

US arms control office critically understaffed under Trump, experts say

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A state department office tasked with negotiating and implementing nuclear disarmament treaties has lost more than 70% of its staff over the past two years, as the [Trump administration](#) moves towards a world without arms control for the first time in nearly half a century.

The [Office of Strategic Stability and Deterrence Affairs](#), normally a repository of expertise and institutional knowledge that does the heavy lifting of arms control, has been whittled down from 14 staffers at the start of the Trump administration to four, according to the former staffers. The state department declined to comment.

The state department has instead focussed its arms control efforts on “creating the environment for disarmament” (CEND) shifting the onus for disarmament from the nuclear weapons powers to non-weapons states.

An invitation to a 2 July state department conference on the subject invites non-nuclear states to come up with “measures to modify the security environment to reduce incentives for states to retain, acquire, or increase their holdings of nuclear weapons”.

The shift in approach comes as the administration claims to be conducting a review on whether to extend the New Start agreement limiting US and Russian strategic nuclear warheads, or find an alternative to it that would include China and new weapons systems.

Vladimir Putin has said Russia is in favour of a New Start extension, but warned that time is

running out.

“If we do not begin talks now, it would be over because there would be no time even for formalities,” Putin told [the Financial Times](#).

There was no sign Putin and Trump came any closer to agreement when they met at the G20 summit in Osaka on Friday. The White House said the leaders agreed to keep talking about a “21st-century model of arms control, which President Trump stated as needing to include China”.

China has ruled out participation in an arms control agreement with US and Russia whose nuclear arsenals are 20 times bigger than the Chinese, [estimated at less than 300 warheads](#). Even if Beijing were willing, a trilateral agreement would require extensive and prolonged negotiation. But former officials and arms control experts in Congress say there have been no serious consideration of what to do when New Start expires in February 2021.

“There is no one home,” a congressional staffer involved in arms control said. “There is no serious effort to come up with a plan. There is nothing real going on.”

Frank Rose, under-secretary for arms control until 2017, said he had tried to rebuild the strategic stability bureau when he was in office, especially by recruiting a young generation of experts.

“We’ve got a real problem,” Rose said. “Regardless of your views on whether we should extend New Start or negotiate a new agreement, you need to have career expertise to actually do the negotiations.”

He added: “You don’t grow these people overnight. It takes time and nurturing.”

Pranay Vaddi, a former member of the strategic stability office, said: “The main mission and that office is implementing the existing arms control agreements with Russia the nuclear ones, New Start and INF and the sort of running the interagency process.”

After an exodus of most of the office’s staffers at the end of last year, Vaddi said: “The bottom line is that, for a myriad of reasons, the state department isn’t equipped [to pursue arms control negotiations]”

Few experts believe that the downgrading of the state department’s capacity to negotiate disarmament agreements is a case of negligence. It is more widely seen as a deliberate strategy directed by John Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser, and [a lifelong opponent of arms control agreements](#) which he sees as unnecessary constraints on US sovereignty.

Over little more than a year on Bolton’s watch, the US has pulled out of the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, and the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, which will terminate on 2 August.

Bolton is also [reportedly pushing](#) for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996 but not ratified by a Republican Senate, to be withdrawn from Senate consideration and “unsigned”, as a possible prelude to a resumption of US nuclear testing.

Bolton has also made clear that he is firmly against the extension of the 2010 New Start treaty, which limits US and Russian deployed strategic warheads to 1550 each and also limits delivery

vehicles. He told the [Free Beacon news website](#) an extension is “unlikely”, and that it would be “malpractice” to preserve a treaty he argued was so fundamentally flawed.

Bolton and other critics of New Start say it does not account for the rise of China and the emergence of new weapons such as [hypersonic glide vehicles](#). However, according to the state department, the Russian Avangard hypersonic weapon would be covered by New Start, as could other new Russian weapons.

Arms control advocates argue Bolton has convinced Trump to insist on Chinese participation fully aware of Beijing’s adamant refusal, as a “poison pill” to kill off prospects of a new arms control treaty.

“Pursuing talks with other nuclear-armed states and trying to limit all types of nuclear weapons is an admirable objective, but such a negotiation would be complex and time-consuming,” Daryl Kimball, the head of the Arms Control Association, said. “There is no realistic chance a new agreement along these lines could be finalized before New Start expires.”

‘We blindfold ourselves’

If New Start is allowed to expire in February 2021 the world will be without any form of formal arms control agreements for the first time since 1972. Since the Cold War, the number of warheads around the world has shrunk from 70,000 to [14,000 now](#) (more than 90% belonging to the US and Russia).

Nuclear arms experts believe that as the world moves back to unregulated nuclear competition, those numbers will start to rise again, especially as the accelerated development of [missile defences](#) ordered by Trump, increase Russian and Chinese anxiety about the reliability of their own deterrence.

The [new era will be all the more dangerous without the mutual transparency provided by arms control agreements](#). Over the life of New Start, Russian and US experts have inspected each others nuclear weapons sites over 300 times, and there have been more than 18,100 notifications, in which the states have exchanged data.

“These are very specific: location information, notifications regarding the movement of our strategic forces, the specific locations of our strategic forces,” Joan Rohlfing, the head of the Nuclear Threat Initiative, said. “It’s quite extraordinary transparency and all of that would go away if we withdrew from the treaty or didn’t extend it.”

Rachel Bronson, the president of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, likened the situation to a pistol duel. “We are so worried about what others might be doing elsewhere, that we blindfold ourselves.”

Bolton played down concerns that arms control would go off a cliff after New Start expires in February 2021. “I’ll just tell you as an old arms control negotiator, if you really want to negotiate, you can do it fast,” he told the Free Beacon.

New Start took 21 months from the start of negotiations to ratification. The JCPOA took 20 months to negotiate and was not subject to ratification.

Bolton’s previous record suggests that he is much better at knocking non-proliferation accords

down than building them up. His earlier scalps include the Agreed Framework with North Korea and the Anti Ballistic Missile treaty. In his memoir, *Surrender is not an Option*, Bolton boasts of the bureaucratic cunning involved in sinking these agreements, and derides the diplomats in the state department as appeasers.

The national security adviser has displayed the same deft infighter's skill since his return to government. He is steadily consolidating his grip on the National Security Council (NSC). The new director of relations with Europe and Russia, in charge of day-to-day contacts with Moscow, Tim Morison, a close Bolton ally and a fierce critic of New Start and other treaties. Morison will keep his current NSC arms control portfolio, diplomatic sources said.

The state department, which customarily takes the lead in arms control, has been hobbled by internal wrangling. The assistant secretary of state for arms control, verification and compliance, Yleem Poblete, [resigned in May](#) after clashing with her boss, Andrea Thompson.

Thompson, the under secretary for arms control and non proliferation who does not have a background in arms control, has herself been weakened by a scandal involving undisclosed connections with the boyfriend of a convicted Russian agent, Maria Butina.

The lack of political appointees with a mandate from the White House to pursue arms control seriously, Vaddi said, is even more of a handicap than the lack of staff.

"The expert dialogues are only as valuable as the political empowerment that is given to them," the former staffer now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said.

According to several sources, the NSC tried to stop a meeting between Andrea Thompson, the under secretary for arms control and non proliferation, and Russian deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov in Geneva in January, according to two sources familiar with the arrangements.

The meeting went ahead but was kept brief, in the face of Bolton's resistance to setting up a permanent dialogue with the Russians. A second Thompson-Ryabkov [meeting in Prague on 12 June](#) wrapped up after two hours and a half-hour lunch, with no timetable for future meetings or a plan for negotiations.
