



## Is Trump serious about arms control?

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On 8 June the US and Russian governments simultaneously announced that arms control negotiations between them would start in Vienna, Austria on 22 June. The American team will be led by Marshall Billingslea, who was named as special presidential envoy for arms control only on 10 April. The Russian delegation will be led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov.

Since coming into the White House in January 2017, President Donald Trump has withdrawn the United States from a number of important arms-control agreements, including the bilateral Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program, and the Treaty on Open Skies.

The INF Treaty, which was in force from 1988 to 2019, eliminated all intermediate-range nuclear weapons and delivery systems from Europe, reducing the danger of a conventional conflict quickly turning nuclear. The JCPOA barred Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon in exchange for economic benefits. The Open Skies Treaty is a pact ratified by 35 nations, which allows member states to conduct unarmed reconnaissance flights over each other's territory to verify military arsenals and deployments. Signed in 1992 and in effect since 2002, its roots are in talks on "mutual aerial observation" held by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Soviet officials as early as 1955.

In every instance of Trump Administration pull-out from the treaties, the President has claimed that other countries were "cheating" and the treaties no longer served US national security interests. In the case of the INF Treaty, Washington officials indicated a desire to make China party to any replacement for it.

A pressing question to be taken up in Vienna will be the fate of another cornerstone arms-control agreement: whether or not to extend the Russian-American New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which expires on 5 February 2021 but has an explicit option for a five-year extension. New START replaced the START I agreement (1994-2009) and the Strategic Offensive Reductions treaty (2003-11), which formally limited strategic offensive nuclear weapons, a process under discussion in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) between the USA and the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s.

New START limits US and Russian deployed nuclear warheads to 1,550; limits the total number of launchers to 800 each; and provides for verification inspections and data sharing. If the treaty is not extended or replaced, there will be no limits on American and Russian strategic nuclear weapons for the first time in 50 years beginning next February.

Russia argues that New START, signed 8 April 2010 by Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitri Medvedev, should be extended for the full five years, while the Trump Administration has placed conditions on its extension, including that Russia agree to help pressure China to join these nuclear arms-control negotiations. Up until recent telephone discussions between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, the USA has been unwilling to commit to any arms control talks that do not include China.

Ryabkov has stated that while Russia understands the US desire to bring China into trilateral strategic nuclear weapons talks and also understands China's refusal, given that the USA and Russia hold 90 per cent of the world's nuclear weapons, Russia is prepared to negotiate now with the United States and will not intercede to press China to participate.

An invitation to the Vienna talks was extended to Beijing, and declined. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has declared that they are not opposed to multilateral arms-control negotiations in principle, but the timing is premature.

### Trump's negotiator

The appointment of Billingslea as chief negotiator raises questions about whether or not the Administration is serious about a new strategic arms-reduction architecture. Trump has stated that he prefers to negotiate a new comprehensive agreement that could replace New START, the INF, and even the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972, from which President George W. Bush withdrew the USA in June 2002.

But in a 22 May speech at an event hosted by the right-wing Hudson Institute, Billingslea charged that Russia had "destroyed the INF Treaty", abandoned the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), and had violated the Treaty on Open Skies. He accused China of violating the international Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and engaging in a massive secret nuclear weapons build-up.

Billingslea summarised: "The president's made clear that we have a tried-and-true practice here. We know how to win these [arms] races. And we know how to spend the adversary into oblivion. If we have to, we will, but we sure would like to avoid it. And so, that's why this three-way arms control agreement to forestall a three-way race is so essential."

Billingslea's credentials as Trump's arms-control negotiator are hardly reassuring. Since June 2017 he had served as assistant secretary of the Treasury for terrorist financing, in which capacity he oversaw the sanctions and other economic warfare directed against Iran, Russia, and other adversaries.

Under the George W. Bush Administration, Billingslea was deputy assistant secretary of defence for special operations and low-intensity conflict and deputy assistant secretary of defence for negotiations policy (where he oversaw the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty). He went on to be assistant secretary general of NATO for defence investment.

In a 29 May interview with Jacob Heilbrunn, editor of *The National Interest*, Ryabkov lamented he had "no confidence, no trust whatsoever" in the United States, adding that Russian-American bilateral relations are "probably worse than we have experienced for decades. We try hard to improve the situation through different proposals in practically all areas that pull Moscow and Washington apart. It doesn't happen. ... Everything associated with Russia policy is ... quite toxic for the US mainstream."

The Russians are not alone in their scepticism about bilateral negotiations. In a 3 June column in *Responsible Statecraft*, journal of the recently established Quincy Institute, Prof. Lyle Goldstein of the US Naval War College

assailed the staging of provocative Anglo-American joint naval drills in the Barents Sea—north of Scandinavia and close by the home of the Russian Navy’s strategic Northern Fleet—and for conducting other acts of aggression “aimed to threaten the very heart of Russian military power”.

Goldstein concluded: “It’s high time a new generation of American strategists and their reporter friends realise that there is a yawning and highly significant gap separating social media shenanigans from nuclear warfare. Washington needs to ‘grow up’, and consequently re-prioritise nuclear stability with Russia, re-discovering arms control, crisis management and yes, even strategic restraint and reassurance in the process.”

Despite the good grounds for scepticism, the upcoming Vienna talks are still a chance to walk the world back from the edge of nuclear Armageddon. This was emphasised 29 April in a joint statement by two of the world’s most experienced strategic arms negotiators, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov and Rose Gottemoeller, who had been undersecretary of state for arms control and international security in the Obama Administration.

Published simultaneously in the New York Council on Foreign Relations journal *Foreign Affairs* and the Russian daily *Kommersant*, the article calls for extending New START. “New START has played a central role in keeping



A good sign: Russian Ambassador to the USA Anatoly Antonov and Former Obama administration official and NATO Deputy Secretary-General Rose Gottemoeller issued a joint article, “Keeping Peace in the Nuclear Age: Why Washington and Moscow Must Extend the New START Treaty”. Photo: Twitter/Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

the peace and preventing a dangerous arms race between the two countries that together possess 90 per cent of the world’s nuclear weapons”, they wrote. Its demise “would have worrying implications for the security of the United States, of Russia, and of the world. It could bring a return to nuclear competition and spark mutual suspicion that would push the world to a level of nuclear risk unseen for decades.”

## To end the arms race, reject ‘enemy image’

A paper issued by American and Russian academics in the closing years of the Cold War illustrated why demonisation of a nation’s adversary is guaranteed to inflame war and drive an arms race. Dropping the use of propaganda to stoke an enemy image of one’s adversary is an important way to de-escalate conflict.

“The Image of the Enemy and the Process of Change” was written by Jerome D. Frank, a professor of psychiatry from Johns Hopkins University, and Andrei Y. Melville from the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. The paper was the result of examining studies of the way “enemy images” are used in war, fuelling negative perceptions and hatred of adversary nations in the populations of both sides, stoked by media coverage.

On both sides of the Cold War, the authors identified virtually identical propaganda: “The perceptions of the enemy very often tend to mirror each other—that is, each side attributes the same virtues to itself and the same vices to the enemy.” That includes the oft-cited line used to defend demonisation of one’s adversary, that, “the people are good; it is only the leaders who are evil”.

The enemy image impedes conflict resolution, wrote the authors, because it “is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In combating what each perceives to be the other’s cruelty and treachery, each may become more cruel and treacherous itself.” It “profoundly disrupts communications” and “reduces the chances of discovering areas of agreement or common interests”. This can lead to a situation where each regards the other party as totally evil, precluding the chance for resolution. Even a proposal for arms control from one party is regarded with suspicion and rejected out of hand.

“The enemy phenomenon is a powerful driver of the arms race and, ultimately, towards war”, the paper stated.

“There is a vicious circle. Arms races are the source of misconceptions and stereotypes. The atmosphere of militarism and preparation for war is an ideal medium for the emergence and confirmation of evil images. Further, in the nuclear age, absolute weapons need absolute enemies. As a

result, the arms race and image of the enemy feed off each other in an upward spiral.”

Disarmament is impossible without a psychological shift—“transcending the image of the enemy inevitably requires rising to a new level of political thinking”. A “reorientation of the psychology of international relations itself” is required.

Fortunately, a positive shift can happen very quickly: “According to public polls in the United States in 1976, three-quarters of the American public saw China as a hostile power. Only six years later, in 1982, the same percentage saw China as a friendly power and close ally, even though the Chinese leaders, like the Soviet ones, remained faithful to communism.”

For this to occur, truth-tellers are required to break the control of the enemy image. “It demands an obligatory condition of maximum possible truth in depicting the other side and oneself, free access to information, without distortion or secrecy. For this effort, one needs political courage and psychological preparedness. This realistic approach is the starting point for transcending the image of the enemy.” Central is recognising that both opponents “share a common humanity and are activated by motives which in their own eyes are often regarded as just”. International cooperative ventures are another critical way to break down barriers, “freeing nations from the thrall of this image, thereby diminishing the threat of nuclear holocaust”.

In conclusion, Frank and Melville write: “The arms race is not driven by weapons alone. It is also driven by a very simple psychological phenomenon, the image of the enemy. Weapons of total destruction would be useless without such images. For such weapons to have any purpose, there must be people who may be totally destroyed. Adversaries must be transformed into demons. Once such images have been created, they, in turn, drive the arms race. People resist giving them up. There is a desire to see everything in a light which will reinforce the image. Images foster closed minds and reinforce resistance to change.”