a formula that may be worth revisiting in any future arms agreement.



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In the past, the U.S. approach to strategic arms control was premised on an expectation that Soviet or Russian forces were the pacing measure, and that a high degree of continuity (i.e., continued mutual reductions via ever more restrictive agreements) in the direction of U.S. and Soviet/Russian strategic forces provided a level of predictability and stability in the bilateral relationship. On that basis, Washington deemed reasonable long-term agreements with precise ceilings and limits “locked in.”<sup>17</sup> However, a combination of Soviet (and subsequently Russian) nuclear weapons developments and arms control treaty violations has demonstrated the fallacy of Washington’s earlier sanguine expectations. And, in the contemporary dynamic strategic threat environment, the prospects for past expected continuities and predictable Russian or Chinese behavior appear highly problematic. The U.S. approach to arms control must adapt to this reality. In particular, it is imperative that future arms control agreements allow the United States to meet the needs for the deterrence of Sino-Russian aggression, together or separately, at the regional and strategic levels.

The classic goals of strategic arms control focus not on the reduction of weapons per se but on reducing the risk of war.<sup>18</sup> Given the multiplicity of deterrence challenges posed in the emerging threat environment, there is little basis for the past optimistic expectations of continuities that undergirded the traditional U.S. approach to arms control negotiations – the expectation of a single pacing opponent, the expectation of a long-term trend of ever-deeper negotiated reductions, and the expectation that agreements could lead to more amicable political relations in general. Those expectations now appear contrary to the harsh realities of the emerging multilateral context, and the U.S. approach to arms control must recognize this reality.

In 1960, the United States faced a similarly unprecedented emerging threat context as the Soviet Union began its massive acquisition of strategic nuclear weapons. In that then-emerging threat context, Herman Kahn advised: “...we must do our homework. We must know what we are trying to achieve, the kinds of concessions that we can afford to give, and the kinds of concessions that we insist on getting... All of this will require, among other things, much higher quality preparations for negotiations than have been customary.”<sup>19</sup> The United States now must contend with an unprecedented multilateral threat context; U.S. preparation for any arms control negotiations should now heed Kahn’s advice from 1960.

## Conclusion

In the current multilateral threat environment, Russia and China appear to be increasingly aligned in their efforts to destabilize and overturn the existing world order at America’s expense. Consequently, despite the Biden Administration’s desire to reemphasize arms control as a key element of U.S. national security policy, the odds of any arms control agreement serving U.S. national security interests are problematic at best.

Russia’s record of arms control behavior, including its violation of New START, its significant advantage in nonstrategic nuclear forces, and its coercive nuclear threats over Ukraine, coupled with China’s extensive nuclear buildup, lack of transparency, and refusal to



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engage in any arms control negotiations, mean not only that meaningful arms control may be unattainable but that the United States may need to reconsider the adequacy of a deterrent force constrained by the limits of the New START Treaty. Those limits were negotiated in a much more benign threat context than now exists. In the current strategic environment, any future arms control treaty must allow the United States the flexibility needed to hedge against unprecedented deterrence challenges and uncertainties, including the potential for closer Sino-Russian collaboration and the risk of deterrence failure. The stakes are far too great to agree to anything else.

<sup>1</sup> This *Information Series* is adapted from Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters, Occasional Paper, Vol. 2, No. 8* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022).

<sup>2</sup> This point is the theme of Colin S. Gray, *House of Cards: Why Arms Control Must Fail* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Michelle Nichols, "Biden, Putin Strike Conciliatory Tones as Nuclear Arms Talks Start at U.N." *Reuters*, August 1, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-urges-russia-china-engage-nuclear-talks-2022-08-01/>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrei Zagorski, "Arms Control Must Remain the Goal," *Arms Control Today*, April 2022, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-04/features/arms-control-must-remain-goal>.

<sup>5</sup> Daryl G. Kimball, "New Approaches Needed to Prevent Nuclear Catastrophe," *Arms Control Today*, April 2022, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-04/focus/new-approaches-needed-prevent-nuclear-catastrophe>.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, pp. 12, 16, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

<sup>7</sup> David J. Trachtenberg, *Overselling and Underperforming: The Exaggerated History of Arms Control Achievements, Information Series, No. 497* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, July 22, 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/IS-497.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-72, Joint Nuclear Operations*, April 17, 2020, p. I-1, available at [https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp3\\_72\\_2020.pdf](https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/jp3_72_2020.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> *Memorandum on Security Assurances in connection with Ukraine's accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, December 5, 1994, available at <https://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/12/13943175580.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive historical critique of arms race dynamics, see David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge, and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Humeyra Pamuk, "U.S. says Russia violating New START nuclear arms control treaty," *Reuters*, January 31, 2023, available at [https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-not-complying-with-inspection-obligation-under-nuclear-arms-treaty-us-2023-01-31/#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20Jan%2031%20\(Reuters\),inspection%20activities%20on%20its%20territory..](https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-not-complying-with-inspection-obligation-under-nuclear-arms-treaty-us-2023-01-31/#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20Jan%2031%20(Reuters),inspection%20activities%20on%20its%20territory..)

<sup>12</sup> See Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia's Putin issues new nuclear warnings to West over Ukraine," *Reuters*, February 21, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-update-russias-elite-ukraine-war-major-speech-2023-02-21/>.



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[21/](#). Also see Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to Federal Assembly,” February 21, 2023, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, one U.S. official stated that restoring Russia’s compliance with New START is the primary U.S. objective and that President Biden “has made it clear that no matter what else is happening in the world, the United States is ready to pursue critical arms control measures.... The value of arms control is greatest when conditions are ripe for miscalculation, escalation, and spiraling arms races.” See John A. Tirpak, “US Hopes to Salvage New START, Says Arms Control Official,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, February 27, 2023, available at <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/u-s-hopes-to-salvage-new-start-says-arms-control-official/>.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Peter Brooks, “Russia’s small nukes are a big problem,” *The Washington Times*, August 3, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/aug/3/russias-small-nukes-are-big-problem/>. See also, Pavel Felgenhauer, “Kremlin Overrides Own Defense and Foreign Policy Establishment on Arms Control,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*: 17, Issue 149, October 22, 2020, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/kremlin-overrules-own-defense-and-foreign-policy-establishment-on-arms-control/>.

<sup>15</sup> Adm. Richard Mies, USN (Ret.), “Strategic Deterrence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Undersea Warfare*, Spring 2012, p. 15, available at [https://igs.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/files/events/mies\\_831\\_strat.in\\_21st\\_century\\_0.pdf](https://igs.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/files/events/mies_831_strat.in_21st_century_0.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> See *Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Strategic Offensive Reductions (SORT/Treaty of Moscow)*, May 24, 2002, available at [https://media.nti.org/documents/sort\\_moscow\\_treaty.pdf](https://media.nti.org/documents/sort_moscow_treaty.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> See Trachtenberg, Dodge, and Payne, *The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> See, Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 576.

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