

Ask an Expert: Thomas Countryman on U.S.-Russia Relations



Thomas Countryman is 35-year veteran of the United States Department of State. He was a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, with the rank of Minister-Counselor, and most recently served as Acting Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security. He simultaneously served as Assistant Secretary for International Security and Nonproliferation.

In this interview, Countryman provides an overview of U.S.-Russia strategic relations, suggestions to address Russia's violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, and reasons to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). He also contends

that it is in the mutual interest of the United States and Russia to resume bilateral nuclear cooperation and strategic stability talks.

1. How would you characterize the current state of strategic stability between the United States and Russia?

The current state of strategic stability is positive. Russia and the United States, through a series of arms control agreements over the years, have greatly reduced the risk of an intentional or an accidental nuclear conflict between the two, and that's building on the efforts of multiple administrations.

The current state of bilateral relations is a different story; it is, to put it simply, complex and fraught with a wide range of problems. Moscow may have been encouraged by the election of Donald Trump, because Mr. Trump seems to admire Vladimir Putin more than he admires any other world leader, and perhaps there was hope in the Russian Federation that there could be an immediate improvement in the bilateral relationship. But there's two problems with that hope, if it is indeed what Moscow hoped for.

The first is that Mr. Trump has proven himself to be inconsistent and unreliable, in the statements and the policies that he pursues. The perception of chaos in the White House is as acute in Moscow as it is to any of us living in Washington.

But second and much more fundamentally, is that even as leadership changes, the fundamental strategic interests of the United States and Russia do not change as rapidly. For Russia, their concern about their national security leads them to continue Mr. Putin's policy of seeking hegemony over its closest neighbors and of disrupting democratic processes not only in its neighbors but throughout the NATO alliance. And from the United States side, our strategic interest in solidifying and leading the NATO alliance and in promoting democracy and human rights throughout the world remain consistent, even if they have been deemphasized by our new President.

So the bilateral relationship has multiple issues to address. I hope, and I expect, that it does not need to interfere with the mandate of strategic stability that both of us have been dedicated to.

2. Allegations that Russia interfered in the U.S. presidential election have further strained U.S.-Russia relations. Could this hinder Congressional support for bilateral cooperation with Russia, especially in the area of arms control?

They are more than allegations. It is an established fact, documented in the unanimous view of our intelligence agencies, that Russia committed such interference, and there are clear indications that it continues today, with a vast cyber effort to influence the public debate in the United States through covert means.

The important question that Congress is investigating is to what degree was there collaboration between officials of the Trump campaign and the Russians. So the fact is established and it has to have a shadow effect upon everything that we do with the Russians.

It is essential for Congress and for our law enforcement agencies to do a thorough investigation. It's difficult to foresee that we can move to a more normal relationship with Russia until those questions are answered. But at the same time, it does not necessarily have a direct effect upon the arms control and nonproliferation cooperation that

we should be seeking to have with Moscow. I remind you that through successive administrations, through crises and confrontations of one kind and another, Moscow and Washington were consistent in pursuing measures that reduced the nuclear danger to both of us. And I think there is an appreciation in Congress for that necessary cooperation on these strategic issues. So the effect is more indirect, but it's a serious issue and one where it is up first to Washington to get clear answers on what happened.

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3. How can the U.S. work with Russia while also holding it accountable for its annexation of Crimea, its role in Syria, and interference in U.S. presidential elections?

Well, the way that you work with Russia is the way that successive Presidents have done it: by clearly defining and defending our key strategic interests. The Obama administration did a strong job on that with regards to Crimea and Ukraine, and I think our opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its continued direct interference in Eastern Ukraine, is well supported by most members of Congress and by some key thinkers within the administration. It's unfortunate that the President himself has not yet been able to say anything negative about Russia's role in Ukraine. Syria, of course, just got much more complicated with the U.S. airstrikes. It is too early for me to judge just hours after the strikes occurred, but it is not necessarily negative for the United States to demonstrate that we are also prepared to take action in defense not just of U.S. interests, but of global standards, and specifically the global standard against use of chemical weapons.

Mr. Putin and Mr. Assad are very similar, and each of them is prepared to push the envelope and see what they can get away with until there is pushback, and Syria is going to be the hardest immediate issue for the U.S. and Russia to manage. It will be hard to work with the Russians on most subjects if the White House continues its efforts to prevent any serious investigation of the Russian disinformation campaign in the United States, and if they continue to seek to change the subject. On all of these, I look to Congress and to the American public to stand strong, and to demonstrate to the Russians that building a better relationship does not mean abandoning all of the principals that the United States has defended.

4. Earlier this year, the U.S. stated that Russia has now deployed ground-launched cruise missile that violates the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The U.S. first announced this violation in 2014 and efforts to bring Russia back into compliance with the treaty have failed. What are your recommendations for solving Russia's violation of the treaty?

There are no easy answers for this violation. The Obama Administration consistently pressed Russia to account for this new category of weapon that is clearly in violation of the INF treaty. We had the support of our allies, but it was always difficult because of the classified nature of our information about the new cruise missile.

With the actual deployment of the missile, it is not quite as sensitive an intelligence issue as it was before. As a result, we have the opportunity to put further pressure on Moscow to pull back from this violation, and the means of pressure will include mobilizing our NATO allies to speak in one, strong voice. After all, these are weapons that are more directly threatening to our allies in Europe than they are to the United States territory.

But in order to have that kind of unity and resolve from NATO, we need to be the leader within NATO and what concerns me is that we're undermining our own efforts to speak with one strong voice on this issue by lecturing our allies and comforting our adversary. We should be doing the reverse; otherwise, this will be an extraordinarily difficult issue to resolve.

5. **The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) expires in 2021, but the treaty has the option to be extended to 2026. Earlier this year, during a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, President Trump apparently criticized New START, saying it favors Russia and is not a good deal for the U.S. It was also reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin brought up extending the treaty on that same call. What would be the implications for U.S. national security if New START is allowed to expire without an extension?**

Within the space of a few days in January, Mr. Trump, as is his habit, said two very contradictory things about New START. In an interview with a British newspaper he suggested that in order to get a new control treaty, he may give an incentive to Mr. Putin in terms of sanctions relief; and then in a phone call with Mr. Putin, he said, as you noted that New START is a bad deal for the United States and he had no immediate interest in extending it. The statements are contradictory and they are both wrong.

There is no sense in which New START is a good deal for one side and a bad deal for the other side. It is like every other arms control agreement negotiated over the last 50 years - symmetrical. It provides for equal responsibility, equal numbers, equal verification measures for both the United States and the Russian Federation. It has reduced the risk of miscalculation. It has improved transparency between the two sides. It has saved both sides substantial amounts of money, which is not the primary reason, but is an important side benefit. To suggest that it is a bad deal or to suggest that we have to give Russia an incentive in order to come to an extension or a new agreement, both views are simply wrong. Either one of them represents a very poor opening negotiating position.

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It is my hope, even with all of the other problems we have bilaterally, it could be done that both sides say this is in our common interest and let's simply do the extension now, for an additional 5 years without linking it to any other issue. It would be easy to do now. It would be harder to do it between now and 2021, and if we fail to do it by 2021, then prospects for future additional measures that would reduce our nuclear stockpiles and provide additional transparency and confidence will be ever more difficult to obtain.

6. **New START was meant to lead to further arms control negotiations between the United States and Russia. Yet further arms control negotiations have stalled. What should be done to get both countries back to the negotiating table?**

I have been very concerned for the last several years that for the first time in 50 years, not only do we not have an active bilateral arms control negotiation, we don't even have a common view between the U.S. and Russia about what is the next step. We made significant efforts in the Obama Administration to offer different alternatives of how to have that discussion without preconditions. This was usually met with rejections or the establishment of preconditions on the Russian side. That's not the way to go forward.

I do think that you can only get to a new significant agreement when you've built up a better relationship between Moscow and Washington and it would have to be done at a very high level. But in the meantime it would be valuable for the two sides to have confidential, medium-level discussions shielded from public view about their respective security concerns, and at least to begin to understand where we are now and what each of us can do that might eventually build towards future discussions and agreements. That kind of discussion should not wait until we have resolved or lessened all of our bilateral problems with Russia. That's something that ought to go ahead now.

- 7. Russia and the United States have a long history of cooperating on nuclear security efforts. However, last year, Russia did not attend the final Nuclear Security Summit and withdrew from the Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement (PMDA). What can the United States and Russia do to resume cooperation on critical nuclear security efforts?**

The two Russian decisions that you mentioned, I think are not very significant in terms of their effect on the nuclear security challenge. These were primarily political statements made by Moscow; first to say that we don't wish to attend at a high level, an initiative that is so closely identified with President Obama, the Nuclear Security Summit. In the case of the PMDA, the Russian withdrawal was purely a political statement. It has zero practical effect upon the steps that both Russia and the United States are going to take towards disposition of excess plutonium stocks.

We have less transparency as to how Russia is managing its own nuclear security; the largest stocks of fissile material, enriched uranium and plutonium are in the Russian Federation. But we don't have a reason at this point, to doubt that the Russians are managing and securing that fissile material responsibly. I would look forward to a time when the U.S. and Russia could do more in terms of assisting other countries to upgrade their security around all kinds of nuclear facilities. I don't think it's going to happen in the near term, partly because of the bilateral relationship but primarily because the Russian attitude has been more to talk about nuclear security than to actually put any of their own money into upgrading nuclear in third countries. We should always be open to the possibility of bilateral cooperation in this field. I don't see it happening immediately, but I am also less worried about that issue than I am about others.

- 8. In the wake of the continuing deterioration of the situation on the Korean Peninsula, do you think there is anything that the U.S. and Russia can do together to contain and engage the North Koreans?**

In brief, no. I have never really counted Russia as a significant player on the North Korean issue. We have to get to a situation with China, in which we have had a very careful discussion about not just immediate steps but our long-term view of how each of us wants the Korean peninsula to look, and China is a key here, Russia is simply not.