

“Next steps to restore US-Russian arms control” Brief summary of Pugwash virtual meeting

On 4 May 2023, Pugwash convened a small virtual roundtable discussion comprising experts and former officials from the US, Russia, and several European countries. The meeting initiated a series of events aimed at finding workable approaches and to redefine common interests which can restore functioning arm control measures. As such, the scope of this first meeting was broad, looking at three important dimensions of the US-Russia strategic nuclear relationship: 1) future of strategic stability dialogue focusing on New START; 2) INF succession and European security; 3) tactical nuclear weapons located in Europe.

It was clear to all that we are in a difficult moment with respect to bilateral relations and arms control. However, as Pugwash has done in the past, every effort today should be made to overcome political divides and seek security through cooperative influence – we must not abandon the 50 years of progress in the arms control sphere. It should be underlined that both governments, the United States and Russia, have agency to avoid a nuclear arms race and look for ways to bring down the nuclear temperature.

As of February 2023, Russia has suspended participation in the New START treaty. Since March 2022, the US put on hold strategic stability talks that were supposed, inter alia, to identify main parameters of the successor treaty to New START. Participants were clear that the legal framework still exists, and effort must be made to convince Russia and the US to remain within the treaty, return to ensure its full implementation and mutual confidence in compliance and keep information flowing.

One useful step could be for Washington to signal to Moscow readiness to resume talks through a goodwill gesture: for example, a straightforward initiative would be an announcement that Washington does not seek the strategic defeat of Russia. As it is, with the strategic stability dialogue currently suspended, it was suggested to explore the option of resuming the dialogue under other existing agreements such as the 1972 INCSEA or 1973 Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War. Other participants were of the belief that bilateral dialogue might not be feasible and that a third party might usefully play a role in convening talks. Indeed, there was widespread support for using – more imaginatively – the P-5 process as a vehicle, especially because China is an integral part of the mechanism.

One critical distinction is that the drive to prevent nuclear war must be separated from the conflict in Ukraine – this is about the preservation of an important set of norms and agreements formed from 50 years of engagement. If things continue on this path, Russia in particular will lose out on a major strategic objective, that of keeping US nuclear forces within limitations as they embark on modernization. Furthermore, as China emerges and modernizes its own forces in a trajectory that is not yet well understood, it should be in everyone’s interests to keep an arm control process in place to avoid arms racing, which will be inevitable if limitations disappear. One inclusive approach to this question might be the initiation of European security discussions.

The INF treaty is an example of the interlocking nature of nuclear forces and conventional security that had done much to stabilise bilateral relations in the European theatre. Similarly, ‘tactical’ nuclear weapons and further technical developments, such as hypersonic missiles, complicate the nuclear-conventional linkage and increase the risk of inadvertent escalation. Now, with the expansion of sub-strategic range missile technologies into the armed forces and

navies of several countries, including non-nuclear weapons ones, discussion should focus on identifying new regional and global risks this process could entail. Risk reduction mechanisms and military-to-military communication (potentially adjusted to reflect new realities) will be necessary to avoid misperceptions and resulting conflicts. The new security environment could be confrontational, with arms build-ups provoking new dangers. These risks suggest the need to restore some form of conventional arms control.

While there is little prospect of resurrecting the INF following US withdrawal, the changing context in Europe and Asia must prompt difficult technical discussions on how to limit these systems in ways that promote regional security. In particular, it was raised that the US, Russia and China should listen to and engage countries of the global South since they stand to suffer from any nuclear exchange. A wholesale approach to this problem which would be in all states' security interest would be seeking a moratorium on both ground- and sea-based INF-range missiles.

Overall, the discussion – as anticipated – was non-conclusive. However, participants encouraged Pugwash to continue the series with regularity such that discussions can play a role in identifying measures and reporting progress to relevant parties.

This summary was prepared by the organizers to capture the ideas and proposals raised during discussion.

Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, Secretary-General of Pugwash

Sergey Batsanov, Pugwash Geneva Director

Cliff Kupchan, Pugwash Council

Götz Neuneck, Pugwash Council