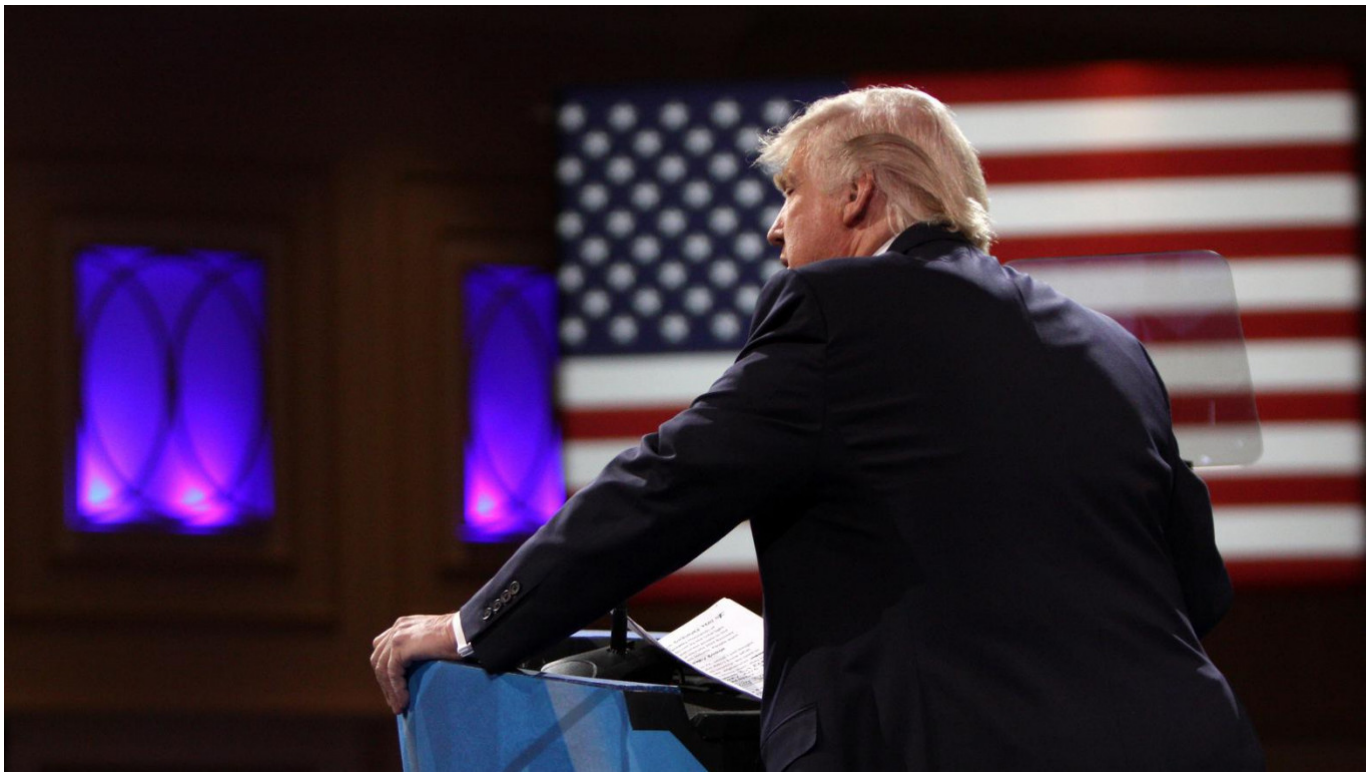
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Trump Wants a Nuclear Deal. Why Is This Bad News for Moscow?

Russia is about to lose its exclusive channel of cooperation with the U.S.

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The United States has announced it is to renew negotiations with Russia on nuclear arms control, with U.S. national security adviser Robert O'Brien making a statement to the effect live on Fox News on May 21. An agreement to hold a meeting of Russian and American delegations on strategic stability was reached on May 8 during the course of a telephone conversation between Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and Washington's new special presidential envoy for arms control, Marshall Billingslea.

This would appear to be good news for Moscow, which has long sought talks on the extension of the Strategic *Arms Reduction Treaty* (START or SNV-III, which expires on February 5,

2021). However, judging by the signals coming from Washington on the U.S. administration's true attitudes to the upcoming talks, the likelihood of achieving any kind of agreement are close to zero, with the exception of a strictly technical agreement on a short-term (6-12 months) extension of START to facilitate the continuation of negotiations on a new treaty. But even this is not yet guaranteed.

Exclusive dialogue

A more realistic scenario is the final collapse of the architecture of arms control and the loss of Russia's most prestigious channel of interaction with the U.S. For the last 30 years, the system of agreements on nuclear arms control inherited from the time of the Cold War has remained the sole format in which Russia had a status completely equal to that of the U.S.

It has strengthened Russia's exclusive role in world politics as the United States' sole rival of equal standing in a sphere of crucial importance for the survival of humanity. Soviet and Russian leaders had almost always strived (naively) for the exclusive status of equal relations with the U.S., which no other world power enjoyed.

As the historian Sergei Radchenko recently showed, in May 1973 Leonid Brezhnev secretly shared with Henry Kissinger his vision that "if the U.S. and the USSR had been able to agree on an equal partnership, we could have ruled the world," and in 1994 Boris Yeltsin told Bill Clinton that Russia "must be the first to join NATO, before the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and then Russia and the U.S. will form a kind of cartel for the provision of security in Europe and the world."

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It is this goal of "exclusive partnership" with the U.S. that is also the aim of Vladimir Putin's strategic initiative to organize an arms control summit for the permanent member states of the UN Security Council, and attempts to revive the "spirit of alliance" of Russia and the U.S. from the "time of the Encounter at the Elbe."

The system of bilateral agreements on nuclear weapons allowed Moscow to speak of the "special responsibility of Russia and the U.S. for the world's destiny."

This elevated Russia's geopolitical role and blocked attempts by other players to isolate or somehow punish Moscow for her involvement in other international problems. Of course, it is Russia's nuclear arsenal that lies behind this prestigious status, but the factor of exclusive dialogue with the U.S. not only gave Moscow added credentials, but also created certain opportunities for influencing Washington's position in other aspects of their relations.

Moscow usually takes a fairly calm approach to the collapse of the multilateral agreements of the Cold War era and is even withdrawing from them itself (the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty).

But if START is not extended, or if it is replaced by some kind of system of multilateral negotiations (the U.S. wants to include China, in which case Moscow will insist on the inclusion of the U.K. and France as U.S. allies, in order to block the possibility of a multilateral

format), this exclusive channel of cooperation with the U.S. will be eroded and will lose its value as an instrument for advancing Russian interests.

The China dilemma

From this perspective, it is clear why Moscow is not exactly happy about the U.S. initiative to invite China to talks on replacing the bilateral START with a new trilateral agreement.

Several rounds of consultations between Russia the U.S. in 2019 and early 2020 did not produce results, nor did attempts by the U.S. to discuss with Beijing the issue of China signing up to a trilateral reduction in nuclear arms.

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It is currently impossible to understand what such an agreement might look like, since the U.S. and Russia in total possess around 6,000 nuclear warheads (fewer than 1,550 of which are deployed on strategic missiles in accordance with START), and China has only 320 undeployed nuclear warheads (only half of which are for strategic missiles).

Either Russia and the U.S. will have to reduce their arsenals to Chinese levels (which is unrealistic), or allow China to increase the number of its warheads to Russo-American levels. This will not suit Moscow and Washington, though it is likely that China will anyway increase its strategic arsenal over time, with the aim of working toward Russia's marginalization in nuclear dialogue with the U.S.

Marshall Billingslea recently lifted the veil on Washington's view of the agreement. It must encompass all forms of nuclear warheads, both strategic and non-strategic (Russia has around 1,800 non-strategic warheads; the U.S. presently has several dozen in Europe, but submarine-launched nuclear cruise missiles may soon reappear; China has several dozen warheads for medium- and short-range missiles). The use of intrusive control methods is also being recommended, including inspections where there are grounds for suspicion, and the provision of an extensive telemetry data set.

The lamentable state of the crumbling arms control landscape is primarily the result of the incompetence and total recklessness of the Trump administration.

Donald Trump has personally been very concerned about the threat of nuclear war for 30 years already and believes that he alone can strike a genuinely big deal that will save humanity from catastrophe and provide him with a Nobel Peace Prize (in the mid-1980s he tried to convince Ronald Reagan to appoint him chief negotiator on arms control and was eager for a meeting with Gorbachev, Reagan sensibly declined).

But in spite of this, his administration has always been staffed with political appointees who are principled opponents of arms control.

Examples of this are national security advisor John Bolton and his right-hand man, National Security Council director Tim Morrison, who insisted on the U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (in 2001 Bolton persuaded George Bush Jr. to

withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty). This also goes for former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control Andrea Thompson and her aide Christopher Ford, who insisted that there was no point in an agreement on arms control "for the sake of arms control alon." Marshall Billingslea, who lacks serious negotiating experience in this sphere (he is a specialist in financial sanctions), is yet another who is opposed to arms control.

Overall, the Trump administration simply does not have enough qualified specialists (and a nuclear weapons agreement is an extremely complex and time-consuming matter, requiring the participation of a very wide range of experts).

Nonetheless, Trump is personally convinced that only he is capable of concluding the most comprehensive agreement on nuclear disarmament, that all he needs to do is negotiate on the issue with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.

Yet Trump does not have the faintest idea of what such a deal should look like and so far he cannot boast of any success in concluding agreements on nuclear weapons (for instance, with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un).

In this situation, Moscow is better off playing it cool and calmly rebuffing the more outlandish ideas of Trump and co. Kremlin's excessive demonstration of interest in the extension of START has already prompted the U.S. to put forward unacceptable conditions.

The factor of presidential elections in the U.S. in November also needs to be taken into full account. If Trump is re-elected, there will be enough time before the expiry of the START treaty to conclude an agreement on a short extension. If Joe Biden and the Democratic Party win, talks will be swiftly resumed in a far more professional and committed format, and the exclusive Russo-American cooperation on arms control will be preserved for the foreseeable future. We need to wait and see.

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