

U.S.-Russia Tension Flares Over Nuclear Arms Control Now at Risk

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H.R. McMaster, national security advisor, speaks at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in Munich
Krisztian Bocsi / Bloomberg

(Bloomberg) — As tensions escalate between Russia and the U.S., the nuclear-armed former Cold War rivals are risking the future of decades-old arms control agreements that have helped to keep a strategic balance and prevent the risk of accidental war.

The conflict played out at a global security conference in Germany where Russia aired grievances about the U.S. and the Trump administration said a new nuclear doctrine unveiled this month doesn't increase risks. Germany, caught in between, was among European countries voicing concern as both big powers modernize their nuclear arsenals.

U.S. National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster defended the U.S. nuclear posture, which envisages building more low-yield bombs, and renewed accusations that Russia is violating a 1987 treaty that bans the deployment of intermediate-range missiles on land.

“We will not allow Russia any of the power to hold the populations of Europe hostage,” he

said Saturday in Munich, appearing on stage moments after Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov listed a litany of complaints about U.S.-led military expansion since the collapse of Communism.

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Syria Clash

Efforts to bridge the divide are stymied by a poisoned atmosphere as the U.S. responds to alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential vote, with 13 Russians indicted Friday including a businessman close to President Vladimir Putin. The two powers are also clashing in Syria, where U.S. strikes killed more than 200 Russian mercenaries who attacked American-backed forces Feb. 7, according to people familiar with the matter.

“In the U.S., the animus is so tremendous that punishing Russia is the thing to do,” Dmitri Trenin, head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, said in an interview. “I see the demise of the entire arms control regime.”

While the two countries have fulfilled the terms of another landmark nuclear weapons reduction treaty, New START, that accord expires in 2021 and there’s political pressure on President Donald Trump to let it expire because of the alleged Russian non-compliance with the INF treaty. Moscow in turn accuses Washington of itself breaking the intermediate-range pact. So far, no formal negotiations are taking place on either issue.

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European Fears

Javier Solana, a Spaniard who served as NATO secretary-general, and Sigmar Gabriel, Germany’s acting foreign minister, expressed alarm.

“The most likely theater for nuclear conflicts would once again be here, in the center of Europe,” Gabriel told the conference.

Graham Allison, a Pentagon adviser under former U.S. President Ronald Reagan when the two superpowers were negotiating arms control, said he’s skeptical momentum will be found to revive START and the INF.

Arms control was developed primarily to prevent the “insane” possibility that Russia and the U.S. would annihilate each other due to miscalculation or accident, despite not even wanting to go to war, said Allison, now a professor of government at Harvard University. “Those risks remain today.”

That’s something the Russians can agree on.

According to Sergei Karaganov, a former Kremlin foreign policy adviser, the situation could get “much more dangerous” than during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, when the world was on the brink of nuclear war.

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'No Limits'

Under New START, which followed from the 1991 START treaty and was signed in 2010, the Russian and U.S. arsenals are restricted to no more than 1,550 deployed strategic warheads on no more than 700 deployed strategic missiles and bombers.

If that long-range missile pact isn't prolonged and the INF collapses, "you have a situation where there are no limits on Russian and American nuclear forces," said Steven Pifer, a former top State Department official and arms control expert.

In addition, Russia and the U.S. would stop exchanging data on each other's nuclear arsenals and permitting regular inspections. "It would be less predictable, less secure, less stable," Pifer said.

Russia would respond to any U.S. move to station land-based intermediate-range missiles in Europe by deploying similar missiles to target "all the bases where these weapons will be," said Igor Korotchenko, director of the Center for Analysis of World Arms Trade in Moscow.

"And the U.S. can't stay safe over the ocean — we'll create the same risk for the U.S. as they do for us in Europe," he said.

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Losing Sight

Sam Nunn, a former U.S. senator and a prominent non-proliferation campaigner, says he's increasingly concerned that "both countries can lose count of their strategic interests."

Some experts such as Thomas Graham, ex-White House adviser under George W. Bush, believe Russia and the U.S. will blink when faced with the prospect of stepping into a void without the security of arms control.

Russia has proposed a 5-year extension to New START, to 2026, though it's tying that to fixing complaints about the way the U.S. has complied with the treaty, the Interfax news service reported Feb. 16.

"The chances are diminishing every day," said Konstantin Kosachyov, head of the foreign affairs committee of the Russian upper house of parliament.

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