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RESTORING STRATEGIC STABILITY IN AN ERA OF GREAT POWER TENSION

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RESTORING STRATEGIC STABILITY IN AN ERA OF GREAT POWER TENSION

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INTRODUCTION

One week after assuming office on January 20, 2021, President Joe Biden reached out by phone to Russian President Vladimir Putin in order to fulfill his campaign pledge to extend the New START nuclear arms control treaty before it expired in early February and use it as a foundation to pursue new arms control agreements. Both sides agreed to the maximum five-year extension allowed under the treaty's guidelines.

In the same phone call, however, Biden brought up the massive SolarWinds cyber-attack of U.S. government computers that the U.S. intelligence community blames on Moscow. Biden also highlighted reports that the Kremlin had placed bounties on U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and criticized the poisoning and subsequent imprisonment of Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny.

"I made clear to President Putin, in a manner very different from my predecessor, that the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions...are over," Biden said days later in his first foreign policy speech. "We will not hesitate to raise the cost to Russia and defend our vital interests."

The testy jockeying between the two strategic adversaries even as they explore common interests in averting a runaway nuclear arms race highlights just how complex and difficult arms control negotiations have become in an era of renewed major power competition, destabilizing new technologies and increasing levels of international tension and distrust. With the United States and Russia possessing roughly 90 percent of nuclear warheads worldwide, the future not only of both countries but of humanity itself depends on their successfully managing escalating tensions and limiting the threat posed by these ultimate weapons. Little wonder that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has reset its Doomsday Clock to just one hundred seconds to midnight, the closest it's ever been to Armageddon.

The recent agreement by the United States and Russia to extend New START for five years is a welcome development. Absent the extension, the United States and Russia would for the first time in decades have had no constraints on their nuclear arsenals, raising the specter of an all-out nuclear arms race at a time when U.S.-Russian tensions are reaching levels not seen since the darkest days of the Cold War.

Previously the Trump administration had delayed serious negotiations on New START until 2019, leaving relatively little time to reach a complex agreement on what was an ambitious proposal. Trump negotiators initially insisted that China participate in the talks, which Beijing has steadfastly refused to do. U.S. negotiators also wanted a stronger verification regime. The final deal breaker, however, was a U.S. proposal that an extended agreement limit all of Russia's nuclear weapons, long-range, "strategic" nuclear weapons covered by New START, as well as Moscow's large stockpile of smaller, shorter range "tactical" nuclear weapons not currently covered. The final U.S. offer was a one-year extension of New START that included a freeze on both countries' full nuclear arsenals, to include tactical weapons. Russia backed away from that deal at the last moment because of concerns about an intrusive verification regime for tactical nuclear weapons.

The intense back and forth over just a brief extension of New START, and the collapse of the Trump administration's negotiations, were a clear indication that the United States, Russia and China have entered a new era of major power competition and high tensions, including an incipient nuclear arms race. All three nations are in the midst of aggressive modernizations of their nuclear arsenals, for instance, and are pursuing new technologies such as hypersonic missiles, space weaponry and offensive cyber capabilities

that threaten to disrupt the delicate balance of nuclear deterrence based on “mutually assured destruction.” The extension of New START creates space and breathing room for negotiators to address those alarming trends, but it does not fundamentally alter a dangerous downward spiral in major power relations.

NEW ARMS RACE

In annexing Crimea in 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin redrew the boundaries of Europe by military force for the first time since World War II. The Kremlin subsequently backed separatist rebels in Ukraine, intervened militarily on behalf of a war criminal in Syria, interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and in 2018 poisoned a former Russian military officer and western spy on British soil, leading to another round of western sanctions and the expulsion of Russian diplomats from the United States and many other nations. Just in the past year Russian intelligence agents reportedly poisoned opposition leader Alexey Navalny, who was recently imprisoned in a show trial, and once again attempted to interfere in the U.S. presidential election. Moscow also conducted the massive SolarWinds hack of U.S. government computers. Meanwhile, Russian military aircraft have stepped up their provocative intercepts of U.S. military aircraft in international airspace, and a Russian military patrol rammed a U.S. military vehicle in Syria and caused injuries to U.S. soldiers last year, a redline that was rarely crossed even in the darkest days of the Cold War.

In a seminal speech in 2018, President Vladimir Putin revealed the centrality of nuclear weapons to Russia’s increasing international aggressiveness by introducing six new nuclear weapons delivery systems then in development, including the now deployed “Avangard” long-range hypersonic glide vehicle, which can reportedly fly 20 times the speed of sound; as well as novel weapons such as nuclear-powered torpedoes and cruise missiles with theoretically unlimited range. According to U.S. officials, Moscow has also adopted and exercised a provocative nuclear warfighting doctrine that calls for early use of its large stockpile of lower-yield, tactical nuclear weapons against conventional NATO forces in an “escalate to win” strategy.



The Chinese DF-17 hypersonic missile on display at the October 1, 2019 military parade. Photo: *Bloomberg*

In September 2020, U.S. Space Command accused Russia of testing a space-based anti-satellite weapon that flew “in abnormally close proximity” to a U.S. satellite. The next month the U.S. Justice Department announced criminal charges against a team of Russian military intelligence agents for conducting the most disruptive and destructive series of cyberattacks ever attributed to one group, which included attacking Ukraine’s power grid in the middle of winter, and releasing a mock ransomware computer virus that infected computers around the world and caused billions of dollars in damage. With no agreement among the major nuclear powers putting constraints on such cyberattacks, the

NUCLEAR DELIVERY SYSTEMS SINCE 2010

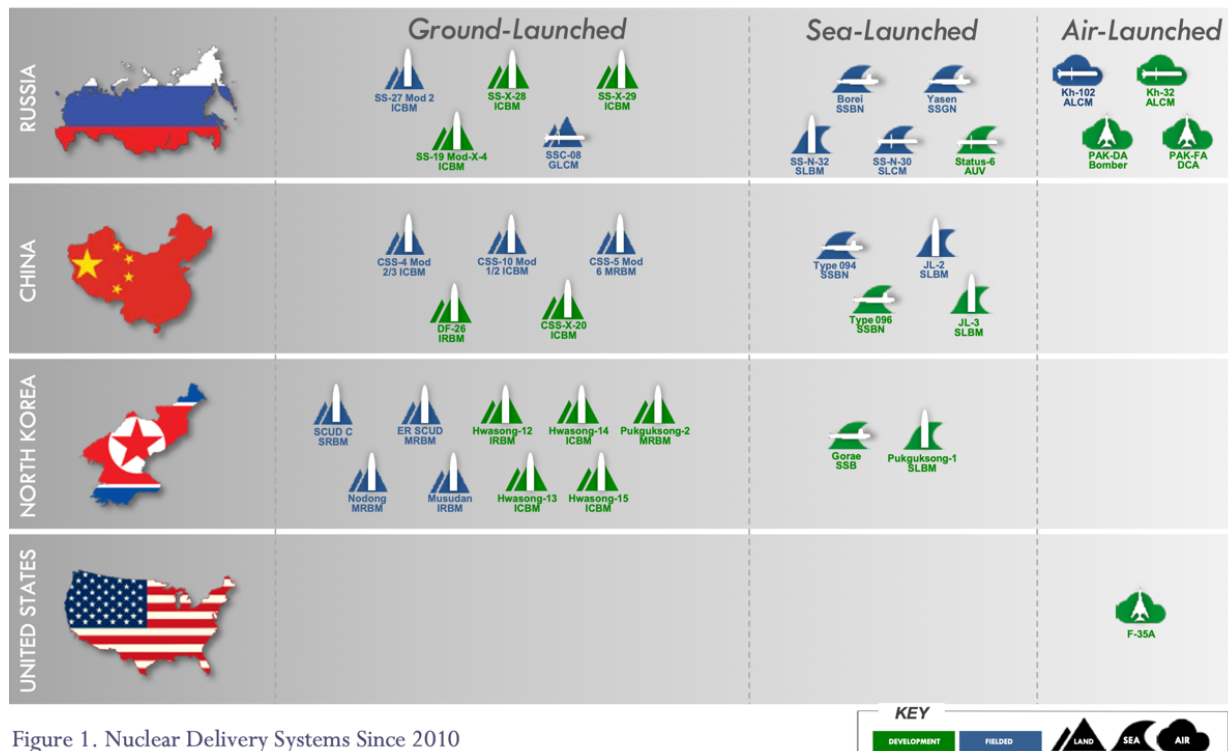


Figure 1. Nuclear Delivery Systems Since 2010

Data provided by the DoD

Analysis of selected nuclear platforms fielded since 2010. Source: U.S. Department of Defense

threat is real that one could wreak havoc on early warning and command-and-control systems for nuclear weapons, greatly increasing the danger of a catastrophic nuclear mishap.

Meanwhile, in its annual “China Military Power” report to Congress, the Pentagon recently estimated that Beijing will double its stockpile of nuclear warheads over the next decade from its current level estimated at 320 (versus 6,100 and 6,500 for the United States and Russia, respectively). Of major concern to the Pentagon, China has built up the world’s largest arsenal of more than 2,000 intermediate range, ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles, most with conventional warheads but some unknown number “dual capable” of carrying either conventional or nuclear warheads to targets in the Asia Pacific region.

As he consolidates power with an iron grip at home, Chinese President Xi Jinping has also greatly increased Beijing’s bullying behavior in the Indo-Pacific region, crushing decent and the individual freedoms inherent in the “one country, two systems” arrangement with Hong Kong; menacing Taiwan with increasingly provocative military maneuvers on its periphery; and engaging in violent clashes with Indian forces along their shared border.

For its part, the United States is also modernizing its nuclear triad of submarine-launched ballistic missiles, nuclear-capable aircraft, and intercontinental ballistic missiles. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review called for beginning construction in 2021 of new *Columbia*-class missile submarines to replace the current *Ohio*-class “boomers”; replacing current B-2 and B-52 nuclear capable bombers with the new B-21 Raider



Rendering of the future USS *Columbia* SSBN. U.S. Navy

bomber beginning in the mid-2020s; and developing a replacement for “Minuteman” intercontinental ballistic missiles to be ready by 2029. The Pentagon has also launched a crash program to field its own hypersonic weapons, with testing of a missile capable of flying faster than the speed of sound (Mach 5) already underway, with initial fielding scheduled to begin in 2023. In the past year, the Defense Department has also launched the U.S. Space Force as its latest warfighting command, tasked with ensuring continued U.S. space supremacy.

ARMS CONTROL COLLAPSE

This nascent nuclear arms race is heating up at a time when the edifice of arms control and confidence-building mechanisms that kept Cold War dangers in check is on the verge of collapse. Over many decades of the Cold War a bipartisan consensus was reached in Washington, D.C. based on the understanding that U.S. national security was served by an architecture of arms control treaties and agreements; regular dialogue and consultation mechanisms; and other transparency and confidence-building measures that managed the risks and mitigated the tensions in U.S.-Soviet relations.

With the end of the Cold War the consensus in Washington, D.C. that national security was served by arms control treaties limiting U.S. and Russian freedom of action began to unravel. In 1999 the Senate signaled that era of bipartisan agreement was over when it emphatically rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) on a mostly party-line vote, marking the first time the U.S. Senate defeated a security-related treaty since the Treaty of Versailles nearly 80 years prior. Though the United States has since honored the moratorium on testing, the vote sent shock waves around the world and signaled that the United States was adopting a different approach towards nonproliferation (in 2020, the Trump administration discussed whether to end that decades-long moratorium and conduct the first U.S. nuclear test explosion since 1992).

In 2002 the George W. Bush administration, eager to build a ballistic missile defense system capable of protecting the United States from the missiles of rogue nations like North Korea and Iran, withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty over Russian objections. Angered at the continued expansion of the NATO alliance closer to its borders, Russia suspended its participation in the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty in 2007 that constrained the deployment of certain types of conventional forces, ending it entirely in 2015.



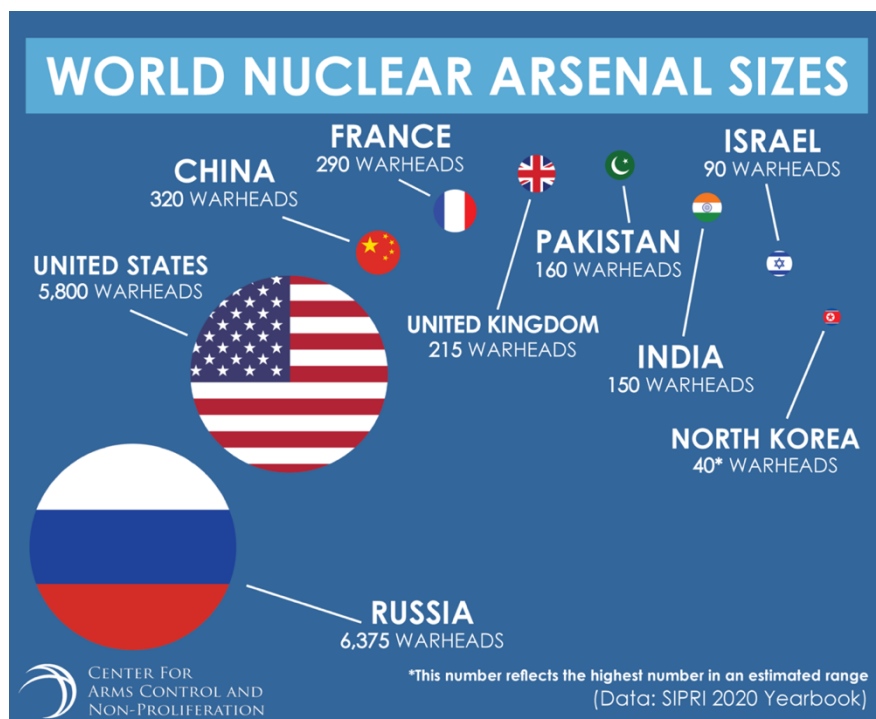
President George W. Bush announces U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, 2002. *White House Photo*

Alleging Russian cheating and concerned about China’s growing number of intermediate-range missiles, the Trump administration in 2019 terminated the landmark Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the first treaty that banned an entire category of land-based, intermediate-range nuclear missiles. In November 2020 the administration also formally withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, a confidence-building regime that permits unarmed aerial surveillance flights over the territory of its more than 30 signatories. That follows the Trump administration’s 2018 withdrawal from the multilateral Iran nuclear deal, isolating the United States from its Western allies and casting a shadow over stymied nuclear negotiations with North Korea.

REBUILDING STRATEGIC STABILITY

Growing tensions in U.S.-Russia-China relations have prompted many experts to draw parallels with the Cold War. With the carefully constructed Cold War architecture of arms control and verification treaties, de-confliction agreements and open communication channels near collapse, however, and as military provocations increase dramatically, today’s world bears an unsettling resemblance to the darkest early years of the Cold War, when missteps and crises like the Berlin Blockade, Korean War and Cuban Missile Crisis pushed the major powers to the brink.

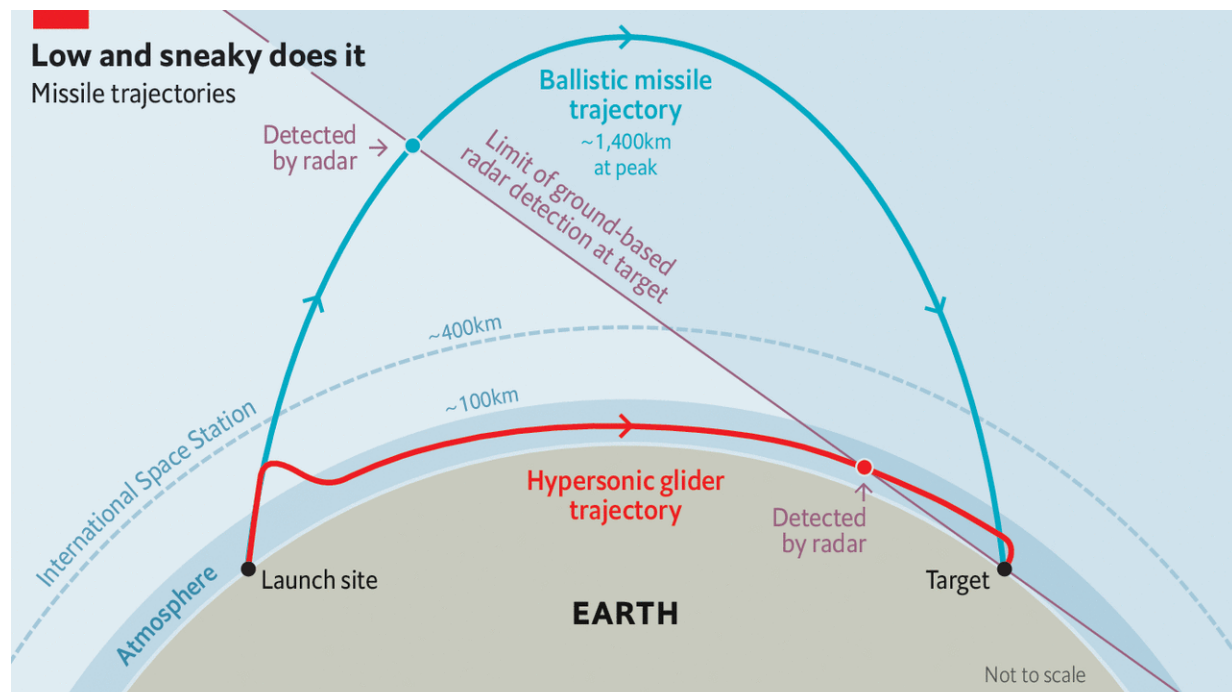
The need to halt this dangerous spiral in major power relations, and an emerging nuclear arms race, will weigh heavily on the Biden administration and Congress. Both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue will need to make rebuilding a foundation for strategic stability a top priority. Doing so will require reconstituting the once strong bipartisan consensus between the Executive Branch and Congress—and within Congress—behind the imperative of reducing nuclear risks. Achieving such a bipartisan consensus in this hyper-partisan moment will undoubtedly prove difficult. Yet the danger this escalating threat poses to the security of the American people—and the existential stakes involved for all of humanity—demand no less.



The Biden administration’s five-year extension of New START was a good beginning. That gives U.S. and Russian negotiators critical time and breathing room to begin discussing a host of thorny issues that must be addressed in planned follow-on agreements and broader strategic stability discussions, to include: the implications of new technologies such as hypersonic delivery systems, and their inevitable linkages to missile defense systems; possible constraints on anti-satellite and other space weaponry; new norms for

ensuring that offensive cyber capabilities are never used to target nuclear command-and-control or early warning systems, thus destabilizing the balance of nuclear deterrence; possible constraints on long-range conventional weapons that can target and hold at risk nuclear arsenals or command nodes; the inclusion in follow-on arms control agreements of lower-yield, shorter range “tactical” nuclear weapons, and the linkages to conventional force levels and positioning in Europe; inclusion of China and possibly other nuclear powers such as France and Great Britain in future arms control discussions; and the overall tenor of U.S.-Russian relations, including the possibility of lifting some sanctions on Moscow in exchange for positive arms limitation steps.

In terms of hypersonic nuclear delivery vehicles, the fact that Moscow has publicly touted its supposed lead in developing these weapons suggests that it is willing to include them in future arms control talks. The caveat is that Russia will inevitably link those talks to U.S. missile defense systems, a thorn in U.S.-Russian talks since Washington withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty back in 2002 in order to construct missile defenses against the limited arsenals of rogue states such as North Korea or Iran. Since resurrecting the ABM Treaty is likely a political non-starter in Washington, a central question in these discussions will be whether the Biden administration can offer further confidence-building or transparency measures that reassure Moscow that the U.S. missile defense system does not in fact threaten its strategic deterrent.



The Economist

Comparison of ballistic versus hypersonic trajectories. Source: *The Economist*

As noted, there is also growing evidence that the major powers are elevating their arms race into space, with the Pentagon noting that Russia conducted a non-destructive test of a space-based anti-satellite weapon near a U.S. satellite in 2020. According to its annual report to Congress on Chinese military capabilities, the Pentagon noted that Beijing is developing missiles and electronic weapons that can target satellites in low and high orbits. Meanwhile, the recent establishment of U.S. Space Command as the Defense Department’s newest warfighting command, and the adoption of a doctrine of maintaining U.S.

military superiority in space, suggests that the United States is also pursuing offensive and defensive anti-satellite capabilities. A key question is whether the three major powers are interested in avoiding extension of the arms race into space by updating the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which currently bans only the stationing of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in outer space and prohibits military activities on celestial bodies.

U.S. Intelligence Community warnings that both Russia and China tried to interfere in the recent U.S. presidential election, coming on the heels of Justice Department indictments of both Russian and Chinese intelligence agents for illegal computer hacking, were just the latest indications that the major powers are also involved in a race to weaponize offensive cyber capabilities. While few experts believe a binding treaty limiting these capabilities is realistic in the current climate of distrust, many have argued that the time has come to establish formalized norms on cyber operations banning the targeting of nuclear command-and-control and early warning systems, as well as other critical infrastructure.



Russian 9K720 *Iskander* short range ballistic missile and transporter erector launcher. Photo: [Vitaly Kuzmin](#)

Before the presidential election, talks between U.S. and Russian negotiators on extending New START bogged down over the U.S. insistence that a one-year extension include a freeze on both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons. As is often the case in arms control talks the devil was in the details of a verification regime to monitor such a "freeze," but the goal was laudable and Biden administration officials have indicated that it will be the subject of follow-on talks. Russia willingness to put its larger stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons on the negotiating table, however, will likely be linked to the disposition of NATO's conventional

military forces in Eastern Europe, reprising issues central to the moribund Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) Treaty. As a confidence-building measure to set the stage for such a discussion, the United States should continue its moratorium on deploying land-based, intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe despite withdrawing from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty over reported Russian cheating.

Another sticking point in recent negotiations was the Trump administration's insistence that China be part of follow-on talks. Because including Beijing in such talks would dilute its status as one of the two most powerful nuclear weapons states, Moscow has little incentive to push for Beijing's inclusion. With its much smaller nuclear arsenal relative to the United States and Russia, China also unsurprisingly refused to participate.



General Secretary Gorbachev & President Reagan sign the Intermediate -Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 1987. Photo: *The New York Times*

However, if the U.S. and Russia were willing to negotiate a significant further reduction in their nuclear arsenals in follow-on talks—as required by the principles agreed upon in the landmark Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty—then Beijing might have an incentive to take part in talks going forward. In the meantime, all three nations could lay the foundation for substantive talks by restating the pledge espoused by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev that helped melt away decades of mistrust and end the Cold War: “A nuclear war cannot be won, and must never be fought.”

CONGRESS’S CRITICAL ROLE

In the current political climate of hyper-partisanship in Washington, D.C., distrust and division have grown between the White House and Congress, and within the legislative branch, on issues such as policy towards Russia, the U.S. nuclear posture, support for NATO and the efficacy of multilateral treaties, institutions and alliances writ large. Indeed, the current generation of lawmakers has little memory of the deep and sustained bipartisanship that was necessary to build the foundation of strategic stability that kept the Cold War dormant for decades, and ultimately paved the way for victory by the western alliance. Congress must now play a critical role in rekindling that spirit of consensus on strategic issues, and rebuilding the expertise in nuclear policy that is once again required to keep the nation safe.

Congress’ role goes far beyond the Senate’s authority to simply ratify or reject treaties. Through the House and Senate Subcommittees on Strategic Forces, for instance, Congress has a critical oversight function in ensuring that the Executive Branch has a coherent and defensible strategy for managing strategic nuclear forces and achieving nonproliferation goals. Through public hearings, Congress also plays an important role in educating the American public and helping to build a constituency for thoughtful arms control and nonproliferation policy. As witnessed by the Senate’s 1999 rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and more recent threats by some senators to defund the CTBT’s international monitoring system, Congress also has significant power to negatively impact arms control measures.

Congressional leaders looking to positively reassert the institution’s critical authorities in strategic issues should take note of the bipartisan Arms Control Observer Group of the 1980s. After a series of proposed arms control treaties failed to win Senate approval in the 1970s, the Observer Group was formed to support President Ronald Reagan’s groundbreaking arms control negotiations with the former Soviet Union. The group helped build and reinforce the consensus that strategic arms control could advance U.S.

interests, and it was supported by President Reagan, Secretary of State George Schultz, and the Majority and Minority leaders of the Senate.

The Observer Group opened critical communications channels between the Senate and the State Department arms control negotiating team at the outset of talks; allowed Group members to report back to their Senate colleagues on treaty negotiations, addressing their concerns and ideas; created a critical pocket of institutional expertise on strategic nuclear issues within the Senate; and met “informally” with counterparts in the Soviet Duma to successfully lower tensions and distrust in a fraught relationship.

As a result of those efforts, every member of the Arms Control Observer Group eventually voted to ratify the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), both of which passed with overwhelming majorities in the Senate. The lowering of tensions and development of trust in U.S.-Soviet relations that flowed from the arms control negotiations were critical factors in ending the Cold War.

After a lull in the 1990s when arms control stalled, the Observer Group was renamed the National Security Working Group, and its writ was broadened to include other strategic issues such as missile defense and export controls.

The Obama administration revived the Working Group to help successfully pass the New START Treaty in 2010. Eventually, however, its impact waned as hyper-partisanship increasingly polarized debate in Congress. Today the Working Group is funded to the tune of roughly \$700,000 annually, but its members rarely meet and there are no public records of its deliberations, making it difficult to assess its impact on the strategic dialogue.



Presidents Obama and Medvedev sign the New START treaty in 2010.

With its pledge to build on the foundation of New START and pursue new arms control agreements, the Biden administration has an opportunity to revive the bipartisan spirit of the original Congressional Arms Control Observer Group of the 1980s, the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program in the 1990s, and the National Security Working Group of the 1990s and 2000s — all of which fostered greater cooperation within Congress, and between Congress and the Executive Branch, on key national security issues. Congressional leaders should seize that opportunity to re-establish their institution’s foreign policy prerogatives, and provide both support and oversight of Executive Branch arms control initiatives.

The world is currently living through a period of great instability as it copes with the worst global pandemic since 1918, the worst economic shock since the Great Depression, and the worst tensions in major power relations since the early days of the Cold War. These crises come at a time when the treaties and multilateral institutions that are the foundation of the international order and strategic stability are visibly weakening, and in danger of collapse. In the past such periods of deep economic distress and geopolitical tensions have given rise to dark political forces, and are ripe for confrontation among nation-states. History will not judge kindly American political leaders who stood complacent while a nuclear arms race was added to that already volatile mix.