

# THE LAST NUCLEAR TREATY

Since the original development of the atom bomb in the 20th century, people across the world have feared and dreaded nuclear war. The nuclear-arms proliferation (buildup) of the “super-powers” of the United States and then-Soviet Union (now Russia) became a central issue of diplomatic and military strategy during the Cold War between them. Even before the fall of the Soviet Union, however, both nations entered into historic agreements to reduce their fearsome nuclear arsenals.

The first such agreement was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The U.S. and the Soviet Union agreed to the INF in 1987 during the U.S. presidency of Ronald Reagan. The INF Treaty mandated that the U.S. and the Soviet Union (later Russia) eliminate and pledge never to use ground-launched nuclear and conventional intermediate-range missiles. These missiles have ranges from 500 to 1,500 kilometers (about 310 to 930 miles). On February 2, 2019, the administration of President Donald Trump announced that it would be withdrawing the United States from the INF within six months.

In 1991, the U.S. and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) signed another important treaty, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). START significantly lowered the maximum limits of the two nations’ deployed (ready-to-use) nuclear weapons. The limit was 6,000 deployed nuclear warheads. The treaty also limited the launch capabilities from land, sea, and air (aka the “nuclear triad”).

The New START treaty of 2011 further limited the number of deployed nuclear warheads to 1,550. But the treaty was set to expire in 2020. Though the withdrawal of the INF treaty was a significant setback to reducing the threat of nuclear war, New START remained. It was the last nuclear treaty between the world’s two largest nuclear superpowers.

The Obama administration negotiated the New START treaty in 2010, and it was then ratified by the U.S. Senate. It included nuclear arms reductions that the White House considered to be “a national security imperative.” Significantly, New START limited the U.S.’s and Russia’s arsenals in the nuclear triad:

- intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs),
- submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and
- deployed heavy bombers equipped for dropping nuclear warheads.



USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. President Ronald Reagan signing the INF Treaty on December 8, 1987.

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

The treaty was then set to expire on February 5, 2021, unless the U.S. and Russia agreed to renew it.

## Two Nations or Three?

In 2020, President Donald Trump stated that he would not be willing to renew the New START treaty unless China was also included. This would make the *bilateral treaty* (between two nations) into a *multilateral treaty* (among more than two nations). A foreign ministry spokesperson from Beijing (China’s capital) said China had “no intention” of entering into the treaty negotiations.

What were China’s reasons for not wanting to enter the treaty? China’s nuclear capabilities were and still are significantly lower than that of both Russia and the United States (see the chart “Number of Nuclear Warheads by Country, 2020” on page 11). China had never been part of any nuclear arms-control treaty before.

Economic tensions between the Trump administration and Beijing made it even harder for New START to be a multilateral treaty. In 2019, Trump had imposed tariffs, or taxes on imports from China. In response, China banned the importing of American agricultural products, one of the U.S.’s principal exports to China.

Proponents of the multilateral treaty idea pointed to a potential nuclear threat from China. Even though China’s nuclear arsenal is significantly smaller than that of Russia and the U.S., the rate of its expansion has increased. The Pentagon reported in 2020 that China plans to double its nuclear arsenal over the next decade. Proponents also argued that even though Russia has a large arsenal, Russia’s economy is only a fraction of that of either the U.S.’s or China’s. They say China, not Russia, is the world power more likely to have future global influence.

Opponents argued that none of the potential threats from China in the future meant the New START treaty was a bad idea. The growing Chinese nuclear arsenal may create challenges for nuclear non-proliferation efforts in the near future. But that might make it more important to support the current bilateral agreement which, after all, has had historically successful results in reducing nuclear arms.

### Cold War Memories

During July 2020 negotiations between the United States and Russia, the U.S. wanted Russia to sign a binding agreement that would, among other things, allow for China's future entry into New START. It had long been Russia's position, however, that if China ever entered the agreement, then the United Kingdom and France would have to enter it, too. In the face of U.S. demands, Russian President Vladimir Putin refused to agree to any "pre-conditions" on New START, saying in October 2020:

I have a proposal — which is to extend the current agreement without any pre-conditions at least for one year to have an opportunity to conduct substantial negotiations.

Trump would not agree to Putin's terms, especially not one month away from an election in which his opponent, then-Democratic candidate Joe Biden, had spoken of his support for renewal of New START. The Democratic Party found itself aligning with Russia's position on New START. Democrats urged the Trump administration to take the necessary steps to ensure the treaty was upheld and extended. Although the Trump administration kept the window of possibility for extending the treaty open, it held to its concerns about a nuclear arms buildup in China.

Many criticized the Trump administration's demand on Russia as a pretext (false reason) for ending New START. Daryl Kimball of the nonpartisan Arms Control Association, which supports nuclear-arms control treaties, called Trump's position "disingenuous." It was, he wrote, "an ill-advised strategy that has little chance of success and is probably designed to run out the clock on the last remaining treaty limiting the world's two largest nuclear arsenals."

Robert M. Gates, who was secretary of defense under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama,

stated that, in theory, it was a good idea to incorporate China into this treaty. In practice, however, that was impossible given China lacked any incentive to join, Gates argued. Through their shared experiences during the Cold War, the U.S. and Russia had become aware of the dangers of an arms race and the need for nonproliferation treaties.

Secretary Gates further stated that he hoped that this evident impossibility of including China would not stand in the way of renewing New START. Rather, he argued, the U.S. should pursue separate agreements with China, just as they did with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

### Election 2020 and Beyond

In November 2020, Donald Trump lost the presidential election. The February 5, 2021, deadline for renewing New START fell only a couple of weeks after the inauguration of the new president, Joe Biden. Though Biden had the intention of renewing the treaty with Russia, it had taken President Barack Obama months to negotiate the 2010 START renewal. Would there be enough time?

In lieu of a fully renegotiated treaty, President Joe Biden and Putin agreed to an extension of the current agreement until 2026. Under Art. II, Sec. 2, of the U.S. Constitution, the president "shall have the power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make treaties . . ." As an extension of New START and not a new treaty, however, Biden did not have to seek approval from the U.S. Senate for his agreement with Putin.

## NUMBER OF NUCLEAR WARHEADS BY COUNTRY, 2020



## The New START Treaty by the Numbers

The treaty sets limits on the maximum number of nuclear weapons that are deployed (ready for use) by the United States and Russia. Each nation can have no more than:

- **700** total deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), deployed submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments;
- **1,550** nuclear warheads on deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments (each heavy bomber is counted as one warhead toward this limit);
- **800** deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, SLBM launchers, and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments.



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A Russian intercontinental ballistic missile mobile launcher.

Source: U.S. Department of State

Putin, however, did have to get the approval of both houses of the Russian parliament, called the Duma. The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying it hoped the Biden administration would end what it called the “destructive U.S. policy” under Trump of ending nuclear arms-control agreements between the two nations.

In the meantime, tensions between the U.S. and Russia remained high. After Russian troops invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the U.S. sent over \$100 billion in military and financial aid to Ukraine. On February 21, 2023, Putin announced that he was suspending Russia's participation in New START. Though Russia's foreign ministry said the decision was “reversible,” the last nuclear treaty would no longer be in effect.

### WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. Why was renewing New START important for reducing the number of nuclear weapons in the United States and Russia?
2. Who were the main supporters and opponents of renewing New START? What reasons did they give for their respective positions? Which side do you think had the better reasons? Why?
3. Compare the positions of President Joe Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump on renewing the treaty.

### ACTIVITY: Should Other Countries Be Involved?

One of the main disagreements that stalled the U.S. renewing the New START treaty was whether China should be a party to the treaty. You are an official with the U.S. Department of State tasked with coming up with terms for renewal of the treaty.

With three or four other officials, deliberate on whether the renewal of the START treaty should be *bilateral* (between the U.S. and Russia only) or *multilateral* (including China and possibly other nations). Use information from this article, including diagrams, and decide in your group what type of treaty you think the president should sign. Choose a spokesperson for your group.

After all groups have decided, each group will present their decision to the class.

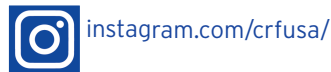
After all groups have presented, write a paragraph on what you think the future START treaty should say and give three reasons why, using information from this article and your small-group discussion.

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(Continued on page 14.)

## Standards Addressed

### American Indian Sovereignty

**California History-Social Science Standard 12.7.** Students analyze and compare the powers and procedures of the national, state, tribal, and local governments. (1) Explain how conflicts between levels of government and branches of government are resolved.

**California History-Social Science Standard 8.8.** Students analyze the divergent paths of the American people in the West from 1800 to the mid-1800s and the challenges they faced. (2) Describe the purpose, challenges, and economic incentives associated with westward expansion, including the concept of Manifest Destiny (e.g., accounts of the removal of Indians, the Cherokees' "Trail of Tears," settlement of the Great Plains) and the territorial acquisitions that spanned numerous decades.

**California History-Social Science Framework (2016), Ch. 17, p. 447:** Teachers can emphasize how power and responsibilities are divided among national, state, local, and tribal governments and ask students to consider this question: Why are powers divided among different levels of government? Students should understand that local governments are established by the states, and tribal governments are recognized by constitutional provisions and federal law.

**National U.S. History Standard 19.** Understands federal Indian policy and United States foreign policy after the Civil War. **Middle School (1):** Understands interaction between Native Americans and white society (e.g., the attitudes and policies of government officials, the U.S. Army, missionaries, and settlers toward Native Americans; the provisions and effects of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 on tribal identity, land ownership and assimilation; the legacy of the 19th century federal Indian policy; Native American responses to increased white settlement, mining activities, and railroad construction). **High School (3):** Understands influences on and perspectives of Native American life in the late 19th century (e.g., how the admission of new western states affected relations between the United States and Native American societies; leadership and values of Native American leaders . . .). **Common Core State Standards:** RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.2, SL.11-12.1, WHST.11-12.10.

### Police Reform After the Death of George Floyd

**California History-Social Science Framework (Adopted 2016), p. 447-448:** Teachers can emphasize how power and responsibilities are divided among national, state, local, and tribal governments and ask students to consider this question: Why are powers divided among different levels of government? . . . Students should also identify typical responsibilities of state government, including education, infrastructure such as roads and bridges, criminal and civil law, and regulation of business. The state also oversees and regulates local governments and the services provided such as fire and police protection, sanitation, local public schools, public transportation, housing, and zoning and land use.

**California History-Social Science Standard 12.7:** Students analyze and compare the powers and procedures of the national, state, tribal, and local gov-

ernments. (5) Explain how public policy is formed, including the setting of the public agenda and implementation of it through regulations and executive orders.

**National Civics Standard 21: Understands the formation and implementation of public policy. Middle School (3):** Understands why conflicts about values, principles, and interests may make agreement difficult or impossible on certain issues of public policy. **High School (2):** Understands the processes by which public policy concerning a local, state, or national issue is formed and carried out. (4) Understands why agreement may be difficult or impossible on issues such as abortion because of conflicts about values, principles, and interests.

### The Last Nuclear Treaty

**Common Core State Standards:** RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.2, SL.11-12.1, WHST.11-12.10. **Standards National World History Standard 43.** Understands how post-World War II reconstruction occurred, new international power relations took shape, and colonial empires broke up. **High School (2)** Understands the impact of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

**National World History Standard 45.** Understands major global trends since World War II. **Middle School (2)** Understands the origins and decline of the Cold War and its significance as a 20th-century event.

**National Civics Standard 22.** Understands how the world is organized politically into nation-states, how nation-states interact with one another, and issues surrounding U.S. foreign policy. **High School (5)** Understands the process by which United States foreign policy is made, including the roles of federal agencies, domestic interest groups, the media, and the public; and knows the ways in which Americans can influence foreign policy. (7) Understands the idea of the national interest and how it is used as a criterion for shaping American foreign policy.

**Common Core State Standards:** RH.9-10.1, RH.9-10.2, SL.9-10.1, WHST.9-10.10.

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