

To Deter China, Extend New START



The Virginia-class attack submarine USS Mississippi (SSN 782) moors at Fleet Activities Yokosuka, Japan. U.S. NAVY / MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS BRIAN G. REYNOLDS

A new arms race with Russia will drain funds from the forces that influence and deter Beijing.

Joe Biden, much like the president he is attempting to replace, is anything but a dove when it comes to China. Be it trade or geopolitics, the Democratic presidential candidate has made it a point to match, if not out-hawk, President Trump on Beijing. One such area where hawkishness would be unwise for the United States, however, would be the topic of New START extension. Choosing to extend the bilateral nuclear arms reduction treaty with Russia is a low-hanging fruit that would serve U.S. interests in a multitude of ways, including buttressing Washington's position *vis-à-vis* Beijing.

Nuclear and China hawks alike have teamed up for more than a year now to push a common goal: the inclusion of China in talks to extend New START, a 2010 agreement between the U.S. and Russia to verifiably decrease one another's

respective strategic nuclear arsenals. Critics of such attempts allege the Trump administration's persistent drive to include China in a trilateral arms framework is unrealistic at best and at worst a transparent attempt to make New START the latest in a string of fruitful arms control arrangements President Trump has scrapped.

While earnest engagement with China on the arms-control front is a laudable longer-term goal, the Trump administration's attempts to include Beijing in a trilateral framework have been flatly rejected and have yet to produce so much as even a vague outline of what such an arrangement would look like. While the U.S. and Russia are both estimated to possess over 6,000 nuclear warheads, China's approximate figure is less than 300. Even this vast disparity only tells part of the story. Given China's relatively minimalist nuclear posture, it would only be accountable for a small fraction of the warheads that the U.S. and Russia are under New START rules, which only count deployed warheads and heavy bombers. With these factors in mind, Beijing's reluctance to entertain Washington's attempts at creating a trilateral framework make sense.

Nonetheless, the clock is ticking. This final major bilateral arms treaty is set to expire on Feb. 5. Failure to renew the agreement would leave the world's two biggest nuclear arsenals unconstrained for the first time in a half-century.

Such a failure would bring a multitude of strategic and fiscal consequences. It would reduce what the U.S. knows about Russia's nuclear arsenal, thereby reducing America's national security. The consequent effort to shore up nuclear security would, for example, divert finite resources from Washington's conventional force posture in East Asia to balance China.

This year's defense budget of \$738 billion may be massive, but amid economic pressure thanks to the coronavirus fallout, hard choices must be made to prioritize where and how the U.S. delegates its finite resources to secure vital national security interests.

Given China's rapid economic rise, it seems prudent to consider China the predominant foreign issue worth expending resources and attention to address from the U.S. standpoint, both now and into the future. As such, extending New START and ensuring that the U.S. will not need to divert funding from priorities at home or in Asia to bankroll an arms race with Russia makes sense, particularly

when one factors in the price tag of Washington's ongoing nuclear modernization efforts.

Nuclear weapons and the means to reliably deliver them do not come cheap. The U.S. nuclear triad is currently in the midst of extensive modernization and life extension, manifesting itself in next-generation complexes ranging from a new ICBM to an upgraded nuclear-capable stealth bomber. The projected cost of this modernization effort is upwards of \$1.7 trillion, a figure that even the Trump administration Nuclear Posture Review concedes is "substantial." The Congressional Budget Office forecasts that spending on modernized nuclear complexes will peak at around \$50 billion annually in the late 2020s and early 2030s, consuming upwards of 15 percent of DoD's acquisition costs and 8 percent of national defense expenditures.

All of these costs are predicated upon the assumption that Washington's nuclear force posture will be within New START-imposed limits on force size. As Frank Klotz, a former Air Force Global Strike Commander, noted, New START is "baked" into modernization efforts, which are more or less a one-for-one replacement program for existing nuclear systems. Allison Bawden, GAO's Director for Nuclear Security, found that NNSA hasn't considered the implications of New START expiration on its modernization plans given DoD's assumption of its warhead and delivery system limits bracketing the U.S. arsenal. Even with these assumptions, GAO says the rising modernization costs could come at the expense of other weapons procurement initiatives with DOE seeking \$15 billion more than expected in 2021 through 2025 in its 2021 budget estimate.

Any potential diversion of funding from conventional complexes to fund a nuclear arms race would disproportionately hurt what is already an overburdened U.S. posture in the Pacific. Speaking bluntly, Gen. Dave Goldfein, previously Air Force Chief of Staff, said tradeoffs will be necessary to fund nuclear modernization while simultaneously bolstering Washington's conventional edge, and even this presupposes New START treaty limits.

These offset impacts have already been felt by the Navy, a vitally important service branch for projecting power to deter China, which was forced to not only cancel plans to add 10 years to the life of the *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer but also cut five of the planned ships to prioritize funding for the modernized nuclear missile submarine. Officials were also forced to make cuts to

planned *Virginia*-class attack submarine and FFG(X) guided-missile frigate procurement plans. With the Navy's widely publicized plans for a 355-ship armada already being squeezed by SSBN modernization costs, it is easy to see how New START's demise could further hurt the Navy's ability to project conventional power in East Asia.

As U.S. power relative to China continues to shrink, it will only become more imperative for policy-makers to make sharp decisions and prioritize resources for the most important task at hand: preventing China from becoming a Eurasian hegemon. While still a great power, Russia is a country in decline and is hardly the geopolitical menace the Soviet Union once was. Engaging in an arms race with Russia—a country with which we already have a strategic relationship characterized by mutually assured destruction—would be an imprudent use of finite resources better spent elsewhere. China is the most important strategic challenger to the United States—the next president would be smart to extend New START to bolster America's ability to compete.

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