

Why Europe Matters: The Case for an Arms Control Negotiation Campaign

BY ARVID BELL

The global arms control architecture is crumbling. While this trend is often framed as a U.S.-Russia (or, sometimes, a U.S.-Russia-China) problem, the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the potential expiration of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) on February 5, 2021, also severely affect the security of European states. The European Union can and should play a more effective role in influencing U.S.-Russia arms control negotiations. This is how.

This was published by CSIS on September 25, 2020.

Interconnected Arms Control Challenges

Since 2014, when the Obama administration first reported Russian noncompliance with the INF treaty, U.S. officials have repeatedly raised INF treaty violations with Moscow. The United States is mainly concerned about the flight-testing of [Russian missiles](#) with ranges of over 500 kilometers, particularly the SSC-8/9M729 missile. Russia argues that the United States has developed weapons systems that blur the line between missiles covered by the INF and missiles not covered by the INF. For instance, it points to the [Aegis Ashore](#) launch platform, which U.S. officials insist can only fire missile interceptors, but which has been used to fire [Tomahawk](#) cruise missiles when deployed onboard U.S. Navy ships. Russia has also alleged that the United States outfits unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in ways that would meet the INF definition of a cruise missile. The United States [responds](#) by arguing that the INF only covers “one-way” delivery vehicles, while UAVs can be reused.

The slow demise of the INF has further weakened the already fragile nuclear arms control architecture. With the New START treaty as the only remaining strategic arms control agreement between Russia and the United States, the expiration of the INF leaves open [questions](#) about how the United States will maintain the support of its allies, uphold strategic stability with Russia, and create a new negotiation framework that accounts for emerging actors and technologies like China and hypersonic weapons. It also raises concerns about the viability of existing verification measures.

According to some of its proponents, the withdrawal of the United States from the INF treaty was necessitated in part by the growing imbalance of military power between the United States and China. In the past, China strongly opposed joining the INF treaty, and the United States felt that its agreement with Russia constrained its ability to deploy intermediate-range (conventional and/or nuclear) missiles to counter Chinese INF-range weapons in South East Asia. Facing the expiration of New START in February, the United States and Russia will have to either let this treaty die, extend it (which is a relatively simple and quick procedure that does not require lengthy renegotiations), or enter into talks to replace it. Russia wants to extend the treaty, with President Vladimir Putin arguing that it keeps a devastating arms race at bay. However, U.S. officials have expressed dissatisfaction with New START, preferring a trilateral agreement that includes China, though this position has changed over the course of the most recent [bilateral negotiations](#).

Either way, the end of the INF treaty cannot be explained only by considering U.S. and Russian interests as they relate to intermediate-range nuclear weapons in isolation. Rather, both Washington and Moscow formulate their interests regarding the INF in the context of broader strategic considerations, such as other arms control

agreements and the changing balance of power among the United States, Russia, and China. While the United States would prefer including China, Russia has voiced a preference for [including the United Kingdom and France](#). It is also interested in maintaining good [relations with China](#) and though not fundamentally opposed to including China in a multilateral agreement, it has dismissed U.S. attempts to do so in August as [unrealistic](#) and counterproductive. What could be done to solve this conundrum, address both U.S. and Russian underlying interests, and strengthen the international arms control regime? This is where the European Union and the concept of a negotiation campaign comes in.

European Arms Control Interests

The INF treaty eliminated an entire category of nuclear weapons that posed a direct threat to European security: short-, medium-, and intermediate-range missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers. The expiration of the INF treaty permits the reintroduction of these weapons into the nuclear arsenals of both Russia and the United States, which would gravely destabilize European security. Russia, for its part, is concerned about the potential for conventional INF-range missile weapons deployed in NATO member countries by the United States. Specifically, the short flight time of such missiles (under 20 minutes) would leave Moscow almost no time to detect and subsequently decide how to react to a launch, thereby making a response based on wrong or incomplete information more likely. To counter this threat and as well as the perceived conventional superiority of the United States and NATO, Russia could deploy the kind of missiles that were eliminated under the INF treaty. The presence of these missiles increases the likelihood that a regional conflict between Russia and the United States will escalate—be it unintentionally or because of miscalculation—above the nuclear threshold, with potentially devastating consequences for Europe.

While NATO and EU officials have recognized Russian violations of the INF, they are [generally wary](#) of a nuclear arms architecture without the INF, in which Russian intermediate-range nuclear weapons could target Western European cities. Recognizing Russia's larger geopolitical strategy, NATO has [expressed](#) its intent “to counter and reject any arms control offers from Russia that serve no purpose other than to divide NATO Allies, bring legitimacy to aggressive Russian steps, and promote a military balance in Europe that favours Russia.” In a replacement for the INF, NATO would prefer clauses that limit Russia's military superiority in regions close to NATO territory, its ability to mobilize overwhelming numbers of conventional forces, and disrupt NATO reinforcement options.

The EU would like to see improved transparency and verification measures in a renegotiation of the INF, recognizing the importance of the existing arms control infrastructure to the security of Europe. It would [prefer](#) to continue the restrictions imposed by the INF and, failing that, to extend New START. Beyond intermediate-range nuclear weapons, the EU would also benefit from limitations on strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons. It emphasizes that Russia, as the party with the largest arsenal, should eliminate the most weapons.

For its part, France prefers a multilateral renegotiation of the INF treaty. French President Emmanuel Macron has pushed for a policy of “strategic autonomy” around European defense, which would suggest a desire to end the pattern of U.S. domination over nuclear talks with Russia. However, critics say this kind of linkage between the French nuclear deterrent and a European defense could [fuel a nuclear arms race](#) instead of ending it. Germany, facing the possibility of becoming stuck in an arms race between Russia and the United States, [seems prepared](#) to give up some of the U.S. nuclear weapons deployed within its borders.

From Subsidiary Deals to a Negotiation Campaign

Negotiation experts Jim Sebenius and David Lax [have argued](#) that negotiation campaigns are necessary when an individual deal is unlikely to be sustainable because of linkages between the issue at stake and issues included in other (potential) agreements. In these situations, the skilled negotiator must craft several “subsidiary deals” grouped into “negotiation fronts” to reach the ultimate “target agreement.” This concept is applicable to the arms control conundrum. It can guide a European negotiation campaign aimed at strengthening the international arms control regime by addressing underlying European, U.S., Russian, and Chinese interests as well as the concerns of other actors. Of course, “Europe” is a heterogeneous actor when it comes to the nuclear issue (i.e., depending on focusing on the EU, the European NATO members, or all European states, etc.). Instead of dissecting how each of these coalitions could proceed, let’s assume that the European Union decides to launch an arms control negotiation campaign and apply the six-step negotiation campaign concept to such a scenario. This is how EU diplomats could do it:

1. *Envision the ultimate target deal.* Rather than trying to convince the United States and Russia to revive INF in isolation, Brussels should set a more ambitious but ultimately more sustainable goal: a new international arms control architecture that addresses the legitimate security interests of all relevant parties.
2. *Decide how a European arms control campaign will influence this target deal.* The EU should conduct a realistic appraisal of its sources of leverage in the context of arms control negotiations. Does Brussels seek to focus on creating value at the negotiation table through offering concessions? If so, Paris could signal to Moscow its willingness to accept restrictions on its nuclear arsenal, and Brussels could negotiate with London to bring the U.K. on board as well. The goal of this negotiation move would be to have Moscow reciprocate on issues where the EU and the United States need help, for example through using the Russian relationship with China to convince Beijing to join multilateral arms control talks. Alternatively, should the EU focus instead on weakening the best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA) of the United States and Russia? If so, the EU could refuse to support the deployment of U.S. ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs), as a signal to Washington, or step up its cooperation with NATO on issues such as military mobility and force readiness, as a signal to Moscow. For the GLCM move to work, Brussels would have to first convince Warsaw to not do a U.S.-Polish side deal on such deployments. While both of these BATNA-weakening negotiation moves might seem detrimental to European security in the short term, they could change the U.S. and Russian negotiation calculus, if combined with clearly formulated European goals as they relate to arms control.
3. *Identify and characterize all key players.* European diplomats should identify and engage all actors that would have to be included in international negotiations about a new arms control architecture, either directly or indirectly. Who would need to sit at the negotiation table? What are the players’ interests regarding arms control? How could those states that do not have nuclear assets, yet have profound and legitimate security concerns regarding other states’ arsenals, be included in negotiations and/or agreements? Who can influence the players “away from the table”? Which concerns regarding current arms control agreements do these influencers have and how could these be addressed by new frameworks? For example, what about American arms control critics who say that the United States should not agree to any restrictions on its own military capabilities as long as, they argue, China makes no concessions and [Russia continues to cheat](#)? An effective negotiation campaign includes a careful analysis of the domestic landscape of all key players with the goal to address legitimate concerns in the ultimate target agreement or in one of its subsidiary deals.
4. *Group the parties into “fronts.”* Looking at the previously identified actors, how could these be grouped into collections that share similar arms control interests? The key is to avoid simplistic labels that might not reflect the nuances of a party’s position. For example, rather than labeling China as a member of a (perceived) “anti-arms-control” front because of its reluctance to join INF and New START

negotiations, China could be grouped into a “missile defense” front because this issue is one of Beijing’s [top concerns](#) in the context of U.S. military capabilities.

5. *Assess interdependence among fronts.* What are the issues and interests that cut across these fronts? This is where savvy negotiators find opportunities to create value. For example, there may not be a zone of possible agreement (ZOPA) between the United States and Russia in bilateral INF negotiations; however, once linked with the China question, this assessment may change. Using “what if” scenarios, European diplomats could probe for possible U.S. and Russian concessions that become tenable were Beijing to rethink its resistance to joining arms control talks.
6. *Decide how to orchestrate the process among fronts.* Equipped with the political and technical knowledge acquired through the previous five negotiation steps, the EU would be in a formidable position to spearhead a diplomatic effort to reform and save the international arms control architecture, rather than protesting its demise. European diplomats would need to figure out which negotiation fronts to prioritize, which parties to engage first, and which sets of talks should take place simultaneously rather than sequentially. Which linkages between which subsidiary arms control deals promise a negotiation breakthrough, and which linkages should be avoided because they will make an ultimate agreement more difficult? Here, EU diplomats could also draw on their expertise gained through the Iran nuclear negotiations, specifically regarding sources of leverage that Europe brought to the table during those talks that may be transferable to an international arms control negotiation campaign (lifting sanctions, access to financial systems, etc.).

This roadmap could help generate progress on several significant arms control issues. Take the example of Washington’s recent attempts to bring Beijing into its bilateral talks with Moscow. Thus far, these attempts have failed. However, Beijing could find an invitation by Brussels to join exploratory talks about the need to reform the international arms control architecture more difficult to reject. In fact, Beijing could take advantage of such a forum to explain its concerns pertaining to U.S. missile defense, thereby enhancing the EU’s understanding of Chinese security concerns, which would in return enable Brussels to probe (in informal, bilateral EU-U.S. talks) for potential U.S. concessions vis-à-vis China.

Given the mistrust between all three dyads in the U.S.-China-Russia triangle, a European arms control negotiation campaign can create important spaces to think more creatively about changes to existing agreements that could be beneficial to all parties. The EU should conduct these negotiations neither as a neutral mediator among the United States, Russia, and China (which it is not, given the EU’s geopolitical alignment with its U.S. allies) nor because of unrealistic great power illusions. Instead, the EU should simply formulate its own, legitimate security interests related to arms control and extend a pragmatic offer to the United States, Russia, and China to do some of the hard diplomatic work it takes to put a comprehensive negotiation campaign together.

Arvid Bell is a lecturer on government and the director of the Negotiation Task Force at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. Research assistance for this commentary was provided by Michael Wallace.

Cambridge, MA. September 25, 2020.