PISM | POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 33 (973), 3 April 2017 © PISM

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Challenges to U.S.-Russia Strategic Arms Control during the Trump Presidency

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The coming years may mark the end of bilateral limitations of U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals. The future of the New START treaty is unclear, chances for a new agreement slim, and violation of the INF treaty by Russia remains a serious challenge. While strategic arms control strengthens NATO's security, it should not come at the price of concessions undermining the role of the U.S. as guarantor of security and stability in Europe.

U.S. President Donald Trump has sent contradictory signals about the future role of U.S.- Russia strategic arms control. On the one hand, as president-elect he indicated that the nuclear forces of both countries should be substantially reduced and that an agreement to do that could be an element of rebuilding mutual relations. On the other hand, Trump also declared that the U.S. nuclear arsenal must be greatly strengthened and expanded and implied that the United States should seek nuclear dominancy. After taking office, he questioned the need for the New START treaty (formally, "Treaty between the U.S. and Russia on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms"), which was agreed in May 2010. According to the U.S. president, the treaty is disproportionally advantageous to Russia. Greater clarity about the U.S. approach to strategic arms control will be provided by the Nuclear Posture Review, ordered by Trump in January 2017.

Unclear Future of New START. Under the treaty, the U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals as of 5 February 2018, cannot comprise more than 1,550 deployed warheads and 800 delivery vehicles (intercontinental range ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers) of which only 700 can be deployed. Important, too, are treaty mechanisms for verification and transparency, which include exchange of information about the numbers, location, and technical characteristics of the strategic arsenals as well as onsite inspections. They provide both the U.S. and Russia with direct access to information about the other's strategic systems, which they cannot acquire through their own intelligence means such as satellites. That information enhances stability and predictability, including during periods of tension. New START has functioned effectively despite the severe deterioration of U.S.-Russia relations after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

New START will expire on 5 February 2021 unless the presidents of the U.S. and Russia agree to extend it for up to five years or until one or both countries decide to withdraw from it based on a supreme national interest. Trump's criticism of New START increases the likelihood that the accord will be allowed to expire. Even if on 20 January 2021, some other person is U.S. president, the timeframe for agreement of an extension might be insufficient. While maintaining New START has been supported by the U.S. military, including the current commander of U.S. Strategic Command and his predecessors, its future might be determined by politics. The majority of Republicans oppose ratification of the treaty and have not budged. Their key point in their sharp criticism of the treaty is that while the U.S. has been reducing its arsenal to meet the treaty obligations, Russia has expanded its arsenal, which was originally below the treaty limits. According to these and other opponents, the treaty has loopholes favourable to Russia. What's more, New START may not even survive until 2021. If serious concerns about Russian compliance emerge, the U.S. might withdraw earlier. In turn, Russia might decide to withdraw if the U.S. continues to build-up its missile defence systems.

Obstacles to a New Agreement. In light of Trump's criticism of New START, it cannot be excluded that he would seek to modify it or replace it with a new agreement. The negotiations, however, could be blocked by Russian demands, consistently expressed over the past years. Their demands were the main reason for the fiasco of President Barack Obama's efforts to conclude a bilateral agreement on deeper nuclear reductions. Moscow has made negotiations contingent upon several conditions, mainly the inclusion of legally binding limits on U.S. missile defence. In addition, when in October 2016 Russia suspended a year 2000 agreement with the U.S. on plutonium disposal, it indicated that cooperation on further nuclear arms reductions would be constrained by the sanctions imposed on Russia (because of its actions in Ukraine) and by the increasing number of U.S. troops near its borders.

Without Russia, negotiations are obviously off the table but it might be encouraged to re-engage if there are U.S. concessions. To improve relations, Trump might try to lift some of the sanctions by delinking them from the situation in Ukraine. As a further step, he could limit the U.S. military presence in Central and Eastern Europe. An especially strong incentive for Russia to agree to talks would be if the U.S. ends its missile defence project in Poland or, better, if it agrees legally binding constraints on missile defence. By agreeing to any of these, the Trump would, however, have to sacrifice certain security interests of the U.S. and its European allies, and would face opposition in Congress, which could block ratification or implementation of a new agreement. Something else that might persuade Russia to renegotiate New START or replace it with another agreement are the U.S.'s nuclear modernization plans, estimated by the Congressional Budget Office to cost $400 billion from 2017 to 2026. That might make Russia conclude that preserving the constraints on the U.S. nuclear arsenal is in its national security interest. It is also possible that Russia would try to alleviate its concerns about a lack of a strategic arms control agreement by further expanding its own forces, essentially leading to nuclear arms race.

Significance of the INF Treaty. Russia's violation of the 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty[1] poses a serious threat to strategic arms control. The U.S. claims that Russia has deployed ground-launched cruise missiles, prohibited by the treaty, which pose a threat to NATO and U.S. military installations in Europe. According to press reports, Russia has deployed one of its two SSC-8 missile battalions. If Russia does not return to full compliance with the treaty, it is doubtful that Trump can decide to extend New START or conclude a new agreement with Russia. Such steps also would be sharply opposed by the Congress.

The lack of resolution of the INF issue also strengthens the probability that one side will withdraw from New START, because changes in the regional military balance can have a negative impact on the U.S.-Russia strategic relationship. By deploying a significant number of the INF-restricted ground-launched cruise missiles, Russia would be able to increase its capability to target U.S. territory with intercontinental-range ballistic missiles previously allocated to targets in Europe and Asia. Similarly, if the U.S. and its NATO allies decide to respond to Russia's violation by deploying additional long-range offensive weapons in Europe (sea, air or ground-launched conventional cruise missiles), Russia might perceive it as a threat to some of its strategic forces. In both cases, one side could claim that the strategic stability has been undermined to the extent that the strategic arms control agreement no longer serves its interests.

Implications for U.S. Allies. Even though the future of U.S.- Russia strategic arms control is in question, it is still possible for both sides to reach a compromise. Maintaining New START, extending it, or agreeing a new treaty would strengthen European security. Predictability and stability at the strategic level would allow the U.S. to focus on growing regional challenges. It would also decrease the risk that it would be forced to radically increase projected costs for nuclear arms, which could come at the expense of the conventional forces that play an integral role in deterrence strategy. Furthermore, bilateral U.S.-Russia strategic arms control would keep the nuclear risk to Europe from increasing as a result of a loss of constraints or information about Russia's strategic arsenal.

Limitation of strategic arsenals is important, but not at any price. It should not come at the expense of other U.S. actions aimed at strengthening European security as long as the rationales for them still exist. This applies to maintaining the sanctions against Russia, strengthening the U.S. military presence in Central and Eastern Europe, and the further development of U.S. missile defence in Europe, including the site in Redzikowo. Also, the U.S. should not seek to maintain strategic stability with Russia at the expense of regional stability. It might be shortsighted of the U.S. if it decides to extend New START or seek a new agreement without resolving the INF issue. It is also important that the United States continue its efforts to include so-called non-strategic nuclear weapons (those not covered by New START or prohibited by the INF) into the arms control process. Concessions undermining U.S. credibility as a guarantor of security and stability in Europe would cause more harm than the lack of treaty-based constraints on Russia's strategic arsenal.

[1] J. Durkalec, "Scenarios for Russia's Withdrawal from the INF Treaty," *PISM Bulletin*, no 97 (829), 30 October 2015.