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Expert Panel Says Russia Holding Nuke Deal 'Hostage' to Deter US Support for Ukraine



A Russian Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missile driving through Red Square in Moscow on May 9, 2009. (Dmitry Kostyukova/AFP via Getty Images)

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Even through the most fractious days of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union, and its successor Russian Federation, maintained compliance with nuclear arms accords and sustained contact in negotiating new treaties.

But Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine changed all that with Moscow now refusing to decouple strategic arms control treaty compliance from U.S. support for the embattled nation.

"We are essentially in a situation of hostage taking," Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation senior research associate Hanna Notte said. Russia has "ceased to compartmentalize" nuclear arms agreements "as ransom" to force the United States from backing away from supporting Ukraine.

That's not going to happen, White House National Security Council deputy assistant Cara Abercrombie assured.



President Barack Obama makes a statement during a meeting on the New START in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in November 2010. (Dennis Brack-Pool/Getty Images)

"We must be equally clear that the United States will not make such concessions" and demand Russia "abide by the legal obligations that it has undertaken for itself," said Abercrombie, who serves as deputy assistant to the president and coordinator for defense policy and arms control.

There have often been “challenges in bilateral relations” between the U.S. and Russia over the decades, she said, but both nations steadfastly sustained treaty obligations as “instruments of stability and predictability” because compliance served them both and the world in general.

Strained American-Russian relations over Ukraine have been further exacerbated by the U.S. State Department’s claim that the Kremlin is refusing to allow on-site inspections of its nuclear weapons arsenals and is not responding to the Biden administration’s requests to discuss Russia’s non-compliance with the new Strategic Nuclear Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

“Russia is not complying with its obligation under the New START Treaty to facilitate inspection activities on its territory,” the State Department said in a Jan. 31 statement accompanying its [Russia New START Noncompliance Determination](#) report to Congress.

“Russia’s refusal to facilitate inspection activities prevents the United States from exercising important rights under the treaty and threatens the viability of U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control.”

Notte and Abercrombie were among the speakers during a 90-minute Feb. 1 webinar, [Challenges and Prospects for Further U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control](#), sponsored by the Washington-based Arms Control Association.

A ‘Russian Calculation’ Not to Comply

The [New START](#), signed by the United States and the Russian Federation in February 2011, obligates both nations to maintain the same number of long-range nuclear weapons in their arsenals that they had in 2018 through the treaty’s February 2026 termination.

The treaty is the latest iteration of [five decades of strategic weapons accords](#) between the world’s largest nuclear powers, beginning with 1972’s Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT).

Notte said Russian officials now insist that compliance with New START, and talks about any future arms control treaties after it expires in 2026, is “not immune” from its war in Ukraine and U.S. support for Kyiv has “made business as usual no longer possible.”

With the Biden administration’s recent agreement to supply battle tanks to Ukraine, “the broader situation remains uncondusive to setting a new date” for talks with the Russians over compliance issues and a new treaty, she said.

“The invasion of Ukraine has become the over-arching principle of Russian foreign policy,” Notte said.

“To Russia, other concerns are secondary. What will happen in 2026 is not a concern. The question, really, is how much longer the Kremlin believes it can blackmail the United States into ending its support for Ukraine.

“It wants to coerce the United States to reconsider its support for Ukraine. I don’t see the United States folding.”



A maintenance team removes the upper section of an ICBM at a silo near Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana. (AP Photo/U.S. Air Force, John Parie)

This may be “the Russian calculation, at least for the time being,” she said because ultimately Moscow is best served by resuming contact and cooperation with verification procedures because the United States is more capable of ramping up strategic capacities more quickly than they are.

Abercrombie said the United States will continue to tell Russia it has a “clear pathway to compliance” by allowing inspections and convening a meeting of a bilateral commission to discuss any issues with the treaty.

“Nothing prevents them from resuming inspections” of the U.S. arsenal, she said. “We have done everything in our power to ensure Russian inspectors can travel to sites inside the United States and globally. There are no barriers to facilitating Russian inspections.”

Mutual inspections were suspended in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In August 2022, the U.S. wanted to resume inspections, but Russia refused, claiming resumption would confer “unilateral advantages to the United States. They did not explain what they meant,” said Steve Pifer, a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and William J. Perry fellow at the Center for Stanford University’s Center for International Security and Cooperation.

In November, the Russians refused to convene a meeting of the bilateral commission to discuss its issues with the treaty. Pifer said first it was a postponement then it became a cancellation because, Moscow said, of “the hostile attitude to Russia” by the United States and Western Europe nations.

“The longer we go without inspections, that is going to create greater concerns. The United States today has less confidence in the accuracy of Russia’s declaration of deployed warheads,” he said. “The longer this goes on without on-site inspections—now at the two-and-a-half years point—it will raise questions [about cheating], create greater pressure to move away from New START.”

Distrust Could Spur Nuclear Arms Race

This unfolding disruption fosters concern about the capacity of the two nations, who possess 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons, to negotiate a new accord when the current treaty expires in 2026, Pifer said.

"Time is growing short. We have three years until New START expires. It may seem like a long time but it is not enough time if you are trying to do something structured," he said, agreeing with Abercrombie the problems with compliance now are "readily fixable:" Allow inspections and convene a bilateral commission meeting.

"We are now in 2023. My guess is there may not be a drop dead date [to begin new treaty talks] but the ability to do something about it is going to be reduced, depending how much time they have," Pifer said. "The less time we have, the less ambitious we can get."

Distrust is already surfacing, he said, citing a comment from House Armed Services Committee Chair Rep. Mike Roberts (R-Ala.) that the Joint Chiefs of Staff must now assume Russia is cheating by exceeding strategic arms limits.

"You are going to see that kind of pressure," he said.

"We're already seeing that play out," agreed Federation of American Scientists Nuclear Information Project Senior Research Associate Matt Korda, noting Roger's reaction to the State Department report that Russia is exceeding limits is dangerously mistaken.

"That is not what the report accuses them of doing. They are not in compliance [with inspections] but not above limits" in weapons, he said. "It took just a few hours for politicians to accuse them" of being above limits. "So you can only imagine what the response would be if we no longer have a treaty in 2026."

Nuclear arms treaties between the United States and Russia have kept a lid on other nations assembling or expanding their own arsenals, said Finland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs ambassador for strategic and arms control Jarmo Viinanen, who is chair-designate of the 2023 Nonproliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee.

Without a treaty, a nuclear arms race will unfold, he said.

“The collapse of nuclear arms control” would be a calamity for nations across the globe, Viinanen said, not only in restraining major powers from expanding arsenals but in combating proliferation to those nations that have chosen not to build their own weapons of mass destruction.

“Support for non-proliferation cannot be taken for granted. One additional nation [builds a nuclear arsenal], many to follow,” he said. “The United States and Russia have a special responsibility. Their leadership on this issue will set an example for other nations to follow.”