

# Dangerous Crossroads in US-Russia Relations: Arms Control and Non-Proliferation in Jeopardy

Looming Crisis Slipping Through the Cracks of Public Attention

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*The missile defense capable USS Porter is in the Black Sea to trigger discussions on the state of European and global security. This month experts mark the 28th anniversary of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) that came into force on June 1, 1988. Those were the days of great hopes and expectations.*

Today Ukraine's drama, the EU's migrants' crisis, China's economic slowdown and the fight against the Islamic State group hit headlines while another crisis is looming in the background – the unraveling of nuclear arms control and the related problem of non-proliferation. The prospect of losing the legal regime for managing the instruments of devastation is very much real.

It is true that the two key treaties – the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty – are still in force.

However, their future is not assured. The 2010 New START (also known as the Prague Treaty) was an important achievement in preventing the collapse of arms control. But it expires in 2020 without any prospects for a new agreement coming into force. There are no signs that the parties are planning to launch talks on the subject. The future of the INF is also in doubt. The Treaty is threatened by ballistic missile defense (BMD) deployment. Aegis Ashore uses the naval Mk-41 launching system, which is capable of firing long-range cruise missile. This is a blatant violation of the [INF Treaty](#) provisions.



The countries which host BMD sites inevitably become targets for Russia's Iskander surface-to-surface missiles and aviation.

Actually, the United States launched the arms control erosion by withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to no longer accept any restrictions on its missile defense deployments. Washington still has not ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) 20 years after it was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1996.

Russia refuses any limitations on its sub-strategic nuclear arms while the US enjoys advantage in conventional long-range precision guided weapons, and NATO is implementing the program of stationing missile defense Aegis sites in Romania and Poland – in the vicinity of Russia's borders. European security is weakened by the Russia-NATO stand-off.

Nowadays, the plans to establish nuclear-weapons-free zones in Europe are, to large extent, forgotten. Measures that might include steps to prevent nuclear weapons being stationed outside the borders of the nuclear-weapon states are not on the Russia-NATO Council's agenda. There is no accord between Russian and NATO on nuclear incidents prevention. Currently around 200 B61 bombs are deployed in underground vaults inside around 90 protective aircraft shelters at six bases in five NATO countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey). About half of the munitions are earmarked for delivery by national aircraft of these non-nuclear states, although they all are parties to the [Non-Proliferation Treaty \(NPT\)](#) of 1968 that envisions certain obligations.

Article I of the treaty prohibits the transfer of nuclear weapons from nuclear-weapons states to other countries. Its Article II requires non-nuclear weapons states not to receive nuclear weapons. The US and NATO breach a major international treaty.

Russia considers US forward-based tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe to be an addition to the US strategic arsenal that is capable of striking deep into Russian national territory. Moscow has, therefore, demanded that the United States withdraw these weapons (which amount to about 200 air-dropped gravity bombs in the process of being upgraded) from Europe as a precondition to any possible talks on the issue. The process is stalled.

In addition, developments in non-nuclear BMD systems and long-range, precision-guided offensive weapons, as well as their proliferation, have complicated nuclear arms control.

The United States is in violation of the 2000 Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement (PMDA). Russia and the US agreed to transparently dispose of weapons-grade plutonium, thereby preventing it from being reused for military purposes. The agreement [specifies](#) that the United States will dispose of its plutonium by burning it in light water reactors (Article III.2).

In 2016 the US Energy Department [changed the plans](#) in favor of "a cheaper, faster alternative".

Changing the disposition method [requires](#) formally amending the agreement, which cannot be done without Russia's consent.

Despite that, the US administration's Fiscal Year 2017 [budget proposal](#) calls for the termination of the MOX (mixed oxide) project.

The violation was one of the reasons the Russian President skipped the Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington, DC on March 31-April 1, 2016.

The seven nuclear-armed states besides Russia and the United States have refused to join the discussions on any limitations till Russia and the US get closer to their numerical levels. In fact, it implies another substantial reduction on top of cuts already undertaken by the "Big Two". Global and regional powers with quite different points of view, ambitions, and political and military experiences from Russia and the United States are now important international players. Nuclear-arms limitations are no longer in the foreground of international security giving place to local conflicts, the fight against terrorism, and nuclear proliferation – the issue greatly [exacerbated](#) by the recent North Korean activities.

Nuclear nonproliferation is also in trouble. Nothing has been done in real terms. For

instance, a conference on the establishment of weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East (agreed on at the 2010 Nuclear Summit) has never materialized. 2016 Washington Nuclear Summit ended without producing any tangible results with Russia skipping the event. Negotiations with North Korea have been in limbo for many years and there is no prospect for their revival. This is [confirmed](#) by the recent events.

The talks on a [Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty](#) have been deadlocked for many years with the US-Russian cooperation on the safety and security of nuclear sites and materials ended in 2014.

The 2015 Iran deal is the only silver lining, but it still has a long way to go to become a long-term, comprehensive process. All other negotiations on nuclear arms reduction and nonproliferation have come to a dead end. Russia and the United States still retain their leading roles in the nonproliferation regime, but they can use this advantage effectively only joining together. The history of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program provides a telling example.

Today the world is facing the most serious and comprehensive crisis in the fifty-year history of nuclear arms control with almost every channel of negotiation deadlocked and the entire system of existing arms control agreements in jeopardy. One can see the US taking one decision after another to undermine the arms control regime that has served as a pillar of international security for dozens of years. This crisis may quite possibly result in the total disintegration of the existing framework of treaties and regimes followed by probable resumption of the arms race with dire consequences for humanity. Further proliferation of nuclear weapons may lead to the deliberate or accidental use of nuclear weapons in local wars. Only political unity among the major global powers and alliances, coupled with urgent and effective action, can reverse this trend.

Inventiveness and an aggressive search for new approaches can adapt nuclear arms control to the new realities, including disentangling further strategic arms reductions from the present knot of problems, binding agreements on the capabilities of BMD systems, limitations on existing and emerging long-range, precision-guided conventional offensive weapons and reductions in substrategic nuclear arms. Cooperative relations among key global and regional powers and alliances could be adapted to the emerging new post-Cold War world order molded through patient negotiations launched upon a joint Russia-US initiative. Nuclear arms control – the central pillar of the process – should be restored and modernized.

Hopefully, the next President of the United States will realize that the problems can be resolved if the leaders of the great powers are willing to work them out, and if experts approach them creatively.

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