

Status of U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Talks

October 19, 2020

Introduction

The **New START** Treaty will expire on February 5, 2021, unless the United States and Russia agree to extend it, possibly for up to five years. In April 2019, President Trump **called for** expanded arms control efforts with Russia and China, both to capture all types of Russian weapons and to bring China into the process for the first time. The Administration **argued that** this would serve U.S. national security interests better than an extension of New START. In December 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin **indicated** that he was willing to extend New START for the five-year period, without preconditions, with Russian officials **noting** that the two countries could address other weapons systems in separate talks after extending New START.

The United States and Russia held several meetings during 2020 to discuss a New START extension and a framework for a future agreement. China has **refused** to participate, noting that it has far fewer nuclear weapons than either the United States or Russia.

Issues in the Negotiations

China

Prior to beginning negotiations with Russia, the U.S. negotiator, Ambassador Marshall Billingslea **suggested** that Washington would not extend New START unless China joined the talks. **He invited** China to participate, but China declined. He then suggested that the United States would seek to convince Russia to pressure China to participate. Foreign Minister Ryabkov **rejected** this, noting that a decision on whether to join would be the “sovereign right of China.” Moreover, Russian officials have **argued that** a multilateral treaty should include the United Kingdom and France, a suggestion the United States has rejected.

After their second meeting in August, Ambassador Billingslea **reiterated** the U.S. goal of including China in the negotiations but, in contrast to earlier statements, indicated that the United States was “not suggesting ... that we would amend the New START Treaty to include China.” He also did not insist that

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IN11520

China participate *before* the United States agreed to extend New START. Instead, he indicated the framework for the next treaty would have to include a path for China to join later.

Extension and Future Agreement

When the United States and Russia met in July, Ambassador Billingslea [stated](#) that the United States would “contemplate an extension” of New START if Russia agreed to negotiate a new agreement to limit its shorter-range nonstrategic nuclear weapons and its new types of longer-range strategic systems. During the [meeting](#), U.S. and Russian officials did not reach an agreement on whether to extend New START, nor did they agree on a framework for a future agreement. They established several working groups to address strategic stability issues, although they disagreed on the subjects for some of the groups.

In August, Ambassador Billingslea [reiterated](#) the U.S. view that New START is “deeply flawed and that it is not particularly in the U.S. interest to simply extend that treaty.” But he noted the United States might agree to an extension if Russia signed “a politically binding agreement” that provided a framework for a new treaty. The United States presented Russia with detailed proposals for a treaty that would count all nuclear warheads and would have better verification and transparency measures than New START. Billingslea did not offer any insights into whether, or how, the proposed framework would address Russia’s stated concerns about U.S. weapons in space, U.S. ballistic missile defenses, and other issues that affect strategic stability. Billingslea also [stated](#) that the cost of extending New START could increase if Russia did not accept the U.S. proposals before the election, perhaps by including “a lot of the other bad behavior that the Russians are engaged in around the world.” He also [indicated](#) that if Russia did not accept the U.S. proposals, the United States would allow New START to lapse and promptly increase the numbers of warheads on its strategic forces.

After reviewing the U.S. proposals in July, Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov [noted](#) that Russia was ready to extend New START but would not do so at any cost. Moreover, he indicated that Russia would not accept the U.S. proposals unless the United States also addressed Russian concerns. In August, he noted that Russia had taken “American ideas into consideration,” and [repeated](#) that Russia “is not ready to pay any price” for New START extension.

In October, the United States [seemed](#) to narrow its position by [seeking](#) to pair a short-term extension of New START with a short-term freeze on both sides’ nuclear arsenals. The freeze [would](#) accommodate U.S. demands for limits on Russian nonstrategic nuclear weapons without addressing all the issues included in the August proposal. After meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov on October 12, Ambassador Billingslea [stated](#) that Presidents Trump and Putin had reached an “agreement in principle” on this deal and that he and Ryabkov could complete an agreement quickly. U.S. officials [believed](#) the two sides could reach an agreement in time for the Presidents to sign it before the U.S. election.

Russian officials, however, disputed this assessment. Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov [called](#) the U.S. reports of a quick agreement “an illusion.” He [stated](#) that the proposed freeze “is unacceptable” because it would not address Russian concerns about U.S. weapons. Ryabkov also [disputed](#) the U.S. assertion that the two sides could conclude the agreement before the election.

On October 16, President Putin [proposed](#) that the two sides extend New START “unconditionally for at least a year” while they continue to hold talks on other arms control issues. President Trump’s National Security Advisor, Robert O’Brien, [dismissed](#) the Russian proposal as a “non-starter” without the freeze on nuclear arsenals, and [suggested](#) that Russia’s position could lead to “a costly arms race.” On October 20, the Russian Foreign Ministry [stated](#) that Russia *would* accept a one-year freeze on nuclear arsenals if the United States did not add any conditions to the freeze. Russia also stated that the countries could “hold comprehensive bilateral talks” on “all factors that can influence strategic stability” during the extension. The U.S. State Department [responded](#) by welcoming the Russian statement and noting that the

“United States is prepared to meet immediately to finalize a verifiable agreement.” Russia may consider the requirement for verification to be an unacceptable condition added to the freeze.

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