BRIEFING

European Parliament

Russia, arms control and non-proliferation

SUMMARY

Multilateral non-proliferation treaties have curbed the spread of the world's dangerous weapons. The international security order also builds on a series of bilateral agreements between the two leading nuclear powers, the Soviet Union/Russia and the United States (US), mostly concluded towards the end of the Cold War or soon afterwards.

Although the multilateral treaties are still in place, the bilateral elements have mostly come unstuck. In 2019, the US pulled out of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and it is probable that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the last remaining major bilateral arms control agreement, will expire in 2021. Russia's systematic violation of its arms control commitments is partly to blame. Other factors include increased US unilateralism and the failure of both sides to adapt the system to changing realities such as China's rise as a military power.

Russia is investing heavily in its nuclear forces and developing new and more powerful weapons. Its arsenal is equal to that of the US and in some areas it may even have at least temporary superiority, partially compensating for weaknesses in terms of conventional weapons.

As geopolitical tensions rise, arms control has become more necessary than ever. However, it seems unlikely that the US, Russia and possibly China will manage to conclude a new generation of agreements. The implications are not yet clear: neither a major shift in the military balance nor a new arms race are expected, but the lack of formal constraints creates uncertainty.

In this Briefing

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Overview of major agreements

Russia is party to a series of agreements that limit the spread of dangerous weapons and reduce the risk of military conflict. Multilateral **non-proliferation agreements** concern weapons of mass destruction (WMD) – those considered particularly dangerous due to their capacity to cause large-scale indiscriminate damage, including to civilian populations. Russia and nearly all the other countries of the world have committed to totally eliminating certain types of WMD, such as chemical and biological weapons, and limiting nuclear weapons to just five countries.

As Cold War competition between the Soviet Union and the US spiralled, the two sides signed a series of mostly bilateral **arms control agreements**, which aimed to ensure stability by setting limits on the numbers and types of nuclear and conventional weapons each of the potential adversaries could hold. Russia remains party to several of these. In Europe, these two types of agreements are flanked by **confidence- and security-building measures**. As their name suggests, these are intended to build trust between countries by requiring them to share information with one another about military activities.

Table 1 – Non-proliferation agreements

Name of treaty	Year of entry into force	Parties	Scope and purpose	Current situation
Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)	1970	191 countries, including Russia, the US and China	Limits nuclear weapons to Russia, US, China, UK and France; sets long-term goal of eliminating nuclear weapons for all countries, but without specifying how to reach it.	Complete nuclear disarmament remains unlikely, as none of the five nuclear-weapon states plan to get rid of their arsenals. In addition, a further four countries (India, Pakistan, Israel, North Korea, which are not parties to the NPT) have acquired nuclear weapons.
Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)	Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1996, but never came into force	166 countries, including Russia, but not the US and China have signed and ratified	A complete ban on all nuclear explosions, whether for military or civilian purposes	Although the CTBT never came into force, it is applied in effect, with a de facto moratorium on testing (North Korea is the only country known to have carried out recent tests).
Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons (TPNW)	Will enter into force once 50 countries have ratified	44 countries have signed and ratified, but not Russia, the US, China, the UK, France or any other nuclear-weapon states	Parties commit to eliminating all nuclear weapons	None of the countries that already have nuclear weapons has signed the TPNW or is likely to do so.
Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC)	1975	183 countries, including Russia, the US and China	A complete ban on biological weapons	According to the US, it is not certain that Russia has destroyed all its biological weapons.
Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)	1997	193 countries, including Russia, the US and China	A complete ban on chemical weapons	In 2018, Russian GRU (military intelligence) agents used Novichok, a weapons-grade nerve agent, in the attempted assassination of Sergey Skripal. The GRU is also accused of an attempted cyber-attack on the OPCW, the organisation that administers the CWC, also in 2018.

Table 2 – Arms control agreements

Name of treaty	Entry into force (/expiry)	Parties	Scope and purpose	Current situation
Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) Agreements I and II, Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START); Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT); New START	SALT I: 1972; SALT II: 1979; START: 1991-2009; SORT: 2002-2012; New START: 2011-2021	(New START): Russia, US	Reducing the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads and their launchers. (New START) does not include: non-deployed warheads, non-strategic warheads, certain new kinds of launchers	New START is due to expire in February 2021 unless the US and Russia decide to extend it for another five years. Talks on a possible extension are ongoing.
Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty	1988	Soviet Union/Russia, US	Complete elimination of all nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500-5 500 km. Does not include: submarine and air-launched missiles; ground-launched missiles with ranges of less than 500km/more than 5 000km	The US ended the treaty in 2019 after repeatedly accusing Russia of developing a banned missile type.
Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty	1972	Soviet Union/Russia, US	Ban on missile systems defending the whole of Soviet/US territory from attacks by strategic ballistic missiles	The US withdrew from the treaty in 2002
Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty	1990 (an adapted treaty was signed in 1999 but never entered into force)	22 NATO and former Warsaw Pact countries	Equal limits on the number of conventional weapons (such as aircraft and tanks) deployed by the two sides in Europe	In 2007 Russia announced that it was suspending implementation of the CFE, and in 2015 it withdrew completely

Table 3 – Confidence- and security-building measures

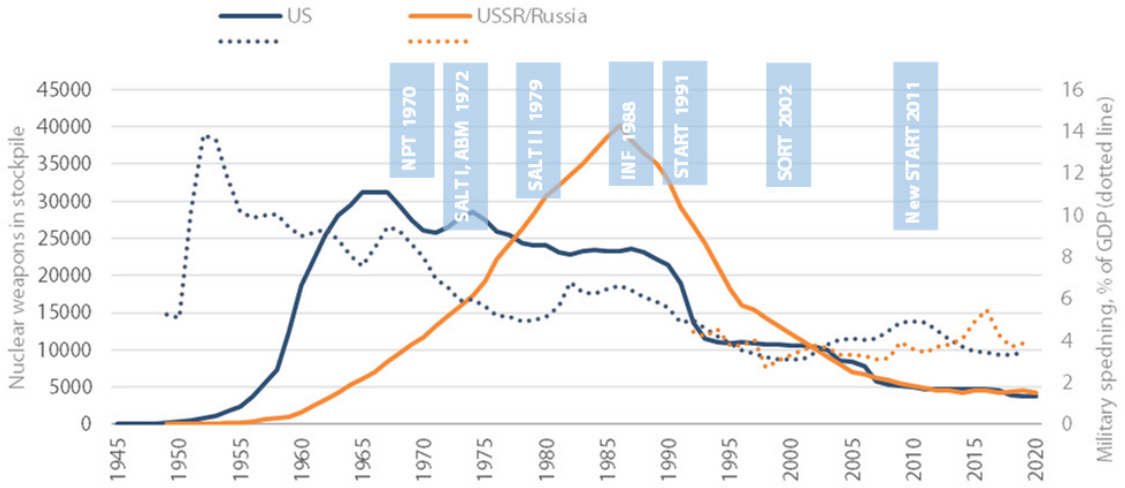
Name of treaty	Entry into force	Parties	Scope and purpose	Current situation
Vienna Document	1990	The 57 countries that belong to the OSCE, including Russia and the US	Participating countries exchange information on the structure and locations of their armed forces, weapons, planning, spending, and activities such as military drills	The US has accused Russia of not fully complying, but the treaty remains in force.
Open Skies Treaty	2002	34 mostly European countries, Russia, the US	Participating countries are allowed a fixed number of reconnaissance flights over each other's territories	In May 2020 the US gave notice of its plan to withdraw from the treaty in six months, due to Russia's failure to comply. No other countries have announced that they will follow suit.

Benefits of arms control and non-proliferation

Arms control is a key part of the European security order. Agreements between military competitors ensure a stable balance in which neither side can acquire a decisive advantage over the other, thus removing the incentive to start a conflict. Increased transparency – which results not only from confidence- and security-building measures such as the Vienna Document, but also from the communication channels and mutual inspections established by START and other arms control agreements – helps to create trust; it also ensures that potential adversaries are better informed of each other's activities, thus reducing the risk of misunderstandings that could trigger aggression.

Figure 1 – Arms control agreements, nuclear weapons, military spending

(Nuclear weapons in stockpile = deployed and non-deployed strategic and non-strategic warheads; does not include retired warheads awaiting dismantlement. No military spending data available for Soviet Union)



Arms control agreements have helped to bring down US and Russian nuclear stockpiles and military spending.

Data source: Federation of American Scientists, 1945-2013/2014-2020; SIPRI.

There are now fewer dangerous weapons in Europe and the world; for example, between 1986 and 2019, the global total of nuclear warheads (mostly held by Russia and the US) fell by 80 %, from nearly 70 000 to 13 500. By ending a destabilising and financially ruinous arms race, they have also brought down military budgets. In the final years of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was spending up to 17 % of its GDP on defence, compared to over 6 % for the US, and 2-4 % for most other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies. By 2019, these figures had fallen to 3.9 % for Russia, 3.4 % for the US, and 1-2 % for western European countries (see Figure 1). The resulting 'peace dividend' frees up government spending for other more constructive purposes that benefit the civilian population.

Arms control challenges

Gradual dismantling of the arms control system

The global non-proliferation regime remains in place. Although Syria has used chemical weapons (possibly with Russian backing) to devastating effect, most countries are complying with the ban on the use of biological and chemical weapons. Just four countries (Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea) are thought to have acquired nuclear weapons since the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty came into effect, and only North Korea has broken the global moratorium on nuclear testing since 2000.

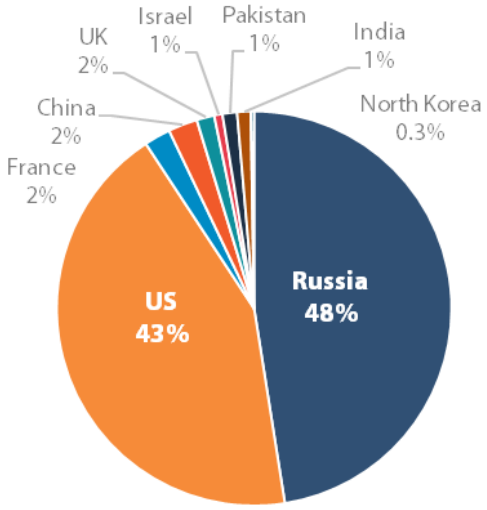
However, most of the agreements signed between the former Cold War adversaries have gradually come unstuck. The first to go was the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which the US unilaterally withdrew from in 2002. For its part, Russia suspended implementation of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty in 2007, and pulled out of it altogether in 2015. After years of claims that Russia had developed banned missiles, the US terminated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019, and is now planning to do likewise for the Open Skies Treaty (Russia has not yet said whether it will follow suit for the latter treaty). New START is due to expire in February 2021, and the prospects for it being extended are currently looking doubtful.

Russia's violations of arms control commitments

Concerns about Russia's compliance with its arms control commitments go back many years. The US first publicly accused Russia of violating the **Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty** in 2014, but development of the banned SSC-8 missile is thought to have already begun in the mid-2000s. For its part, Russia has raised three concerns about US compliance: firstly, the US uses intermediate-range missiles as targets in tests of missile defence systems; secondly, the latter systems use launchers that could be used to fire intermediate-range missiles; thirdly, the US has developed drones that are launched from the ground and can carry weapons to intermediate range. Washington disputes these claims, arguing that 1) the INF Treaty specifically allows disaffected missiles to be used for research and development purposes; 2) missile defence launchers, though similar to those banned by the INF, are not compatible with offensive missiles; 3) drones are fundamentally different from missiles, in that they are pilot-controlled and recoverable, and are therefore outside the scope of the treaty (in any case, Russia is developing similar weapons of its own). Refusing to accept Russian assurances that the SSC-8 is a short-range missile (the US estimates its maximum range at 2 500km), Washington decided to withdraw from the Treaty in 2019.

Figure 2 – Nuclear weapons by country, 2020

(deployed /non-deployed /retired /strategic /non-strategic)



Nine countries are known or believed to have nuclear arms. Between them, the US and Russia have over 90 % of the world's nuclear weapons.

Data source: Federation of American Scientists.

In 2018, Russian agents were accused of using Novichok nerve agent in an attempt to assassinate former spy Sergey Skripal. An unknown, but possibly similar substance may have been used to poison Russian opposition politician Alexey Navalny in August 2020. Long before these two incidents, the US already suspected that Russia had not completely destroyed its **chemical weapons**. It had similarly long-standing concerns with unjustified Russian restrictions barring **Open Skies Treaty** reconnaissance flights over Chechnya, Russia's border with the separatist Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Kaliningrad. Russia's refusal to provide information on the location of its troops in these two territories also violates the **Vienna Document**. In addition, Russia is suspected of under-reporting the number of troops participating in large-scale military drills such as ZAPAD-2017, in order to avoid having to invite international observers, as required by the Vienna Document.

In 2019, US military intelligence claimed that Russia may have carried out nuclear tests, which are prohibited by the **Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty**, but without producing evidence. Russia denies this claim.

Declining US interest in arms control

In line with President Trump's 'America First' policy and his scepticism of multilateral agreements and institutions, arms control has become less of a priority for his administration. In 2013, Barack Obama suggested that Russia and the US could reduce their strategic nuclear arsenals to 1 000 warheads each, one third less than the limits currently set by New START, and he also advocated US ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. By contrast, Donald Trump and Presidential Arms Control Envoy Marshall Billingslea have emphasised America's capacity to spend Russia and China 'into oblivion' in the absence of INF and New START constraints. In May 2020, US officials reportedly even considered breaking the country's 28-year old moratorium on nuclear tests.

Despite this change of direction under the Trump administration, many of the frustrations which it has expressed with the arms control regime echo those of his predecessors. These include failure to address Russia's long-standing violations of arms control agreements, as well as the fact that some of the most dangerous Russian weapons are exempt from restrictions. Furthermore, US officials note that China has a potentially unfair advantage as it is not bound by most of the commitments undertaken by the US and Russia.

Missile defence: A sensitive issue for Russia

Bilateral Russia-US nuclear arms control is not just a matter of each side cutting equal numbers of warheads. In his March 2018 address to the Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin claimed that superior US missile defences risked 'the complete devaluation of Russia's nuclear potential' by acquiring the capacity to intercept all of its missiles, thereby making it impossible for Moscow to launch an effective counter-attack in the doomsday scenario of an all-out nuclear war.

Russia has often claimed that strong missile defences could create a perverse incentive to take the enemy by surprise by launching the first attack, in order to eliminate as many nuclear weapons and missile defences as possible. The aim of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was therefore to eliminate this incentive by restricting both sides' defensive systems.

However, in 2002 the US pulled out of the ABM Treaty, arguing that it was no longer needed because relations between Russia and the US had improved and the risk of a nuclear conflict had receded. Since 2007, NATO has developed a European missile shield; interceptors have already been deployed to Romania and a second site is under construction in Poland. NATO has repeatedly insisted that its missile defence systems are intended to counter limited threats from countries such as Iran, not Russia. Indeed, given that Russia has more than enough nuclear warheads to overwhelm NATO defences, the argument that the latter would allow Washington to launch a nuclear attack against Moscow with impunity makes little sense.

Nevertheless, missile defence remains a sensitive issue for Russia. After the US withdrew from the ABM Treaty, Russia announced that it was cancelling its ratification of the START II Treaty on strategic nuclear weapons before the latter came into force (although this did not prevent it from signing SORT in the same year). Similarly, in 2007 it pulled out of the CFE treaty over the planned European missile shield. Russia's June 2020 nuclear deterrence policy (see below) also identifies US anti-ballistic missile systems as a threat.

Nuclear weapons in Russian military strategy

During the Cold War, the balance in Europe of conventional weapons such as tanks and aircraft was overwhelmingly in favour of the Soviet Union; indeed, it was this situation that the CFE Treaty was designed to address, by requiring the Warsaw Pact and NATO to cut back to equal levels. However, during the 1990s Russia was unable to maintain Soviet-era levels of military expenditure, and a huge gap opened up. Nuclear weapons are the only area where Russia has retained parity.

In 1982, at a time when Moscow still had a conventional advantage, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev pledged that his country would never be the first to use nuclear weapons. However, after that

advantage disappeared, Russia withdrew its no first-use policy in 1993. The 2000 Military Doctrine states that nuclear weapons can be used 'in response to large-scale aggression involving conventional weapons in situations that are critical for the national security of the Russian Federation and its allies'.

The US 2018 Nuclear Posture Review expresses a widely held belief that, in order to compensate for the weakness of its conventional armed forces, Russia is prepared to contemplate limited nuclear strikes even in smaller-scale conflicts, using them to rapidly end fighting or to deter a NATO intervention. As evidence for this idea of 'escalating to de-escalate', which Russia has never acknowledged, western analysts point out that all the country's large-scale military drills have included simulations of nuclear strikes. In 2015, Putin admitted that he had put the armed forces on nuclear standby during the annexation of Crimea. Several times since then, Russia has invoked its nuclear arsenal to intimidate Ukraine's western backers. For example, referring to EU and US economic sanctions against Russia, in October 2014 Putin hinted at the consequences of 'discord between large nuclear powers' for strategic stability.

Despite such rhetoric, it remains unclear whether Russia would ever carry out a nuclear strike when not under extreme pressure to do so. Following military reforms that have upgraded conventional capability, Russia now has more non-nuclear options to fall back on. At least in published documents, official nuclear policy has actually become more restrictive, with the two most recent versions of the Russian Military Doctrine (from 2010 and 2014) only allowing a nuclear response to a conventional attack if 'the very existence of the state is in jeopardy. In 2018, Putin ruled out the idea of a pre-emptive strike.

Russia's nuclear deterrence policy, published for the first time ever in June 2020, adds more details on what the Kremlin considers to be existential threats: the launch of ballistic missiles, whether conventional or nuclear, against Russian territory; the use of weapons of mass destruction; and attacks on critical Russian state or military facilities intended to disrupt its nuclear response. This wording is quite similar to that of the US 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, which also envisages the use of nuclear weapons 'to defend the vital interests of the United States [against] significant non-nuclear strategic attacks' such as attacks on civilian population and nuclear forces'.

Russia's 2020 nuclear policy confirms that deterrence, including nuclear deterrence, is one of its highest priorities. However, it does not spell out the size of the nuclear arsenal needed to ensure this goal, other than stating that it should be 'at an adequate level'. Given that its conventional forces, though much improved, are still no match for NATO, Moscow is unlikely to be interested in further nuclear disarmament. At the same time, Russia has every reason to want to keep the status quo under New START, which guarantees strategic nuclear parity with the US. In December 2019, Putin expressed his unconditional willingness to extend the treaty.

A new nuclear arms race?

Since 2000, Russia has invested heavily in its nuclear arsenal. As well as replacing obsolete Soviet-era missiles, it has also developed several new types of weapon. In his March 2018 address to the Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin claims that the latter are necessary owing to the refusal of the US to scale back its missile defences. Precise, highly manoeuvrable and travelling up to 20 times the speed of sound over huge distances, they are practically unstoppable, according to him.

Table 4 – New Russian nuclear weapons

Name	Type	Warheads carried	Range	Targets	Features	Deployment
Sarmat	Ground-launched intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)	10-15 nuclear	16 000 km	Missile defence	Replaces SS-18 ICBM	2022-2027
Avangard	Hypersonic glide vehicle, launched by ICBMs such as Sarmat	1 nuclear	6 000km	Missile defence/high value targets	Travels at 20 times the speed of sound	2019
Poseidon	Submarine-launched Underwater drone	Conventional or nuclear	10 000 km	Coastal cities, infrastructure, aircraft carriers	Capable of reaching depths of 1km. Could set off a radioactive tsunami	After 2027
Burevestnik	Ground-launched cruise missile	Nuclear	Over 25 000 km	Missile defence	Powered by a nuclear reactor	After 2030
Kinzhal	Air-launched ballistic missile	Conventional or nuclear	2 000 km (including bomber flight)	Naval vessels	Travels at 10 times the speed of sound	On trial basis in 2017
Tsirkon	Cruise missile, launched from ship or submarine	Conventional; perhaps also nuclear	500 km	Ships and ground targets	Travels at 9 times the speed of sound	2025-2030

Data sources: Congressional Research Service, Nuclear Threat Initiative.

In December 2019, Russia claimed that it had already deployed Avangard, though it remains unclear whether the system is ready for use. Burevestnik appears to be at a less advanced stage; an explosion in August 2019 that killed five engineers and released a radioactive cloud over the Arctic settlement of Severodvinsk is thought to have been caused by a test that went wrong. Most of these systems are unlikely to be deployed before the late 2020s.

According to one estimate, in 2016 Russia spent US$11 billion on nuclear weapons, around 13 % of its total defence budget, up from US$7 billion in 2010. This is only a very rough figure, given that Russian military expenditure is mostly classified. Following recent deep budget cuts, current nuclear spending is unlikely to be much more than this.

On the US side, Barack Obama pledged in 2010 that Washington would not develop any new types of nuclear weapons. However, the country's modernisation programme has been running for several years, and has already delivered missiles that are more lethal and accurate than ever before. Expenditure on nuclear forces has been stepped up under Donald Trump, and is expected to reach US$50 billion a year over the next 10 years, equivalent to 7 % of US military spending in 2019.

Although Russia and the US are both putting more and more money into nuclear weapons, the prospect of a Cold War-style arms race, in which each side tries to outspend the other, is a distant one. With the US modernisation programme costing possibly five times as much as Russia's, Moscow cannot afford to keep pace; with its economy facing a massive post-coronavirus downturn, the Russian Finance Ministry is now considering further defence spending cuts. In March 2018, Putin announced that Russia was far ahead of its rivals in terms of innovative offensive weapons, but even

if his claim is true, this is not likely to give more than a temporary advantage as new US weapons are deployed over the next few years.

Nuclear weapons outside the scope of arms control restrictions

A large share especially of Russia's nuclear arsenal remains outside the scope of New START, which only applies to deployed strategic nuclear warheads and their carriers. Both sides have large numbers of non-deployed weapons, although these are of lesser concern as they are not available for immediate use and could not therefore be launched during the initial and probably decisive stages of a nuclear conflict. Russia is particularly strong in the non-strategic category, where it has almost 10 times more weapons than the US. Little is known about China's non-strategic arsenal, but if it exists, it is likely to be still smaller (see Figure 3).

Categories of nuclear warheads

Strategic versus non-strategic/tactical: although there is no universally agreed distinction between these two categories, non-strategic warheads are generally designed for use against military targets, for example in battle. They tend to be less powerful than strategic warheads, and are used at shorter distances. By contrast, strategic warheads (such as the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) are capable of causing much more extensive damage, including at long distances.

Deployed versus non-deployed: deployed warheads are mounted on missiles or kept at heavy bomber bases, ready for immediate use, whereas non-deployed warheads are kept in storage.

Both the US and Russia have large numbers of warheads that, though still intact, have been **retired** from service and are scheduled to be dismantled.

Some observers have expressed doubts that non-strategic weapons could seriously threaten NATO, arguing that they are mostly intended for limited military targets at short distances. In any case, Russia's advantage in this respect is offset by NATO's conventional strength, for example in precision-guided missiles. However, non-strategic weapons could also cause serious damage to civilian targets at longer distances, especially if mounted on the intermediate-range missiles that Russia is accused of developing. The US therefore has a strong interest in ensuring that a future nuclear arms control agreement to replace New START should include limits, or at least some provisions for transparency, in this area.

New START restricts not only the number of deployed nuclear warheads, but also the total number of weapons that carry them: intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and heavy bombers. Hence, the intercontinental ballistic missiles used to launch the Avangard system arguably fall within the scope of the treaty. On the other hand, it is less certain whether innovative weapons such as Poseidon, Burevestnik and Kinzhal fit the definitions set out in New START – a tricky issue for negotiations on extending New START or replacing it with a new agreement.

Outlook

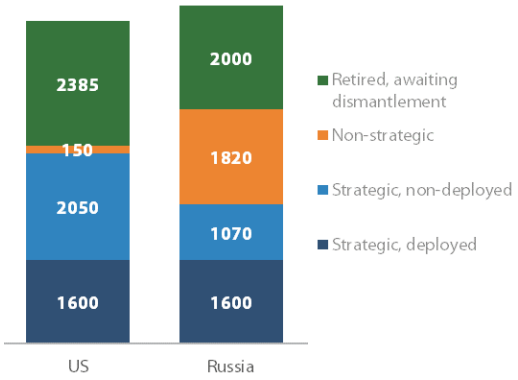
Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty: Although Russian non-compliance was the immediate cause of the US decision to end the treaty, both Russia and the US have pointed out that the INF Treaty put them at a disadvantage compared with countries that have built up extensive arsenals of intermediate-range missiles. The US is unlikely to be interested in a new treaty unless it includes China, which however has ruled out participating – unsurprisingly, given that up to 95 % of its missiles would be banned by such a treaty. Given the lack of interest on all sides in replacing the INF treaty, there is little chance of a formal agreement not to deploy of land-based intermediate-range missiles in Europe.

In theory, this development could shift the balance in Russia's favour. In 2018, Putin claimed that giving up its ground-launched missiles had amounted to unilateral disarmament for Moscow, given that it did not have the same capacity to launch missiles from the air and the sea as the US. With the INF Treaty constraints gone, Russia could openly deploy large numbers of the formerly banned

missiles in Europe. Whether this will actually happen is debatable. While both Russia and the US have plans to develop ground-launched intermediate-range missiles, NATO has ruled out deploying such weapons in Europe, and Russia has declared that it will not be the first to do so. However, in the absence of formal treaty commitments, this could change.

New START: The US has declared Russia to be in compliance with New START, unlike the INF. The Treaty is due to expire in February 2021, but can be extended for a further five years without further negotiation, provided both parties are willing. So far, US arms control envoy Billingslea and Russian deputy foreign minister Sergey Ryabkov have met for two rounds of talks in Vienna.

Figure3 – US and Russian nuclear warheads by category, 2019



Russia and the US have equal numbers of deployed strategic nuclear warheads, roughly in line with New START limits (1550 by 2021), but Russia has many more non-strategic weapons.

Data source: Federation of American Scientists, US, Russia.

The two sides are still far from agreement. Whereas Putin says he is willing to extend New START unconditionally, the US has reservations; in 2017, President Trump denounced the Treaty as a 'bad deal'. Rather than simply extending it, the US has signalled its preference for a new trilateral agreement with China on all nuclear weapons, including non-strategic ones. However, there is no reason to expect that Beijing will commit to the unequal status quo; it has rejected an invitation to join Russia-US talks in Vienna. In July 2020, Fu Cong, Billingslea's Chinese counterpart, declared that Beijing would only be willing to participate if the US agreed to reduce its arsenal to the size of China's, which according to him was twenty times smaller. Without restrictions, US military intelligence predicts that China could double its number of nuclear warheads over the next 10 years.

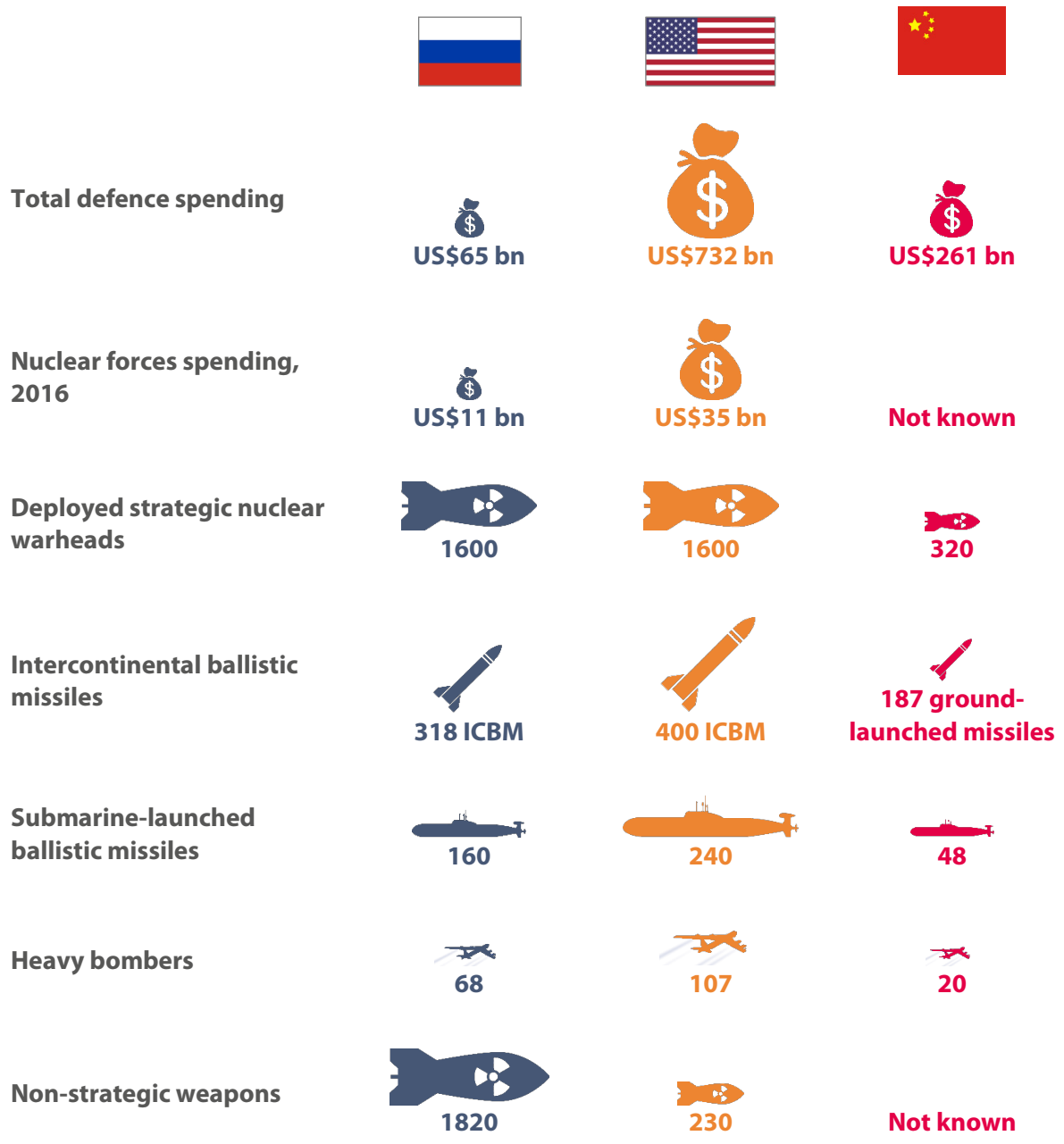
In August 2020, the US appeared to have backed down on including China, at least for now, with Billingslea acknowledging a shift in Washington's position. However, the chances of a compromise on other issues still look remote. Russia has no interest in including its currently unrestricted non-strategic weapons, as this is an area where it has a significant advantage, unless the US offers concessions on missile defence and conventional weapons, which also seems unlikely. After the second round of talks in August 2020, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov described US demands as 'absolutely unrealistic'.

Opinions are divided on what the end of New START would mean. According to the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review, Russia has significantly greater warhead-production capacity than the US and its allies. In the short term, this capacity and the absence of treaty constraints would allow Russia to deploy up to two thirds more strategic weapons even without acquiring new launchers, simply by increasing the number of warheads deployed on existing missiles. On the other hand, given much higher US spending, this advantage would probably not last very long. It could be argued that allowing New START to lapse would even serve the cause of disarmament by giving the US more leverage to persuade Russia to include non-strategic weapons in a future agreement, given Moscow's interest in having at least some limits on the US arsenal.

On the other hand, advocates of New START argue that it gives the two parties transparency and predictability about each other's strategic forces. The US and Russia have exchanged thousands of notifications about each other's activities, and carried out dozens of inspections (up to 18 per year for each party). Without the treaty, all this will end. Moreover, however imperfect, so long as it remains in force, New START can serve as a stepping stone towards a new and upgraded agreement. From this point of view, its likely demise is a setback for arms control.

Even before the international arms control regime started to unravel, it already had major shortcomings. Built largely during and immediately after the Cold War, it has not kept pace with developments since, and excludes large categories of dangerous weapons, as well as increasingly important players – China in particular. Nevertheless, its disintegration has created a new and dangerous situation for Europe, with more weapons and less communication. Less transparency increases the risk of dangerous miscalculations. Rising geopolitical tensions make a new generation of arms control agreements more necessary than ever, but also – in the absence of trust needed to negotiate and implement them – more difficult to conclude.

Figure 4 – Russian, US and Chinese nuclear forces



Data for 2019 unless stated otherwise.

Data sources: defence spending: SIPRI; nuclear forces spending, US, Russia; nuclear weapons: Russia, US, China.

EU/NATO/European Parliament position

The EU's 2016 Global Strategy expresses concerns about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and support for the full implementation of arms control and non-proliferation treaties. In line with this position, after the US announced its intention to pull out of the INF Treaty, the spokesperson of the European External Action Service described the Treaty as a pillar of European security architecture, called on Russia to address compliance concerns, and asked the US to consider the consequences of its withdrawal. For the EU, a new arms race would benefit no-one and bring further instability.

In December 2018, foreign ministers of NATO countries expressed strong support for the US position that Russia was in material breach of its obligations under the INF Treaty, and noted that a situation when Russia violated the Treaty while other parties complied was not sustainable.

In its January 2020 resolution on the implementation of the common security and defence policy, the European Parliament emphasised the need to tackle the threat of nuclear proliferation, called for compliance with nuclear treaties, and expressed support for a new treaty to replace the INF treaty.

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