GLOBAL POLICY AND STRATEGY INITIATIVE

Nuclear Arms Control in the First Year of the Second Trump Administration

Edward Ifft, with an introduction by Amb. James E. Goodby

Introduction

Three years ago—at the time, less than a year into Russia's invasion of Ukraine—our colleague Ed Ifft took stock of the nuclear arms control landscape and offered an essay, "Beyond New START."

At that time, we found ourselves with three years remaining on the Biden administration's last-minute five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). And as he considered the elements that could make up any new nuclear treaty between the United States and Russia, Ifft also expressed his concern on "the risk that the sides would fritter away what appeared to be a generous amount of time for negotiating, leading to yet another crisis in late 2025/early 2026 with possibly a new US administration."[1]

As I write this introduction now in early December of 2025—that three-years-remaining window now down to just two months—Ifft's worries appear to have come to pass. Whether or not a new deal or simply a general statement about stability and restraint is forthcoming, it is worth reflecting on how we got here. One explanation is that the omission is deliberate: Perhaps either the United States, or Russia, or both, have felt that it is in their national interest not to negotiate a new bilateral nuclear arms agreement. On the United States' side, the most prominent public effort to examine the situation, the October 2023 Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, advocated for nuclear weapons modernization and the capability to produce and deliver more weapons. But it notably avoided clearly advocating either an increase or decrease in deployed weapons.

Another explanation, one offered here by Ifft, is that of an operational failure: staffing turnover and agency disruptions with a new Trump administration, combined with slow confirmations of key political appointees, that deprioritized the groundwork of nuclear treaty negotiation.

One could similarly speculate on the bureaucratic machinations on the Russian side amid the Russia-Ukraine War. But that does not explain the lack of clear signals on a preferred course of action during the second half of a Biden administration that in other areas generally conveyed an image of a smooth-running national security decision-making apparatus.

A final explanation may therefore simply be that the correct course of action for the United States is unclear. Today's nuclear landscape—with massive nuclear build-out in China and an unsettled broader global security environment across hemispheres, including an ongoing war in Ukraine—is much changed since the treaty's original negotiation fifteen years ago. Even with our best minds working this issue both in and out of government, it is much harder to say what an acceptable target for nuclear deterrence really is today.

This essay goes to press amid the second Trump administration's continued efforts to negotiate an end to the Russia-Ukraine War. Media reporting suggests that the terms the United States has so far proposed more closely reflect Russian President Vladimir Putin's goals than those of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, including significant territorial concessions on the part of Ukraine and unclear Western security guarantees. How states in the region and the rest of the world view any conclusion of this war will also impact their thinking about their own security going forward—and, potentially, how they think about nuclear weapons. Whether in Europe or Asia, leaders of non-nuclear weapons states who face revisionist and expansionist neighbors will think again about their pragmatic ability to deter—with or without the United States at their side. That puts even greater importance in a just peace for Ukraine.

When George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, and Bill Perry worked together with Sid Drell and myself at the Hoover Institution in the first quarter of this twenty-first century toward a world free of nuclear weapons, we did so on the basis that with the end of the Cold War, and with American hegemonic military strength, there could be a window to create the broader global security conditions that would obviate the need for the strategic stability offered through their destructive power.

Today, as we enter the next quarter century, the creation of such a world should remain our shared enterprise.

Amb. James E. Goodby

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Interest is growing on how the Trump administration will deal with the expiration of New START in February 2026, along with a number of other important nuclear arms control and international security issues. But the signals from Washington concerning nuclear weapons policy objectives and process thus far have been mixed. Expectations in the United States over the past two years have been that it will seek to increase its capabilities both to produce and to deliver nuclear weapons through the medium term, primarily to deal with the rapid

increase in Chinese forces, but also to counter possible future Russian aggression. At the same time, President Trump himself has expressed interest in reducing weapons numbers. And in the short term, it is unclear if the United States would find it beneficial to continue to observe current limits on deployed weapons should New START expire.

And while the arms control approaches of the first Trump and Biden administrations suggested that the era of negotiations was largely over—negotiations could still be useful in certain circumstances, but different paths would be needed to deal with conflicting national interests—the second Trump administration has shown a strong inclination toward direct negotiations across both economic and security realms of US foreign policy. Applying that approach toward nuclear weapons issues would mean harmonizing the administration's "America First" philosophy with the defined roles of US allies, especially NATO. The emergence of the Golden Dome missile defense system poses even newer questions for the existing understanding of nuclear deterrence and strategic stability.

This essay takes stock of recent currents in nuclear arms control in Washington and considers the decisions that would need to be made either to extend New START, abandon it, or conceptualize an alternative.

TAKING STOCK IN 2025

What is new in nuclear arms control since the outset of the second Trump administration, and what unresolved issues have been inherited?

THE TRUMP FACTOR

In spite of some well-known discontinuities, a considerable degree of continuity and consistency in nuclear weapons policy can be seen across recent US administrations. The Nuclear Posture Reviews and nuclear modernization programs in the Obama, first Trump, and Biden administrations contained differences in tone, but general consistency in the evaluation of threats, modernization of the US strategic triad and nuclear weapons complex, understanding of deterrence and extended deterrence, and conditions under which nuclear weapons might be used. When changes have occurred, these can be seen as primarily responses to changes in the international situation—the rise of China, lowered concerns about the threat of nuclear terrorism, the war in Ukraine, and disputes with allies. To be sure, the first Trump administration was noticeably negative toward arms control compared to the Obama and Biden administrations. During the four years with Trump, the United States left the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Open Skies Treaty, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran; failed to solve problems with the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty; almost allowed the New START Treaty to expire; and opposed entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). Conflicting narratives on the president's personal views emerged from a July 2017 meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff; initial news reports stated that Trump had advocated for an increase in the US nuclear weapons stockpile, while he himself denied this, publicly stating, "We don't need an increase. But I want modernization."[2]

The early months of the second Trump administration have shed some light on the president's current views on deterrence and arms control, but questions remain. Strong emphasis has been placed on dealing with the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. It seems clear that President Trump sincerely seeks an end to these tragic situations, followed by a lasting peace, and he has invested considerable political capital toward this end. One notable development has been Operation Midnight Hammer, which did serious damage to Iran's nuclear programs, both military and civil, following the failure of months of negotiations and Israel-Iran skirmishes. On strategic arms control, the next immediate problem is the looming expiration of the New START Treaty in February 2026. It is not clear, however, whether this issue is getting the attention it deserves. Ahead of his August 2025 meeting with President Putin in Alaska, Trump stated of New START: "That's not an agreement you want expiring. We're starting to work on that."[3] But the Alaska meeting did not produce a substantive statement on the treaty, with reports that it would be dealt with after negotiations over the Russia-Ukraine War. Former negotiators also note that career staff-level nuclear-arms-control expertise in the State Department and other agencies to support such efforts has been affected alongside broader government staffing reductions.

At the end of the Biden administration, all signs were pointing toward a requirement for the United States to increase its number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads above the number allowed in the New START Treaty. This was explained as being due primarily to the rapid increase in Chinese nuclear forces, which is leading the United States into a dynamic where it must contend with two peer nuclear adversaries. The 2023 *Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, though not explicit, also strongly hinted that the United States needed to move in this direction.[4]

The 2022 Biden Nuclear Posture Review characterized the five major nuclear threats to the United States as follows:[5]

- China is the "overall pacing challenge";
- Russia is an "enduring existential threat";
- North Korea presents "deterrence dilemmas" and a "persistent threat and growing danger";
- Iran's recent activities, previously constrained by the JCPOA, are of "great concern"; and
- nuclear terrorism "continues to pose a threat."

Whether the Trump administration choses to issue a specific nuclear policy document, or simply a more general defense guidance document that would offer less insight on nuclear and arms control issues, one might expect the Trump administration's characterization of nuclear threats to be similar, and to perhaps have even greater emphasis on China. Nuclear policy could also be affected by the fraying relationship between the United States and NATO, which seems to involve more than just a demand that Europe accept more responsibility for its own defense.[6]

Against this general bipartisan movement toward an increase in numbers stands a statement by President Trump to the World Economic Forum on January 23, 2025, that "we'd like to see denuclearization. . . . And I will tell you that President Putin really liked the idea of—of cutting way back on nuclear. . . . So we want to see if we can denuclearize, and I think that's possible. And I can tell you that President Putin wanted to do it. He and I wanted to do it. We had a good conversation with China. They would have been involved, and that would have been an unbelievable thing for the planet."[7]

Regardless of past policy pronouncements, a major shift in US thinking appears to be underway. The first Trump and Biden administrations were guided by the view that great-power conflict had returned after a calmer and more cooperative period following the end of the Cold War. Negotiations, while still useful, were not likely to resolve the quest for dominance, both military and economic, and the United States must strengthen its unilateral efforts to remain in first place. Now, Trump appears to favor a return to negotiation—in particular, relying upon his personal negotiating skills. Whether this can be consistent with an "America First" philosophy remains to be seen.

THE CHINA FACTOR

For the first Trump administration, including China in negotiations for a follow-on agreement to New START was given high importance; this was even made a requirement for further negotiations. China resisted this and all other efforts by the Trump administration to engage in bilateral or trilateral talks on arms control. The Biden administration managed to extend the New START Treaty with Russia for five years, dropping the Trump requirement that this must include China. It appeared to conclude that the next step beyond this should be further bilateral negotiations with Russia regarding how to proceed beyond New START, but these efforts were quickly stifled by the war in Ukraine. Biden recognized the need to engage China in some way in arms control, but met with little success, and relations with China actually worsened. For its part, China affirmed a positive attitude toward arms control and disarmament in general but took the position that participation in negotiations is premature as long as US and Russian nuclear stockpiles are greater than its own. The one consistent Chinese proposal has been that the United States should adopt the Chinese declaratory position on "no first use." This has been rejected by all US administrations. Meanwhile, the rapid Chinese buildup in nuclear weapons and their delivery systems continues, causing concern in the United States. It appears that China is transitioning from minimum deterrence to something else, but it has not yet presented any official rationale or goals for its current activities. Chinese doctrine on the subject also has not changed. How this concern translates into future United States nuclear weapons levels will be a key decision for any US administration.

NON-NUCLEAR STATES

This lack of progress took its toll on parallel efforts to eliminate, or at least greatly reduce, nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which prohibits nuclear weapons entirely, entered into force in 2021. It now has seventy-four States Parties and ninety-nine signatories, numbers that represent a significant portion of the world's

population, but that includes none of the countries that actually have nuclear weapons. The US government approach to the TPNW has generally been to ignore it, and that is likely to continue. As seen by the mainstream arms-control community, the realistic task now appears to be the more modest one of protecting what remains of the achievements of the past half century, including continued reductions in nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, rather than increases.

EXISTING NEW START ISSUES

The New START Treaty has been highly successful throughout the fourteen years of its existence. There are, however, issues to be cleaned up. The forum that was created to do this, the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC), has not met for several years, due to the refusal of Russia to meet. This is a violation of the treaty. The failure of Russia to allow on-site inspections and to provide specified data required by the treaty is also a violation. As a result, the latest Implementation Report provided to Congress states that the United States "cannot certify the Russian Federation to be in compliance with the terms of the New START Treaty." It further elaborates that "the United States also has a concern regarding Russian compliance with the New START Treaty warhead limit." However, the report also explains that "while this is a serious concern, it is not a determination of noncompliance." In addition, "it does not determine . . . that Russia's noncompliance specified in this report threatens the national security interests of the United States."[8] The uncertainty in the United States' judgment of compliance results from the lack of data and of the information provided by the required on-site inspections, which results in a deterioration of monitoring capabilities. These problems can presumably be resolved by the resumption of data exchange, on-site inspections, and meetings of New START's BCC.

Russia also has "questions and concerns" about US compliance. These relate to modifications made to certain launchers on US ballistic missile submarines and to B-52H heavy bombers to render them incapable of carrying nuclear weapons. Discussions directed at resolving these issues can be resumed in the BCC once Russia allows it to meet. At one point, Russia made resolution of these two issues a precondition for extending the treaty.[9] This precondition was later dropped, allowing the extension of the treaty to proceed. The United States has stated that it is in full compliance with the treaty, but the issues remain on the agenda.

There is obviously not enough time between now and the expiration of the treaty to negotiate and bring into force a new comprehensive treaty. The treaty itself does not allow for further extensions. Thus, the sides need to agree on measures to maintain constraints, transparency, and confidence after February 5, 2026. One key issue is whether this arrangement would be legally binding, politically binding, parallel unilateral statements, or take some other form. Connected to this is whether on-site inspections of sensitive facilities and exchanges of sensitive data require a legally binding document. In informal discussions, Russian negotiators have maintained that such a document would be required. However, Putin has shown an ability to override previous "requirements." There could be many variations of what data are exchanged and how often, and what form inspections, observations, and visits could take.

The simplest solution, already noted by many observers, would be just an agreement to continue to abide by the major provisions of New START, and there are precedents for this. The levels—there are three major numbers in New START—could be kept the same, or adjusted up or down, and the details of verification could be modified, as desired. It would be useful to bear in mind that the greater the deviation from the existing treaty, the more difficult the negotiation is likely to be. It is not useful to speculate on what arrangement the Trump administration would seek. One would expect that the United States would favor one with strong verification—for example, with as much of the New START verification regime as possible. In the United States, making any of this legally binding would likely require approval by the Senate, which could be a major complication.

NEW NEGOTIATIONS AND CHOICES AHEAD

The war in Ukraine has greatly complicated efforts to move forward in arms control. After Biden and Putin extended the New START Treaty until 2026 (a few days before it would have expired), attention could have then focused on the few issues existing in that treaty and what should be negotiated to replace it. Instead, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 stopped all efforts on that front. Things got worse, including the cessation of all on-site inspections, at first because of COVID-19; then, when the US was ready to resume, Russia continued the stoppage. It also stopped providing data required by the treaty, because of US support for Ukraine. The next big development came when National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, in a speech to the Arms Control Association on June 2, 2023, reversed the US position and offered to resume talks on strategic stability and arms control "without preconditions." After appearing to give a positive reaction to this offer, Moscow rejected it.

However, there may still be hope. Shortly after the arrival of President Trump in the Oval Office, both Washington and Moscow expressed an eagerness to resume discussions. This amounts to a return to the concept both sides had during the Cold War, recognizing the importance to the entire world of constraining nuclear weapons, and of isolating this process from other political and military events. It is clear that no one wants an uncontrolled nuclear arms race. Trump has at some points suggested that the United States, Russia, and China could all spend less on defense, adding "and I know they're going to do it. They agreed to it." He also recently again said that he raised the subject of "denuclearization" with Putin and said both had agreed "to do it in a very big way."[10] A dilemma we have is that, aside from Trump's statements, there is little or no evidence that Putin has any intention to do so.

In thinking about a future, more comprehensive agreement, one can identify several key issues.

NUCLEAR WARHEADS

The New START Treaty constrains eight quantities—ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) launchers; ICBM missiles; ICBM warheads; SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile) launchers; SLBM missiles; SLBM warheads; heavy bomber airframes; and heavy bomber armament. For each of these categories, the treaty recognizes that items can be deployed or

non-deployed. The treaty also distinguishes between nuclear and non-nuclear warheads carried by these systems. This creates a complex set of provisions that will need to be dealt with in any new agreement. What stands out in this set of constraints is that there are provisions for *non-deployed* missiles, missile launchers, and heavy bombers, but none for *warheads*—the treaty term for weapons. No arms control treaty has ever attempted to regulate the numbers or locations of non-deployed nuclear warheads. The first Trump administration did attempt to begin to deal with all nuclear warheads in discussions about a follow-on to the New START Treaty. It was able to negotiate with Russia a tentative one-year freeze on the current numbers of weapons in nuclear stockpiles, but final agreement failed over the issue of verification. It is time for the world to seek such controls, and one would expect the Trump administration to continue this effort, beginning with US and Russian stockpiles. Russia and China—unlike the United States, the UK, and France—have never even revealed the size of their stockpiles.

The minimum first step in this direction would be simply to declare the size of nuclear weapons stockpiles, with no attempt to develop an intrusive monitoring regime. This could be accompanied by periodic data exchanges to declare changes in these numbers. Once the sides are comfortable that this is working, data on the types of weapons and their locations could be added. Monitoring the numbers and locations of these stockpiles would be a major and more complex further step. For this to be effective, intrusive forms of on-site inspection would be needed. It would not be difficult to *formulate* each of these more ambitious stages but *negotiating* them would be a challenge. The initial goal should be at least to create a baseline of the world's nuclear weapons. Such a baseline would be an important asset in moving successfully to whatever measures are sought after New START.

One related unresolved methodological question concerns the lack of provisions for carrying out and monitoring the *elimination* of individual nuclear weapons. States with nuclear weapons already do this, but there have never been international, agreed-upon provisions for how to eliminate these weapons safely and securely, or to monitor the process to verify that what is being eliminated is really the declared weapon. Some research on solving these problems is going on in the United States and Russia, and in other states as well. Significant progress was made years ago in the Trilateral Initiative among the United States, Russia, and the International Atomic Energy Agency involving detecting neutron emissions and the use of "information barriers" to limit the information gained to the minimum needed for verification.

LEVELS

The New START Treaty has three key numbers, limiting the maximum levels of missiles, launchers, heavy bombers, and (deployed) warheads. A new agreement will need to deal with these levels. Whether the Trump administration will seek to have these numbers go up, down, or sideways is not clear. A key aspect of this will obviously be what Russia wants. In any reductions, the United States would be expected to emphasize missiles and warheads and resist reductions in launchers.

President Putin has offered to continue to abide by the three central limits for one year beyond the expiration of the New START Treaty—that is, until February 2027—if the United

States would do likewise.[11] This could be a minimalist measure that would provide time to negotiate a broader agreement along the lines discussed above, while preventing an undesirable nuclear arms race to develop during a period with no constraints at all. An initial reaction to this proposal, should the United States agree with it, could be to attempt to reestablish key portions of the existing verification regime as soon as possible. When asked, President Trump offered that Putin's proposal was "a good idea."[12] However, this may not be as simple as it appears. Operating under the assumption that there would be no constraints at all after February 2026, the United States appears to be starting to engage in activities that, if continued, could put it over all three of the central limits—in particular, the 1,550 ceiling on deployed warheads. These programs include the deployment schedules of existing and new ballistic missile submarines, reinstalling MIRV (multiple independent reentry vehicle) warheads that had been downloaded from deployed missiles in order to meet the 1,550 limit in the first place and reconverting B-52H heavy bombers back to having the capability to carry nuclear warheads.

RANGES

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), INF, and New START Treaties based their provisions on three general missile ranges:

- Strategic: over 5,500 km
- Intermediate: 500 km to 5,500 km
- Tactical/substrategic: less than 500 km

These ranges worked well in these treaties, but there is some arbitrariness in these concepts. It may well be that it will be necessary to have different range definitions in a new and more comprehensive agreement, or series of agreements. For example, the idea of a ban, or at least a limitation, on missiles over an agreed range *in Europe* should be explored. In addition, the United States and its allies have long sought to constrain short-range/tactical missiles. The US Senate even placed the beginning of negotiations on such systems as a requirement for its advice and consent to the New START Treaty.[13] Russia, with a large advantage in such systems, has thus far refused any such negotiations. For its part, Russia has historically sought to bring long-range, precision-guided, conventionally armed missiles into the mix and the United States has resisted that. The recent successful Ukrainian attack on Russian strategic bombers by low-cost, conventionally armed drones vividly illustrates the problem. Several of these types of disputes are complicated by the fact that some of these systems can carry either conventional or nuclear warheads, and which of these two is true for any particular missile at any point in time may not be easy to determine.

SCOPE AND NEW SYSTEMS

Any new agreement would have to address the major dilemma of scope. Both sides may wish to expand the scope by including things not in New START but strongly disagree on what

these should be. For example, the Trump administration could seek constraints on all nuclear weapons and tactical nuclear weapon delivery vehicles. Russia has long sought to include conventional, precision-guided missiles and ban weapons in orbit. Each side wants to include other countries in the negotiations, but these countries are different—China for the United States and the UK and France for Russia and China. Whether each side wants the number of nuclear weapons deployed to go up or down remains a fascinating mystery yet to be clarified. Since each country has a veto on what is included, the case for not including something has the advantage in negotiations.

One particular interest of the Trump administration could be to deal with several "exotic" systems being developed by Russia.[14] Some of these are already deployed and others will not be deployed until after New START expires. The United States will seek to have these accounted for in some way. Hypersonic missiles, some of which are already deployed, pose another challenge. These issues and others are already within the purview of the BCC, which could play a key role in solving them.

It is frequently noted that cyberattacks could play a dangerous and destabilizing role in future conflicts. It would appear that this should be the subject of separate analysis and negotiation.

VERIFICATION

Verification is always a major issue for the United States in treaty negotiation; how ambitious constraints can be is generally limited by how well they can be verified. In New START, the two sides agreed that they wanted a verification regime "adapted, simplified, and made less costly" as compared to START I.[15] This was due to their positive experience verifying the provisions in START I, along with the greater trust and transparency between them at the time New START was negotiated. Most analysts today would say that this level of trust no longer exists. This could force the sides into less ambitious measures, such as confidence-building and risk-reduction measures, which do not require intrusive monitoring. For the "hard" arms control envisioned here, some on-site inspection and data exchange would be essential for the United States. The United States might also insist on greater access to unencrypted telemetry—a subject raised by the US Senate in its advice and consent to ratification of the New START Treaty. Such access is minimal in New START. What level of intrusive monitoring Russia will be prepared to allow, and what compromises the United States would accept to achieve it, remain to be seen.

NUCLEAR TESTING

President Trump issued an unexpected statement on October 30, 2025, that the United States should resume nuclear testing "immediately" and "on an equal basis" with Russia and China. Resumption of large-scale nuclear explosive testing would damage the international nuclear nonproliferation regime constructed over decades, violate US obligations under the CTBT, and almost certainly lead other nuclear powers to resume such testing in a way that would not be in the US interest given our comparative knowledge advantage in this area.[16] The United States has not conducted a nuclear explosion since 1992 and no country, other than North

Korea, has done so since 1996. North Korea's last test was in 2017. Several countries, including the United States, do conduct legal subcritical nuclear experiments. It is unlikely, however, that conducting full-scale nuclear explosions was Trump's intention when making this statement. It is more likely that his statement was made in response to briefs on recent Russian missile tests or US assessments that Russia has conducted several supercritical tests, without Threshold Test Ban Treaty notification, since 1996 at its Novaya Zemlya facility and that China may now be doing the same at Lop Nur. On November 2, 2025, Secretary of Energy Chris Wright stated that the United States has no plans to conduct nuclear explosions "at this time."[17]

DETERRENCE THEORY AND GOLDEN DOME

Compared to the Cold War era, there is relatively little discussion in the United States these days about the theory of deterrence and arms control. President Putin's veiled threats regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine did lead to concerns regarding the use of nuclear deterrence to shield conventional aggression, but no obvious answers to this problem in deterrence theory have emerged.

Important legally binding agreements on arms control have nonetheless been achieved in spite of this. This has been possible because the sides have adopted a pragmatic approach. Realizing that disputes over whether some weapon system is "strategic" or "tactical/substrategic," "stabilizing" or "destabilizing" are not productive, they have chosen instead to state clearly which items or activities are being constrained and how, setting aside whether or not this conforms to some theory.

But one huge issue for nuclear deterrence theory, unsolved for decades, is what to do about strategic defenses. This has now come to a head as President Trump, apparently inspired by the success of Israel's Iron Dome, has proposed a Golden Dome missile defense for the United States in his executive order of January 27, 2025.[18] Israel's system involves defending a relatively small area against unsophisticated attacking missiles flying relatively slowly and at low altitudes. Defending a vast area (the United States homeland) against modern ICBMs, SLBMs, and cruise missiles (including hypersonic missiles) would be quite a different challenge. Such a defense could involve hundreds of weaponized satellites in orbit and could become a major sticking point in attempts to constrain strategic offensive weapons.

From what little is known about Golden Dome until feasibility studies are completed, it is clearly a major departure from recent US programs. If, as seems clear, it is to be designed to defend against ballistic, hypersonic, and advanced cruise missiles launched against the United States homeland (and perhaps even against US allies) in any numbers and from any source, it could reignite a policy debate within the United States. Current US antiballistic missile (ABM) programs are limited in scope (currently forty-four ground-based interceptors) and designed to defend against accidental or unauthorized attacks and very small attacks from rogue states or terrorists. Assurances have been given to Russia that these programs are not intended to jeopardize Russia's deterrent capability. As far as is known, no such assurances have been given explicitly to China, but efforts have been made to convince China that

this limited system is not designed against them. This could result in an awkward situation if agreements with Russia and China legitimize deterrent offensive forces, accompanied by rhetoric praising strategic stability and the need to keep deterrent forces survivable, while, at the same time, the United States is openly seeking to negate such forces with a massive ABM system. This is a major issue in deterrence theory and policy. Put in the starkest terms, does the United States acknowledge that Russia and China have a right to strategic deterrent forces? Golden Dome, as currently being presented in the executive order, appears to deny any such right, and has the explicit goal of negating it.

Another aspect of Golden Dome is interesting from the deterrence point of view. A key aspect of the Reagan-era Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program was an effort to persuade Russia (and, by extension, China) that it was in their interest to join a cooperative effort to move toward "defense dominance" and away from "mutual assured destruction." President Reagan even offered General Secretary Gorbachev a sharing of ABM technology to further this goal. Reagan's vision, which was evidently sincere, was that this cooperative effort to emphasize defense over offense would facilitate the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. His SDI efforts failed, both technologically and diplomatically, but it was a coherent policy effort to create a cooperative multilateral path to fulfillment of the promise for nuclear disarmament made in Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and reiterated many times since.

These dynamics have reentered popular culture. The recent film *A House of Dynamite* involves the launch of a single ballistic missile, presumably with a nuclear warhead, at Chicago. Though the film contains a number of questionable assumptions concerning what the US response would be, it does direct public attention toward the deterrence dilemmas that would be created in such a scenario.

THE THIRD-COUNTRY PROBLEM

The dilemma of what to do about China looms large in thinking about what comes after New START. President Trump's earlier attempts to include China in a three-way negotiation were noted above. China's nuclear capability, and US concerns about it, have only increased since then. China continues to show no interest in joining the United States and Russia in nuclear arms control and there is no easy way to force it to do so. The administration will therefore have to choose whether to (a) continue with its past, yet-unfruitful stance that China's participation is a prerequisite for new US conversations with the Russians; (b) resume bilateral negotiations with Russia to address the post–New START world, accompanied by efforts to involve China more in both bilateral and multilateral arms control activities (and which may involve making more of an effort to address Chinese concerns); or (c) offer some other novel framework to address the emerging "three-body problem" of nuclear deterrence in a world with two near-peers.

Both China and Russia have made clear that greater involvement of China in nuclear arms control must then include the UK and France. Taking account in some way of their nuclear capabilities has always been on the Soviet/Russian agenda. This was raised initially in the SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) negotiations but dropped when it was strongly rejected

by the United States, the UK, and France. These concerns were again set aside in START I and New START but are now back and linked to China. It is likely that neither the UK nor France would be enthusiastic about this but may at least accept a seat at the table; they can point out that their nuclear forces are already at minimum deterrence levels, leaving little room for adjustments. However, they do have considerable nuclear expertise and could make constructive contributions to resolving some of the problems highlighted in this paper.

If China, the UK, and France were all involved, it is obvious to everyone that this is basically the NPT P5, the five nuclear powers recognized by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Since this forum already exists, with China already at the table, it would seem logical to somehow make use of that. In fact, the P5 did engage in some arms control efforts before the war in Ukraine, with limited results. Further thought could be given to how this could be revived and made more productive. For any P5 work on nuclear arms control, perhaps India and Pakistan could be added to this traditional grouping. It's hard to judge what the US appetite for that larger conversation would be given an emergent preference for ad hoc bilateral or smaller mini-lateral coalitions over formal multilateral fora.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to lay out the choices for the United States to respond to the problems that will be created by the expiration of the New START Treaty and the rise of China, within the context and apparent preference of the second Trump administration. It is normal to have disruption and uncertainty during the transition of any new United States administration with different views than those of its predecessors. But this is also happening in the context of the other considerable damage that has been done to arms control in recent years, along with acute international crises, a worsening of relations with both Russia and China, and an uncertain future for NATO.

The United States has long had a different nuclear deterrence relationship with Russia than it has had with China, due to the great disparity in the sizes of their respective nuclear forces and the lack of arms-control agreements with China. It is time to modernize and make consistent these relationships.

Hovering over this are the largely space-based components of Golden Dome. If such a system is developed, efforts to persuade Russia and China to further constrain their offensive nuclear forces would appear to be rather unrealistic.

The conventional wisdom has been that a minimalist agenda of confidence-building measures, risk reduction, improved communications, and improvements around the edges is the most attainable outcome as the world contemplates the immediate future. Ideas are abundant for how that could be achieved. But given the fundamental shifts in scale and technology that are also afoot, we should at least think about the possibility that the next few years could also be used to pursue a more creative nuclear agenda that could ultimately support a more predictable and secure level of international peace and security.[19]

NOTES

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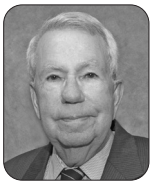

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Essays of the Nuclear Security Dialogues are drawn from policy roundtables featuring academics and security practitioners from across the United States, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific. They are edited by Amb. James E. Goodby, who negotiated landmark cooperative security arrangements under three US presidents. His commentaries consider the basis for a world free of nuclear weapons—as envisioned by the "four horsemen" George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn—within the global security environment emerging from Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

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