

Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs

Pugwash seeks a world free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Through our long-standing tradition of 'dialogue across divides' that also earned us the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995, Pugwash aims to develop and support the use of scientific, evidence-based policymaking, focusing on areas where nuclear and WMD risks are present. By facilitating track 1.5 and track II dialogues, we foster creative discussions on ways to increase the security of all sides and promote policy development that is cooperative and forward-looking.

2nd Pugwash meeting on next steps to restore US-Russian arms control

June 11, 2023 / Europe, Russia and NATO

On 1 June 2023, Pugwash convened its second small virtual roundtable discussion on the current situation facing nuclear arms control. The session involved 15 experts and former officials from the US, Russia, and some European countries to focus on what actions could be taken that would promote an official restart of dialogue between the United States and the Russian Federation. In particular, the emphasis was to identify what concrete measures and recommendations are both realistic and mutually acceptable.

It was noted that despite claims that bilateral nuclear arms control is in crisis, it has not collapsed entirely. There remain various arrangements that are operational, such as executive agreements, multilateral treaties, and the possibility of unilateral steps. The critical area is with bilateral legally binding treaties – specifically that the last remaining, New START, is in limbo as inspections are suspended and the bilateral consultative commission has not been used. One participant observed that the Russian official position is now the opposite of what it had been even recently, where they had made great effort to preserve New START in the face of the Trump Administration's hostility.

The problem, as raised in the first Pugwash session, revolves around the capacity to compartmentalise nuclear arms control from other prominent issues, not least the ongoing war in Ukraine. The situation with Ukraine appears to have accelerated and inflated several trends that had already been happening, such as the dilution of concepts as mutual vulnerability and strategic balance. However, a positive US role in pushing an initiative for a ceasefire in Ukraine, leading toward possible settlement discussions, could favourably affect prospects for arms control. One important point is centred on perceptions of US intent to inflict a 'strategic defeat' on Russia: in Russia, this phrase is repeated by officials in connection to pursuing the war in Ukraine, and it would prove a helpful step for public understanding if US officials clarified that their interpretation is narrowed only to ensuring that Russia does not revise international borders through aggression. At the same time, US could emphasise that the Russian Federation indeed has

legitimate security interests in its neighbourhood as long as these do not impinge on the security of its neighbours, and as such the US has not discussed the dismemberment of the Russian Federation.

In general, participants agreed it was important that it be stressed to the leadership in Moscow and Washington that arms control be insulated from the negative influence of events in Ukraine. As discussed in the previous meeting, there is a real need to resume bilateral dialogue on arms control – an additional proposal to use existing mechanisms comes from invoking “urgent consultations” under article IV of the Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War. Although the Russian Federation has taken some more drastic steps to suspend New START and formally end the CFE Treaty, it was suggested that the more the US continues to persuade Russia to return to compliance, the more leverage Moscow feels it is gaining. At the same time, while prevention of nuclear war and resumption of nuclear arms control is the key focus of this Pugwash initiative, the conundrum remains that, given the contextual elements present, there is a case that can be made to broaden a possible dialogue. Addressing the issues of arms control more holistically than a bilateral US-Russia dialogue will contribute much to reduce the risks of nuclear war and promote strategic stability.

The US might usefully press Russia instead to think creatively and engage on imagining the post-START realities of a world without nuclear arms control. There will have to be some give-and-take on issues such as the offense-defence balance and long-range precision-guided systems that both sides will want to see included. Such discussions would likely entail addressing the inclusion of other nuclear weapons states and the agenda would necessarily be shaped by such consultations. More widely, there are many other countries – particularly in the global South – who are willing to play a useful role in stimulating dialogue between the US and Russia.

Note: This workshop was convened on the eve of US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s speech to the Arms Control Association, in which he outlined a US strategy which includes a “willingness to engage in bilateral arms control discussions with Russia and with China without preconditions,” as well as engagement in multilateral talks with the P-5 countries to seek risk reduction and arms control measures.[1] Significantly, the reaction in Moscow was that these announcements are “important and positive.”[2]

This summary was prepared by the organizers to capture the ideas and proposals raised during discussion.

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[1] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/06/02/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-for-the-arms-control-association-aca-annual-forum/> (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/06/02/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-for-the-arms-control-association-aca-annual-forum/>)

[2] <https://tass.com/politics/1627809> (<https://tass.com/politics/1627809>)

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