

Five Agenda Items for the Next U.S.–Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The United States and Russia are expected to hold a second round of their newly established Strategic Stability Dialogue at a time of heightened tensions.

Russia is likely to try to take advantage of Biden’s foreign policy missteps to advance its great-power competition agenda.

The U.S. must protect its interests while pursuing substantive dialogue with Moscow in an effort to improve predictability and stability on strategic issues.

The United States and Russia are expected to hold a second round of their newly established Strategic Stability Dialogue (SSD) soon in Geneva, Switzerland. This second round follows the first meeting of the SSD in late July. The meeting will continue to focus on reducing the risk of nuclear war and on arms control. How the United States handles these talks will be an important indicator of the White House’s political and national security posture toward the Kremlin. It is critical that Team Biden get it right.

Tense Relations with Moscow

Unfortunately, these talks come at an extraordinarily difficult, tense time in U.S.–Russian relations. Some would even suggest that Russian–American bilateral ties are now at a post–Cold War low.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5218>

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For instance:

- Washington and Moscow remain at odds over Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, its support of the ongoing insurgency in the eastern part of Ukraine, and Russia's continued occupation of Georgia.¹
- There are concerns about the Kremlin's support of the Bashar al Assad regime in Syria during the years of conflict there as well as Moscow's meddling in Belarus and cooperation with China on security issues.²
- The Kremlin is also likely directly involved in cyber operations against the United States government and private industry, including ransomware attacks and the SolarWinds hack.
- Human and political rights in Russia—or the lack thereof—are a concern for much of the international community. The attempted assassinations of political opposition leader Alexei Navalny and former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal with a chemical weapon are especially egregious.³
- With respect to arms control, confidence-building and security-building agreements, Moscow has violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty and is in clear breach of the Chemical Weapons Convention.⁴

A Difficult Time in U.S. Foreign Policy

The SSD also comes at a troubling time in U.S. foreign policy in the aftermath of the precipitous, shambolic withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, ending U.S. military operations after nearly 20 years. In addition to Afghanistan:

- Negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program and the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action are stalemated. Changes in regime leadership have taken place in Tehran with the election of a new hard-line president, engendering questions about the future of talks.
- North Korea is applying pressure with news that it has started operations once again at its Yongbyon nuclear reactor, producing additional

plutonium for its bomb-making fissile material stockpiles.⁵ Pyongyang also recently tested a long-range cruise missile, adding to its already muscular missile arsenal.⁶ Negotiations are nonexistent.

- The revelations about three new, undisclosed Chinese intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) silo fields by open-source researchers are raising concerns that Beijing could become a near-peer or peer nuclear force competitor of the U.S., eschewing its long-standing minimal-deterrence strategy.⁷

What the Administration Should Do

As a result, the Kremlin will certainly be looking for weakness in the American position and a willingness to compromise U.S. interests as a result of these strategic distractions and national security challenges and Team Biden's desire for a perceived foreign policy victory with some sort of agreement. With this in mind, the Biden Administration at a minimum should pursue the following in the upcoming talks:

- **Missile Defense.** The Russians must understand that U.S. missile defense is not on the table for negotiation. Moscow has long hated U.S. missile defense and claims that any advancements will threaten its assured retaliation capabilities. However, U.S. plans to improve homeland defense are modest and will not affect Russia's nuclear deterrent. Planned homeland missile defense improvements such as the Next Generation Interceptor program, however, are critical to defense against rogue regimes like North Korea and Iran. It has been long-standing U.S. policy to pace the rogue nation threat, so these efforts should not be limited because of false Russian claims. In addition, Russia already deploys more advanced missile defense than does the United States, including 68 nuclear-tipped missile interceptors and its new S-500 Prometheus surface-to-air missile system that may have missile defense capabilities and will likely be deployed and possibly sold abroad.
- **China's Buildup.** Beijing is involved in an unprecedented—some have said “breathhtaking”—nuclear buildup.⁸ According to some estimates, China could have as many operational warheads as the U.S. and Russia have in the coming decade.⁹ It is predicted that China's nuclear capabilities will eventually exceed Russia's.¹⁰ If this comes to pass, China

will become a threat not only to the U.S., but to Russia as well. As a result, Beijing must be brought into strategic arms control talks, and Russia can help to achieve this.

- **“Exotic” Weapons.** Russia is developing and deploying a slew of nontraditional nuclear weapons, from ICBM-launched hypersonic weapons to unlimited-range cruise missiles to intercontinental torpedoes that may be unconstrained by any treaty or agreement.¹¹ The Biden team must work to have these novel weapons included in existing—or new—U.S.–Russia arms control agreements because they have the potential to be destabilizing.
- **Tactical Nukes.** Moscow has significant advantages in the number of low-yield, “battlefield” nuclear weapons that are unconstrained by the existing New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.¹² Russia has long failed to be transparent about its stockpile of these tactical nuclear weapons, but the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency estimates that Russia outnumbered the United States in this category by at least 10 to 1.¹³ These weapons must therefore be brought into arms control negotiations, especially considering Russia’s possible use of these weapons in an “escalate to deescalate” strategy to win a future, possibly limited conflict in Europe.
- **Chemical Weapons.** Russia’s use of the nerve agent Novichok against Navalny and Skripal is evidence of the existence of a Russian offensive chemical weapons program—and a violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).¹⁴ The use of these weapons undermines international norms and may encourage others to pursue these weapons. Moscow must end this program—and any biological weapons programs—and come back into compliance with the CWC and the Biological Weapons Convention.¹⁵

Conclusion

Considering the challenging state of U.S.–Russia relations, the United States should keep its expectations for “progress” on strategic stability and arms control issues low for the time being. Nevertheless, even though Russia will likely try to take advantage of the Biden Administration’s foreign policy difficulties to advance its interests, the Administration should pursue substantive, disciplined dialogue with Moscow for the purpose of

potentially achieving more predictability, stability, understanding, and communication in U.S.–Russian bilateral and strategic relations.

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