



New START and Next Steps for Reducing Nuclear Weapons Risks

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During the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviet Union had over 70,000 nuclear warheads in their total stockpiles combined, each ready to be deployed at a moment's notice. Since the end of the Cold War, that number has been reduced to about [8,000](#) nuclear warheads (U.S. and Russia combined) in the total stockpile with just under [1,550](#) deployed warheads on each side. This achievement is due to various arms control agreements between Washington and Moscow, including the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which entered into force on February 5, 2011.

In 2019, President Trump, followed by President Putin, withdrew from the 1987 [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty](#) (INF). This made New START the only remaining nuclear arms control pact between the U.S. and Russia, which, combined, own 90% of the world's nuclear weapons.

Expiration of New START

In December 2010, the Senate voted 71-26 to ratify New START. It went into effect in February 2011, shortly after the Russian government ratified it. The Senate is constitutionally required to provide advice and consent for treaties, but renewing an existing treaty does not require another vote in the Senate.

According to the terms of the treaty, New START was set to expire on February 5, 2021. The treaty could be extended for a maximum of five years and that required an agreement between Washington and Moscow. The Trump Administration left President Biden with only a two-week window to decide about extending the treaty. On January 26, 2021 President Biden and President Putin exchanged diplomatic notes informing the other about their countries' intention to extend the treaty for five years. This was later confirmed in a [phone call](#), the first between these two leaders since President Biden took office.

While it does not require congressional approval in the U.S., the Russian Parliament needed to hold a [vote](#) on the extension. Immediately after the phone call between Biden and Putin agreeing to an extension, Putin submitted a [draft bill](#) on the treaty's extension to the Russian Parliament, which voted to [approve](#) the extension on January 27, 2021. New START was formally [renewed](#) on February 3, 2021.

Nuclear Weapon Limits Under New START

Under New START, the U.S. and Russia must:

- Limit the number of deployed and non-deployed nuclear weapons delivery systems, such as missiles and bombers, to no more than 800
- Limit the number of deployed nuclear weapons delivery systems, such as intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), to no more than 700
- Limit the deployed strategic (long range) nuclear warhead stockpile to no more than 1,550

These [limits were met](#) by February 5, 2018, seven years after the treaty went into effect.

In addition to limiting the number of nuclear weapons each country maintains, New START includes a detailed and comprehensive monitoring and verification system. This allows the U.S. and Russia to confirm the location and capacity of each other's nuclear weapons. Examples of these verification measures include:

- Regular data exchanges between the U.S. and Russia on each country's nuclear arsenal, including the number of [ICBMs and SLBMs](#)¹
- Timely notification of any changes to size, location, movement, and status of strategic nuclear weapons and the number of warheads deployed
- 18 on-site inspections per year of nuclear facilities and storage locations to verify the content of the data exchanges

These verification mechanisms build trust and confidence between Washington and Moscow and decrease the likelihood of misunderstanding and miscalculation regarding the size and location of the other's nuclear arsenals. This transparency is [crucial](#) in preventing a nuclear arms race or accidental use.

Debate over New START

The looming expiration of New START triggered a [debate](#) in the nuclear policy community over whether to use the deadline as [leverage](#) for a more ambitious arms control agreement. Some of President Biden's advisors [suggested](#) a shorter extension, less than the five-year maximum outlined in the treaty, in hopes of extracting more concessions from Russia for a potential follow-on treaty.

Deviating from a straightforward, five-year extension threatened the security guarantees and transparency provided by New START and could risk a nuclear arms race.² This high risk approach did not guarantee that Russia would agree to more concessions and it was unlikely that a new agreement could be reached prior to the expiration of a short-term extension. Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby [stated](#) that

¹ New START does not limit the number of non-deployed ICBMs and SLBMs. However, this verification system allows Washington and Moscow to ensure that ICBMs and SLBMs are not added to the deployed force.

² See work from the [Arms Control Association](#), [Ploughshares Fund](#), [Win Without War](#), and a [coalition of foreign policy groups](#) supporting an extension of New START.

the U.S. could not afford to lose the comprehensive inspection and notification tools outlined in New START and that failing to extend the treaty would “weaken America’s understanding of Russia’s long-range nuclear forces.” Kirby further stated that only by extending the treaty for the full five-year term can Washington and Moscow negotiate a more ambitious nuclear arms control agreement.

Cognizant of these conditions, the Biden Administration [agreed](#) to a full five-year extension and said it would “explore new verifiable arms control agreements” with Russia.

Nuclear Non-proliferation and Risk Reduction in Congress

Congress has a significant role to play in advancing nuclear non-proliferation and risk reduction policies in the 117th Congress and encouraging the Biden Administration to pursue the next generation of arms control agreements. There are opportunities to build off of legislation introduced during the 116th Congress. A number of progressive nuclear non-proliferation and risk reduction bills introduced include:

No First Use: A no-first-use policy means that the U.S. will not be the first country to use a nuclear weapon. Instead, it will maintain a second-strike posture and only employ a nuclear weapon if attacked with one first. Currently, the U.S. does not have a no-first-use policy. On the campaign trail, then-candidate [Biden](#) embraced support for no-first-use. In 2019, Rep. Adam Smith and Sen. Elizabeth Warren introduced a [bill](#) for the U.S. to adopt a no-first-use policy.

End Sole Authority: The President of the United States has the sole authority to order a nuclear strike. He does not need congressional approval and is not required to consult with the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, leaders of the intelligence community, military leaders, or other members of the Cabinet. This unilateral power in the wrong hands can be dangerous. After the insurrection on the Capitol on January 6th, Speaker Nancy Pelosi [spoke](#) with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, to discuss actions to prevent President Trump from accessing the nuclear codes and launching a nuclear strike. Speaker Pelosi expressed concerns that President Trump was not fit to be the sole individual with this vast power. Similarly, In the last days of the Nixon Administration, Defense Secretary James Schlesinger [asked](#) the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to inform him if they received an order from President Nixon to launch a weapon.

In 2019, Rep. Ted Lieu and Sen. Ed Markey introduced a [bill](#) that would prevent the president from deploying a nuclear weapon first, without congressional approval. This bill modifies the sole authority given to the president when launching a nuclear weapon and expands congress’ role in nuclear powers.

Review the Nuclear Modernization Program: The nuclear modernization program is a roughly [\\$1.5 trillion](#) effort to build more advanced nuclear weapons delivery systems. Initially conceived as an informal agreement to secure GOP support for New START in the Senate, it has since transformed into an overhaul of nearly every

nuclear weapons system in the American arsenal regardless of cost or strategic necessity. Among those controversial upgrades are the new Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD), intended to replace the current ICBM. The GBSD is designed to deliver nuclear weapons from land-based silos in the U.S. to targets across the world.

The 117th Congress and the Biden-Harris Administration must [determine](#) if the GBSD is an effective use of taxpayers dollars. Then President-elect Biden [stated](#) that he would explore making cuts to this program. In 2020, Rep. Ro Khanna introduced an amendment to cut the GBSD program by \$1 billion — and make these funds available to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. It was [voted down](#) in committee 44 to 12.

Smarter Approach to Nuclear Expenditures (SANE Act): Rep. Earl Blumenauer and Sen. Ed Markey introduced the [SANE Act](#), which would reduce spending on nuclear weapons programs and prohibit the procurement and deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons. The SANE Act would cut funding for submarines, missiles, aircrafts, weapons laboratories, and other items in the nuclear arsenal. These cuts would lead to an estimated savings of \$100 billion.

Hastening Arms Limitations Talks (HALT Act): Rep. Jim McGovern and Sen. Ed Markey introduced the [HALT Act](#) which calls on the U.S. to implement a freeze on nuclear testing, production, and deployment of weapons. The HALT Act specifies agreeing to a full five-year extension of New START and calls for the U.S. to ratify the [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty](#), which prohibits explosive nuclear testing.

Non-Proliferation Resolution: Already this Congress, Rep. Don Beyer introduced [H.Res. 54](#) which affirms America's commitments to arms control and nuclear non-proliferation agreements. The resolution expresses support for a five-year extension of New START and for the U.S. to return to its participation in the Open Skies Treaty, which the Trump Administration withdrew from in November 2020. On January 15, 2021, President Putin announced that Russia would withdraw from the treaty.³

Next Steps in Nuclear Policy

JCPOA: The Biden-Harris Administration must ensure regional nuclear stability around the world, especially in the regions most likely to face potential conflicts, including the Middle East, South Asia, and the Korean Peninsula. This starts with returning to the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ([JCPOA](#)). The JCPOA was hailed as a diplomatic success with countries coming together to non-violently address the challenges posed by Iran's nuclear program with the most intrusive non-proliferation agreement to date. The U.S. and its allies negotiated commitments from Iran to scale back and limit its nuclear program, which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) verified that Iran was

³ Withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty requires a six-month notice. The Trump Administration announced it would withdraw in May 2020 and formally withdrew in November 2020. Russia announced its withdrawal in January 2021, meaning it would formally leave the treaty in July 2021.

complying with after the JCPOA went into effect. In exchange, the U.S. and its negotiating partners lifted nuclear-related sanctions against Iran. When the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA, it began reimposing sanctions and imposed new, non-nuclear-related sanctions. In the midst of a pandemic, Iran is [unable](#) to import tests, masks, sanitizers, ventilators, and the vaccine because of U.S. sanctions. In December 2020, 150 House members sent a [letter](#) to then President-elect Biden to swiftly return to the deal, ensure Iranian compliance, and lift sanctions.

President Biden [stated](#) that Iran must return to full compliance of the JCPOA before the U.S. recommits to the deal and lifts sanctions on Iran. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif [countered](#) that, given the U.S. is the party that violated the treaty, it should be first to return to the deal. These statements have essentially led to a stalemate on the deal's future. Iran has taken [steps](#) to put pressure on the U.S. to rejoin the deal and lift sanctions. On December 1, 2020, before President Biden took office, [Iran's Parliament](#) voted that it would enrich uranium to 20% and bar inspectors from the IAEA if the U.S. did not lift sanctions by February 21, 2021, essentially providing the Biden Administration with an ultimatum.

Proactively reducing stockpiles: In addition to returning to the JCPOA, President Biden must also reverse other damage done by the Trump Administration by committing to negotiations with Russia to restore both the INF Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty. President Biden should also pursue meaningful efforts to reduce the global stockpile of nuclear weapons — per the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons — and end, and work with other nations to end, the development of more nuclear weapons. President Biden should commit to the objectives of President Obama, who called for a [“world without nuclear weapons”](#).

Conclusion

New START has played a substantial role in reducing the threat of nuclear war by limiting the number of deployed warheads between the U.S. and Russia and instituting an enhanced monitoring and verification mechanism. Nevertheless, there is much more that needs to be done. Congress and President Biden must address the reality that spending money on maintaining and expanding our already massive nuclear program does not keep us safe. As demonstrated by the events of this past year, the real threats to our safety are disease, climate change, economic inequality, systemic racism, and white nationalism. None of those issues can be solved by building more nuclear weapons. Despite this, the U.S. is on track to spend [\\$2 trillion](#) over the next 30 years maintaining our nuclear weapons program. Every dollar that goes to our nuclear program is less money available to address our most urgent crises. The U.S. must reassess the role of nuclear weapons and work to build a world without them.

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