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NEW STRATEGIC ARMS REDUCTION TREATY BETWEEN THE US AND RUSSIA

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EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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On January 26, 2021, during a phone conversation between the President of the United States, Joseph Biden, and the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, a decision was confirmed by the parties to extend the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START, CHB-3) without any preconditions for five more years from February 5, 2021 to February 5, 2026 after which the sides exchanged diplomatic notes.

New START was the last treaty still in force with regard to nuclear armaments as the United States left the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) under the Trump administration. At the same time, the Trump administration was also against extending New START without changes as it was set to expire in February 2021. Russia, on the other hand, was opposed to any kind of changes to this treaty.

In a very short while after Biden's arrival to power, the treaty was extended by five years without any changes. What was the reason for this decision? Why was the prior presidential administration against this and why did the new one make efforts to achieve an agreement in a short period of time? What can we expect to happen next? These are the questions that we will attempt to answer in this publication.

History of New START

Since our topic addresses the extension of an already existing treaty without any changes made to it, let us start by taking a look at the preconditions, details and results of the initial signing of the treaty.

The Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, New START¹ (Договор между Российской Федерацией и Соединенными Штатами Америки о мерах по дальнейшему сокращению и ограничению стратегических наступательных вооружений, СНВ-3²) was signed on April 8, 2010 in Prague.

The original propositions for creating such a treaty were being discussed by Clinton and Yeltsin back in 1997. The initial version envisaged setting the upper limit of strategic nuclear warheads to 2,000-2,500 units with the treaty being permanent; however, this attempt turned out to be fruitless at the time.

In 2006, Putin put forward an initiative to launch new negotiations about this issue. The formulation of the document itself started on April 1, 2009

after a meeting between Obama and Medvedev in London. The document entered the legislative structures of both countries for ratification in May 2010. The US Senate ratified it on December 22, 2010 while the Duma and the Senate of the Russian Federation ratified it on January 25-26, 2011.

The presidents of Russia and the United States signed laws on ratifying the treaty on January 28, 2011 and February 2, 2011, respectively. Ratification certificates were exchanged on February 5 after which the treaty came into force, replacing its predecessor treaties. Namely:

- July 31, 1991 - Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics on the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, START I³ (**Договор о сокращении стратегических наступательных вооружений, СНВ-1⁴**);
- May 24, 2002 - Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions, SORT⁵ (**Договор о сокращении стратегических наступательных потенциалов, СНП⁶**).

During the ratification, the parties added certain caveats. The resolution of the US Congress pointed out that this treaty does not preclude placing anti-missile systems, including in Europe. Russia, on the other hand, retained the right to leave the treaty if the US anti-missile systems program reached its threat threshold.

The Obama administration was stating that agreeing to this treaty had a vital importance for improving US-Russian relations which had deteriorated markedly by the end of the Bush administration.

According to the Russian side, the treaty had to include a significantly lesser number of warheads than envisaged by the 2002 Bush-Putin intermediate treaty.⁷ At the same time, Medvedev was saying that Russia would not agree to sign the treaty unless the US suspended its plans of placing missile-defense elements in Poland and the Czech Republic. The Americans, on the other hand, stated that these two issues were not related.

New START established the following limits on units:

- 700 units of carriers (Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), underwater ballistic missiles, heavy bombers);
- 1,550 combat warheads (on ICBMs, underwater ballistic missiles and heavy bombers that were considered to be deployed);

- 800 units of deployed or non-deployed carrier ICBMs, underwater ballistic missile launchers, deployed or non-deployed heavy bombers.

According to the treaty, the missile types created to intercept or combat objects that are not on the surface of the Earth would not be considered as ballistic missiles.

The treaty stayed in force for ten years after the exchange of the ratification certificates unless it were to be superseded by another treaty during this period. After its expiry, the treaty could only be extended by five years.

Each of the parties could leave the treaty under special conditions and the treaty would stop functioning three months after the notification about one of the sides exiting it.

The treaty prohibited the placement of strategic attack armaments outside one's own territory, also prohibiting the re-modelling of ICBM and underwater ballistic missile launchers into anti-missile system launchers and vice-versa. Also, the issues of strategic attack armaments and anti-missile systems were now connected.

A bilateral consultative commission was created in order to facilitate the goals of the treaty. The verification mechanism that was formulated was supposed to ensure the irreversibility and transparency of the reduction of strategic armaments.

The treaty enabled the parties to conduct checks with prior agreement on the bases of the placement of ICBMs, submarines and strategic aviation as well as at the points of missile loading, repairs and storage. A total of 18 inspections per year were envisaged (10+8). A total number of 328 inspections were conducted during the entire period of the treaty with 21,403 messages exchanged.

According to the START I treaty functioning at the time, the maximum allowed number of warheads for each party was 6,000 with the number of carriers limited to 1,600. According to open sources, the Russian Federation had 628 missile complexes with 2,805 nuclear warheads at the beginning of 2009. Of this:

- 385 complexes in strategic purpose missile forces: silo-based and mobile **PC-12M2** "Тополь-М"⁸ (NATO classification - SS-27 Sickle) – 65 units; land-based **PC-12M** "Тополь"⁹ (NATO classification - SS-25 Sickle) – 180 units; heavy missiles **PC-20Б**¹⁰ (NATO classification - SS-18

Mod.4) - and **PC-20B**, “Воевода”¹¹ (NATO classification - SS-18 Mod.5/ Mod.6) – 62 units; PC-18Б, “Стилет”¹² (NATO classification - SS-19 mod.2 Stiletto) – 72 units with 1,357 warheads;

- In naval military forces: **PCM-50**¹³ (NATO classification - SS-N-18, Stingray) and **PCM-54**¹⁴ (NATO classification - SS-N-23 Skiff) – 172 units, type rockets with 612 warheads;
- In military air force: 77 missile-carrying heavy bombers with 856 warhead cruise missiles of X-55 type (NATO classification - AS-15 Kent).

It must be pointed out that “Воевода” and “Стилет” were “getting old” quite fast and were removed from combat readiness while the new “Тополь-М” was being produced in limited numbers. A total of three such complexes were planned to enter exploitation in 2009 together with three PC-24 “Ярс”¹⁵ missiles (with a minimum of four warheads on each).

However, on July 1, 2009, the Russian Federation published data that were slightly different from the ones presented above, featuring 608 carriers (-20) and 2,683 warheads (-122). This kind of difference could have been caused by inaccurate information in open sources and also by the removal of some armaments from combat readiness.

By June 2011, the United States had 882 deployed and 242 undeployed carriers. These were mostly: LGM-30G Minuteman III type ICBMs, UGM-133A Trident II underwater based ballistic missiles and B-52H, B-2A, B-1B strategic bombers.

The START I treaty (functioning of the control mechanism) expired on December 4, 2009. Therefore, a new treaty was supposed to be signed before this date; however, its preparation was postponed several times. Negotiations were strictly classified and neither of the parties revealed any details.

Main Results of New START

After taking the measures envisaged in the new treaty, the number of nuclear warheads was supposed to go lower than envisaged by the 1972 (SALT I¹⁶) negotiations for the first time in the existence of nuclear weapons. The number of strategic carriers was being reduced by about three times as compared to 1972 and about two times as compared to the limits envisaged in START I. However, the actual reduction was 25-30%.

The treaty brought the carrier to warhead ratio to 1:2 (instead of the 1:3.5 existing earlier). This made it more difficult to mount an initial disarming attack.

According to one part of the Russian experts, the treaty contained positive developments for Russia. Specifically, the US anti-missile program was corrected and its focus was shifted to intercepting operative-tactical missiles with the verification mechanism simplified. Hence, the treaty set conditions for maintaining strategic stability for the foreseeable future.

Another part of experts, however, saw the treaty as a total “defeat” for Russia. Namely, they were stating the following reasons:

- It was unclear whether there were any limits on the size of the deployment territories of mobile complexes;
- The upper limit of 1,550 warheads was fiction. This was due to the fact that one bomber was considered as one warhead which gave little superiority to the US in terms of a quantitative perspective; however, qualitatively the superiority of the US was significant due to the fact that US B-2s can carry more than one warhead and likely have the ability to penetrate Russia’s aerial defense;
- The inspection mechanism was so flexible that it could significantly complicate the functioning of strategic nuclear forces if not paralyze them outright. Even though parity was maintained, the importance of strategic nuclear forces is much higher for Russia than it is for the United States;
- The treaty made it possible to replace SLBMs (Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles) with cruise missiles. In this sense as well, despite formal parity, superiority remained on the side of the US. They had the mentioned technology developed on a high level (four OHIO type submarines had already been re-modelled with the 24 ballistic missiles replaced with 154 cruise missiles);
- The US retained great return potential;
- By reducing strategic nuclear forces, the center of gravity moved to conventional weaponry in which the United States enjoyed significant superiority.

Despite these negative assessments, by the time of signing the treaty Russia already had a smaller number of carriers than envisaged in the

treaty. The Russians would simply have to remove 200-300 warheads from multi-warhead ballistic missiles and the treaty would be fulfilled. However, seven years was envisaged for this process by which time Russian strategic nuclear forces would naturally “fulfill” the treaty obligations anyway due to the lack of resources. Therefore, even solely due to this – the treaty could not be considered a “defeat” for Russia.

Apart from this, from the political point of view, Russia managed to create an illusion that it was on par with the United States. In this sense, it got more than it could have managed otherwise as it had no leverage on the United States. Russia needed strategic nuclear forces very much; however, their degradation was a continuous process even if the treaty did not exist at all.

The treaty practically had no great influence on military balance. The US does not need strategic nuclear forces at all and the lower this potential goes on both sides, the better it will be for the US. The United States paid far greater attention to cruise missiles and other high-precision weapons where its superiority over the rest of the world is quite clear.

Implementation of New START

According to the official data of the United States and Russia,¹⁷ the United States had 882 deployed warhead carriers (ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers), 1,800 warheads and 1,124 deployed and non-deployed launching systems in 2011. The US fulfilled the terms of the treaty by September 2017 when they retained 660 carriers, 1,393 warheads and 800 launching systems.

In 2011, the Russian Federation had in its armaments: 521 deployed carriers (ICBMs: PC-12M, PC-12M2, PC-18Б, PC-20Б, PC-20B and PC-24; underwater based ballistic missiles: **PCM-50**, **PCM-54**, **PCM-56** “Булава-30”¹⁸ and **PCM-52**,¹⁹ heavy bombers: Ty-95M and Ty-160; 1,537 warheads and 865 systems). Russia fulfilled the terms of the treaty by February 2018. After this, it had retained 527 deployed carriers, 1,444 warheads and 779 systems. According to the data of September 1, 2020, these numbers reduced further, reaching respectively 510, 1,447 and 764 units. At the same time, US had 675, 1,457 and 800 units, respectively.

However, it must be pointed out that the US strategic bombers could carry 20 cruise missiles (B-52H), 16 nuclear aviation bombs B-2A and 24

nuclear aviation bombs B-1B. Therefore, they in fact had a bigger number of deployed carriers. They also removed part of these bombers from the framework of the agreement by stating that they had been re-modelled for performing non-nuclear tasks (checking this was impossible).

It was also announced that the number of SLBM Trident II on OHIO type submarines was reduced from 24 to 22 with the number of warheads on these missiles also reduced (from 8 or 14 to 4) and with an additional reduction of warheads on Minuteman III ICBMs (from three to one). Based on this, the problem of the so-called return potential arose. The US could soon reverse this. Russia had no such potential. Its ICBMs and SLBMs were equipped with a full package of warheads while the underwater missile cruisers also had full packages on SLBMs.

In order to fulfill the agreement, the US needed to reduce the parameters in all three directions. Russia only needed to reduce the non-deployed carriers (and even that in a small number, usually more obsolete units). As for deployed carriers and warheads, it could even increase them.

Why did the US agree to what practically amounted to a one-sided reduction? One of the reasons could be the aforementioned return potential. Also, there was probably a great need to maintain the verification mechanism. In addition, Russian expert circles expressed their opinion²⁰ that this was kind of a repayment for Russia's refusal to sell a C-300 anti-aircraft missile complex to Iran.

Current Situation

Given the fact that the treaty has been extended without changes, Russia can even increase its strategic nuclear forces; however, since Russia is replacing multi-warhead intercontinental ballistic missiles PC-18 (YP-100H – 6 warheads on each) and PC-20 (P-36M – 10 warheads on each) with PC-24 “Ярс” missiles (3-4 warheads on each), the number of deployed warheads will probably even reduce. The US can maintain its forces at the existing level, especially if we take into account the return potential. Therefore, the treaty will be fulfilled without any problems.

Biden's decision on the extension of the treaty for five more years without any preconditions invited criticism from the previous administration. Namely, President Trump's Special Representative for Arms Control, Marshall Billingslea, tweeted²¹ that it took only 24 hours for Biden's team

to waste the most important leverage against Moscow – “we agree on the extension and get nothing in return.”

Former US State Secretary, Mike Pompeo, stated that this treaty constrains 92% of the US nuclear arsenal as opposed to 45% on the Russian side. Apart from this, it does not cover China at all which is unacceptable for the United States.

Such attitudes are not surprising given that, as already pointed out, the Trump administration was negatively disposed towards this from the outset. In 2017, Donald Trump stated²² that the treaty is favorable for Moscow while it is detrimental for US interests. According to the statement of his administration, it was necessary to involve China in the upcoming treaty or it should have been extended with the inclusion of new conditions (the newest types of strategic armaments should have been included as well as tactical nuclear weapons. Also, new mechanisms for verification should have been drawn up). Russia’s proposal was to extend the treaty without any prior conditions. Due to these opposing views, an agreement was not achieved under the Trump administration.

The Trump administration was actually unwilling to extend the treaty and was not simply using it as a negotiation tactic. The 2020 plan of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) had twice as many nuclear armament projects envisaged than in 2019. More long-term plans were also ambitious.

Despite the fact that the US significantly has reduced the creation and production of new types of nuclear warheads since 1991, the great scientific and technical potential which is able to fulfill these ambitious plans nonetheless still remains. These first of all include the US Department of Energy laboratories: Los Alamos National Laboratory – LANL and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory – LLNL. During the Cold War, the majority of nuclear arms projects were concentrated there; however, in recent years these laboratories were less busy with defense topics unlike the Sandia National Laboratories which were mostly occupied with the adaptation of nuclear warheads with carriers and the creation of bodies and warheads for aviation bombs.

According to the US Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan (SSMP) of the National Nuclear Security Administration, the number of programs for the creation of warheads has doubled in 2021 as compared to 2019.

It also indicates that the gradual replacement of these warheads with the newer versions will be necessary beginning from the 2040s. The first new warhead will probably be a nuclear warhead for sea-based cruise missiles (SLCM-N). Its production is scheduled to start in 2029.

US nuclear plans and capacities could have been one of the main stimulants for the interest of the Russian political leadership to extend the treaty without any preconditions.

The main creator of nuclear weapons in the USSR and Russia was Sarov KB-11 (Arzamas-16) and Snezhinsk KB-10 (Chelyabinsk-70). In the 1990s, there was not a lot of work to do owing to various reasons. They renewed their work intensively in the 2000s, however, with the creation of modern nuclear materials between 2000-2010. Thanks to their work, Russia had certain achievements in these fields. That said, the US scientific, financial and technical resources far exceed those of Russia and the continuation of the race could end by repeating the history of the Cold War.

The possible transformation of the Pentagon's views on nuclear weapons could also have been one of the reasons for the extension of the treaty by Russia. More specifically, an article²³ published in one of the institutional journals by the US STRATCOM Admiral Charles Richard caused great interest among Russia's expert circles. The article discusses novel views about strategic containment and the possible use of nuclear weapons. According to the admiral, the US has led counter-terrorist operations for decades and ignoring the topic of nuclear weapons has become a usual state of affairs. The admiral concedes that the likelihood of a nuclear conflict is low, yet it is not in the realm of impossibility. This is especially true in the case of deteriorating relations with an adversary in possession of nuclear weapons which actively uses its armies for supporting its interests all around the world.

While the Pentagon was concentrated on counter-terrorism, Russia and China were violating universally recognized norms of conduct, using force and the threat of using force. At the same time, this became much more of a challenge than it was during the Cold War. Modern technologies have made this easier through the cyber and the informational dimensions.

If these actions do not meet a response, an opinion may arise that the US does not want or is not able to respond. This will encourage rivals while causing the allies to think that the US does not wish to lead. One day, we

might have to face the situation when a rival will be the leader at which point Washington will have to make a choice – accept the new reality or use force and restore the status-quo or establish a new order.

According to Admiral Richard's assessment, the long-term program of the modernization of Russia's nuclear weapons has already been fulfilled by 70% and continues. Apart from this, Russia is creating new innovative systems. It does not refrain from intimidating or using force against neighboring countries. Putin reminds the world through his words and actions that Russia is a nuclear state and the results of its aggressive actions are irreversible.

China, despite the fact that its nuclear potential is far lower than that of Russia, also requires attention in this regard. It is quite close to the status of a global strategic state. At the same time, China, much like Russia, demonstrates the non-acceptance of democratic values, seeking to re-shape the world economic order in its favor.

Russia and China have sufficient nuclear potential which they can attempt to use in the cases of local conflicts ending not in their favor such as defeat or the risk of regime change. Therefore, the US military must alter their principled approach of "using nuclear weapons is impossible" to "using nuclear weapons is fully realistic." According to the admiral, these views must change in line with the new realities and according to the change dynamics in the world political landscape. The Pentagon must change its approach; however, the main purpose of nuclear containment forces should be to clear the field for projecting conventional force maneuvers in strategic directions.

Hence, if the usage of strategic nuclear weapons were not even considered due to the fact that the supposedly victorious side would also have to risk suffering unacceptable damages, now the military have started considering that this is acceptable in certain conditions.

Russian expert circles have expressed the opinion²⁴ that this is not an accidental article and rather it continues the trend of articles published by high-ranking US military officials with the aim that the US and the rest of the world comprehend the scale of threats and risks brought on by the increasing confrontation between the two worlds: the West led by Russia and the East represented by Russia and China.

The US had its logic. The Biden administration, including in its strategic planning documents,²⁵ states that the threats stemming from China are more important and require resource mobilization for the Instruments of National Power. Therefore, the decision to extend the New START treaty could be serving the purpose of freeing up these resources.

Apart from this, the new US administration understands very well that given the conditions of the pandemic, domestic problems and still mending relations with allies, the deficit of resources could arise which could have been an additional argument.

As for the issues of involving China in the negotiations at this point, something which the Trump administration was pushing, the new administration is of the opinion that there is no real leverage to influence China at this stage.

The extension of the treaty generated mostly positive responses both in the parties of the treaty as well as in general. The European Union and NATO, among others, welcomed the extension. According to Josep Borrell's statement, this step will strengthen international and European security. In its February 3 statement, NATO pointed out that the alliance accepts with satisfaction and fully supports the extension of the treaty by five years, considering that this will facilitate international stability.

According to the assessment of the experts of China's Global Problem Research Center, the extension of the treaty will positively influence global strategic stability, creating a suitable atmosphere for resolving subsequent complicated tasks, yet it will fail to cardinaly alter the reality of the two countries being rivals.

The National Security Advisor of the US President, Jake Sullivan, stated that extending this treaty is only the beginning of "serious" negotiations with Russia. Negotiations of a fundamental nature must be held on the full spectrum of nuclear challenges and threats that are outside the scope of this treaty.

Opinions were voiced by Russia's leadership that they are prepared to develop initiatives and continue joint work in this direction. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia proposed²⁶ that the US involve hyper-sonic weapons in the treaty. According to him, new weaponry was created after the signing of the treaty in 2010 which is partly or fully absent from the

envisaged limitations. It was previously stated that Russia had expressed good will to include the hyper-sonic missile complex with the steerable warhead “Avangard”²⁷ into this treaty.

Conclusions

What were the factors facilitating the extension of the treaty and what should we expect in the future?

Presumably, the parties were taking into account the very reasons due to which the treaty was originally signed. Namely:

- The US strongly required maintaining some kind of a verification mechanism with regard to Russia’s nuclear potential, especially taking into account that Russia announced the creation of a qualitatively new type of weaponry. Also, the US maintains certain superiority in terms of the return potential.
- In line with the direction of the US President, the main efforts during the formulation of the new national strategy should be directed towards China. Extending this agreement with Russia could free up certain resources which will be used for the aforementioned purposes.
- Russia, in the current situation, very much needs to present itself as a global power and a strategic player on par with the United States that is recognized as such throughout the world. Apart from this, Russia knows its capabilities rather well and also knows that creating and producing expensive weaponry will put the state in a very difficult situation, especially in light of sanctions.

The nuclear balance between the US and Russia will not, in reality, change much with the extension of this treaty.

In addition, the treaty forces the parties to not only fulfill its terms but to also think on a more long-term basis. The treaty will stop functioning completely in 2026 and it is necessary to already think about a new containment mechanism while it is still in force.

Unlike the open goal stated by the Obama administration that signing this treaty was the cornerstone of their efforts in improving relations between the US and Russia, the new US president has a different opinion. The extension of the treaty will probably not prevent Biden from bringing up problematic issues with Russia. The treaty does not limit him in this regard

in any way. A clear example of this could be Biden’s answer to a question put to him by an ABC network journalist on whether he considers Putin to be a killer to which Biden responded – yes.²⁸ This, in itself, is an unprecedented development in terms of US-Russia relations and represents a clear example of the Biden administration’s approach to Russia.

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