

The US Rubbished Another Arms Control Regime as Part of Its Risky Renegotiating Gamble

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The US' planned withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty represents yet another rubbing of the international arms control regimes that helped maintain strategic stability after the end of the Old Cold War, with this dramatic move and the others like it being part of the Trump Administration's risky renegotiating gamble intended to get Russia to bring China on board a broader system of replacement regimes in the New Cold War.

Closing Down The Formerly "Open Skies"

The Trump Administration recently announced its intention to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty, which had hitherto allowed the over 30 signatory states to conduct unarmed flights over one another's territories under special conditions in order to build confidence and reduce the odds of a war breaking out by miscalculation. The US [accuses](#) Russia of violating this agreement by limiting American flights over Kaliningrad and near its state borders with Abkhazia, Georgia, and South Ossetia, and exploiting this pact to secretly fine-tune its cruise missile targeting capabilities. Russia, meanwhile, [accused](#) the US of unspecified violations in kind but [confirmed its commitment](#) to keep the treaty in force with its other members for the sake of maintaining strategic stability.

Trump's Risky Gamble

The larger pattern at play here is that the US once again rubbished yet another international arms control regime that helped bring predictability to the post-Old Cold War world order after pulling out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) last summer. Critics are extremely concerned that the US is single-handedly dismantling the mechanisms that are partially credited with helping to avoid a nuclear war with Russia, thus further worsening the global international security situation during these unpredictable times in the midst of the [New Cold War](#) and [WorldWar C](#). That's veritably true to a large extent, but it should be recognized that the Trump Administration isn't doing this just for the sake of causing more chaos at the worst possible time but as part of its risky renegotiating gamble to get Russia to bring China on board a broader system of replacement regimes.

Special Presidential Envoy Marshall Billingslea said as much during his remarks at last week's videoconference hosted by the [Hudson Institute](#) think tank. In his own words about the call that he recently had with his counterpart Russian Deputy Minister Sergey Ryabkov, he said that "I emphasized the crucial roles that verification and compliance play in making arms control effective, but above all, I made perfectly clear that it is our expectation that Russia help us to bring China to the negotiating table, just as the deputy minister himself said needed to happen." He also provocatively boasted about his country's prospects in the

event of a three-way arms race between itself, Russia, and China, saying that “We know how to win these races. And we know how to spend the adversary into oblivion. If we have to, we will, but we sure would like to avoid it.”

The “New Arms & Space Races”

As the author wrote in February 2019 when analyzing the US’ announcement that it planned to withdraw from the INF Treaty half a year later, [“Trump’s Baiting Russia Into an Arms Race, But Putin Won’t Bite”](#). The reason why Russia has thus far avoided falling into this trap is because of its hypersonic missile advances over the past two years that the author also touched upon in his related piece a month later about how [“Russia’s Hypersonic Missiles Didn’t Surprise America But They Awed The World”](#). Complementary to the New Arms Race is the US’ similar intentions to trigger [“A New Space Race For A New Cold War”](#), which have together combined to create an unprecedentedly uncertain state of strategic affairs across the world, exactly as Trump planned. This doesn’t mean that Russia will go bankrupt racing to catch up, but just that it is indeed being pressured to invest more.

[“What The US Really Wants From Russia”](#) is for it to slow down the pace of its strategic partnership with China, hoping to repeat the Kissingerian strategy of “triangulating” between these two Great Powers for the purpose of weakening both of them. Just like Nixon enjoyed his celebrated [“Opening of China”](#) as his administration co-opted the country against the USSR in the Old Cold War, so too does Trump hope to clinch a [“New Detente”](#) with Russia that would do something similar vis-a-vis China, albeit not in as tense of a manner as his earlier predecessor did but in a more indirect way that would still serve America’s geostrategic agenda. To be clear, the “New Detente” doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing since it could end up being to Russia’s benefit so long as Moscow ensures that there isn’t any anti-Chinese angle to it, but it still unsettles Beijing to even think about.

There are no realistic prospects of returning to the heated Old Cold War-era rivalry between Russia and China despite their publicized disagreements with one another over some aspects of their COVID-19 containment measures as explained by the author in his piece on the topic last month titled [“Rare Wrinkle Or Growing Rift?: Russia & China Exchange Criticisms Over World War C”](#). Nor, for that matter, does the US truly believe that it’s capable of provoking such a scenario in the first place despite its best efforts at trying. Rather, what Washington is really aiming for is to manipulate the strategic security context in such a way that Moscow feels compelled to “lean on” Beijing in order to “convince” it to join the US’ proposed trilateral arms negotiation frameworks, with the US knowing very well that Russia stands little chance of succeeding in this respect.

Russia’s Tricky Task

[“It’s Too Early To Include China In Trump’s Nuclear Weapons Proposal”](#) because the country’s capabilities still pale in comparison to the US and Russia’s so any reductions on its part would simply amount to formalizing its junior status relative to its primary American competitor. There’s a chance that this might not matter much so long as the country can succeed in developing and deploying its own hypersonic missiles, but even then, the US might pressure it to include these weapons systems in any forthcoming reductions as well as part of a “complete package”. As for Russia, its national interest lays in renegotiating these pacts with the US, though America said that it won’t sit down at the table unless China participates too, which presses Moscow to at the very least probe Beijing’s willingness to do so behind closed doors.

The task at hand is therefore very tricky since any “excessive insistence” on China’s participation could be interpreted by Beijing as “Russian pressure”, which might weaken their unprecedentedly close and trust-based relationship. Nevertheless, as the saying goes, “there’s no harm in asking”, so it should be assumed that Russia will continue to “gently” “lean on” China to this end. It’s unlikely to succeed for the previously mentioned reason, however, which might then predictably result in the indefinite absence of any serious strategic security agreements with the US. That outcome is extremely troublesome since it would by necessity compel Russia to continue to invest its resources in competing with the US (the “New Arms & Space Races”) despite the difficult economic conditions brought about by World War C.

Concluding Thoughts

As it stands, the US and China have the financial and political wherewithal to engage in a costly competition with one another, so Russia should regard the New Arms & Space Races as a fait accompli even though it would prefer for this scenario not to unfold. Moscow should continue to “encourage” Beijing to join it in trilateral negotiations with Washington but should also understand how counterproductive it would be to “press” it too hard on this issue. Instead, Russia should prepare to double down on its research into cost-effective solutions such as more advanced hypersonic missiles and whatever it deems necessary to defend its interests in space. In both of these races, Russia isn’t the primary player but it’s nevertheless compelled to defend its interests in these related competitions despite never having wanted to participate in them to begin with.

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