



Nuclear Arms Control After the Biden-Putin Summit

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After meeting in Geneva on June 16, 2021, President Biden and Russia’s President Vladimir Putin released a [Joint Statement on Strategic Stability](#), which outlined their agreement on a path forward for nuclear arms control and risk reduction. In February, the two Presidents had [agreed to extend the New START Treaty for five years](#) beyond its planned expiration on February 5, 2021. This treaty limits deployed long-range strategic nuclear weapons but does not address all U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons or other factors that could affect the risk of nuclear use. In their joint statement, the Presidents agreed to hold further discussions on these issues; the first round of strategic stability talks are [scheduled](#) to begin on July 28, 2021.

Summit Goals

When announcing the planned meeting with President Putin, the White House [indicated](#) that the Presidents would “discuss the full range of pressing issues” and would “seek to restore predictability and stability to the U.S.-Russia relationship.” President Biden [emphasized](#) that, although areas of disagreement exist, it is in the two nations’ interest to cooperate when possible and that strategic stability is one area of possible cooperation. Capturing this sentiment, the joint statement begins by recognizing that “the United States and Russia have demonstrated that, even in periods of tension, they are able to make progress on our shared goals of ensuring predictability in the strategic sphere, reducing the risk of armed conflicts and the threat of nuclear war.”

Statement on Nuclear War

In their joint statement, Presidents Biden and Putin reaffirmed “the principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev had issued this [statement](#) in 1985, when they indicated that they were “conscious of the special responsibility of the USSR and the U.S. for maintaining peace.” By issuing this statement, Reagan and Gorbachev recognized the need to ease tensions that might lead to a conflict that could escalate to nuclear war.

In recent years, some experts [have suggested](#) that a U.S.-Russian reaffirmation of this statement might help bolster international nonproliferation efforts by reducing the perceived value of nuclear weapons.

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Some have also suggested that this statement, if adopted by all nuclear weapons states, might offset the impression that the nuclear weapons states seem to view these weapons as a viable tool to address regional security challenges. The statement might also signal that the nuclear weapons states recognize the growing risks of nuclear escalation during crises.

Others, however, have questioned the value of the statement in the current security environment, noting that, in 1985, it was a reflection on the risk of large-scale nuclear war between the United States and Soviet Union. Moreover, some argue that a statement excluding the possible use of nuclear weapons in a regional conflict could undermine efforts to deter large-scale conventional attacks or even cyberattacks. Some have also questioned whether the United States might have to alter its employment policy or force posture if it acceded to a statement forswearing the value of nuclear weapons in regional conflicts.

The Biden Administration has not addressed questions about its rationale for reaffirming the statement. When it [issued](#) its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance in March 2021, it noted that the United States would “take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.” Reissuing this statement on nuclear war may contribute to that goal without foreshadowing any changes in the U.S. nuclear posture.

Strategic Stability Dialogue

Presidents Biden and Putin agreed that the United States and Russia would engage in “an integrated bilateral Strategic Stability Dialogue” that would “seek to lay the groundwork for future arms control and risk reduction measures.” The United States and Russia had engaged in similar talks in the past, and both Presidents supported their resumption prior to the summit. In his [press briefing](#) following the summit, President Biden noted that this dialogue would allow diplomats “to work on a mechanism that can lead to control of new and dangerous and sophisticated weapons that are coming on the scene now that reduce the times of response, that raise the prospects of accidental war.”

With its focus on an “integrated, bilateral” dialogue, it seems evident that the U.S.-Russian strategic stability talks will not include other nations with nuclear weapons—such as China, France, and the United Kingdom—but could include discussions about other types of weapons beyond the long-range strategic weapons limited in New START. These might include shorter-range [nonstrategic](#) nuclear weapons, [hypersonic](#) glide vehicles, and [new types](#) of nuclear delivery systems. Nevertheless, the two nations may begin the talks with different views on which topics they should discuss and different understandings of what constitutes strategic stability. Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s National Security Advisor, [suggested](#) that “the starting point for strategic stability talks should be the very complex set of nuclear arms issues that face our two countries.” He noted that the two sides might address later whether to add other elements to the talks. Russia appears to favor a broader agenda, with Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [noting](#) that the discussions should include everything that “influences strategic stability,” including “nuclear and non-nuclear weapons, offensive and defensive weapons.”

With its mention of “arms control and risk reduction measures,” the joint statement also seems to indicate that the talks will not focus exclusively on negotiating a new treaty limiting nuclear weapons. They might also address transparency and risk reduction measures that could reduce the risk of inadvertent or intentional escalation to nuclear use during a crisis or conflict. The agenda could also include emerging technologies, operational practices, or doctrinal statements that might exacerbate tensions or complicate crisis management. The Presidents did not address the structure of the talks, although both sides have indicated they could begin with high-level contacts between the Russian Foreign Ministry and the State Department, which could then break out into working groups of experts from both sides.

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