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The New Start Treaty: Containing the black elephant (II)

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Abstract:

US and Russia recently agreed to a five-year extension of the New START Treaty on strategic nuclear weapons. President Biden's arrival in the White House has allowed the new US administration to unblock negotiations that had been frozen during President Trump's mandate. However, there are still important challenges to be solved, which will indicate whether the European continent will be a safer place over the next five years. Returning to the INF and Open Skies Treaties, as well as a new negotiation with Iran, will be key issues for European security during Joe Biden's term in office.

Keywords:

New START, INF, Open Skies, JCPOA, Biden.

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El Tratado New START: Contener al elefante negro (II)

Resumen:

Recientemente EE.UU. y Rusia han acordado la prórroga durante cinco años del Tratado New START, sobre armas nucleares estratégicas. La llegada a la Casa Blanca del presidente Biden ha permitido que la nueva Administración estadounidense desbloquee las negociaciones que durante el mandato del presidente Trump habían quedado congeladas. Sin embargo, quedan todavía importantes retos por resolver, que durante el próximo lustro indicarán si el continente europeo será un lugar más seguro. La vuelta a los Tratados INF y Cielos Abiertos, así como una nueva negociación con Irán, serán aspectos claves para la seguridad europea durante el mandato de Joe Biden.

Palabras clave:

New START, INF, Cielos Abiertos, PAIC, Biden.

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Introduction

In the previous paper entitled "The New START Treaty: Containing the black elephant", reference was made to the fact that one of the first actions to be taken by the new US Administration would be to take a decision on the strategic nuclear arms reduction treaty called "NEW START"¹.

This treaty limits Russian and US nuclear weapons to 1550 deployed warheads each, and the number of delivery vehicles to 800. In addition, it includes a number of control measures. Although it was due to expire on 5 February 2021, it has been extended for a maximum of five years².

Negotiations on the treaty during the Trump administration had been conducted in a climate of misunderstanding between the Americans and Russians. Trump needed to bring China into the talks, while Putin offered a one-year extension of the treaty, but without preconditions.

When Biden took over the US presidency, this issue was not exactly new to him, as he had personally experienced the signing of the treaty in 2010, when he was vice-president during the Obama administration. The new president was in favour of extending the treaty for a maximum period of five years, but had to weigh his options, as there was no full consensus on this issue within his team.

Subsequently, both the Russians and the Americans agreed to extend the treaty for five years. While the news is to be welcomed, this first step should be followed by many others to reduce the tension between the two actors, especially significant on the European continent.

¹ CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *The New START Treaty: Containing the black elephant*, IEEE Analysis Paper no. 02/2021. http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA02_2021_CASTRO_NewStart.pdf (accessed on 05/01/2021)

² Ibid.



Image 1: "Vice President Biden and Prime Minister Putin shake hands in 2011." Source: ZEMLIANICHENKO, Alexander, AP Photo. "First Biden-Putin call shows both cautious on big concerns" CP24. <https://www.cp24.com/world/first-biden-putin-call-shows-both-cautious-on-big-concerns-1.5282423?cache=yesclipId104062%3FclipId%3D89531%2F5-things-to-know-for-thursday-september-5-2019-1.4578831> (accessed on 07/12/2020)

Recent developments

At the same time as President Biden's inauguration, both the Americans and the Russians expressed their readiness for an extension of the New START Treaty. With unusual speed, US Ambassador to Moscow John Sullivan and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Riabkov exchanged diplomatic notes prior to the agreement³.

In the end, it was agreed to extend the treaty for five years without preconditions or additions, as the Russians wanted, which seems to be to their advantage. The coincidence of the agreement with President Biden's choice makes Americans feel that they benefit equally, even if they have not achieved significant new advantages.

This mutual benefit seems to be apparent from statements by officials from both states, with White House spokesperson Jen Paski stating that "the extension of the New START Treaty makes the United States, its allies, partners and the world safer. Unrestricted nuclear competition would endanger us all"⁴. These statements were reinforced by

³ TASS. "Russia, US agree to extend New START on Moscow's conditions — senior diplomat". 27 JAN, 08:00. <https://tass.com/politics/1249313> (accessed on 05/01/2021)

⁴ HANSLER, Jennifer; GAQUETTE, Nicole. "US extends nuclear arms treaty with Russia" CNN, 3 February 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/03/politics/blinken-new-start-extension/index.html> (accessed on 05/01/2021)

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, who acknowledged that "the extension of the New START Treaty ensures that we have verifiable limits on intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched missiles and Russian heavy bombers until 5 February 2026"⁵.

On the Russian side, Putin himself said more cautiously that the extension was "a step in the right direction", although he hinted that the arms race was still on since the Americans abandoned the Anti-Missile Treaty in 2002 and later other agreements⁶.

For their part, Europeans welcomed the agreement, with German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas declaring that this extension is significant news with which the new US administration is sending an important first gesture. However, the setbacks suffered in recent years, including the "INF Treaty" for intermediate-range nuclear forces and the "Open Skies" treaty⁷, should be reversed as a matter of urgency.

Conclusions

It is clear that the extension of this treaty is a sigh of relief in a situation of great tension, which in the European region is particularly worrying against the background of nuclear weapons. Given that most nuclear weapons are in US and Russian hands, détente and the existence of control and verification mechanisms raise the spectre of nuclear conflict.

This first step should be the impetus to reopen negotiations on other security-related issues, which particularly affect Europe, and which involve reviving the agreements that have been abandoned during the Trump presidency.

The first and most worrying of these is the "INF Treaty". This US-Russian treaty eliminated all land-based missiles, including nuclear missiles, with ranges between 500 and 5,000 kilometres. Its abandonment in 2019 by both states raised concerns in old Europe, where it is still remembered that its territory was one of the main planks of the nuclear game during the Cold War.

⁵ GARAMONE, Jim. "U.S., Russia Extend Arms Reduction Treaty" DOD News, 4, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2493593/us-russia-extend-arms-reduction-treaty/> (accessed on 05/01/2021)

⁶ VV.AA. "Davos highlights: Putin warns of 'all against all' fight if global development is neglected" Financial Times, 27 JANUARY 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/3c352034-fa6e-4b41-b10b-cfb5666d6a75> (accessed on 04/01/2021)

⁷ Auswärtiges Amt. *Außenminister Maas anlässlich der Verlängerung des New START-Vertrags zwischen den USA und Russland* 27.01.2021 <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/maas-new-start/2437802> (accessed on 06/01/2021)

The return to the possibility of deploying intermediate-range weapons on the ground opened up new response options. If one also takes into account that both the Russians and the Americans contemplate using nuclear weapons from different powers, their proportionate use in the face of what they might consider aggression would be possible. This possibility of nuclear escalation and flexible response was especially significant in Europe during times of heightened Soviet-American tension.

On the other side of the world, however, China is profusely developing all kinds of weapons, including missiles that fall under the INF treaty. Tensions between the Chinese and the Americans thus affect the Euro-Atlantic theatre, which should disengage from the Asia-Pacific in order to return to the channels that would lead to calming the turbulent European waters.

Alongside the nuclear-related treaties, there have been treaties on conventional forces, and these should be revived in order to build confidence-building measures in Europe. One of the most significant was the "Open Skies Treaty", which allowed unarmed aircraft to conduct reconnaissance flights over the territories of other countries to verify the location and movement of their armed forces. The US abandoned it in 2020 on the grounds that the Russians prevented them from flying over Kaliningrad and the Georgian border, while taking advantage of it to obtain information on US infrastructure⁸.

The damage to Europe was remarkable, as it meant increased suspicion of the Russians in the border territories. As a result, ten European states, including Spain, regretted the US decision while pledging to continue to comply with the treaty⁹.

It should be borne in mind that these misgivings have deeper roots. In 2007 Russia withdrew from the "CFE Treaty" on conventional forces in Europe, which limited conventional armaments and destroyed their surplus. In 2011, the NATO signatory states, together with Georgia and Moldova, did the same for certain operational aspects. It is quite possible that the straw that broke the camel's back of Russian fears was the US

⁸ La Razón. "¿Qué es el Tratado de Cielos Abiertos que Estados Unidos abandona?". 22-11-2020. <https://www.larazon.es/internacional/20201122/q36r73si4ze43atkmpyzo3epa4.html> (accessed on 06/01/2021)

⁹ MOMTAZ, Rym. "Europeans 'regret' US plan to withdraw from Open Skies Treaty". Politico, 22 May 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europeans-regret-us-plan-to-withdraw-from-open-skies-treaty/> (accessed on 07/01/2021)

intention to install a missile defence shield in Eastern Europe, which was preceded by the unilateral withdrawal of the US in 2002 from the "ABM Treaty" on Anti-Ballistic Missiles¹⁰.

On the other hand, Europeans were particularly affected by the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JPCOA) nuclear deal with Iran. The agreement reached by the P5+1 Group¹¹ basically consisted of temporarily limiting Iran's uranium production and storage capacity and modifying its nuclear facilities so that it could not produce plutonium¹².

Trump had always criticised this agreement and in 2018 announced his withdrawal. The Europeans for their part have always sought to keep the agreement in place, not only because of the business opportunity of the Iranian market, but also because of the reduced nuclear risk to Europe from the Greater Middle East region. With more frustrations than successes, France, Germany and the UK set up a barter system with Iran called INSTEX, which, although outside the US banking system, is limited to food and medicine. This is because these products are exempted from the US sanctions regime¹³.

Meanwhile, the future of the deal is uncertain, as Biden has stated that the US would return to the agreement if Iran again defaults. However, other issues, such as Iran's missile programme, should be negotiated. However, the Iranians do not seem ready for an extension of what has been agreed¹⁴.

As a final recapitulation, one could conclude that Biden has started his term in office with a hopeful step, namely the extension of the New START Treaty. It is foreseeable that in the years that lie ahead, until the treaty expires, international diplomatic activity will be able to bring the nuclear issue back to a more secure level.

¹⁰ AGUADO VALLADARES, Carlos. *La lenta agonía del Tratado FACE*. IEEE Opinion Paper 23/2012. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2012/DIEEEO23-2012_LentaAgoniaTratadoFACE_AguadoValladares.pdf p. 10. (accessed on 08/01/2021).

¹¹ The P5+1 Group, also known as the EU 3+3, comprised China, the US, Russia, Germany, France and the UK.

¹² For a more detailed study of the subject, we suggest reading CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *Las negociaciones con Irán después del 4 de noviembre: Nuevas cartas para una vieja partida*. IEEE Analysis Paper 36/2018. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2018/DIEEEA36-2018_Negociar_con_Iran_despues_del_04NOV_JICT.pdf (accessed on 07/01/2021)

¹³ ROBINSON, Kali. "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?" Council on Foreign Relations, 4 January 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-iran-nuclear-deal> (accessed on 07/01/2021)

¹⁴ BRENNAN, David. "Joe Biden Must Rejoin Iran Nuclear Deal To Avoid 'Unacceptable' War, Former Officials Say" Newsweek, 2/5/21. <https://www.newsweek.com/joe-biden-must-rejoin-iran-nuclear-deal-avoid-unacceptable-war-former-officials-say-1567097> (accessed on 07/01/2020)

A number of momentous challenges lie ahead for the security of Europeans in the next five years, such as the negotiation of a new INF Treaty, the return to the Open Skies Treaty and a new nuclear deal with the Iranians. The consequences of developments will lead to a more or less secure Europe.

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