

Begin New Strategic Talks with Russia!

Amid Heightened Tension, Merkley, Feinstein, Sanders, and Markey Press Trump Administration to Jumpstart New Strategic Talks with Russia

By [Defend Democracy Press](#)

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Amid heightened tension with Russia, U.S. Senators Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), and Edward J. Markey (D-MA) today urged Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to begin a new round of strategic talks with Russia without delay.

“A U.S.-Russia Strategic Dialogue is more urgent following President Putin’s public address on March 1st when he referred to several new nuclear weapons Russia is reportedly developing including a cruise missile and a nuclear underwater drone, which are not currently limited by the New START treaty, and would be destabilizing if deployed,” the Senators wrote. “There is no doubt we have significant disagreements with Russia, including Russia’s brazen interference in the 2016 U.S. elections; continued violation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF); invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea; and destabilizing actions in Syria.

“However, it is due to these policy rifts, not in spite of them, that the United States should urgently engage with Russia to avoid miscalculation and reduce the likelihood of conflict,” the Senators continued.

In their letter to Tillerson, the Senators urged the administration to address Russia’s violation of the INF; to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, commonly known as New START; and to work to enhance transparency on non-nuclear weapons. All of these steps are intended to lessen the chance that nuclear weapons will ever be used again.

The full text of the letter follows below.

March 08, 2018

*The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson
Secretary of State
U. S. Department of State
Washington, DC*

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

We write to urge the State Department to convene the next U.S.-Russia Strategic Dialogue as soon as possible.

A U.S.-Russia Strategic Dialogue is more urgent following President Putin's public address on March 1st when he referred to several new nuclear weapons Russia is reportedly developing including a cruise missile and a nuclear underwater drone, which are not currently limited by the New START treaty, and would be destabilizing if deployed. There is no doubt we have significant disagreements with Russia, including Russia's brazen interference in the 2016 U.S. elections; continued violation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF); invasion of Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea; and destabilizing actions in Syria. However, it is due to these policy rifts, not in spite of them, that the United States should urgently engage with Russia to avoid miscalculation and reduce the likelihood of conflict.

First, we encourage the administration to propose alternative solutions to address Russia's violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov admitted to the existence of this ground launched cruise missile (GLCM), but contended that the system was INF Treaty compliant.

Senior officials from the United States and Russia have said that the INF Treaty plays an "important role in the existing system of international security." As such, we urge the State Department to resolve Russia's violation through existing INF Treaty provisions or new mutually acceptable means.

Second, we urge the United States to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). The Trump administration's own 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) references Russia's robust nuclear modernization program as a main justification behind the U.S. need to recapitalize its three legs of the nuclear triad. An extension of New START would verifiably lock-in the Treaty's Central Limits – and with it – the reductions in strategic forces Russia has made.

The New START Treaty, which entered into force in 2011, provides transparency and predictability into the size and location of Russia's strategic nuclear delivery systems, warheads, and facilities. New START's robust verification architecture involves thousands of data exchanges and regular on-site inspections. The United States confirmed in February that Russia met New START's Central Treaty Limits and it stated that "implementation of the New START Treaty enhances the safety and security of the United States." These same Central Treaty Limits could also govern two of the new types of nuclear weapons referenced by President Putin on March 1st – a case the United States can argue through the Treaty's Biannual Consultative Commission (BCC).

Lastly, as the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review notes, Russia maintains a numerical advantage to the United States in the number of non-strategic nuclear weapons. The Senate, in its Resolution of Ratification on New START in 2010, took stock of this imbalance and called upon the United States to commence negotiations that would "secure and reduce tactical nuclear weapons in a verifiable manner." Attempts by the Obama administration to negotiate an agreement on this class of weapons met resistance from Russia. However, even absent the political space for a formal agreement or binding treaty with Russia, we urge the State Department to discuss ways to enhance transparency on non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Extending New START, resolving Russia's INF violation, and enhancing transparency measures relating to non-strategic nuclear weapons will also help quiet growing calls from

many countries that the United States is not upholding its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations. The Treaty's three mutually reinforcing pillars: non-proliferation, peaceful uses of the atom, and disarmament can only be advanced through U.S. leadership on all three.

There is no guarantee that we can make progress with Russia on these issues. However, even at the height of Cold War tensions, the United States and the Soviet Union were able to engage on matters of strategic stability. Leaders from both countries believed, as we should today, that the incredible destructive force of nuclear weapons is reason enough to make any and all efforts to lessen the chance that they can never be used again.

Sincerely,

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