

Decision Brief | 2018.003 | July 31, 2018

Putin's Gambit: A Return to the Establishment's Arms Control Agenda; Here's What the President Should, And Shouldn't, Do

Summary: Russian dictator Vladimir Putin laid a trap for President Trump in Helsinki. He said that he wants to re-start bilateral arms control processes with the United States. That proposal, much favored by the U.S. foreign policy establishment, would: preclude the United States from decisively countering Putin's strategic nuclear modernization; deny America the right to defend itself against ballistic missile attack; and emasculate Trump's envisioned Space Force military service. President Trump must take a businesslike approach to get Putin to pay for his own arms control, while putting American defense interests first.

Background: For decades, the foreign policy establishments in Moscow and Washington have embraced "arms control" – a system of agreements and treaties that purport to govern military weapons, but especially weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems. Protracted arms control negotiations brought us several Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty for Europe and Asia, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, from which the U.S. withdrew in 2002 because its restrictions were obsolete and dangerous.

The Risks: Putin's arms control gambit is actually dangerous. (1) Moscow has a skilled and disciplined arms control team that is slavishly loyal to the Kremlin. Washington's arms control "team," to the extent there is one, is almost completely hostile to Trump. (2) Russia has vastly upgraded its strategic nuclear weapons systems while the United States has not, making it advantageous for Russia to lock in its technological gains and force the U.S. to rely indefinitely on increasingly obsolescent systems. (3) Moscow has violated every single one of its arms control commitments, including fresh material breaches under Putin. (4) The Putin/establishment arms control agenda would continue to leave the U.S. vulnerable at least to Russian and Chinese missile attacks and, in due course, others'. (5) Arms control is not a "Make America Great Again" issue unless it actually negates nuclear threats against the American people.

Putin's Agenda: Putin revealed his stratagem in the press conference after the Helsinki summit: "We believe it necessary to work together further to interact on the disarmament agenda, military and technical cooperation," he said. Specifically, Putin expressed an intent to:

- Extend the New START treaty, which is set to expire soon;
- Further cripple American ballistic missile defense systems in Europe;
- Revive discussion of the INF Treaty, which Russia is violating with provocative moves aimed at NATO;
- Prevent the U.S. from deploying a Space Force branch of the military; and
- Prevent the U.S. from building a global defense against ballistic missiles.



In putting forth this agenda, Putin effectively challenged Trump to surrender his America First policy in favor of defective accords that would lock in Russian technological advances and imperil the United States. "It's a dangerous situation with the global American anti-missile defense system," Putin said. The Kremlin's arms control ploy suits many of Trump's domestic critics.

Trump's Statements: In his public remarks, Trump repeatedly called for "constructive dialogue" with Russia. Yet, he seemed unclear about the nature of Putin's proposals. Putin focused on establishment arms control. Trump focused on fighting nuclear proliferation to places like Iran and North Korea. "Whether it's nuclear proliferation in terms of stopping, we have to do it," he said. "Ultimately that's probably the most important thing that we can be working on." He then made a comment that seemed to blame arms control failure on the Justice Department's investigation of Russian election interference.

The "collusion" narrative over the 2016 election, Trump said, "has had a negative impact on the relationship of the two largest nuclear powers in the world. We have 90 percent of nuclear power between the two countries. It's ridiculous; it's ridiculous what's going on with the probe."

"I would rather take a political risk in pursuit of peace than to risk peace in pursuit of politics," Trump said, adding, "As president, I will always put what is best for America and what is best for the American people."

How Actually to Fight 'Nuclear Proliferation': Both leaders expressed a commitment to work together to fight nuclear proliferation to third countries. While laudable, this can be done without falling into the arms control trap. Trump should first secure Putin's personal commitment to undo past Moscow policies that helped North Korea build its nuclear weapons program in the first place and then to take concrete steps to help denuclearize the Pyongyang regime.

Apply a Deterrence Strategy: Regarding Putin's bilateral agenda, Trump should treat the nuclear disparity he largely inherited as a business problem. Russia could afford to pursue a decisive nuclear advantage as long as the United States wasn't doing the same. The U.S. can afford to match or exceed Russia's strategic weapons modernization and under the Trump presidency is prepared to do so – which is why Putin wants to stop Trump by reviving the past practice of one-sided arms control.

Trump should take the following steps: (1) Remind Putin that the last time the United States had to catch up with Moscow's strategic nuclear modernization, it bankrupted the Kremlin and collapsed the Soviet Union. (2) Tell Putin that Russia's new, massive and threatening nuclear build-up requires the United States to modernize its own strategic triad, which is something that the U.S. can afford to do. (3) Trump must treat a total modernization of the American strategic nuclear triad, development of a global missile defense, and creation of an independent Space Force not only as needed defense modernization – but as necessary investments in the U.S. defense industrial infrastructure and long-term security.

The Bottom Line: President Trump should show Vladimir Putin that it is in Russia's interests to disarm most of its strategic nuclear arsenal on its own, without a phony and endless arms control process. The alternative will be to force Putin to bankrupt his country into oblivion.