

Addressing New START's key failure

Washington is facing a critical arms control dilemma, with the New START Treaty due to expire, Russia developing a range of strategic weapons outside the treaty, and China meanwhile significantly building up its nuclear forces, warns **Michael Sobolik**

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), an agreement with Russia brokered by the Obama administration that capped deployed warheads and delivery systems, is set to expire next year unless Washington and Moscow agree to a five-year extension. However, unlike the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty agreements that the administration of President Donald Trump withdrew from due to concerns about Russian cheating, the debate over whether to extend New START centres on the actual document itself: specifically, who the treaty does not cover.

Administration officials have raised concerns that China, which is not party to New START, is overseeing a massive build-up of nuclear forces that, according to US Defense Intelligence Agency estimates, will at least double in size during the next decade. In an effort to head such a development off at the pass and gain greater transparency into Beijing's strategic forces, Trump has conditioned the extension of New START on China's participation.

Evading missile defences

Russia has, in recent years, built up its arsenal of hypersonic weapons, several of which are not covered under New START as they are categorically different from ballistic missiles. According to the Congressional Research Service, Moscow is developing several variants of these,

including the short-range Tsirkon cruise missile, the intercontinental-range Avangard glide vehicle, and the air-launched Kinzhal.

Russia is not alone. Included in China's vast missile build-up are four types of hypersonic weapon: the nuclear-capable Xingkong-2, the DF-ZF, the Dongfeng-26 'Guam killer', and the CM-401 anti-ship missile.

These weapons pose an acute challenge to US defence planners. Unlike ballistic missiles, hypersonic weapons can easily evade Washington's missile defence capabilities. The US originally calibrated its homeland and theatre missile defences to track parabolic flight paths, which provide enough time to get several shots at the incoming threat. Hypersonics, however, can evade every layer of the US defences by flying at speed below the radar line and having incredible manoeuvrability. By the time US ground- and sea-based sensors identify a hypersonic weapon, the engagement window is essentially gone, which raises serious questions about the ability of the US to defend its allies in Eastern Europe and East Asia.

One possible workaround to this problem is space-based sensors. According to the Pentagon's 2019 Missile Defense Review, space-based sensors "can monitor, detect, and track missile launches from locations almost anywhere on the globe" and "can provide 'birth to death' tracking that is extremely advantageous".

Moreover, these sensors enable interceptors to engage threats over the horizon, long before existing radar would detect them. Indeed, the US has plans to co-develop such a system with Japan.

The Kremlin's gambit

Washington faces a conundrum. The very breakthroughs in missile defence that the US requires to neutralise hypersonic weapons could endanger the viability of the current arms control regime. New START has few legally binding limitations on missile defences and its preamble contains seemingly innocuous language: "current strategic defensive arms do not undermine the viability and effectiveness of the strategic offensive arms of the parties". However, Russia made its interpretation of this clause clear in 2010, stating, "The [New START] Treaty can operate and be viable only if the United States of America refrains from developing its missile defence capabilities quantitatively or qualitatively."

It is here that Russian President Vladimir Putin's gambit with New START comes into focus. The plan: build up new capabilities outside of the treaty's purview and limit the US' ability to defend against them within the treaty.

This is not mere conjecture. The US State Department's Assistant Secretary for International Security and Nonproliferation, Christopher Ford, raised this possibility nine years ago, shortly before New START came

into force, warning, "The treaty's preamble makes any US missile defense deployment beyond current levels something that is clearly related to the subject matter of the agreement [and] seems to go out of its way to tee up Russian withdrawal threats."

It seems likely that Russia is seeking to exploit long-held assumptions by some in Washington that missile defences destabilise global security and that protecting Russia's nuclear arsenal is somehow more important than defending US interests from those weapons.

Correcting the treaty's failure

Congress was right to reject this assumption in 2016 when it expanded US missile defence policy to include protecting the US and its allies from Russian and Chinese nuclear threats. After all, if leaders like Putin openly boast about their own anti-hypersonic capabilities, what possible excuse could US leaders offer for refraining from developing their own?

Washington must take concrete steps to bolster its defences and address the treaty's silence on emerging missile technology. Moreover, attempts to bring China into New START, while commendable, will not solve this larger problem: a point that policy-makers should take to heart.

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