Keep J & Heslop DJ. A farewell to New-START? Strategic arms control under pressure amid war in Ukraine. *Global Biosecurity. 2023; 5(1).*

CBRN NEWS

A farewell to New-START? Strategic arms control under pressure amid war in Ukraine

Joel Keep & David J Heslop[1]

[1] School of Population Health, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Abstract
Moscow's unilateral suspension of the last remaining strategic nuclear arms treaty between Russia and the U.S. signifies both peril and opportunity for future nuclear security.

Keywords
Nuclear security / Human security / Conflict and health

Introduction

Russian President Vladimir Putin's address to parliament on February 21st, 2023, was delivered nearly a year to the day after his administration launched its disastrous second invasion of Ukraine. With his military campaign faltering, many observers had suggested the possibility that Putin would order a further "partial" mobilisation, having first done so following a successful Ukrainian counter-offensive in the oblasts of Kharkhiv and Kherson in the final months of 2022. Instead, Putin's most consequential announcement was a unilateral "suspension" of Moscow's adherence to New-START, the last remaining treaty between the United States and the Russian Federation on the control of strategic nuclear forces (1).

Putin's address came the day after U.S. President Joe Biden visited Kyiv, where he reiterated a commitment to providing material and political support to the defence of Ukraine. In 2021, in his first week in office as President, Biden had agreed an extension of New-START (2), which would have kept the treaty in place until at least 2026. Extending the treaty maintained a limit of 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads on each party's strategic delivery systems. As the first measure taken by the Biden administration on Russia, some interpreted this both as an urgent practical matter, and as an act of goodwill. A little over a year later, however, Russian missiles would be pounding Ukrainian cities, and armoured columns would be bearing down on Kyiv in a failed attempt to seize the capital.

While New-START played a critical role in strategic arms control, critics of the 2010 treaty highlighted its inapplicability to tactical nuclear weapons, in which Russia maintained a clear numerical and geographic advantage. Sea and air-launched nuclear cruise missiles were not covered by the agreement, nor were so-called "battlefield" low-yield weapons (3), the category assumed to be most likely used in the context of the war in Ukraine. Regardless, Putin's unilateral pause on New-START is the most serious setback for strategic arms control since former President Donald Trump announced Washington would withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2018, a move that arguably benefited Moscow more than the United States (4).

Hello to arms

Moscow's current focus on the strategic nuclear question recalls a point of contention between the U.S. and Russia in the early years of Putin assuming office. In 2001, the year in which U.S. President George Bush Jnr. looked into Putin's eyes and "got a sense of his soul", Washington announced plans to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABMT). Signed in 1972, the ABMT sought to limit the number of defensive missile interceptors each party could field, in a bid to relieve pressure on military planners who would (theoretically) feel compelled to develop a wider offensive arsenal to account for missiles that could be lost to interception systems. Under the agreement, the United States and Moscow were permitted to maintain two anti-ballistic missile sites, each hosting no more than 100 interceptors (5).

The end of the ABMT has since been repeatedly cited by Moscow as an affront that has compelled Russia to increase the effectiveness of its offensive nuclear capability. At the time, however, Washington stated that defensive measures had nothing to do

with Moscow's nuclear arsenal, with Bush asserting that "the Cold War is over" and "Russia is no longer an enemy" (6). Coming as it did in the uncertain months after the September 11th terrorist attacks, Washington's primary concern was instead weapons of mass destruction emanating from "rogue states" such as North Korea and Iran (7). Withdrawing from the ABMT allowed for the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) systems to the Korean peninsula (8), where the threat of nuclear employment had been steadily increasing since the 1990s. More consequentially for Moscow, however, the end of the ABMT opened the way for anti-ballistic missile complexes to be established in central and eastern Europe. While the Bush administration insisted interceptors and radar based in Poland and Romania were aimed at preventing missiles from Iran reaching European cities, Putin decried these sites as an unacceptable countermeasure to the Russian nuclear arsenal. Fearing retribution, the Czech Republic withdrew from the arrangement before it could be deployed (9).

However dubious his reasoning, Putin's subsequent reaction to these defensive systems would have ramifications relevant to today's impasse. Starting in 2004, Russia began testing a new generation of weapons – among them the intercontinental hypersonic glider (10). This was the system Putin revealed in 2018, which could evade radar detection and defeat traditional missile interceptors by taking long, unconventional routes around the globe to reach their intended target (11). In late 2021, U.S. defence planners reacted with shock when China tested their own hypersonic glide vehicle, which appeared to "defy the laws of physics" and allow it to traverse the South Pole on its way to the Northern Hemisphere. Speaking at a tense Congressional hearing, Pentagon officials struggled to explain how such a system could be adequately defended against (12).

Goodbye to all that

The day after Putin delivered his address, Beijing's top diplomat, Wang Yi, arrived in Moscow to meet with the Russian President. The meeting came after heated exchanges between Chinese and U.S. officials at the Munich Security Conference, where U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken warned that Beijing was actively considering the provision of material lethal assistance to Russian forces in Ukraine for the first time (13). Later that week, Beijing floated a 12-point "peace plan" that had been drafted without consulting Kyiv, the idea of which was dismissed by Washington as "not rational" (14, 15).

The increasingly tight alignment between Beijing and Moscow has raised alarm throughout the Western world. However, a break from the traditional formulation of New-START may be a blessing in disguise. Signed in 2010 and based on earlier agreements from the Cold War, New-START involved only the U.S. and Russia - it did not take into account China's sizeable nuclear arsenal. This was the core rationale cited by the Trump administration in their withdrawal from the INF Treaty in 2018: there was no point in any strategic nuclear control agreement that did not include Beijing (16). In the years since, China has embarked on a considerable increase in the quality and quantity of its nuclear capability. In January 2023, the top commander of U.S. nuclear forces revealed that China now had more land-based missile launchers than the United States did (17). While the U.S. maintained more warheads and missiles, this unwelcome development came only a year after Beijing's new hypersonic capability was revealed.

Just prior to the strained Munich summit, a planned visit to Beijing was cancelled by Secretary Blinken after a high-altitude Chinese surveillance balloon was shot down over U.S airspace. While much acrimony filled the highly partisan American political landscape in the ensuing scandal, the incident could have prompted a discussion on how China may be drawn into future arrangements on nuclear arms control. A good starting point could be a new iteration of the Open Skies Agreement, this time involving Beijing as a participant (18). Sailing as it did above sensitive nuclear sites in Alaska, Montana and elsewhere, "balloon-gate" demonstrated China's appetite for understanding the U.S. nuclear posture. The 1992 Open Skies treaty allowed for fly-over surveillance of nuclear sites between Belarus and the Russian Federation on one hand, and NATO and the United States on the other. However, the agreement became yet another casualty of the Trump era, when it was jettisoned in the final year of that administration, despite vociferous opposition from the Democrat Party in the U.S. as well as European partners, including Ukraine (19).

Following Putin's "suspension" of New-START, close observers of nuclear arms control noted that the Russian Foreign Ministry stated it would continue to honour warhead limits and would still provide formal missile launch warnings to the U.S. via a separate bilateral agreement made in 1988. However, the unilateral suspension of New-START means that not only will there be no on-site inspections or meetings of the Bilateral Consultative Commission, but other routine reporting and data exchange will cease, dramatically increasing the risk of miscalculation (20). Furthermore, the more immediate threat of low-yield tactical nuclear deployment remains unresolved.

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and the 2014 invasion that preceded it, had profound implications for nuclear proliferation well before Putin's

suspension of New-START. Ukraine had been a lynchpin of the Soviet Union's nuclear programme, and following the dissolution of the USSR, the newly independent country inherited a large stockpile of missiles that made it the third largest nuclear power at the end of the Cold War. While much attention has been paid to Putin's mischaracterization of "promises" supposedly made that NATO would not accept members in Russia's "near abroad", the commitments of the 1994 Budapest Agreement, in which Ukraine agreed to surrender its inherited nuclear arsenal in exchange for security guarantees from Moscow, have been utterly disregarded (21). The lesson, noted by commentators from Europe to the Korean peninsula, is that a viable nuclear deterrent may now be the only means by which a state can ensure its survival in this new era (22). Such a conclusion has profound implications for nuclear security, in Ukraine and beyond.

References

1. Pucheta R., Chernova, A., Hodge, N., Kent, L. & Gigova, R. Putin pulls back from last remaining nuclear arms control pact with U.S. *CNN*. 2023 Feb 21. *https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/21/europe/putin-russia-new-start-nuclear-pact-intl/index.html*
2. Blinken, A. On the extension of the New-START Treaty with the Russian Federation [press release]. 2021. U.S Department of State. https://www.state.gov/on-the-extension-of-the-new-start-treaty-with-the-russian-federation/
3. United States Congressional Research Service. The New-START Treaty: Central limits and key provisions. 2022 Feb 2. https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/R41219.pdf
4. Ellehus, R., Beutin, R. & Lopinot, Q. What comes after the U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty? Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2018 Dec 4 https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-comes-after-us-withdrawal-inf-treaty-case-nato-strategy
5. Kimball, D. The Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty at a glance. (Dec 2020.) Arms Control Association. https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/abmtreaty
6. Office of the President of the United States. ABM Treaty fact sheet. (Dec 2001). White House Press Service. https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011213-2.html
7. Acton, J. The U.S. exit from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty has fuelled a new arms race. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2021 Dec 13. https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/13/u.s.-exit-from-anti-ballistic-missile-treaty-has-fueled-new-arms-race-pub-85977
8. Trezza, C. The THAAD deployment in South Korea: A challenge and an opportunity. (13 Feb 2018). *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*. https://www.apln.network/analysis/commentaries/the-thaad-deployment-in-south-korea-a-challenge-and-an-opportunity
9. Dyomkin, D. Putin says Romania, Poland may now be in Russia's cross-hairs. *Reuters*. 2016 May 28. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-europe-shield-idUSKCN0YI2ER
10. Acton, J. Russia and strategic weapons: Concerns and responses. *The Non-proliferation Review*. 2016;22(2):141-154 https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2015.1105434
11. Putin reveals new Russian missile that can 'reach any point in the world'. *CNBC*. 2018, Mar 1 *https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/01/putin-new-russia-missile-nuclear.html*
12. Sevastopulou, D. & Hille, K. China tests new space capability with hypersonic missile. *The Financial Times*. 2021 Oct 17. *https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/01/putin-new-russia-missile-nuclear.html*
13. Wintour, P. China may be on the brink of supplying weapons to Russia, Blinken says. *The Guardian*. 2023 Feb 20. *https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/19/china-may-be-on-brink-of-supplying-arms-to-russia-says-blinken*
14. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. China's position on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis [press release]. (24 Feb, 2023). https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html
15. Beech, E. & Costas, P. 'Not rational' for China to negotiate outcome of Ukraine war, Biden says. *Reuters*. 2023 Feb 25. https://www.reuters.com/world/not-rational-china-negotiate-outcome-ukraine-war-biden-2023-02-25/
16. Owens, E. Trump is right about the INF Treaty. *Foreign Policy*. 2018 Oct 24. *https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/24/trump-is-right-about-the-inf/*
17. O'Brien, C. Top Republicans sound alarm over China's nuclear expansion. *Politico*. 2023, Feb 7. https://www.politico.com/news/2023/02/07/republicans-chinas-nuclear-expansion-00081561
18. Layton, P. Chinese grey zone spy balloons over the American heartland. *The Lowy Interpreter*. 2023 Feb 6. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/chinese-grey-zone-spy-balloons-over-american-heartland
19. King, I. Storm clouds gather over Open Skies Treaty. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. 2019 Oct 23. *https://www.csis.org/analysis/storm-clouds-gather-over-open-skies-treaty*

20. Roth A, Borger, J. Putin says Russia will halt participation in New Start nuclear arms treaty. *The Guardian.* 2023 Feb 22. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/21/putin-russia-halt-participation-new-start-nuclear-arms-treaty
21. Reznikov, O. To stop Putin, the Western world must revisit the 1995 Budapest Memorandum. *The Atlantic Council.* 2023 May 31. *https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/to-stop-putin-the-western-world-must-revisit-the-1994-budapest-memorandum/*
22. Sinovets, P., Parachini, J. & Holynska, K. How Russia's nuclear double-cross of Ukraine teaches dangerous lessons. *The RAND Corporation*. 2022 Aug 16. https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/08/how-russias-nuclear-double-cross-of-ukraine-teaches.html

How to cite this article: Keep J & Heslop DJ. A farewell to New-START? Strategic arms control under pressure amid war in Ukraine. *Global Biosecurity*. 2023; 5(1).

Published: April 2023

Global Biosecurity is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of New South Wales.