

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 17, 2024

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
President of the United States  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 25000

Dear President Biden,

Early last year, the Russian Federation announced it would suspend implementation of the last remaining U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control treaty — the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).<sup>1</sup> That disturbing announcement was not made in a vacuum, but in the context of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s unprovoked invasion of an independent, democratic, non-nuclear Ukraine and Putin’s subsequent threats to use nuclear weapons in that conflict. Russia has since rebuffed a U.S. proposal to engage in nuclear risk reduction and arms control talks. We write with grave concerns about the growing specter of nuclear instability and the fraying of international arms control norms. We urge your Administration to renew efforts to restart arms control talks with Russia and other nuclear states.

The New START treaty was a seminal nuclear arms control agreement. It capped each of the U.S and Russian strategic nuclear arsenals at 1,550 warheads deployed on 700 ballistic missiles and bombers.<sup>2</sup> On February 21, 2023, Putin announced that Russia was suspending its participation in the treaty,<sup>3</sup> a position that your State Department has correctly called “irresponsible and unlawful.”<sup>4</sup> Despite Russia’s position that it will no longer abide by the agreement — for example, now refusing to allow inspections or provide mandated notifications on the status and movement of its nuclear forces<sup>5</sup> — “Russia has stated, both publicly and in diplomatic correspondence with the United States, that it will abide by the Treaty’s central limits on strategic offensive arms, which includes the limit on deployed warheads.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Putin: Russia suspends participation in last remaining nuclear treaty with U.S.*, Reuters (Feb. 21, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-russia-suspends-participation-last-remaining-nuclear-treaty-with-us-2023-02-21/>.

<sup>2</sup> Treaty Between the United States of American and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, Russia-U.S., Apr. 8, 2010, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> *Putin: Russia suspends participation in last remaining nuclear treaty with U.S.*, Reuters (Feb. 21, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-russia-suspends-participation-last-remaining-nuclear-treaty-with-us-2023-02-21/>.

<sup>4</sup> Fact Sheet, Russian Noncompliance with and Invalid Suspension of the New START Treaty, Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Dep’t of State (June 1, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/russian-noncompliance-with-and-invalid-suspension-of-the-new-start-treaty/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> 2023 Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty, Bureau of Arms Control, Deterrence, and Stability, U.S. Dep’t of State (Jan. 31, 2024), <https://www.state.gov/2023-report-to-congress-on-implementation-of-the-new-start-treaty/>.

But at the same time, Putin has raised the specter of a nuclear conflict in ways not seen in the post-Cold War era. For example, in February 2022, just four days after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, Putin “issued a directive to increase the readiness of Russia’s nuclear weapons.”<sup>7</sup> In September 2022, Putin ordered a “partial mobilization” of Russian troops and warned that Russia “will use all the means at our disposal” to defend its territory — widely interpreted as a “veiled nuclear threat.”<sup>8</sup> In March 2023, Putin announced plans to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine’s neighbor, Belarus.<sup>9</sup> And just a few weeks ago, Putin made his most explicit nuclear threat, warning that, if the West were to send troops into Ukraine, it would threaten “a conflict with the use of nuclear weapons, and therefore the destruction of civilization,” emphasizing that Russia has “weapons that can strike targets on their territory.”<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists’ “Doomsday Clock” — which “warns the public about how close we are to destroying our world with dangerous technologies of our own making”<sup>11</sup> — stands at a perilous 90 seconds to midnight, “the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been—in large part because of Russian threats to use nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine.”<sup>12</sup>

Recognizing the seriousness of the danger nuclear weapons pose, and despite Russia’s dangerous intransigence, your Administration rightly has sought to engage it on arms control. Last June, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan emphasized that it was not in the interest of either the United States or Russia “to embark on an open-ended competition in strategic nuclear forces,” advised that the United States is “prepared to stick to the central limits” of New START “as long as Russia does,” and stood “ready to engage Russia now to manage nuclear risks.”<sup>13</sup> Sullivan reiterated the U.S. “willingness to engage in bilateral arms control discussions with Russia and with China without preconditions.”<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov rejected that overture, calling it “unacceptable” and asserting that “Washington first needs to revise its current hostile policy toward Russia.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Yuras Karmanau et al., *Putin puts nuclear forces on high alert, escalating tensions*, AP (Feb. 27, 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-business-europe-moscow-2e4e1cf784f22b6afbe5a2f936725550>.

<sup>8</sup> Ishaan Tharor, *Russia pushes the panic button and raises risk of nuclear war*, Wash. Post (Sept. 21, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/21/russia-referendums-ukraine-occupied-nuclear/>.

<sup>9</sup> Heather Chen et al., *Russia plans to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, Putin says*, CNN (Mar. 26, 2023), <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/25/world/russia-putin-nuclear-weapons-belarus-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Anton Troianovski, *Putin Says West Risks Nuclear Conflict if It Intervenes More in Ukraine*, N.Y. Times (Feb. 29, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/29/world/europe/putin-speech-ukraine-nuclear-conflict.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Answers to Common Questions, Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/faq/>.

<sup>12</sup> Science and Security Board, *A moment of historic danger: It is still 90 seconds to midnight*, Bulletin of Atomic Scientists (Jan. 23, 2023), <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/>.

<sup>13</sup> Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan for the Arms Control Association (ACA) Annual Forum, National Press Club, The White House (June 2, 2023), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/06/02/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-for-the-arms-control-association-aca-annual-forum/>.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, *Russia’s foreign minister rejects a US proposal to resume talks on nuclear arms control*, AP (Jan. 18, 2024), <https://thehill.com/homenews/ap/ap-international/ap-russias-foreign-minister-rejects-a-us-proposal-to-resume-talks-on-nuclear-arms-control/>.

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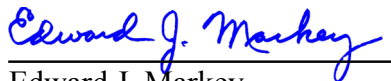
The stakes are too high not to try again. Even as the United States continues to provide aid and support for Ukraine in its effort to repel Russia's ongoing assault, we can and must seek to engage with Russian leaders on risk reduction and arms control measures in order to protect U.S. and allied security. In the absence of a new bilateral framework for nuclear arms control, an already dangerous Russia would be harder to manage.

And without observed U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control agreements, China could be emboldened to expand its nuclear arsenal even further than it already has. Your Defense Department currently projects that by 2030, China will possess more than 1,000 nuclear warheads and will accelerate its development of intercontinental ballistic missiles.<sup>16</sup> For that reason, we also encourage you to continue to engage China on nuclear risk reduction and arms control. Last November, the United States and China held their first nuclear arms control talks in five years.<sup>17</sup> Continuing these discussions should be a priority. We also urge you to pursue new multilateral arms control efforts involving the five permanent members of the UN Security Council: the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France.

We know that a world without effective nuclear arms control is dangerous and unstable. We must act now to guard against the further degradation of the nuclear arms control regime, prevent an unconstrained, costly global nuclear arms race that has no winners, and avoid the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine or anywhere else.

We thank you for your attention this issue and the existential threat that nuclear weapons pose.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator

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<sup>16</sup> Shizuka Kuramitsu, *China, U.S. Hold Rare Arms Control Talks*, Arms Control Assoc. (Dec. 2023), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-12/news/china-us-hold-rare-arms-control-talks>.

<sup>17</sup> *US urges discussions with China on practical nuclear risk reduction steps*, Reuters (Jan. 18, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-urges-discussions-with-china-practical-nuclear-risk-reduction-steps-2024-01-18/>.

The Honorable Joseph R Biden, Jr.

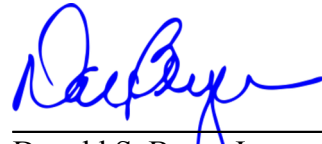
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John Garamendi  
Member of Congress



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Donald S. Beyer Jr.  
Member of Congress



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Robert Menendez  
United States Senator



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Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



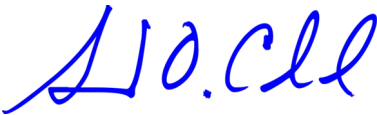
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Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator



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Peter Welch  
United States Senator



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Salud Carbajal  
Member of Congress



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Bill Foster  
Member of Congress



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James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress

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