

## Russian-U.S. Strategic Stability Talks: Where they are and where they should go

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Over the decades, Moscow and Washington have held multiple rounds of consultations, dialogues, and negotiations on nuclear arms control and strategic stability. The current round of talks<sup>1</sup> is different from the past, however, because of the dismantlement of the existing arms control architecture. Russia and the United States will soon find themselves in a situation where almost no area of military competition is regulated. This situation is a cause for concern because of the increased risks of crisis escalation and an unconstrained arms race.

At the same time, the demise of traditional arms control opens the door to a broad spectrum of potential new arms control negotiations that are without precedent in the post-Cold War era. Should they muster the political will to do so, Russia and the United States now have greater freedom to restructure the arms control architecture, taking into account their interests and those of their allies, as well as new technological developments.

With this as its premise, this paper will

- briefly analyze the current strategic stability dialogue;
- outline four tracks of a possible new dialogue between the two countries (and describe how Europeans can make their voice heard); and
- outline how such a dialogue would relate to other fora where stability related issues are being discussed.

### Current State of Affairs

The United States initially suspended strategic stability talks after Russia's 2014 incorporation of Crimea. In summer 2017, however, Moscow and Washington agreed in principle to resume this dialogue, and a first round of consultations took place on September 12 in Helsinki. More than three years later, this process has yet to result in tangible outcomes, such as risk reduction measures, a resumption of what both sides characterize as formal nuclear arms control negotiations, or an agreement to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). There are several reasons why this process has not moved beyond structured exchanges of viewpoints to date.

The increasingly adversarial relationship between Moscow and Washington has presented the biggest hurdle to progress thus far. Mutual accusations of non-compliance with arms control treaties reflect the two countries' deep and growing distrust. Their bilateral discussions on strategic nuclear issues were often dominated by debates over violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty until its collapse in August 2019. Other conflicts have overshadowed dialogue, too. In March 2018, for example, Russia cancelled a planned round of discussions after Washington decided not to hold consultations on cybersecurity because of alleged Russian cyberattacks.<sup>2</sup>

Over the last three-and-a-half years, internal turmoil within the Trump administration has complicated talks as well. The lead of the U.S. delegation has changed several times, from Under Secretaries of State for Political Affairs Thomas A. Shannon and Andrea L. Thompson to Assistant Secretary for International Security and Nonproliferation Christopher Ford. Now, they are headed by current U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control Marshall Billingslea. Russian delegations, meanwhile, have been consistently led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov.

In addition, at times contradictory statements by President Trump on the scope, format, and timing of nuclear dialogue with Russia have sowed confusion. In the absence of a clear vision on the future of arms control, the United States has remained noncommittal with respect to several important arms control issues. These include, most significantly, the extension of New START. These circumstances have put Moscow in the convenient position of being able to reject U.S. demands while, at the same time, signaling its willingness to resolve outstanding conflicts.

Despite their rocky start, strategic stability talks became more structured and “business-like” after June 2020.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the demise of the INF Treaty may have made dialogue easier, as non-compliance accusations became irrelevant. With Marshall Billingslea in the lead, both sides were able to reach an agreement in Vienna on June 22, to form three working groups on military capabilities and doctrines, transparency verification, and space security – a separate initiative being led by Chris Ford.<sup>4</sup> Technical experts within these three groups met in Vienna for an initial round of discussions on July 27-30. On August 16-17, senior political and military officials met for a third time both to take stock of technical discussions and to discuss options for

New START extension. Even though the U.S. side tried to characterize these talks as “negotiations,” this dialogue consisted mainly of an exchange of views.

During the meeting on June 22, Billingslea made it clear that Washington expected China to join the talks by setting up Chinese flags in the meeting room. He appeared to backtrack, however, following a July phone call between Putin and Trump, in which the two leaders discussed nuclear arms control issues and the “special responsibility of Russia and the United States for maintaining international peace and security.”<sup>5</sup> In subsequent statements in August, Billingslea’s insistence on a trilateral dialogue had noticeably softened and he suggested that “the framework that we could establish with Russia” should include China “in due course.” In an apparent effort to shift the political dynamics surrounding these talks, he indicated instead that any new agreement should include “all nuclear warheads” and a “better set of verification and transparency measures.” In Billingslea’s assessment, this approach put the “ball in Russia’s court.”<sup>6</sup>

Russia, for its part, has agreed that New START follow-on negotiations should address nuclear capabilities of other nuclear weapons possessors. As Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has explained:

“We are not saying that all these countries necessarily and at all times should be at the table. Configuration is debatable. It’s negotiable. But we cannot just continue cuts after cuts on a bilateral basis. For Russia, it would be of extraordinary importance to bring to the table the closest allies of the U.S. and Europe, that is U.K. and France, irrespective of how much their national nuclear capabilities matter compared to those of the U.S. and Russia.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite having two different conceptions for how to proceed, the U.S. and Russian delegations met again on October 5, in Helsinki. At this meeting, Washington reportedly proposed an extension of New START, provided that both sides agree to a complete freeze on the number of nuclear warheads in their arsenals (deployed and non-deployed) and accept intrusive verification measures at warhead production facilities.<sup>8</sup> Russia rejected this proposal. Ryabkov argued that both sides “need to deal with the problems of strategic stability in a complex.” In Ryabkov’s words, the United States and Russia needed to first address “launch vehicles, we need to deal with space, we need to deal with missile defense – a system that the United States is creating, it is necessary to deal with their new strategic range carriers in conventional equipment.”<sup>9</sup> Russia has subsequently agreed to a one-year extension of New START and even to a political agreement to freeze both countries’ nuclear arsenals. The fate of the treaty, however, still remains undecided, since Washington has insisted on an intrusive verification of the freeze while Moscow has maintained that its offer is final.

Under these circumstances, the present strategic stability talks constitute both a sign of hope and a cause for concern for NATO allies.

On the one hand, Europeans have an interest in avoiding a new nuclear arms buildup, which – as NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg observed after the June 18, 2020, NATO Defense Ministerial – would be both “extremely costly and [...] dangerous.” On this basis, Stoltenberg underscored Allied support for strategic talks “that can make sure that we also have effective arms control related to strategic weapons.” He also welcomed “the fact that the United States is now consulting closely with other NATO Allies” and will “continue to consult with Allies” as strategic stability talks progress.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, some Europeans worry that Moscow and Washington could cut a deal that ignores their interests. For instance, it is unclear to what degree Marshall Billingslea consulted with allies regarding the U.S. proposal for an overall quantitative freeze on all nuclear warheads, which would also include tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe. While few officials would say so in public, there are concerns among Europeans that Presidents Putin and Trump could take steps that would be detrimental to their strategic interests. Under these circumstances, it is interesting to note that France and Russia do consult bilaterally on strategic stability and regional and international crises – talks that have a much broader remit than the nuclear-centered Russia-U.S. dialogue but which reflect French concerns about Europe’s lack of diplomatic and political independence.<sup>11</sup>

### **How to organize Negotiations: Proposal for multitrack Talks on Strategic Stability**

One of the key problems plaguing the strategic stability dialogue between the United States and Russia has long been the structure of the talks. As is often the case in international politics, competing procedural preferences reflect both sides’ respective interests. Although perspectives differ among stakeholders in Washington and Moscow, some within U.S. government would like to focus narrowly on nuclear weapons-related issues, while others within the Russian government prefer a more wide-ranging agenda that would facilitate a discussion of other strategic capabilities. Although the United States has proposed that talks be broadened to address all types of nuclear weapons and to engage China, Russia prefers to extend New START prior to addressing issues like missile defense and before including other nuclear weapon states, particularly France and the United Kingdom.

With these differences of approach in mind, we propose to structure the next phase of Russian-U.S. negotiations around four separate tracks on substantively interconnected problems. These are:

1. Strategic offensive arms (nuclear and conventional);
2. Non-strategic systems, including dual-capable delivery systems;
3. Space security and missile defense; and
4. Risk reduction.

Under this proposal, negotiations on specific agreements would proceed in parallel along their assigned tracks but within the broad strategic stability remit. While there may be natural linkages and trade-offs between the different tracks – for example, reducing tensions over U.S. missile defense plans could facilitate agreements on further cuts – wherever possible, agreements should be codified when sufficient progress has been made. Indeed, while it is true that progress in one area of arms control can facilitate progress in others, failure to make progress in one area can just as easily stymie progress in others. Nuclear risk reduction, for instance, is one shared interest area where Russia and the United States ought to be able to agree on steps independent of progress on more contentious issues. To ensure that this is the case, however, the United States and Russia must take care to avoid an all-or-nothing approach to negotiations, in which nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. They should also make an effort not to engage in hostage taking, where forward movement on a host of issues hinges on agreement in one specific area.<sup>12</sup>

Ideally, these negotiations would take place after New START has been extended. Progress on any of the issues outlined above would be easier with treaty-based limits on deployed strategic weapons in place and the transparency provided by the treaty's verification regime. Conversely, should New START expire in February 2021, the looming nuclear arms race and resulting mistrust would greatly complicate any kind of new agreement on issues related to strategic stability. While this context may increase the pressure on the United States and Russia to reach new and more comprehensive agreements, it will also greatly raise the stakes should they fail in their efforts.

Engaging third parties in these talks could be both feasible and beneficial, although the mode of their involvement would necessarily vary on the basis of their relevant military capabilities and capacity to contribute to agreements. Recent exchanges within the P5 process on nuclear doctrine suggest, for instance, that the nuclear weapon states may be interested in multilateralizing discussions on strategic stability. It is also imperative that non-nuclear weapon states be kept informed about the progress of the negotiations outlined there, because Russia and the United States still hold more than 90% of the global nuclear weapons stockpile. Transparency on the scope, progress, and goals of these talks would also strengthen the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), under which the nuclear weapon states are obliged to be open about their nuclear weapons policies. Because of their geographical position between Russia and the United States, Europeans have an interest not only in being kept in the loop but in being consulted as closely as possible on issues affecting their security.

### ***Historical lessons***

History provides some lessons on how best to make progress on a set of issues on which negotiating parties hold different priorities. From an organizational standpoint, the 1985 U.S.-Soviet Nuclear and Space Talks, which comprised three concurrent dialogues on strategic nuclear arms, intermediate-range missiles, and preventing an arms race in space, provide a useful model for strategic stability talks today. While past precedent suggests that these negotiating tracks should not be dependent on one another, lead negotiators should bear their interconnectedness in mind as a means to increase the chances of a successful outcome. Multitrack U.S.-Russia talks have succeeded in the past in part because they ensure that specific issues of concern to both Washington and Moscow are addressed in context, rather than in isolation.

History also shows that success in one area of multitrack negotiations can lead to success in another. For this reason, concurrent dialogues on a range of issues offer opportunities to overcome negotiating impasses that single-issue dialogues do not. In 1977, for instance, the administration of U.S. President Jimmy Carter embraced negotiations with the U.S.S.R. on a radiological weapons convention (RWC) in part in hopes that they could reinvigorate the second round of Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) talks that were taking place at the same time.<sup>13</sup> Just two months after the two sides reached an agreement on the language in a draft RWC, the United States and Soviet Union signed SALT II, illustrating the utility of this approach.

### ***Track One: Nuclear and conventional strategic offensive arms***

The first negotiating track outlined in this proposal would address the classical issue of strategic offensive arms as it pertains to both nuclear and conventional weapons. Relevant capabilities would include those systems currently covered by

New START and new long-range conventional and nuclear-capable systems, which are not yet regulated but have a strategic effect. The goal of this negotiating track could be twofold, where a first objective would entail reaffirming New START ceilings and agreeing on the new mix of weapons that would be included in a future treaty, along with counting rules and verification provisions. A second, more ambitious aim would be to cut both the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals further. While the first goal would appear to be achievable on its own, the second will likely be directly tied to, and conditioned upon, progress in two other weapons-related tracks proposed here. It is hard to imagine Russia agreeing to cut the numbers of its offensive arms while the U.S. increases missile defenses or deploys intermediate-range systems that could target Russian strategic nuclear forces.

Even the most straightforward task of staying at New START levels, however, will be far from easy. While the treaty imposes limits on the numbers of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) in both the U.S. and Russian arsenals, for instance, many modern missile types do not fall neatly into these categories. As a recent analysis from the Aerospace Corporation argues, the traditional missile taxonomy – which focuses on range and delivery vehicle, and which is enshrined in New START – obscures distinguishing features of today's missile systems, such as payload type and means of propulsion.<sup>14</sup> Unless Moscow and Washington are able to reach an understanding of how newer additions to their nuclear forces fit into the traditional missile taxonomy, they will have to agree to a new system of classification, including a list of kinds of weapons and specific systems to be regulated. Whether in the context of extending New START or a future treaty, this issue is one with which policy-

makers must grapple. This is particularly true considering that the Russian side has already agreed in principle that some of its new “exotic” nuclear systems (like intercontinental cruise missiles and torpedoes) could be the subject of future negotiations.<sup>15</sup>

Remaining at New START levels will also be challenging when it comes to hypersonic boost glide vehicles (HGV), whose high precision and speed make them potentially destabilizing even with a conventional payload. New START covers SLBMs and air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) with a range exceeding 600 kilometers<sup>16</sup> – but negotiators would have to determine whether HGVs, which can have ranges of several thousand kilometers when deployed on long-range aircrafts, warships, or submarines, should be considered strategic arms.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the U.S. Navy’s plans to field a new nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM) raise important questions regarding whether SLCMs should be categorized as strategic offensive weapons. The issue is not new and was debated extensively in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) was negotiated. At that time, the two parties were unable to agree to include long-range SLCMs under START I and instead pursued reductions through unilateral political declarations as part of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs). It is clear, however, that both Russian and U.S. policymakers were aware of the strategic nature of such missiles. Should it prove impossible to discuss nuclear SLCMs in the context of limits on strategic offensive arms, they could usefully be discussed in the second negotiating track.

### **Track Two: Non-strategic systems**

The second negotiating track could focus on nuclear-capable non-strategic systems. The demise of the INF Treaty makes it possible to design novel arms control approaches for short-, medium-, and intermediate-range systems that meet both sides and Allied nations’ interests. Consultations and negotiations would show whether the Trump administration’s goal of having a single accord that covers all types of nuclear weapons is feasible. Additionally, separating strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons is a useful way to start such talks, regardless whether New START is still in place.

Addressing non-strategic nuclear weapons (an umbrella term that can be used to describe nuclear weapons as diverse as gravity bombs, short-range missiles, and missile defense interceptors) is particularly difficult because these types of nuclear weapons have never been covered by any formal treaty. Washington and Moscow greatly reduced stockpiles and limited deployments under the PNIs in the early 1990s, but these reciprocal, unilateral commitments were only politically binding and not subject to verification. Today, Washington accuses Moscow of not having comprehensively implemented the PNIs and insists that limits on Russian non-strategic nuclear systems must be part of any future agreement. In this context, negotiators could usefully distinguish between four broad categories of non-strategic nuclear weapons and thus establish a rough balance of preferences with regard to regulations.

These categories could include:

- Shorter range ground-launched systems and gravity bombs. Washington is interested in limiting these systems because this is an area where Russia holds a numerical advantage;

- Sea-launched cruise missiles. Russia has an interest in including such weapons, which the United States intends to bring back, in arms control;
- Long-range air-launched hypersonic weapons to be delivered using airplanes that are not covered by strategic arms control treaties. Both sides may potentially be interested in controlling or limiting such destabilizing weapons;<sup>18</sup>
- Ground-launched intermediate-range weapons previously banned by the INF Treaty. Russia has indicated an interest in regulating such weapons by means of a moratorium.

Previously, discussions on non-strategic nuclear weapons have mostly centered around the first category identified above. In that regard, Moscow has linked any negotiations over its tactical nuclear weapons to a withdrawal of U.S. gravity bombs deployed in European NATO countries. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it: “the first step to solving this issue should be withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons to the territory of the possessor state and dismantlement of the infrastructure for deployment abroad.”<sup>19</sup> NATO, conversely, insists it would reduce non-strategic nuclear weapons assigned to the Alliance only “in the context of reciprocal steps by Russia, taking into account the greater Russian stockpiles of non-strategic nuclear weapons stationed in the Euro-Atlantic area.”<sup>20</sup>

To overcome this impasse, the United States should consult closely with its European NATO allies on the conditions for making the estimated 150 B-61 deployed under NATO nuclear sharing arrangements a nego-

tiating topic. In the eyes of many Europeans, these weapons have little, if any, military value today. Multitrack negotiations would open up opportunities to link changes in NATO’s nuclear posture to measures on reducing nuclear risks. These might include transparent measures and geographical limits on deployments, among other approaches.<sup>21</sup>

These negotiations could also benefit from the inclusion of non-strategic weapons from other categories. Were the United States to agree to put its future nuclear-tipped SLCMs on the table, Russia might be more willing to discuss, for example, its stockpile of non-strategic nuclear weapons. In either case, progress on existing tactical nuclear weapons is likely to be incremental. It could realistically begin with the adoption of transparency measures, moratoria on the deployment of new weapons, codifications of separate storage of warheads from means of delivery, notifications of weapons movements, and, eventually, non-deployment zones.<sup>22</sup>

Another issue this negotiating track could address is that the end of the INF Treaty has lifted the ban on production and deployment of ground-based cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges from 500 to 5500 kilometers. There is disagreement between Moscow and NATO on whether the Russian 9M729 cruise missile belongs to this group. The number of deployed 9M729s so far remains relatively small. This leaves a limited opening to deal with previously banned systems before they are mass-deployed in Europe and elsewhere.

In the interest of exploiting this opening, Russia and the United States could pursue measures to limit potential competition in this sphere. The two parties could agree to

negotiate over the regions in which they deploy their INF-range systems (both conventional and nuclear) and establish provisions to verify the compliance. Moscow already has said that it is open to discussions on verification measures.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, on October 26, 2020, President Putin proposed that the 9M729 missile could be included in the Russian moratorium proposal even if Russia and NATO were unable to reach an agreement on its specifications.<sup>24</sup> While the possibility of such an arrangement remains slim, it is more likely to happen in Europe than in Asia, where the United States has vowed to deploy new systems to counter China. If a solution could be found, France and the United Kingdom, which currently have neither ground-launched intermediate-range missiles nor plans to develop – much less deploy – them, could also be invited to join the accord.

Engaging France and the United Kingdom would not only strengthen this agreement but would also give the Europeans direct say in its implementation. Whether they are directly involved or not, however, NATO allies need to be consulted closely by Washington on all of the issues connected to the non-strategic nuclear weapons as any changes in postures will affect the European security landscape directly. These consultations should happen through the underused Special Advisory and Consultation Committee on Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation. This body can advise on forming positions regarding NATO-Russian transparency on tactical nuclear weapons and serve as a forum for the United States to consult with its allies on the full range of U.S.-Russian strategic stability topics.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Track Three: Space security and missile defense***

The third negotiating track would combine space security and missile defense. Although space security is currently being discussed in a dedicated working group within the U.S.-Russia strategic stability dialogue, the line between anti-satellite weapons and midcourse missile defense systems is blurry. As a result, these two issues should be discussed together. The delimitation of strategic and regional missile defenses should also be addressed as part of this track.

These issues are salient because the United States has raised concerns over the testing of alleged Russian anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons and the “irresponsible behavior” of its “inspector satellites.”<sup>26</sup> Moscow, meanwhile, wants limitations on the U.S. global missile defense system, which it sees as a potential threat to its strategic deterrent. It has also consistently opposed U.S. plans to deploy weapons or elements of its missile defense system into Earth’s orbit. On this basis, the two parties could start with specific discussions on the role that missile defenses play in their respective security strategies and their respective concerns over the developments of the other side.

If this dialogue succeeds, Moscow and Washington could try to agree on parameters for missile defense systems, which could be effective for limited purposes and not threatening to the survival of either U.S. or Russian strategic nuclear forces. In addition, the two sides could agree on which systems pose a strategic threat and which do not and through a discussion of the quantitative and qualitative parameters of strategic missile defense.<sup>27</sup> While these



issues remain deeply contentious, Russia and the United States do have some past successes to draw from. These include the signing of 1997 New York memorandum of understanding and two agreed statements related to the ABM Treaty and U.S.-Russian missile defense discussions from 2010-11.

Progress may be possible in some areas relating to space and missile defense. However, Russian and U.S. satellites will remain vulnerable as long as other countries also possess maneuvering satellites and exo-atmospheric missile defense. A ban on live kinetic ASAT tests, however, could reduce the potential for confrontation in space. In the interim, both parties should aim to keep space-based missile defense interceptors and land-attack weapons from getting into the Earth's orbit. This is also an area where China could potentially be invited to join the United States and Russia in discussions. Engaging Beijing in this negotiating track would make sense given China's increasing economic and military dependence on space and its own concerns over U.S. missile defense. As there would be no direct link between discussions in this track and discussions on strategic offensive arms or intermediate-range weapons, this format could also be seen as less threatening and more welcoming for Chinese officials.

#### **Track Four: Risk reduction**

The fourth track of strategic stability talks would focus specifically on nuclear risk reduction. This issue area is of particular relevance now, at a time when mistrust and acrimony in U.S.-Russia relations increase the likelihood of nuclear use by miscalculation or miscommunication. Further, nuclear risk reduction measures can take a variety of forms, offering a wide menu of possible steps for the United States and Russia to consider.<sup>28</sup> The number and diversity of bilateral risk reduction agreements that the two countries

have in place, already demonstrate that this is an area where they are equipped to engage.

As part of a multitrack strategic stability dialogue, the two sides could begin by assessing existing bilateral risk reduction measures and determining whether they are adequate to block current pathways to unintended nuclear use. A comparison of U.S. and Russian declaratory nuclear policy suggests, for instance, that an agreement prohibiting attacks on nuclear command and control structures might be one area to pursue.<sup>29</sup> Other areas ripe for agreement could emerge in discussions across the multitrack dialogue proposed above. These proposals could then be discussed in-depth and taken forward in the risk reduction channel.

While there are elements of nuclear risk reduction that the United States and Russia will almost certainly wish to reserve for bilateral discussion, this issue is one where the two sides can and must engage with other actors. Not only would any use of nuclear weapons by either the United States or Russia have a significant impact on the entire international community, but other countries, including those without nuclear weapons, play a role in increasing or decreasing the risk of nuclear use. The 1995 Black Brant incident, in which a Norwegian sounding rocket was mistaken for a submarine-launched Trident missile by Russian nuclear forces, offers a vivid case in point of this potential, as does the Soviet response to the Able Archer 83 command post exercise.

With this in mind, the two sides should establish regular mechanisms to consult with other nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states as part of their strategic stability talks on risk reduction. It may be useful to supplement these talks by a resumption of the dialogue between Russia and NATO in the NATO-Russia Council. From the late 1990s until 2014, both sides engaged in extensive discussions on nuclear transparency and confi-

dence-building measures in this forum. Some of these measures could contribute significantly to reducing nuclear risks today.<sup>30</sup>

### Strategic Stability and other Multilateral Fora

The multitrack approach to strategic stability talks proposed here will usefully complement ongoing activities in other multilateral fora in which United States and Russia participate. For instance, U.S.-Russia engagement on the issues outlined above remains central to the NPT. A strong and credible NPT remains in the U.S. and Russian national interests. At the same time, the current crisis in their bilateral relations and the dismantling of the arms control architecture undercuts the “grand bargain” at the center of this treaty.

Many non-nuclear weapon states have long expressed frustration over what they perceive as the slow pace of nuclear disarmament. Against this backdrop, the multitrack strategic stability talks could help reassure states parties to the treaty who view the “unraveling of the arms-control fabric” as a threat to the credibility of the NPT.<sup>31</sup> These talks could point toward new opportunities for arms control that would help restore balance across the treaty’s three pillars. At the same time, they would demonstrate that the United States and Russia are indeed pursuing “negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating” to nuclear disarmament in fulfillment of their obligations under NPT Article VI.

This dialogue format would also dovetail with existing efforts within the P5 process aimed at increasing doctrinal transparency and reducing nuclear risk. Although the five NPT nuclear weapon states engaged in regular meetings on these and other topics during 2019 and 2020,

these efforts did not produce significant tangible outputs. The underwhelming results of this process speak to the geopolitical challenges that dominate relations between the five nuclear weapon states and shape their divergent perceived threats. It is clear that – while the P5 process can help to facilitate engagement between its five participants on NPT issues – it itself cannot resolve the broader issues in their relationship that stand in the way of nuclear disarmament.

Rather than expecting more from the P5 process than it can reasonably deliver, a recent report produced by King’s College London and the European Leadership Network recommends that the P5 states also “engage in bilateral dialogues on sensitive issues and include military officials as much as possible to increase transparency around nuclear issues.” From this vantage point, the multitrack talks could usefully enhance the work of the P5 process, which is aimed more at “generating ideas and scoping ‘rules of the road’” than at laying the groundwork for new agreements.<sup>32</sup> More routine bilateral engagement on a host of strategic stability issues, as recommended in this paper, can enable the United States and Russia to address their current security dilemma separately rather than within the P5 process. The two countries have used this format of work – in which bilateral and multilateral engagement proceed concurrently – effectively on and off since the NPT was concluded.<sup>33</sup>

In a similar vein, multitrack bilateral talks can also usefully supplement activities ongoing within the Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) initiative. CEND centers around the idea that “disarmament is possible only when and to the degree that the underlying security conditions of the global environment are, or can be made, conducive to

such progress.”<sup>34</sup> A U.S.-led initiative in which diverse states – including Russia – are involved, CEND engages nuclear and non-nuclear weapon possessors in discussions on three sub-topics: reducing incentives to possess nuclear weapons, strengthening the institutional framework for disarmament, and enhancing nuclear risk reduction.<sup>35</sup> While each of these groups is tasked with developing programs of work and identifying concrete deliverables, CEND, like the P5 process, appears aimed at thinking through, not resolving, the problems facing today’s international security environment.

From this vantage, the discussions that take place within each of CEND’s three subgroups could be enhanced by the four tracks for U.S.-Russia dialogue identified in this paper. Further, because of the diversity of its participants, CEND could provide a useful forum for the United States and Russia to engage NATO states and others in conversations around risk reduction in particular. Under Germany and Finland’s co-chairmanship, the CEND risk reduction working group could offer feedback and recommendations for bilateral U.S.-Russia efforts to reduce nuclear risk, and the United States and Russia could brief working group members on the contours of their bilateral discussions. Not only would this interaction likely lead to better outcomes by facilitating greater diversity of thought, but it would also serve the objectives of the CEND process by surfacing ways to move toward disarmament “in a still highly imperfect security environment.”<sup>36</sup>

Other multilateral fora into which the U.S.-Russia talks could usefully feed, relate to disarmament verification. Verification is likely to occupy center stage in number of the dialogue tracks outlined in this paper, not least because the United States believes that a future

nuclear arms control agreement must include a “better set of verification and transparency measures” than New START.<sup>37</sup> Moscow and Washington have already established a verification working group under the current strategic stability talks. If Russia (and potentially China) can revise their skeptical position vis-à-vis the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV), it may prove possible for them to brief IPNDV participants on progress made in the strategic stability talks and to engage in discussions around relevant problems.

### **First Steps towards a new Arms Control Architecture**

There is little question that it will take significant time and effort to reverse the current downward spiral in U.S.-Russia relations. While the new dialogue tracks proposed in this paper are not a panacea, they can help to limit the further erosion of strategic stability while increasing predictability between the two largest nuclear weapon states. At the same time, this approach will also serve to facilitate discussion around emerging challenges that the traditional arms control architecture was not designed to address. Although existing treaties did not need to be dismantled in order for these conversations to take place, these circumstances certainly make identifying replacements both more critical and time sensitive. If implemented, the proposals presented in this paper can help to ensure that policymakers in the United States and Russia make the most of these discussions. By engaging one another and their allies in wide-ranging dialogue, the two sides may be able to develop new approaches to arms control that are responsive to both evolving and enduring threats.

## Endnotes

- 1 Russia prefers to refer to the bilateral discussions as strategic stability talks, while the United States mostly refers to them as strategic security talks. The former designation is used here because it seems to have established itself in reporting on this issue.
- 2 “Russia delays strategic stability talks with U.S.: RIA”, *Reuters*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-usa-talks/russia-delays-strategic-stability-talks-with-u-s-ria-idUSKCN1GE2DS>.
- 3 “Russia’s dialogue with US on strategic stability intensifies, senior diplomat says”, *TASS*, August 18, 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1191055>.
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## About Deep Cuts

The Deep Cuts Commission provides decision-makers as well as the interested public with concrete policy options based on realistic analysis and sound research. Since it was established in 2013, the Commission is coordinated in its deliberations by the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH), the Arms Control Association (ACA), and the Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO, RAN) with the active support of the German Federal Foreign Office and the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg.

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