



Status of U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Talks

Updated February 3, 2021

Introduction

The [New START](#) Treaty would have expired on February 5, 2021, unless the United States and Russia agreed to extend it for up to five years. On January 21, 2021, the Biden Administration [announced](#) that it would seek a five-year extension of New START, leading to an exchange of diplomatic notes and the formal [extension](#) of the treaty on February 3, 2021. The State Department [noted](#) that the extension was a first step that would provide “the stability and predictability [needed] to enhance and expand discussions with Russia and China.”

The United States and Russia held several meetings during 2020 to discuss New START extension and a framework for a future agreement, but did not reach an agreement. In April 2019, President Trump had [called for](#) expanded arms control efforts with Russia and China, both to capture all types of Russian weapons and to bring China into the process. In December 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin had [indicated](#) that he would extend New START for five years, without preconditions; Russian officials also [noted](#) that the countries could address other weapons systems in separate talks after extending New START.

Issues in the Negotiations

China

Prior to beginning negotiations with Russia, the U.S. negotiator, Ambassador Marshall Billingslea [suggested](#) that Washington would not extend New START unless China joined the talks. [He invited](#) China to participate, but China [refused](#), as it has far fewer nuclear weapons than the United States or Russia. He then suggested that Russia pressure China to participate. Foreign Minister Ryabkov [rejected](#) this, noting that such a decision would be the “sovereign right of China.” Moreover, Russian officials have [argued that](#) a multilateral treaty should include the United Kingdom and France, a suggestion the United States has rejected.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11520

After meeting again in August, Ambassador Billingslea [reiterated](#) the U.S. goal of including China, but indicated that the United States was “not suggesting ... that we would amend the New START Treaty to include China.” He did not insist that China participate *before* the United States agreed to extend New START, but indicated that the framework for the next treaty would have to include a path for China to join later.

The Biden Administration has [affirmed](#) that the United States will “pursue arms control to reduce the dangers from China’s modern and growing nuclear arsenal.”

Extension and Future Agreement

In July, Ambassador Billingslea [stated](#) that the United States would “contemplate an extension” of New START if Russia would negotiate an agreement limiting shorter-range nonstrategic nuclear weapons and its new types of longer-range strategic systems. During the July [meeting](#), U.S. and Russian officials did not agree on whether to extend New START or on a framework for a future agreement. They established working groups to address strategic stability issues, but disagreed on the subjects for some of the groups.

In August, Ambassador Billingslea [reiterated](#) that the United States considered New START “deeply flawed” and noted that “it is not particularly in the U.S. interest to simply extend that treaty.” He said the United States might agree to an extension if Russia signed “a politically binding agreement” that provided a framework for a new treaty. The United States presented Russia with detailed proposals to count all nuclear warheads and to incorporate more verification and transparency measures than New START. Billingslea did not indicate whether, or how, the framework would address Russia’s concerns about U.S. weapons in space, U.S. ballistic missile defenses, and other issues that affect strategic stability. Billingslea also [stated](#) that the cost of extending New START could increase if Russia did not accept the U.S. proposals before the election, perhaps by including “a lot of the other bad behavior that the Russians are engaged in around the world.” He also [indicated](#) that if Russia did not accept the U.S. proposals, the United States would allow New START to lapse and promptly increase the numbers of warheads on its strategic forces.

After reviewing the U.S. proposals, Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov [noted](#) that Russia was ready to extend New START but would not do so at any cost. He indicated that Russia would not accept these proposals unless the United States also addressed Russian concerns. In August, he [repeated](#) that Russia “is not ready to pay any price” for New START extension.

In October, the United States [seemed](#) to narrow its position by [seeking](#) to pair a short-term extension of New START with a short-term freeze on both sides’ nuclear arsenals. The freeze [would](#) accommodate U.S. demands for limits on Russian nonstrategic nuclear weapons without addressing other issues in the August proposal. After meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov on October 12, Ambassador Billingslea [stated](#) that Presidents Trump and Putin had reached an “agreement in principle” on this deal and that he and Ryabkov could complete an agreement quickly. U.S. officials [believed](#) the two sides could reach an agreement in time for the Presidents to sign it before the U.S. election.

Russian officials disputed this assessment. Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov [called](#) the U.S. reports of a quick agreement “an illusion.” He [stated](#) that the proposed freeze “is unacceptable” because it would not address Russian concerns about U.S. weapons. Ryabkov also [disputed](#) the U.S. assertion that the two sides could conclude the agreement before the election.

On October 16, President Putin [proposed](#) that the two sides extend New START “unconditionally for at least a year” while they continue talks on other arms control issues. President Trump’s National Security Advisor, Robert O’Brien, [dismissed](#) this as a “non-starter” without the freeze on nuclear arsenals, and [suggested](#) that Russia’s position could lead to “a costly arms race.” On October 20, the Russian Foreign Ministry [stated](#) that Russia *would* accept a one-year freeze on nuclear arsenals if the United States

did not add any conditions to the freeze. Russia also indicated the countries could “hold comprehensive bilateral talks” on “all factors that can influence strategic stability” during the extension. The U.S. State Department [welcomed](#) the Russian statement and noted that the “United States is prepared to meet immediately to finalize a verifiable agreement.” Russia, however, considered the requirement for verification to be an unacceptable condition added to the freeze.

On October 22, President Putin [repeated](#) his call to extend the treaty and freeze weapons for a year, without preconditions. Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov and NSA O’Brien acknowledged that the two sides remained at odds over whether to codify verification measures before extending New START or to work them out in discussions following the extension. In mid-November, after the U.S. election, Steve Biegun, the Deputy Secretary of State, [noted](#) that the two sides had reached a “plateau” in their discussions. Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov [said](#) it was still possible for the two sides to conclude an agreement during the Trump Administration, but only if the United States “softened” its position.

The Biden Administration did not pair the extension of New START with a freeze on all weapons. The State Department [noted](#), however, that the five-year extension would provide time to “pursue ... arms control that addresses all of [Russia’s] nuclear weapons.”

Author Information

Amy F. Woolf
Specialist in Nuclear Weapons Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS’s institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.