

THE ROLE OF U.S. DIPLOMACY IN COUNTERING RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR THREATS AND MISBEHAVIOR

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With the ongoing war in Ukraine and the recent suspension of the New START treaty, concerns about nuclear escalation have been on the rise. Rose Gottemoeller argues that, because of the existential threat that nuclear weapons pose, the United States has a special responsibility — indeed, an obligation to humanity — to use diplomacy to lower the nuclear temperature. In this article, she discusses the nuclear threat, the importance of diplomacy, and two primary toolsets of diplomacy and negotiation: nurturing communication and attending to process.

“We must never negotiate from fear, but we must never fear to negotiate.”

- John F. Kennedy

These words, spoken long ago by President John F. Kennedy, have a special resonance now, as Russian President Vladimir Putin seems bent on upending the nuclear order that has been in place for over 50 years. From the start of Putin's adventure in Ukraine, he has threatened “ominous consequences” for those who would meddle with Russia's invasion.¹ His loyal deputies amplified these threats, calling for nuclear death to rain down on NATO capitals.² Thus, the United States and its NATO allies were put on notice from the outset that if their support for Kyiv brought allied soldiers into contact with the Russian invaders, nuclear escalation could ensue. Not since the darkest days of the Cold War had such explicit nuclear use been promised.

Nonetheless, the primary restraint on strategic nuclear weapons, the New START treaty, remained intact in the first year of the Ukraine war. Although on-site inspections had been paused by mutual agreement in March 2020,³ during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States and Russia continued to exchange notifications about the status of their nuclear delivery vehicles and launchers

on a frequent basis, sometimes multiple times a day. This continued routine provided significant mutual confidence that initiating a nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia was not an aspect of the Kremlin's nuclear saber-rattling.

This mutual reassurance took a significant blow when, on Feb. 21, 2023, Putin suspended implementation of the New START treaty. He and his government stated that no “business as usual” could be conducted while the United States and its NATO allies continued to support Ukraine in its fight for continued independence and sovereignty.⁴

This position is at odds with the longstanding tradition, embraced by both the Soviet Union and Russia, as well as the United States, that, where nuclear weapons are concerned, the concept of “business as usual” does not exist. This tradition emerged out of the trauma of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the United States and Soviet Union, the two largest nuclear powers, came to the brink of nuclear conflagration. The crisis led to a virtual taboo on brandishing the weapons in the heat of bilateral disagreements. Rarely were nuclear weapons invoked during Cold War struggles.⁵

Instead, nuclear diplomacy propelled the two countries forward for over 60 years. Diplomacy enabled the United States and the Soviet Union to resolve differences without resorting to direct

1 “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” Kremlin, Feb. 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

2 Mary Ilyushina, Miriam Berger, and Timothy Bella, “Russian TV Shows Simulation of Britain and Ireland Wiped Out by a Nuke,” *Washington Post*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/03/russia-ireland-nuclear-weapons-video-ukraine/>; and Dmitry Medvedev's Telegram channel, May 12, 2022, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/77 (Russian language).

3 Shannon Bugos, “U.S. Cites Russian Noncompliance with New START Inspections,” *Arms Control Now*, Feb. 9, 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2023-02/nuclear-disarmament-monitor>.

4 “Presidential Address to Federal Assembly,” Kremlin, Feb. 21, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>; “Foreign Ministry Statement in Connection with the Russian Federation Suspending the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Feb. 21, 2023, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1855184/?lang=en; and Mike Eckel, “How Bad Are Things Between Russia and the U.S.? They Can't Even Agree to Discuss Nuclear Weapons Inspections,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Dec. 2, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/united-states-russia-new-start-treaty-inspections-canceled-tensions/32159325.html>.

5 A prominent exception was President Richard Nixon's threat to use nuclear weapons to end the Vietnam War. See William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, “Nixon White House Considered Nuclear Options Against North Vietnam, Declassified Documents Reveal,” The National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book 195, posted July 31, 2006, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB195/index.htm>.

combat. Likewise, it allowed them to pursue effective efforts to control and limit nuclear weapons and ensure that they did not proliferate.

Throughout this period, diplomacy served a dual purpose. It was a way to solve tough problems, but also a means to deliver effective messages about goals, objectives, and national interests. In this way, diplomacy was at the heart of U.S. resolve to sustain mutual deterrence, both nuclear and conventional. Deterrence messaging was a profound aspect of every negotiation that touched on military forces.

During the current Ukraine crisis, diplomacy between Moscow and Washington has stagnated, with neither capital willing to engage except on focused issues.⁶ Certainly the Biden administration has been clear that it will not negotiate about Ukraine if Kyiv is not in the room — the president has been forceful on that point since February 2022, when the war began.⁷

But by limiting diplomatic engagement so narrowly, the administration has been missing opportunities to pursue a goal that is clearly in the U.S. national interest: bringing down the nuclear temperature with Moscow. Moreover, it is losing the chance to deliver clear deterrence messages directly at the negotiating table.

This article focuses on how to get diplomacy between the United States and the Russian Federation back on track in order to address the existential threat of nuclear weapons. It does not, of course, discard the necessity of maintaining a defense posture that is potent and convincing. As President Barack Obama said during his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2009, “To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism — it is a recognition of history, the imperfections of man, and the limits of reason.”⁸ The egregious Russian invasion of Ukraine as well as China’s growing military forces highlight the necessity of sustaining a strong deterrence and defense posture, together with America’s allies and partners.

One might ask, *why* should Washington make this special effort, when Moscow has left the table and refuses to return? The Kremlin has raised high

political barriers to any effort to restore full implementation of the New START treaty and continues to engage in nuclear threats and sabre rattling. However, because nuclear war is an existential threat to countries around the globe, the United States has a special responsibility — indeed, an obligation to humanity — to try to keep talking with Moscow. Washington should do everything it can to lower the nuclear temperature and return New START to full implementation.

Using Diplomacy to Lower the Nuclear Temperature

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were constantly on the brink of conflict. Washington and Moscow were not generally cooperating to solve problems. One particular hot-spot was the Middle East, where battles between Israel and its Arab neighbors were a regular feature. The United States and Soviet Union were on opposite sides of this struggle. During the Six-Day War in 1967 and a few years later, during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, both sides took steps to raise the readiness of their strategic nuclear forces. In those days, everyone was familiar with what DEFCON 3 meant.⁹ In Vietnam during the late 1960s, Soviet air defense forces were working side by side with North Vietnam to shoot down U.S. fighter aircraft over Hanoi.¹⁰ The late Sen. John McCain knew this story well. Although there were many hot crises between Washington and Moscow during this period, the two capitals were still able to negotiate to constrain nuclear weapons.

Cold War history shows that it is not only necessary to avoid nuclear threats, but also to control and limit nuclear weapons. The United States and Russia possess by far the largest nuclear arsenals, approximately 4,000 nuclear warheads each. The closest competitor, China, has approximately 400.¹¹ Although China is fast modernizing and needs to be part of the calculus, the United States and Russia should take the lead in preventing the crisis in

6 Jennifer Hansler, et al., “WNBA Star Brittney Griner Released from Russian Detention in Prisoner Swap for Convicted Arms Dealer,” *CNN*, Dec. 8, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/08/politics/brittney-griner-released/index.html>.

7 “Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference,” White House, March 24, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/24/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-7/>.

8 President Barack H. Obama, “A Just and Lasting Peace,” transcript of Nobel Lecture speech delivered in Oslo, Norway, Dec. 10, 2009, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2009/obama/lecture/>.

9 “DEFCON DEFence CONdition,” Federation of American Scientists, April 29, 1998, <https://nuke.fas.org/guide/usa/c3i/defcon.htm>.

10 “Soviet Troops Said to Have Killed U.S. Pilot in Vietnam,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 20, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/02/20/soviet-troops-said-to-have-killed-us-pilot-in-vietnam/5a88bfe-e51c-45f3-99a6-80f3bc629750/>.

11 “Status of World Nuclear Forces,” Federation of American Scientists, 2022, <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>; and “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

Ukraine from escalating to nuclear use.

And yet, Putin and his deputies seem to have decided to set aside this history and its nuclear lessons. They have heedlessly raised the nuclear temperature to levels not seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis 60 years ago. They have furthermore refused to do anything to bring it down. By refusing to implement the New START treaty, they have shown that they do not care to do so. For Russia, evidently, even existential threats to humanity have a tactical political value that can be cashed in on. Nuclear weapons can be used for leverage to try to get the Kremlin what it wants in Ukraine. Putin has even gone so far as to dismiss the importance of the continued survival of Russia. Were Russia to disappear with the rest of the world in a nuclear conflagration, as Putin famously stated in 2018, it would be worth it, for a world without Russia is not worth preserving.¹²

Notably, the United States and its allies are not the only ones to have recoiled from such apocalyptic visions. Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi were publicly terse with Putin during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Kazakhstan in November 2022, saying that nuclear weapons should not play a part in the Ukraine war.¹³ These messages have been reiterated at high levels, notably at the Munich Security Conference in February 2023, where Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi gave a firm “no” with regard to the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.¹⁴ These voices are highly valuable, because they are more likely to be heard in Moscow than voices from the United States and its allies.

However, America and its allies have a continuing responsibility to try to bring down the nuclear temperature despite Putin's every effort to stoke it. As Lawrence Freedman has argued, “Anything that generates caution and apprehension has possible

deterrent effects, even when the behaviour to be avoided has to be inferred.”¹⁵

The United States is clearly trying to engender caution and apprehension in the Kremlin through judicious signaling — bomber demonstration flights, flight testing of nuclear missiles, and exercises and training.¹⁶ But it has also been careful to avoid taking military steps that could be construed as escalatory.¹⁷ Diplomatic communications are being used to bolster these signals, as when CIA Director William Burns, one of the nation's top diplomats, traveled to Ankara in November to convey messages directly to his counterpart, FSB Director Sergei Naryshkin.¹⁸ Thus, the Biden administration is combining military action with some diplomacy in an effort to head off Russian nuclear use.

Washington needs to try to change the *status quo* with Moscow without resorting to the use of force.¹⁹ Despite the stark difficulty of dealing with Moscow, diplomacy has a special advantage at this moment. It is a powerful instrument that uses human communication skills to get across the benefits of certain behaviors and the costs of others. Although military backing can increase its effectiveness, diplomacy does not require the movement of armed forces, increases in operational readiness, or military exercises in order to be effective. Convincing language and the means to communicate it can alone produce results.

The value of effective diplomacy is especially clear now, at a time when the United States should be highly wary of using nuclear exercises or demonstrations to respond to Russia's nuclear threats. As the nuclear peer of Russia, America has a special responsibility: Its diplomats need to try to convince Russia to stop threatening nuclear use and instead resume responsible nuclear behavior. This should be a top U.S. national security goal.

Such negotiations would be a worthy test of

12 For trenchant commentary on Putin's speech, see Masha Gessen, “Putin Lied About Russian Nuclear Doctrine and Promised Russians that They Would Go to Heaven,” *New Yorker*, Oct. 19, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/putin-lied-about-his-nuclear-doctrine-and-promised-russians-that-they-would-go-to-heaven>.

13 “India Prime Minister Modi Tells Russia's Putin that Now 'Is not an Era of War,’” *CNBC*, Sept. 16, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/17/indias-modi-tells-russias-putin-that-now-is-not-an-era-of-war.html>; and Tessa Wong and Simon Fraser, “Putin-Xi Talks: Russian Leader Reveals China's 'Concern' Over Ukraine,” *BBC*, Sept. 15, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62912892>.

14 John Ruwitch and Emily Feng, “China Calls for a Cease-Fire and Peace Talks Between Russia and Ukraine,” *NPR*, Feb. 24, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/24/1159208413/china-calls-for-a-cess-fire-and-peace-talks-between-russia-and-ukraine>.

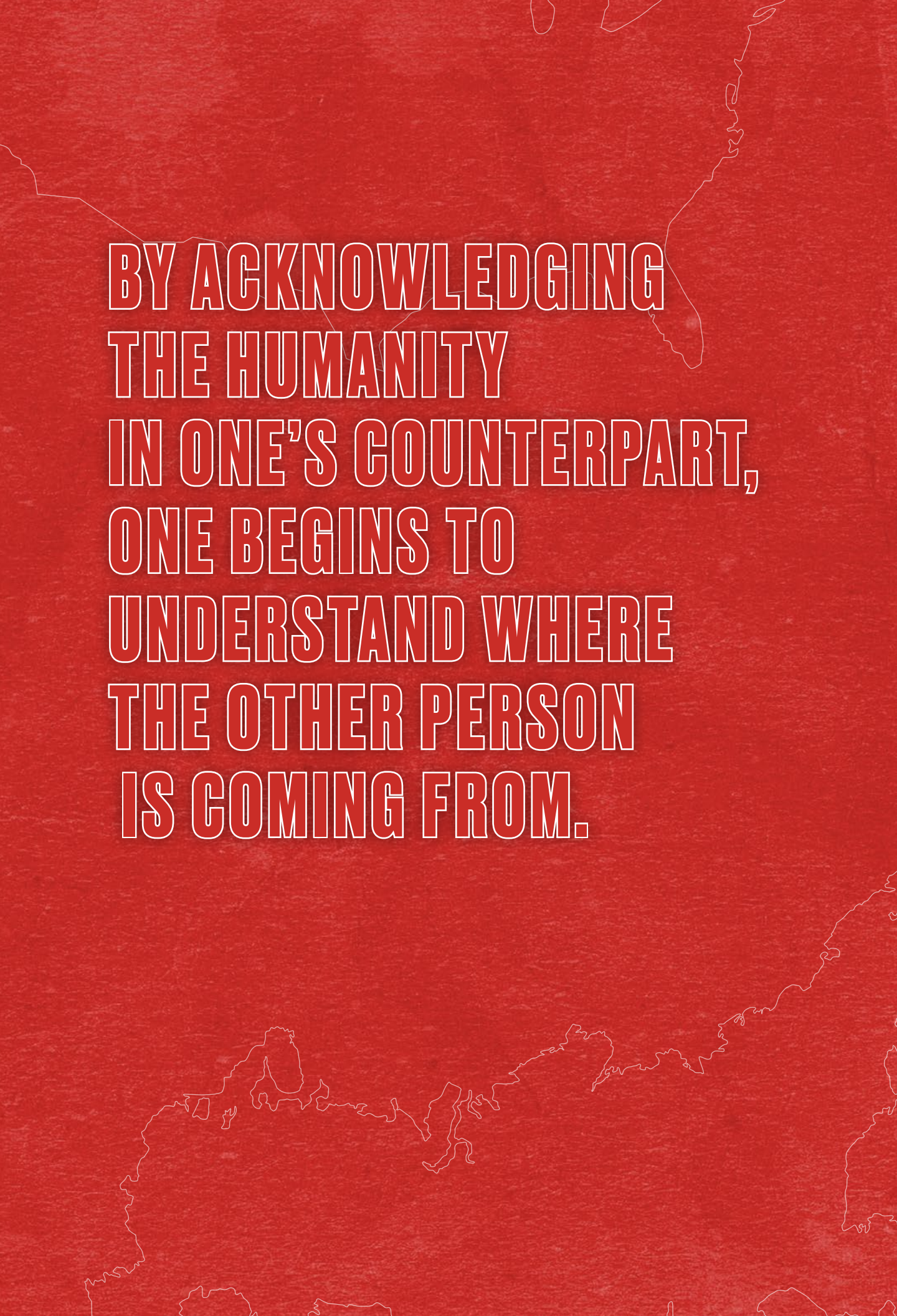
15 Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Books, 2004), 122. This small volume is a masterclass in deterrence practice, with many vivid examples, both historic and contemporary.

16 See, for example, “American B-52 Bombers Make Low Sweep Over Stockholm,” *Defense Post*, Sept. 2, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/09/02/us-b52-bombers-sweden/>; and “NATO's Annual Nuclear Exercise Gets Underway,” NATO, Oct. 14, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_208399.htm.

17 “Minuteman III Test Launch from Vandenberg SFB Postponed,” *KSBY*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.ksby.com/news/local-news/minuteman-iii-test-launch-from-vandenberg-sfb-postponed>.

18 “CIA Chief in Ankara Meeting with Russian Counterpart, U.S. Official Says,” *Reuters*, Nov. 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/cia-chief-ankara-meeting-with-russian-counterpart-white-house-official-says-2022-11-14/>.

19 I am indebted to Dr. Jamie Shea, former NATO deputy assistant secretary general for emerging security challenges, for this insightful formulation.



**BY ACKNOWLEDGING
THE HUMANITY
IN ONE'S COUNTERPART,
ONE BEGINS TO
UNDERSTAND WHERE
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IS COMING FROM.**

diplomacy's mettle. To have a chance of succeeding, of course, the United States must have a willing partner. Thus, the first challenge is to bring Russia to the negotiating table. Making the case to Putin for direct negotiations will, at some point, be necessary, a difficult task at a time when lines of communication between the White House and the Kremlin have been seriously weakened. Neither side has seen much value in tending to them in the midst of the current crisis.

Nevertheless, functioning lines of communication are a crucial element of diplomacy. Working directly with a counterpart, no matter how unsavory or unscrupulous, is necessary to the success of any negotiation. Talking is not a reward for bad behavior. It is the road to altering bad behavior and, in the end, halting it.

In diplomacy, problem-solving and deterrence messaging go hand-in-hand. Enabling these two functions to succeed requires injecting new energy into U.S. diplomatic practice regarding Russia. From the outset, of course, top-level political support from the president and the secretary of state, as well as the secretary of defense and other key cabinet secretaries, will be required. They will have to be persistent and committed to engagement. Such top cover will be absolutely necessary, not only for the diplomats at lower levels to succeed, but also to gain the support or "backstopping" that they will require from U.S. government agencies.

Assuming such top-level political support is forthcoming, U.S. diplomats will benefit from thinking through what factors will be most likely to deliver success in what will amount to an enormous challenge (indeed, possibly an existential one): backing the Russians off their nuclear threats and returning them to the status of a worthwhile partner in the arena of nuclear control and limitation.

Such high-level support will also be necessary on the Russian side, of course. Lack of it will continue to stymie engagement. However, there are two compelling factors that may bring the Kremlin back to the negotiating table before too long. The first is Putin's abiding love of the global stage as a place to convey Russia's continued importance as a nuclear "superpower." The second is the strong security interest that Russia has in limiting America's strategic nuclear arms. With the United States now

embarking on a 20-year nuclear modernization effort, the last thing that Russia needs is a future in which U.S. nuclear forces might expand or develop in unpredictable ways.²⁰

To prepare for such negotiations, U.S. policymakers, diplomats, and experts should take stock of the diplomatic tools that they have available. These tools may need to be used in new or unusual ways, but they are at the heart of the practice of negotiating. The first is nurturing communications. The second is attending to process.

Nurturing Communication

Diplomacy should take full advantage of all of the available forms of communication. Some of these are informal, even mundane. Years ago, diplomats started making wide use of mobile platforms and mobile messaging applications in order to engage less formally with their interlocutors. Of course, such methods must be within policy guidance, but their use allows for a more human interaction and engenders trust. If that trust is not betrayed, then a gain in mutual confidence ensues.

Informal communication methods have always played a role in negotiations, of course. That is why negotiators meet for informal coffees or lunches, sketch on paper napkins, make notes on scraps of paper, or chat about past precedents. Sometimes long walks are called for — the "walk in the woods" that Ambassador Paul Nitze, who was U.S. chief negotiator of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, took with his Soviet counterpart Yuli Kvitsinsky is a famous example.²¹ U.S. Ambassador George Bunn reported how a long Sunday afternoon hike with his counterpart Roland Timerbaev in the mountains above Geneva led to the concept of the International Atomic Energy Agency, a core implementing mechanism of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.²² Over time, these types of casual interactions give both sides a sense of common responsibility for the progress of negotiations, and that leads to further progress.

It helps along the way to remember normal human relationships — an inquiry about family or concern for a bout of the flu. Small expressions of human nature are important and build regard. By acknowledging the humanity in one's counterpart,

20 For a useful summary of the U.S. nuclear modernization program, see Paul K. Kerr, "Defense Primer: Strategic Nuclear Forces," U.S. Congressional Research Service, Feb. 2, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10519>.

21 "What Can We Learn from a Cold War 'Walk in the Woods?'" Centre on Conflict, Development & Peacebuilding, Geneva Graduate Institute, Jan. 24, 2018, <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/news-events/news/what-can-we-learn-cold-war-walk-woods>.

22 Beth Duff-Brown, "Obituary of George Bunn (1926-2013)," *Physics Today*, May 9, 2013, <https://physicstoday.scitation.org/doi/10.1063/PT.4.2590/full/>. With typical humility, Roland Timerbaev wrote of the roots of this breakthrough in Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs deliberations beginning in the late 1950s. R.M. Timerbaev, *Tales of the Past* (Russian language), PIR Center, 2007, 38–42.

one begins to understand where the other person is coming from. This approach also works to develop broader mutual confidence between delegations. If you have the good luck to be able to congratulate the other side on the success of a national sports team, then the confidence benefits are immediate and palpable.

Sympathy also pays dividends. During the New START negotiations in February 2010, the U.S. delegation commiserated with the Russian delegation on the loss by their national hockey team to Canada during the Vancouver Winter Olympics. All levels of the Russian delegation, from the chief negotiator to the crustiest military expert, appreciated the gesture, helping to lighten the mood during a difficult moment in the talks.²³ Good wishes on national holidays — as long as they are not politically repellant — similarly can go a long way.

A note of caution: It is important that these good working relationships are not construed as friendship or camaraderie. The negotiators on both sides understand that their purpose is deadly serious and each side has its own national security interests to preserve and advance.

Of course, communication is easiest when the parties have a common language. Often, switching between languages works well. During the negotiation of the New START treaty, Ambassador Anatoly Antonov and I regularly used a mixture of Russian and English to communicate, quickly trading ideas back and forth and checking each other's comprehension. It helped to increase speed of understanding and also to build a sense of mutual respect and confidence. We were both lucky to have bilingual Russian and English experts on our delegations, so that we had reliable note-takers during our "heads of delegation" meetings.

It is also possible to achieve this effect with interpreters in the mix. Professional interpreters are skilled at trying to match the mood of their principals, including translating jokes and attempts at more personal interaction. Sometimes these efforts can backfire. But for the most part, the interpreters become full partners in the communication effort. If they regularly support the negotiators over a

long period of time, then the communication environment becomes essentially seamless.

Above all, it is vital that private communication does not appear in the press. If leaks start to emerge, then mutual trust will be obliterated and it will be difficult to restore it. The negotiation can quickly turn into megaphone diplomacy where nothing is accomplished because all action, including necessary compromise, is in danger of going public. Sometimes when this happens it is a signal that one side does not want a negotiation to succeed, as when the Russian government transformed the strategic stability dialogue with the United States into a megaphone operation prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This was an early signal that invasion was inevitable.

During tough periods, when regular negotiations are not taking place, the use of routine lines of communication takes on added importance. This is true at all levels, from the president to experts trying to work on tough issues. These lines of communication include hotlines, deconfliction lines, and notification centers. Although the U.S.-Soviet hotline put in place after the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 is the most prominent example of establishing presidential lines of communication, deconfliction lines have become a regular feature of a number of conflicts and crises.²⁴ They are used to ensure that tactical actions, such as missile launches, do not endanger air and related operations of other countries present in the battle space. A recent example is the multilayer lines that were established between the U.S. Department of Defense and the Russian Ministry of Defense during the Syrian civil war.²⁵ These were replicated during the same crisis with the creation of lines of communication between the Israeli and Russian ministries of defense and the Turkish and Russian ministries of defense.²⁶

The National Nuclear Risk Reduction Center in the U.S. State Department and its counterpart in the Russian Ministry of Defense are used to convey notifications about the implementation of treaties and agreements, both formal, legally binding actions as well as non-legally binding transparency-

23 See Tim Wharnsby, "Canada Flattens Russia in Olympic hockey," *CBC Sports*, Feb. 24, 2010, <https://www.cbc.ca/sports/2.722/canada-flattens-russia-in-olympic-hockey-1.878855>. On this "long winter slog," see Rose Gottemoeller, *Negotiating the New START Treaty* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2020), 119–32.

24 "Hotline Agreements," Arms Control Association, May 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Hotlines>; and Jon Gambrell, "AP Explains: What Is the US/Russia 'Deconfliction Line?'" *Associated Press*, April 7, 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-ap-top-news-international-news-bombings-russia-9147aa068855466386cf19ddab5bc827>.

25 For a fascinating reflection on deconfliction in Syria, see Robert Hamilton, "The Weirdest War," *The Stanley Center*, October 2022, <https://riskreduction.stanleycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2022/10/The-Weirdest-War-1022.pdf>.

26 "Israel, Russia to Review Syria Hotline After Plane Downed," *Associated Press*, Sept. 21, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/6dd53d3da4914b-79bcad8a9257abcbeb>; and Pavel K. Baev, "Russia and Turkey Deconflict Their Geopolitical Moves in the Caucasus," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Jan. 20, 2021, <https://gija.georgetown.edu/2021/01/20/russia-and-turkey-deconflict-their-geopolitical-moves-in-the-caucasus/>. Russia and Turkey also maintain a deconfliction line for the long-running crisis between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

and confidence-building activities.²⁷ Although such communications are routine in nature, their continuity and pace during times of crisis can, in themselves, build mutual confidence and predictability. They can also be used to convey messages of urgency, such as the message that was passed on Sept. 11, 2001, to let Moscow know that the United States was raising its alert levels because of a terrorist attack, and not because of a perceived threat from Russia.²⁸

The well-established protocols that go along with operating these communication lines enhance their utility for sustaining communications during times of crisis. However, what happens when the other party, despite the protocols, refuses to respond? The Chinese government, famously, has established any number of hotlines and deconfliction lines with both the United States and countries in their neighborhood.²⁹ However, China often does not respond to attempts to communicate — they do not “pick up the phone.”³⁰

In such cases, the first effort should be to communicate about communicating — to inquire through available means, such as diplomatic channels, whether there is anything technically wrong with the link, or whether protocols need to be adjusted in order to ensure that hotline operators and interpreters are available. In some cases, although hotlines are supposed to be available on a 24/7 basis, their operators are not. Government ministries have to be convinced to employ a night shift, which can take time and money. In any event, it is important to start first by trying to fix operational problems.

If counterparts persist in not picking up the phone, however, then here is a case where some judicious communication through the press and proxies might be necessary. During the Ukraine crisis, the United States conveyed through the media that Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Mark Milley had been trying to reach their Russian counterparts

but had been unable to do so.³¹ It was important to keep up that public messaging but without fanfare, especially since the Kremlin took to declaring that it was ready to talk to the United States at any time. Eventually, the leaders of the Russian Ministry of Defense began to pick up the phone again, although their first messages about Russian allegations of Ukrainian dirty bomb threats were bogus.³²

Proxies can also be helpful. Leaders such as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey have been able not only to stay in touch with the Kremlin, but also to make progress on tough issues such as prisoner-of-war exchanges and grain shipments out of the Black Sea. Such individuals, if they are willing to do so, can provide a high-level conduit for important messages. At lower levels, individuals involved in Track 2 discussions with their counterparts can sometimes deliver effective messages.

Above all, however, it is important to sustain attempts at private communications — even if an interlocutor has gone dark, even if he refuses to pick up the phone. It is important to keep trying.

The Advantages of Good Process

Sergio Jaramillo, the former high commissioner for peace in Colombia, has argued convincingly that if you cannot trust your interlocutors, then make sure that you can trust the process. His standard for producing that trust is simple: If the process is generating good results, then you can trust it.³³ Attending to the process is the second set of tools that can help to ensure success in diplomacy.

During the Ukraine crisis, the clearest example of relying on process has been the grain deal brokered by U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres and Erdogan. Currently, grain and other foodstuffs flow out of the Black Sea following inspections conducted by Russian, Ukrainian, Turkish, and U.N. inspectors. A more difficult inspection regime is

27 Such activities take place, for example, under the Vienna Document. See “Vienna Document 2011 on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures,” Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Nov. 30, 2011, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/86597.pdf>.

28 “National and Nuclear Risk Reduction Center,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-arms-control-and-international-security-affairs/bureau-of-arms-control-verification-and-compliance/nuclear-risk-reduction-center/>. A framed copy of the 9/11 message hangs in the National and Nuclear Risk Reduction Center in Washington as a reminder of the critical role that it can play in nuclear risk reduction.

29 “Major Powers Including US, China Set to Welcome Expansion of Asean Security Hotline,” *South China Morning Post*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3137402/major-powers-including-us-china-set-welcome-expansion>.

30 Ellen Knickmeyer, “It Just Rang: In Crises, US-China Hotline Goes Unanswered,” *ABC News*, Feb. 10, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/rang-crises-us-china-hotline-unanswered-97025524>.

31 John Hudson, “Top Russian Military Leaders Repeatedly Decline Calls from U.S., Prompting Fears of ‘Sleepwalking Into War,’” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/03/23/russia-us-military-leaders-communication/>.

32 Matthew Bunn, “Russia’s ‘Dirty Bomb’ Disinformation, Annotated,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Dec. 1, 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/12/russias-dirty-bomb-disinformation-annotated/>.

33 John Paul Rathbone, “How to Broker a Deal Between Russia and Ukraine,” *Financial Times*, Aug. 3, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/b86cfd68-787e-44e5-a485-8c694467e664>.

hard to imagine, but it is working. Over 20 million tons of food have left Ukrainian Black Sea ports from the July 2022 start of the initiative through February 2023.³⁴

Guterres and Erdogan were able to facilitate this deal so effectively because Kyiv and Moscow bought into it at a high level, the latter after Russian attempts to weaponize the food issue began to backfire in Africa and the Middle East.³⁵ Although Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky did not interact with each other directly on this issue, they acquiesced to the instructions that their governments produced. Russian and Ukrainian negotiators were thus able to work on pragmatic ways to develop the inspection regime, rather than focusing on continued severe political differences.

In general, the negotiating process succeeds best when those at the table carry instructions from the highest possible level. This frees them up to use their expertise — and creativity — to find practical solutions to the problems at hand. They do not need to keep repeating the political messages that are so important in other settings, allowing their time together to be spent on problem-solving.

Sometimes, however, high-level instructions are not forthcoming, either due to the difficult political environment or to animus that prevents leaders from engaging directly or instructing their negotiators. During the first phase of the Ukraine crisis in 2022, this was largely the situation between Putin and President Joe Biden. Biden declared early on that Putin was a war criminal, and the Kremlin shot back that such language was unforgivable.³⁶ As a result, any engagement between the two of them in direct negotiations became impossible, and their willingness to acquiesce to anything their governments might have proposed was minimal. Indeed, in this case, these two high-level actors developed a certain animus, an unwillingness to communicate or work together on issues where mutual interest might otherwise have brought them together.

However, when top-down instructions are not possible, sometimes the process moves to an expert level where progress can be made. These are cases where a bottom-up approach produces re-

sults in a particular technical arena, where both sides have an interest. Until they were interrupted by the Kremlin's political decision to suspend the New START treaty, such was the case with the negotiations to resume on-site inspections.

These inspections were halted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the nature of the disease was still uncertain. Both sides agreed that it would be unwise to try to send inspectors into each other's nuclear bases. Restarting the inspections proved to be a difficult technical negotiation, since some new protocols had to be developed regarding the inspectors — e.g., the nature of their vaccination and booster status — and new transit arrangements had to be agreed to once commercial flights were suspended following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Step by step, the issues were addressed by U.S. and Russian diplomats and military experts involved in New START implementation.³⁷

Technical experts working together in such a steady way end up producing a relationship of mutual confidence, with a good deal of understanding of the issues that are important to the other side and how they can best be handled. "Problem-solving" is their most common watchword. In the case of the New START experts, this good working relationship has been long established, with roots in the negotiation of the treaty in 2009 and 2010.

No matter how much mutual confidence negotiators enjoy, making progress on technical issues takes time and sustained effort, which is why drive-by diplomacy is a cardinal sin. This is when two parties agree to meet for no more than a day or two in some intermediate spot with a high-profile agenda and much to accomplish. The result is predictable: They exchange formal talking points in plenary sessions and never get beyond agreeing to the next meeting. The only way to make real progress is to get beyond the plenaries and the talking points.

In particular, breaking into working groups in which experts can delve into the issues and try to achieve progress is vital. Until the expert level begins breaking down the issues and looking for areas of mutual agreement, nothing can really be accomplished.

34 For the latest information on grain exports from Ukraine, see "Updates from the Joint Coordination Centre," United Nations, Black Sea Grain Initiative Joint Coordination Centre, accessed March 16, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative/updates>.

35 "Who Are the Winners in the Black Sea Grain Deal?" International Crisis Group, Aug. 3, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/who-are-winners-black-sea-grain-deal>.

36 Nandita Bose, "Biden Urges Putin War Crimes Trial After Bucha Killings," *Reuters*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-says-putin-is-war-criminal-calls-war-crimes-trial-2022-04-04/>; and "Biden's Insults to Putin Are Unworthy of US President — Kremlin," *TASS*, April 5, 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1432743>. This perception was bolstered internationally by the International Court of Justice's decision in March 2023 to issue an arrest warrant against Putin for the unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children from the war zone. "Situation in Ukraine: ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrants Against Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova," International Criminal Court, March 17, 2023, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>.

37 An excellent description of these measures can be found in the remarks of Mallory Stewart, assistant secretary of state for arms control, verification, and compliance at the Brookings Institution on Feb. 27, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/mallory-stewart-remarks-at-brookings-institution/>.



Experienced negotiators scope the issues in reasonable packages, where one side gains a little and so does the other. They understand that it is best to make small concessions throughout the negotiations and not to try to solve everything at once. If both sides understand that they are making progress day by day, then mutual trust in the process grows, as does the momentum of the talks. This dynamic among experts also gives the principals time to work together to connect the small technical “wins” that both sides are making to the overarching superstructure of an agreement.

On the other side of the equation is the golden rule of all negotiations: “Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.” Building up small victories day by day leads steadily toward a final agreement, but this approach inevitably leaves the most difficult-to-solve issues until the end. By that time, enough trust in the negotiating process should have built up that all sides will be ready to tackle the toughest issues. The threat that all could be undone if some final sticking point cannot be resolved is potent and generally produces results — if only because, by that time, the top leaders involved sense the nearness of victory and an opportunity to shine on the world stage. If necessary, they will break the final road-blocks among the entrenched interests in their own bureaucracies.

Avoiding a Monochrome Approach

If the tool-sets described here focus on creating a positive negotiating dynamic, it is only to underscore the point that the best success in negotiations comes when the parties either trust each other or trust the process. But that is not to say that the mood from day to day stays the same, nor should it. Natural human emotions — anger, frustration, mistrust, stubbornness, and dislike — temporary or not, play as powerful a role on a daily basis as do more positive interactions. In fact, to be effective, a diplomat has to be able to skillfully call on many moods. One of the goals is to keep one’s counterparts slightly off balance, so they do not relax into thinking that their negotiating goals will be easy to accomplish — or alternatively, impossible to accomplish. If the latter happens, then they will simply walk away.

That is one problem with China’s “Wolf Warrior” approach to negotiation — the Chinese notion that threatening or obstreperous behavior will inevitably lead to success. The Chinese government has used this concept as a way to inject dynamism into its diplomacy. However, such a monochromatic approach consigns Chinese diplomacy to being overly predictable. China’s would-be counterparts are likely to avoid negotiating if they can help it. This

leaves China failing to make progress and isolated.

Of course, the Wolf Warrior approach, born of a film series, is a cartoon representation of Chinese diplomacy.³⁸ Indeed, according to some reports, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has moved away from this posture.³⁹ The fact is that there are many skillful Chinese diplomats in the world who deploy a range of tools, including on the emotional front, to achieve their objectives.

Another example of monochromatic behavior is the storied stubbornness of the Soviet-era Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev famously declared that he could ask Gromyko to “sit on a block of ice” until the other side capitulated in the negotiations.⁴⁰ This tradition has come down through the years in the practice of Russian negotiators who can sit through the night to insist on their point while everyone else is longing to sleep. They can also slow-roll progress without embarrassment or apology. Luckily, during the negotiation of the New START treaty, both the U.S. and Russian negotiators had strict instructions from the top leaders — in this case, Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev — to complete the negotiations as quickly as possible so that a new treaty would be available to replace the first strategic arms reduction treaty, START.⁴¹

Another famous tactic is so-called “souk behavior,” seeking the best bargain in the transaction, no matter how long it takes or how much political capital it burns. Often ascribed to Middle-Eastern negotiators — hence the name — it actually makes a frequent appearance at negotiating tables around the world. Any negotiator focused on a narrow transaction rather than the larger picture might be falling prey to souk behavior. One has only to watch the intra-European Union negotiations over migration to see examples of this behavior — the focused interests of one party dominating efforts to save migrant lives at sea.⁴²

The main point is that “monochrome diplomacy” — whether Wolf Warrior characters, or stubbornness, or souk behavior — is not the best way to

succeed in a negotiation. Sometimes, a tough message delivered with a calm demeanor and a vision for exiting the crisis is more effective. This brings us back to the role of diplomacy in handling the nuclear threats that are emanating from the Kremlin. The primary objective is to prevent these threats from turning into nuclear attacks on Ukraine or any other country.

Keeping the Door Open

Russia insists that it suspended its implementation of New START for political reasons having to do with Ukraine: specifically, America’s military assistance to Ukraine and the notion that the United States and its allies are seeking a “strategic defeat” of Russia.⁴³ These excuses are very much tied to Putin and his fixation on subjugating Ukraine. Full resumption of New START, therefore, will depend on Putin’s willingness to see that it is in Russia’s national security interest. This will not be easy. Nevertheless, the United States should keep trying to communicate with Moscow. There are three primary courses of action that Washington should pursue.

The first is to continue with diplomatic encounters at multiple levels to sustain a focus on resuming New START. Over the past 50 years, both the United States and Russia have benefitted from mutual predictability. Russia should still have a strong interest in this predictability because, as stated earlier, the United States is embarking on a nuclear modernization program that will unfold over the next 20 years. This program will lead to a significant increase in U.S. production capacity for both nuclear warheads and missiles. In addition, neither the United States nor Russia should want to see other countries, including U.S. allies, worried enough about the deteriorating security environment that they feel compelled to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Finally, both the United States and Russia should be concerned about China’s rapid nuclear modernization and acquisi-

38 Jamie Dettmer, “China’s ‘Wolf Warrior’ Diplomacy Prompts International Backlash,” *Voice of America*, May 6, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic_chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-prompts-international-backlash/6188830.html.

39 James Palmer, “Why Did China Banish Its Chief ‘Wolf Warrior?’” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 11, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/11/china-wolf-warrior-zhao-lijian-diplomacy/>.

40 Serge Schmemmann, “Russians Come and Go, but Not Gromyko,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/04/world/russians-come-and-go-but-not-gromyko.html>.

41 Gottemoeller, *Negotiating New START Treaty*, 9–10, 175.

42 Nikolaj Nielsen, “EU Migration and Asylum Pact Faces Reality Check,” *EU Observer*, Sept. 14, 2022, <https://euobserver.com/migration/156048>; and Benjamin Fox, “Migration Ministers Promise to Agree Asylum Bill Stance by June,” *EURACTIV*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/migration/news/migration-ministers-promise-to-agree-asylum-bill-stance-by-june/>.

43 For a discussion of the Russian rationale, see Rose Gottemoeller and Marshall Brown, “Legal Aspects of Russia’s New START Suspension Provide Opportunities for US Policy Makers,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 1, 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/2023/03/legal-aspects-of-russias-new-start-suspension-provide-opportunities-for-us-policy-makers/>.

tion of wide-ranging missile capabilities — both conventional and nuclear.

These messages of mutual interest are better delivered quietly and in small venues — phone calls, diplomatic encounters, technical meetings, if they occur, or even text messages — rather than at the plenary table in public. The goal should be to reestablish the notion that America and Russia have a shared interest in avoiding new nuclear build-ups not only between the two of them, but anywhere else in the world as well.

The question naturally occurs: How can the United States be assured that such steady messaging is filtering up to the Kremlin leadership? The truth is that no such assurance can be guaranteed, of course. However, Putin seems to be demanding to make decisions on even the smallest matters with regard to the Ukraine crisis,⁴⁴ which implies that he will be paying attention to communications about nuclear weapons. Even if he does not, steady communications with multiple interlocutors are bound to land in the Russian ministries with which they are linked — the General Staff, Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and intelligence agencies — creating awareness of America's determination to maintain responsible action where nuclear weapons are concerned.

The second course of action should be to try to gain approval from Washington and Moscow to move beyond discussing New START implementation to discussing — at a technical level — what each side would like to achieve in a New START follow-on negotiation. Although the road to a formal discussion of this matter lies through resuming full implementation of the existing treaty, informal technical exchanges would bolster the conviction in Moscow and Washington that strategic nuclear arms control will remain in the interest of both countries into the future.

Public sources have already made clear what the main U.S. objectives will be in such negotiations: achieving reductions in Russian non-strategic nuclear warheads and limits on the so-called “exotic delivery vehicles” that Putin announced in a speech in March 2018.⁴⁵ It would be useful to find out what Russia's top objectives will be. From past experience, the so-called “prompt global strike” systems — conventionally armed, highly accurate

long-range missiles — will be on their list, and perhaps also missile defense. In that case, however, it will be helpful to remind Russia that the United States also has concerns about Russian missile defense modernization programs, including the S-500 system, which appears to have considerable capability against intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Once the United States begins to understand Russia's top objectives, we can also begin to consider what is worth sustaining from the New START treaty. The two technical teams could have a rich discussion of what kind of foundation New START provides for the next treaty, and where additional measures will be needed. The challenge of directly limiting warheads will be significant and will require a good deal of technical creativity on both sides.

The surface goal of this process would be to prepare for eventual formal negotiations, but the subsurface goal would be to reiterate both parties' interest in strategic nuclear arms control and bringing the nuclear temperature down between Washington and Moscow. Each side, in allowing its nuclear experts to reengage in discussions, would also be affording the other an opportunity to renew the sense of shared benefit in nuclear restraint. In achieving technical success, the United States would be gaining insight into current nuclear thinking in Moscow as well as establishing a regular mechanism through which to deliver steady deterrence messaging: “Wouldn't you rather be in this together than staring at each other through nuclear gun sights?”

Taking the discussion to a political level could be a third course of action, but much will depend on the resumption of New START implementation as well as the overarching relationship between the two capitals as they grapple with the war in Ukraine. It might be possible to undertake some more senior discussions with the goal, on the U.S. side, of continuing to bolster deterrence messaging and the sense of shared interest and responsibility. These discussions could continue to flesh out U.S. interests and might be used to task technical experts to work on some thorny problems, such as the aforementioned direct controls on nuclear warheads.

Political talks might take place at a middle or higher level, but they will be unlikely to result in a

44 Erin Snodgrass, “Putin Is Making Low-level Tactical Decisions and ‘Micromanaging’ Russia's War Efforts, According to Reports,” *Insider*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-is-micromanaging-russian-war-efforts-per-reports-2022-5>; and Katie Bo Lillis, “Russia's Military Divided as Putin Struggles to deal with Ukraine's Counteroffensive, US Sources Say,” *CNN*, Sept. 22, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/22/politics/russia-military-divided-ukraine-putin/index.html>.

45 “Under Secretary Bonnie Jenkins' Remarks: Nuclear Arms Control: A New Era?” U.S. Department of State, Sept. 6, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/under-secretary-bonnie-jenkins-remarks-nuclear-arms-control-a-new-era/>; and “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Kremlin, March 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>. It should be noted that Russia has already notified the United States that two of these systems, the RS-28 Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile and the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle, will be brought under the limits of the New START treaty.

summit between the current leaders of the United States and Russia. As noted above, Biden has called Putin a war criminal, and the Kremlin has shot back that such remarks are unforgivable. This lack of direct communication between the two top leaders will hamper progress, but it need not completely negate it. Both leaders will continue to communicate via their top advisers and diplomats and, at times, via spokesmen in the media and proxies. If positive dynamics develop around renewed New START implementation and the follow-on discussions, then the two might come to place more positive messages in the public square. That outcome, however, currently seems far off.

Dialogue and Deterrence


In diplomacy, problem-solving through dialogue and deterrence messaging go hand-in-hand. In that way, diplomacy is an essential aspect of integrated deterrence, which draws on all elements of U.S. national power. The Biden administration introduced the concept in its 2022 national security strategy, stressing that it would integrate capabilities “to leverage the full array of American advantages, from diplomacy, intelligence and economic tools to security assistance and force posture decisions.”⁴⁶

Nowhere is diplomacy more important than in the nuclear realm, where escalation must be avoided at all costs. Threats of nuclear use are about an existential threat to humanity. They should therefore be treated as problems of importance and priority to humanity as a whole. Attempts to address them are not “rewards for bad behavior” or “responding to nuclear blackmail.”

If a productive process can be established and sustained, then America will be better off than it is today in terms of its ability to deter Russian nuclear threats. At a minimum, Washington will have strengthened lines of communication that will afford it more opportunities both to deter and to challenge threats put forward by politicians in Moscow. At a maximum, the United States will have bolstered a deterrent against Russian nuclear use by reestablishing the shared interest in a stable nuclear relationship that the two countries have developed over the past 60 years.

This shared interest was best expressed in the

Reagan-Gorbachev statement that nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. Ironically, Russia, the United States, China, France, and the United Kingdom reiterated this statement in January 2022, less than two months before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.⁴⁷ As the two largest nuclear powers, the United States and Russia have a special responsibility to ensure that these weapons are controlled and limited and that they do not proliferate into other hands. That partnership has been responsible for ensuring that the number of nuclear weapons in the world has been on a downward trajectory since the late 1960s.

If it is able to achieve success at the negotiating table, the United States will show that it is determined to change the *status quo* without resorting to the use of force. In this case, the United States will be acting on behalf of all humanity in defusing nuclear threats that, if enacted, could lead to global nuclear conflagration. It will be a worthy test of the role of diplomacy in U.S. deterrence strategy. 

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Image: United States Mission Geneva (CC BY 2.0)⁴⁸

46 *National Security Strategy*, White House, October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

47 “Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races,” White House, Jan. 3, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/03/p5-statement-on-preventing-nuclear-war-and-avoiding-arms-races/>.

48 For the image by the United States Mission Geneva, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rose_Gottemoeller,_Anatoly_Antonov_4.jpg. For the license, see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>