

Arms Control or Ukraine? Scott Ritter

As Russia suspends New START, the sooner the Ukraine war ends, the sooner the U.S. and Russia can work to preserve arms control to avert the ultimate disaster.

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Russia experts and national security specialists will be pouring over the text of Russian President Vladimir [Putin's address on Tuesday](#) for some time to come, trying to divine hidden meaning.

The fact is, however, Putin's speech was something rarely heard in Western political circles — unvarnished statements of fact, set forth in a straightforward, surprisingly easy-to-understand manner.

In a world where Western politicians regularly dissemble to shape perception, even if the underlying "facts" are not true (one need only refer to President Joe Biden's [infamous phone call](#) with former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, in July 2021, for an example), Putin's speech was a breath of fresh air — no hidden agendas, no false pretense — no lies.

And on the issue of arms control, the truth hurts.

"I have to say today," Putin announced near the end of his address, "that Russia is suspending its participation in New START. I repeat, not withdrawing from the treaty, no, but merely suspending its participation."

The [New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty](#) (New START), signed in 2010 as the outcome of negotiations between U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, ostensibly caps the number of strategic nuclear warheads that each country can deploy at 1,550; limits the number of deployed land-and submarine-based missiles and bombers used to deliver these warheads to 700; and caps at 800 the deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, SLBM launchers and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments.

In February 2021, Biden and Putin agreed to extend the treaty for an additional five years. New START will expire in 2026.

Background to the Decision

The backstory to New START is important, especially in the context of Putin's declaration regarding Russia's suspension. The core of that backstory is missile defense.

In December 2001, then-President George W. Bush announced that the United States was withdrawing from the landmark 1972 anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty, which banned (with limited exception) the development and deployment of missile defense systems designed to shoot down intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

The ABM treaty set in stone the Cold War concept of mutually assured destruction, or MAD, the idea that no side possessing nuclear weapons would use them against another nuclear power for the simple reason that to do so would bring about their own demise through guaranteed nuclear retaliation.

The insanity of MAD helped pave the way for all arms control agreements that followed, from the Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (SALT), to the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and on to the various iterations of Strategic Arms Reduction treaties (START).

Putin condemned the U.S. decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty as "a mistake." At the time, U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals were subject to the limitations imposed by the 1991 START treaty. Efforts to further reduce U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons were undertaken as part of the START II treaty.

But post-Cold War politics, combined with the U.S. decision to abandon the ABM treaty, left the treaty signed but unratified, effectively killing it.

Similar issues helped conspire to kill the START III treaty in the negotiation stage. The narrowly focused Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, or SORT, which was signed in 2002, committed both the U.S. and Russia to additional reductions beyond those mandated by START I, but contained no verification or compliance mechanisms.

The START I treaty expired in 2009, and SORT in 2012. New START was intended to replace both agreements.

The Medvedev Presidency

One of the sticking points has been the issue of missile defense. Under President Putin, Russia refused to enter any new substantive arms control treaty (SORT was more informal agreement than treaty in structure and substance) that did not meaningfully address missile defense.

But in May 2008, Dmitry Medvedev took over as Russian president. The Russian constitution prohibited a president from serving more than two consecutive terms in office, and so, with Putin's support, Medvedev ran for Russia's highest office, and won. Putin was subsequently appointed prime minister.



Dmitry Medvedev's presidential election campaign took advantage of Vladimir Putin's endorsement and high popularity. (Leonid Dzhepko, CC BY 3.0, Wikimedia Commons)

While the Bush administration sought to negotiate a follow-on treaty to the soon-to-be expired START I, Medvedev proved to be every bit as reluctant to entering any agreement with the U.S. that did not include limitations on missile defense, something President Bush would not accept.

In the end, the problem of negotiating a new treaty would be left to the administration of Barack Obama, who assumed office in January 2009.

In their first meeting, in London in late March 2009, the two leaders [issued a statement](#) in which they agreed “to pursue new and verifiable reductions in our strategic offensive arsenals in a step-by-step process, beginning by replacing the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with a new, legally-binding treaty.”

As for missile defense, Obama and Medvedev agreed to treat it as a separate issue. “While acknowledging that differences remain over the purposes of deployment of missile defense assets in Europe,” the statement read, “we discussed new possibilities for mutual international cooperation in the field of missile defense, taking into account joint assessments of missile challenges and threats, aimed at enhancing the security of our countries, and that of our allies and partners.”

Let there be no doubt — the New START treaty that was negotiated between Russia and the United States, while singularly focused on reducing strategic offensive nuclear arsenals, contained a clear understanding that this treaty would be followed by a good-faith effort by the U.S. to address Russia's longstanding concerns over missile defense.

This was reflected in [the exchange of non-binding unilateral statements](#) attached to the New

START treaty. The “Statement of the Russian Federation Concerning Missile Defense” set out the position that New START “may be effective and viable only in conditions where there is no qualitative or quantitative build-up in [U.S. missile defense system capabilities].”

Moreover, the statement said any build-up in U.S. missile defense capabilities which gave “rise to a threat to [Russia’s strategic nuclear force potential]” would be considered one of the “extraordinary events” mentioned in Article XIV of the treaty and could prompt Russia to exercise its right of withdrawal.

For its part, the United States issued its own statement declaring that U.S. missile defenses “are not intended to affect the strategic balance with Russia” while declaring that it intended “to continue improving and deploying its missile defense systems in order to defend itself against limited attack.”

The agreements reached between Obama and Medvedev, however, was not necessarily acceptable to Putin. According to Rose Gottemoeller, the U.S. negotiator for New START, Putin, as prime minister, nearly scuttled the talks when, in December 2009, he once again raised the issue of missile defense.

“They [the Russians] were going to have a critical National Security Council meeting,” Gottemoeller [later recounted in an October 2021 talk with the Carnegie Council](#), “and the story I have heard told is that Putin, for the first time showing some interest in these negotiations, walks into the National Security Council meeting and simply draws lines through all the issues on this decision sheet and said, ‘No, no, no, no, no.’”

Gottemoeller went on to describe how Putin then travelled to Vladivostok and delivered a speech where he denounced the treaty as “totally inadequate,” criticizing both the U.S. and Russian negotiating teams as being “only focused on limiting strategic offensive forces,” noting that “they are not limiting missile defense. This treaty is a waste of time,” Gottemoeller quoted Putin. “We should get out of the negotiations.”

According to Gottemoeller, Medvedev stood up to Putin, telling his prime minister, “No, we are going to continue these negotiations and get them done.”

Broken Promise

Anatoly Antonov was the Russian negotiator for New START. He dutifully complied with his instructions from the Kremlin to craft a treaty focused on the reduction of strategic offensive weapons, working under the assumption that the U.S. would be as good as its word when it came to engaging in meaningful negotiations on missile defense.

And yet, less than a year after New START entered into force, Antonov found that the U.S. had no intention on following through on its promises.

In [an interview with Kommersant newspaper](#), Antonov said that talks with NATO on a planned Western European missile-defense system had reached “a dead end,” adding that NATO proposals were “vague” and that the promised participation of Russia in the proposed system “is not even up for discussion.”

Antonov indicated that the lack of good faith shown by the U.S. regarding missile defense could lead to Russia withdrawing from the New START treaty altogether.

While the U.S. did offer to let Russia observe specific aspects of a specific test of a U.S. missile interceptor, the offer never amounted to anything, with the U.S. downplaying the abilities of the SM-3 missile when it came to intercepting Russian missiles, noting that the missile lacked the range to be effective against Russian missiles.

The [late Ellen Tauscher](#), who at the time was the U.S. undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, had offered Antonov written assurances that the Mk. 41 Aegis Ashore system, which would employ the SM-3 missile interceptor, was not directed against Russia.



U.S. Under Secretary Ellen Tauscher, right, in 2009. (U.S. Mission Geneva, Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

However, Tauscher said,

“We cannot provide legally binding commitments, nor can we agree to limitations on missile defense, which must necessarily keep pace with the evolution of the threat.”

Tauscher’s words were prophetic. In 2015, [the U.S. began testing](#) the SM-3 Block IIA interceptor against ICBM targets. The SM-3 did, in fact, have the range to shoot down Russian intermediate- and intercontinental-range missiles.

And now those missiles were to be stationed on bases constructed in Poland and Romania, two former Warsaw Pact nations that were closer to the border with Russia than NATO forces had ever been.

The Americans had negotiated in bad faith. Putin, it turned out, had been right to question a strategic arms control treaty that did not consider Russia’s concerns over missile defense.

And yet this did not weaken Putin’s commitment to fulfilling New START. According to

Gottemoeller,

“Putin, since this treaty has been signed, has taken a very positive stance about it. Since the treaty has entered into force, he has called it repeatedly publicly the ‘gold standard’ of nuclear treaties and has supported it...I know that he has been committed to the treaty and really committed to the efforts underway now in this strategic stability dialogue to get some new negotiations going.”

But Putin’s assiduous adherence to New START did not mean that the Russian leader had stopped worrying about the threat posed by U.S. missile defense. On March 1, 2018, Putin delivered a major address to the Russian Federal Assembly — the same forum he spoke to on Tuesday. His tone was defiant:

“I want to tell all those who have fueled the arms race over the last 15 years, sought to win unilateral advantages over Russia, and introduced unlawful sanctions aimed at containing our country’s development — everything that you wanted to impede with your policies has already happened. You have failed to contain Russia.”

Putin then unveiled several new Russian strategic weapons, including the *Sarmat* heavy ICBM and the *Avangard* hypersonic vehicle, which he said were developed in direct response to the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty.

Putin said Russia had warned the U.S. that it would take such measures back in 2004. “No one listened to us then,” Putin declared. “So listen to us now.”

One of the people listening was Rose Gottemoeller. “[P]eople are worried about ... the new so-called exotic weapons systems that President Putin rolled out in March of 2018,” the former arms control negotiator, by then retired, said in 2021. “[T]wo of them are already under the limits New START, the so-called *Sarmat* heavy [ICBM] and also the *Avangard*, which is their first strategic-range hypersonic glide vehicle that they are getting ready to deploy. They have already said that they will bring it under the New START Treaty.”

Gottemoeller noted that any future arms control agreement would be seeking constraints on these systems.

Treaty Extension in 2021

The New START Treaty was extended for a five-year term in February 2021, even though the Russians believed that the “conversion or elimination” procedures used by the U.S. to determine whether B-52H bombers and Ohio-class submarines converted from nuclear- to non-nuclear use, or eliminated altogether, were insufficient.

The Russians hoped that these issues could be worked out using the treaty-mandated Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) process, which meets twice a year to resolve issues such as these.



March 28, 2011: U.S.-Russian delegations at the Bilateral Consultative Commission on the New START Treaty. (U.S. State Department, Wikimedia Commons)

One of the problems facing both the U.S. and Russian inspectors and negotiators, however, was the Covid-19 pandemic. In early 2020, both sides agreed to suspend on-site inspections and BCC meetings due to the pandemic. By mid-2021, U.S. and Russian negotiators began discussing the creation of joint Covid protocols that could get both inspections and BCC consultations up and running.

But then came Ukraine.

On March 9, 2022, the U.S., U.K. and European Union [all passed sanctions](#) which banned Russian aircraft from overflying their respective territories and placed visa restrictions on Russians transiting EU or the U.K. en route to the United States. According to the Russians, these restrictions effectively prohibit the dispatch of weapons-inspection teams to the U.S. using New START short-notice inspection protocols, which have strict treaty-mandated timelines attached to their implementation.

In June 2022, [the U.S. unilaterally declared](#) that the moratorium on inspections imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic was no longer in effect. On Aug. 8, 2022, the U.S. attempted to dispatch a short-notice inspection team to Russia to carry out treaty-mandated inspection tasks.

Russia denied entry to the team, and accused the U.S. of trying to gain a unilateral advantage by conducting on-site inspections while Russia could not. [Citing the restrictions](#) imposed by sanctions, the Russia Foreign Ministry said “there are no similar obstacles to the arrival of American inspectors in Russia.”

To resolve the impasse over inspections as well as other outstanding treaty-implementation issues, Russian and U.S. diplomats began consultations on convening a meeting of the BCC, and eventually were able to settle on a Nov. 29, 2022, date in Cairo, Egypt. Four days before the BCC was supposed to begin, however, Russia announced that the meeting was off.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, in statements made to *Kommersant*, said that the war in Ukraine was at the heart of the decision. “There is, of course, the effect of what is happening in Ukraine and around it,” Ryabkov said. “I will not deny it. Arms control and dialogue in this area cannot be immune to what is around it.”



Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, center, at an International Atomic Energy Agency meeting, August 2020. (Dean Calma/IAEA, Flickr)

Arms Control Could Be Dead

The State Department issued an official report to Congress on Russian compliance with New Start in early 2023 which accused Russia of violating the New START treaty by refusing U.S. inspectors access to sites inside Russia.

Russia, [a State Department spokesperson stated](#), was “not complying with its obligation under the New START Treaty to facilitate inspection activities on its territory,” noting that “Russia’s refusal to facilitate inspection activities prevents the United States from exercising important rights under the treaty and threatens the viability of U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control.”

The insensitivity of the U.S. side to the impact of its actions targeting Russia — sometimes literally — as part of the overall U.S. response to Putin’s initiation of the Special Military Operation in February 2022 is, however, telling.

In his address on Tuesday, [Putin highlighted the role](#) played by the U.S. and NATO in facilitating the Ukrainian use of Soviet-era drones to carry out an attack on a base near Engels, Russia, that housed Russia’s strategic aviation assets, including nuclear-capable bombers. He also pointed out that he had just signed orders for the *Sarmat* and *Avangard* systems to become operational and, as such, inspectable under the terms of New START.

“The United States and NATO are directly saying that their goal is to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia,” Putin said. “Are they going to inspect our defense facilities, including the newest ones, as if nothing had happened? Do they really think we’re easily going to let them in there just like that?”

Rose Gottemoeller [observed that](#) the U.S. is “not going to change our policy on Ukraine because he’s [Putin] in a hissy fit over the New START treaty. That’s just not going to happen.”

But Putin’s stance is far more principled than a simple “hissy fit.” Born of the original sin perpetrated by the U.S. in withdrawing from the ABM treaty, Putin’s angst is directly tied to the deceit displayed by U.S. officials — including Gottemoeller — when it came to assurances given Dmitry Medvedev about missile defense during the New START negotiations.

This deceit led to Russia deploying new categories of strategic nuclear weapons — the *Sarmat* and *Avangard* — to defeat U.S. missile defense systems, including those that had been forward deployed into Europe.

And now, with the war in Ukraine being linked to a U.S. strategy of achieving the strategic defeat of Russia, the U.S. is seeking to use New START to gain access to these very systems, all the while denying Russia its reciprocal rights of inspection under the treaty. As Putin aptly noted, such an arrangement “really sounds absurd.”

The inability and/or unwillingness of either party to compromise on New START means that the treaty will remain in limbo for the indefinite future which, given that the treaty expires in February 2026, means there is a distinct possibility arms control between the U.S. and Russia is dead.



K-114 Tula nuclear submarine at a pier of the Russian Northern Fleet’s naval base during drills for nuclear submarine crews in the Murmansk Region of Russia. (RIA Novosti archive/ Mikhail Fomichev / CC-BY-SA 3.0, Wikimedia Commons)

Risk of New Arms Race

While the U.S. and Russia had previously committed to a follow-on treaty to replace New

START, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine poses a nearly insurmountable obstacle for anyone seeking to have such a treaty document ready for signature and ratification by the time New START expires.

There is a good chance the U.S. and Russia, in two years' time, will find themselves without any verifiable mechanism to assuage the fears and uncertainty about the two parties' respective nuclear arsenals, leading to the real possibility — if not probability — that they will both embark on an unconstrained arms race fueled by ignorance-based angst that could very well result in the kind of misunderstandings, mistakes, or miscalculations that could trigger a nuclear war and, in doing so, end all humanity.

“The truth is behind us,” Putin said, closing out his address to the Russian Federal Assembly.

So, too, may be humanity's last chance to prevent nuclear calamity, if a way can't somehow be found to get arms control back on the agenda.

Here, Gottemoeller's assertion that the U.S. would not alter its Ukraine policy to save New START underscores the self-defeating reality of the Biden administration's efforts to arm Ukraine.

The sooner the war in Ukraine is over, the sooner the U.S. and Russia can get down to the business of preserving arms control as a viable part of the relationship between the two nations.

By seeking to extend the Ukraine conflict, however, the U.S. is in effect engaging in an act of self-immolation that threatens to engulf the world in a nuclear holocaust.

During the Vietnam War, the noted correspondent Peter Arnett quoted an unnamed U.S. Army officer as saying, “We had to destroy the village to save it.” With regard to the linkage that has been created between Ukraine and arms control, the same sick logic now applies — to save one, the other must be destroyed.

To save Ukraine, arms control must be destroyed.

To save arms control, Ukraine must be destroyed.

One sacrifices a nation, the other a planet.

This is the Hobson's Choice U.S. policy makers have created, except it is not.

Save the planet. That is the only choice.

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Featured image: Russian President Vladimir Putin's Feb. 21 address to Federal Assembly. (Kremlin)

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