

Fight Over Ukraine Darkens Future of Russia-U.S. Nuclear Arms Control

By [Matthew Bodner](#)

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The rhetoric of the Ukraine crisis has amplified long-standing apprehensions in Moscow and Washington and halted progress on arms control for the time being.

Five years after the United States and Russia signed the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty, the spirit in which it was signed is dead.

Relations between the two countries have crumbled as the crisis in Ukraine prompts mutual accusations and thinly veiled threats of nuclear war.

The New START treaty itself is safe. Officials on both sides have repeatedly stated their commitment to implementing its provisions, while verification procedures are being honored. But the rhetoric of the Ukraine crisis has amplified long-standing apprehensions in Moscow and Washington and halted progress on arms control for the time being.

"While the U.S. continues to strengthen its national security methods, which reduce the level

of Russia's national security, to speak of future nuclear disarmament is hardly possible," Mikhail Ulyanov, the Russian Foreign Ministry's senior arms control and non-proliferation official, said in February.

Nuclear Rhetoric

But Ulyanov's concerns go both ways. In the United States, officials and policy experts are becoming increasingly riled by the nuclear rhetoric coming out of Moscow. Their fears are bolstered by a program to modernize all of Russia's nuclear forces by 2020.

Dr. Mark Schneider, an arms control negotiator who worked on New START, said engaging the Russians on further nuclear cuts is completely out of the question.

"The focus must be on deterrence, or we run the risk of [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's first use of nuclear weapons with potential catastrophic consequences," he said.

"I can't read Putin's mind, but I can read what he says and that scares me."

Amid the rhetoric, both sides increased the number of deployed warheads last year after Russia annexed Crimea. Russia has 1643 warheads deployed, one more than the United States, according to the most recent New START report released in October.

The treaty stipulates both sides reduce to 1550 each by 2018.

Arms Control Amid Crisis

New START is the product of U.S. President Barack Obama's policy to reset relations with Russia after coming to office in 2008.

When Obama met then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Prague in April 2010 to sign the treaty, the leaders heralded it as an important step toward further reducing nuclear arsenals. But that was the last time the two sides sat down to work on nuclear arms control.

Visiting Berlin in 2013, Obama suggested reducing warhead deployments by another 30 percent under New START, but Putin promptly rejected the offer.

"I think at some point, and this may not be for two to three years, the Russians will probably be interested in a dialogue," said Steven Pifer, a former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine and the head of the Brookings Institution's arms control and nuclear non-proliferation program.

According to Pifer, the historical record shows that Moscow has always been interested in some kind of cap on U.S. and Russian strategic warheads. Arms races are expensive, and Pifer said that Russia may come back to the table as New START's 2021 expiration date approaches.

The View from Moscow

According to Dr. Eugene Miasnikov, director of the Moscow-based Center for Arms Control, Energy and Environmental Studies, "Russia always considered the New START treaty a valuable instrument" since it does limit U.S. nuclear arms.

Russia isn't interested in further cuts. Last month, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov, who was part of the Russian New START negotiation team, said Russia "is satisfied with the current situation" with regard to strategic arms limitations.

Still, Moscow has problems with the treaty, namely that it doesn't limit U.S. missile defense or prompt global strike weapons — a U.S. program to develop a new class of hypersonic non-nuclear missiles capable of destroying any target on the globe in under an hour.

"The sides are unable yet to resolve the related issues of ballistic missile defense and conventional strategic arms," Miasnikov said. Sanctions also hurt strategic dialogue, he added.

Russian officials have said that future developments with U.S. missile defense technology or the Prompt Global Strike program might serve as grounds to pull out of the treaty.

The Foreign Ministry's Ulyanov said Tuesday "the reckless deployment by the U.S. of a one-sided missile defense system damages the interests of Russian national security, and at some point may lead us to reconsider our attitude toward the treaty," Russian news agency RIA Novosti reported.

The View From Washington

In Washington, the Obama Administration remains committed to New START, analysts said. But since the treaty's signing, there has been a large camp opposed to its implementation.

"When measured against the most basic metrics for nuclear arms limitation treaties — for example, significant reductions or limits on nuclear weapons and effective verification measures — New START should be judged a failure," said Schneider.

During treaty negotiations, the Russians pushed for a higher cap on nuclear weapons, with fewer verification procedures, and they were given those concessions. The United States cannot cede more, Schneider said, arguing that holes in verification procedures leave room for a large Russian nuclear buildup — a dire threat to U.S. national security.

Pifer takes a more sanguine view: "The New START treaty is more important now than it was 18 months ago," as it promotes transparency and regular dialogue on nuclear issues while East and West revert to Cold War form over the crisis in Ukraine.

However, these virtues may become harder to defend. Republican congressmen at various times have tried unsuccessfully to stop New START's implementation. Last year the Republican party won a majority in the U.S. Senate.

"I am not sure this will become a serious threat to the treaty, but my guess is that the administration is going to have to devote more time and attention to defending New START against efforts in Congress to undermine it," Pifer said.

Contact the author at m.bodner@imedia.ru

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