

Extension of New START Central Limits: Overview of the Expert Debate

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The [New START Treaty](#), a 2010 arms control agreement that imposes numerical caps (or *central limits*) on deployed U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons at intercontinental ranges, is set to expire on February 5, 2026. The treaty's [provisions](#) do not allow for an extension beyond this date. U.S. and Russian officials [have not negotiated](#) a follow-on agreement since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In September 2025, Russian President Vladimir Putin [stated](#) that Russia was prepared to uphold the treaty's central limits for one year following its expiration. The treaty [caps](#) U.S. and Russian strategic forces at 700 deployed launchers equipped for strategic nuclear weapons (intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs; submarine-launched missiles, or SLBMs; and heavy bombers), 1,550 warheads on deployed launchers, and a total 800 deployed and nondeployed launchers. Putin also [said](#) the Russian proposal would be "only feasible if the United States acts in a similar spirit and refrains from steps that would undermine or disrupt the existing balance of deterrence." While President Donald J. Trump initially [reportedly expressed](#) interest in Putin's proposal, Russian officials [have said](#) the United States has not formally responded. On January 8, President Trump [reportedly said](#) of the agreement, "If it expires, it expires."

Congress plays a role in arms control, which is implemented pursuant to [treaties or agreements](#) negotiated by the executive branch. The Senate's 2010 resolution of advice and consent to ratification of the New START Treaty [states](#) that "further arms reduction agreements ... may be made only pursuant to the treaty-making power of the President as set forth in Article II, section 2, clause 2 of the Constitution of the United States." However, the executive branch may pursue a [nonbinding or political commitment](#) to extend New START central limits that may not require Senate action.

Some Members of Congress have debated the issue of nuclear arms control with Russia. A December 10, 2025, hearing [featured](#) witnesses associated with the [Congressional Commission on the U.S. Strategic Posture](#) (Strategic Posture Commission, or SPC) with diverging opinions on whether the United States should agree to extend New START central limits. The following summarizes ongoing debate among U.S. experts on this issue.

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U.S. Simultaneous Deterrence of Russia and China

At the core of the debate has been whether a U.S. yearlong extension of central limits with Russia would hamper U.S. efforts to credibly deter a [growing nuclear arsenal](#) of the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) or help to forestall what [some see](#) as an arms race.

The 2023 SPC final report, which proposed recommendations for U.S. deterrence in a “two-nuclear-peer” environment in the 2027-2035 timeframe, [argued](#) the United States needed to “prepare” to increase the number of warheads deployed on existing strategic launchers. Such an increase, or *upload*, of warheads would require the United States to reverse measures taken to comply with New START. These measures [included](#) a decrease in the number of warheads deployed on [ICBMs](#) and the conversion of some [SLBM launch tubes](#) and [heavy bombers](#) to not carry nuclear weapons.

Some opponents of the extension have [contended](#) it would preclude the United States from increasing the number of warheads deployed on existing launchers (a process that some have [said](#) may take several years) or [from](#) taking steps to increase the U.S. order of new ballistic missile submarines and heavy bombers. Some have [argued](#) that it could “create a political dynamic in which recurring renewals become expected, narrowing future U.S. options.”

Some proponents of the extension have [contended](#) that it would allow the United States “more time to decide what to do about the ongoing Chinese buildup without having to worry simultaneously about new Russian deployments.” They have [argued](#) it would “not prejudice our planning and preparation to upload.” Others have [stated](#), while it will take time for China to build up its arsenal, Russia could “build up faster than the United States.” Still others have [maintained](#) that an extension “could slow, if only for one year, a three-way nuclear arms race with Russia and China that has begun gathering steam.”

Details of a Potential Deal with Russia

Some experts have expressed [concern](#) with Russia's treaty compliance and have [argued](#) for verification in any deal with Russia. In congressionally mandated *New START Annual Implementation Reports*, the U.S. Department of State has [outlined](#) its determinations of Russia's noncompliance, including of its unilateral suspension of the treaty's verification regime in 2023. The United States has since relied on so-called *national technical means* (NTM), such as satellites, for monitoring Russia's [declared](#) commitment to New START central limits.

Some have [argued](#), because Putin's proposal does not include verification, it is unclear “whether his offer is made in good faith.” Others have [contended](#) a restart of New START inspections and data exchanges, prior to the treaty's expiration, could establish a baseline for an informal extension of limits. They also have [raised concerns](#) about the expiration of New START [provisions](#) that forbid interfering with NTM, such as the jamming of satellites.

Some experts have [said](#) Russian [novel nuclear capabilities](#) developed after signing of the treaty, such as its Kinzhal air-launched ballistic missile, as well as its new [Oreshnik](#) intermediate-range ballistic missile, must be considered for inclusion in any central limits extension. Others have [maintained](#) that an extension of strategic forces limits does not address the disparity between the United States and Russia in [nonstrategic nuclear weapons](#). Still others have [pointed](#) to concerns with Russia's potential preparations to place “a nuclear weapon in orbit.”

Arms Control in U.S. Nuclear Policy

Debates over the [desirability](#) and [feasibility](#) of bilateral and trilateral arms control continue. Some experts also disagree on the sources of U.S. leverage that could bring Russia and China to such negotiations.

Some have [argued](#) that an extension with Russia could create leverage for future negotiation with China. Others have [said](#) an extension could “[deprive](#)” the United States of such leverage.

During the December 10, 2025, congressional hearing, Members and witnesses [discussed](#) how an interagency assessment of U.S. nuclear policies, such as a Nuclear Posture Review, could contribute to the development of U.S. nuclear force requirements and arms control goals for a “two-nuclear-peer” environment. It is unclear if the Trump Administration plans to conduct such a review.

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