

# Dangerous Nuclear Policy Idea No. 1: Unconditionally Extending New START for Five Years

*Patty-Jane Geller*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

New START has allowed Russia to develop an unconstrained stockpile of tactical nuclear warheads and strategic delivery systems, while doing nothing to contain China.

Unconditional extension of the treaty for five years would cede the progress that the Trump Administration has made and give Russia another arms control win.

The incoming Administration should continue to pressure Russia to agree to a nuclear stockpile cap in exchange for a short-term New START extension.

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) between the United States and Russia is set to expire on February 5, 2021, leaving the Biden Administration just two weeks to either let the treaty expire, or to extend it for up to five years. New START officially restricts the number of delivery systems and warheads each country can deploy, and provides a monitoring and verification regime, albeit limited. However, the treaty is flawed, and has allowed Russia to build up its nuclear forces without violating the treaty's terms. It also does not include China, which continues to increase its nuclear forces unconstrained.

The Trump Administration had pursued an improved New START agreement and sought to include China. While China has thus far refused to negotiate, the United States and Russia had agreed in principle to extend New START for one year in

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6039>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

exchange for a freeze on both countries' nuclear stockpiles. However, once the U.S. presidential election drew near, Russian President Vladimir Putin delayed further talks in hope of obtaining a more favorable deal with a new Administration. Indeed, President-Elect Biden has indicated that he would change course and extend the agreement for five years unconditionally, walking back progress made on a nuclear stockpile cap.<sup>1</sup>

## Why It's Dangerous

New START is a deeply flawed treaty, which, if extended, will allow Russia to continue to pursue an advantage over the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

**Limitations Not on All of Russia's Nuclear Forces.** New START excludes Russia's unconstrained stockpile of about 2,000 nonstrategic nuclear weapons (whereas the United States only has 500). Russia's apparent "escalate to win" doctrine indicates a greater willingness to use these weapons on European battlefields.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, Russia is building new nuclear delivery systems outside New START limits, including an unmanned, underwater nuclear drone, a nuclear-powered cruise missile, and an air-launched ballistic missile.

**Flawed Counting Rules.** New START does not limit the number of warheads per missile, so Russia has fielded missiles that can hold up to 10 warheads each. Its new Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) can reportedly carry up to 24 warheads. This gives Russia a significant capacity to upload warheads to its ICBMs and surpass the total New START warhead limit of 1,550.<sup>4</sup>

New START counts one bomber as one warhead regardless of how many warheads a bomber can carry, enabling Russia to surpass New START limits legally.

**Weak Verification Regime.** Since New START allows any number of warheads per any missile, the mere 10 inspections allowed each year make it impossible to determine if Russia abides by warhead limits.<sup>5</sup>

**Five-Year Extension Ignores China's Nuclear Buildup.** China is completing its nuclear triad with the fielding of strategic bombers, acquiring advanced capabilities like nuclear-tipped hypersonic glide vehicles, and growing its ballistic missile arsenal.<sup>6</sup> China is expected to double the size of its nuclear stockpile over the next decade.<sup>7</sup> According to U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) Commander Admiral Charles Richard, China is on track to become a strategic nuclear peer to the U.S. by 2030.<sup>8</sup>

China is obligated by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to work toward disarmament, but extending New START for five years

without including China lets Beijing continue to advance its nuclear arsenal unconstrained.

**Strong Negotiating Position Is Ceded to Russia.** President Putin had publicly agreed to cap nuclear stockpiles and extend New START for one year, but the Russian Foreign Ministry has since declined five times to meet with the United States to finalize this agreement.<sup>9</sup>

The Kremlin favors a five-year unconditional New START extension, which is understandable given the advantage it has gained from the treaty thus far. Agreeing to a five-year extension would cede all progress made on an improved agreement and give Putin another arms control win.

## What Key U.S. Senior Leaders Say

Presidential Envoy Marshall Billingslea stated, “The so-called New START Treaty amazingly constrains more than 90 percent of the U.S. nuclear deterrent. Less than half of Russia’s, on the other hand, and none of China’s.”<sup>10</sup> Billingslea points out that “[the Chinese are] repeatedly and aggressively expanding the size and scope of their nuclear arsenal. They are arms racing. We’re not. But any treaty or agreement that doesn’t account for this is by definition incomplete, ineffective, and does fail to ultimately safeguard the American people.”<sup>11</sup>

When Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Hyten was STRATCOM Commander, he stated that, in order to support a New START extension, “We have to have a partner that can participate.... And if the Russians continued to build the capabilities outside the New START treaty that are not accountable and will not come to the table under the treaty...that causes me to have concerns.”<sup>12</sup>

## Recommendations for the U.S.

The incoming Biden Administration should:

- **Reject an unconditional five-year extension of New START.** Agreeing to an unconditional extension of five years would maximize Russia’s and China’s time to advance their forces not limited by the treaty and remove a key incentive for Putin to negotiate an improved agreement.
- **Continue to push Russia to follow through on its agreement to a nuclear stockpile cap in exchange for a short-term (under**

**five years) New START extension.** Putin is likely rejecting U.S. offers to finalize this deal in order to wait for President Joe Biden to simply extend the agreement to Russia's favor.<sup>13</sup> Instead of ceding to Russia's preference, picking up where the Trump Administration left off would strengthen the Biden Administration's negotiating position from the start.

**Patty-Jane Geller** is Policy Analyst for Nuclear Deterrence and Missile Defense in the Center for National Defense, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

## Endnotes

1. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again> (accessed December 22, 2020).
2. For further reading, see Marshall S. Billingslea, "Arms Control and the New START Treaty," National Institute for Public Policy *Information Series Issue* No. 472, <https://www.nipp.org/2020/12/08/billingslea-marshall-arms-control-and-the-new-start-treaty/> (accessed January 11, 2021), and Patty-Jane Geller, "New START: The U.S. Should Not Extend the Dangerously Flawed Treaty for Five More Years," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 5043, March 6, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/new-start-the-us-should-not-extend-the-dangerously-flawed-treaty-five-more-years>.
3. Amy F. Woolf, "Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons," Congressional Research Service, updated May 4, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL32572.pdf> (accessed January 12, 2020).
4. Russia's current ICBM force consists of 318 missiles that carry about 860 deployed warheads, but have the capacity to carry up to 1,165 warheads. The United States arms each ICBM with only one warhead. See Amy F. Woolf, "Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization," Congressional Research Service, updated July 20, 2020, p. 14, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R45861.pdf> (accessed December 21, 2020).
5. Bryan Smith, "Verification After the New START Treaty: Back to the Future," National Institute for Public Policy *Information Series Issue* No. 463, July 16, 2020, <https://www.nipp.org/2020/07/14/smith-bryan-verification-after-the-new-start-treaty-back-to-the-future/> (accessed December 21, 2020).
6. Also, last year, China test-launched more ballistic missiles than the rest of the world combined. See U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, September 2020, pp. 55 and 87, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed December 21, 2020).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
8. Center for Strategic and International Studies, "International Security at the Nuclear Nexus (Day 1)," Opening Remarks and Prerecorded Keynote featuring Admiral Charles Richard, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, virtual event recorded October 21, 2020, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/201021\\_International\\_Security\\_Nuclear\\_Nexus\\_Day\\_1.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/201021_International_Security_Nuclear_Nexus_Day_1.pdf) (accessed December 21, 2020).
9. Marshall S. Billingslea, Twitter Post, December 17, 2020, 2:06pm, <https://twitter.com/USArmsControl/status/133964817535577025> (accessed January 13, 2020).
10. Marshall S. Billingslea and Peter Brooks, "Behind the Great Wall of Secrecy: China's Nuclear Buildup," Heritage Foundation virtual event, October 13, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/arms-control/event/virtual-event-behind-the-great-wall-secrecy-chinas-nuclear-buildup>.
11. *Ibid.*
12. U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, "Hearing to Receive Testimony on United States Strategic Command and United States Northern Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2020 and the Future Years Defense Program," February 26, 2019, p. 84, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/19-14\\_02-26-19.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/19-14_02-26-19.pdf) (accessed January 13, 2021).
13. Putin said: "We are ready to continue the dialogue. I know that the newly elected President, Mr. Biden, said that, well, it sounded like...a readiness to continue the dialogue, to preserve this fundamental document." See Brendan Cole, "U.S. Says Russia Rejected Nuclear Treaty Talks Five Times Despite Putin's Push for Deal," *Newsweek*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/start-treaty-russia-putin-biden-nuclear-arms-1555874> (accessed December 21, 2020).