

# DOES AN ARMS REDUCTION TREATY MATTER WHEN ZERO NUCLEAR WEAPONS IS THE ONLY SAFE NUMBER?



## Stop or START?

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced last February at the annual state of the nation address to Russia's National Assembly the suspension of his country's participation in the **New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty)** with the United States, imperiling the last remaining pact that regulates the world's two largest nuclear arsenals.

Why does it matter whether the two nuclear super powers agree to cap their arsenals at "only" 3,000 or so lethal nuclear missiles and warheads each? Given the utter destruction of planet Earth that these would cause if used, an escalation (or even a decrease) seems irrelevant.

*"The **New START**, while somewhat useful, is a very limited document and a very inadequate treaty. It still allows the United States and Russia to maintain — and they do — 3,100 strategic nuclear weapons, ranging in size from 100 kilotons to 800 kilotons. That is six to 50 times more powerful than the bombs which destroyed Hiroshima."* Says Dr. Ira Helfand of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, It's a treaty that

**"allows both the United States and Russia to maintain arsenals which are capable of destroying modern civilization six times over."**

So, is there any point to **START**, "**New**" or otherwise? Surely we need to stop the manufacture, possession, siting (including in other people's countries), and especially the use of nuclear weapons and get rid of them altogether? And the only instrument equipped to do that is the **Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons**.

US condemnation of Putin is hypocritical: the US has broken or withdrawn from almost every treaty it ever signed (including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019 and the Open Skies Treaty in 2020).

*"The US does not want to remain limited by **New START** numbers because they want more warheads to 'counter' China. Putin has once again fallen into the trap of getting the blame for the demise of this treaty when the US is the one who wants to breach the numbers,"* wrote Timmon Wallis, who leads the group Nuclear Ban-US.

So is **New START** just window-dressing? Arguably "yes," wrote Jack Cohen-Joppa, a self-avowed nuclear abolitionist who, with his wife Felice, runs The Nuclear Resister. *"All **New START** ever did was put the veneer of some sort of downward progress on an inevitable reduction in warheads due to redundancy and technological obsolescence,"* he said. He compared it to a

**"going out of business" sale, with the business never actually closing.**

The timing of Putin's announcement, rather than the decision itself, is perhaps the greater concern. The nuclear football should never be used as a political football. If indeed Russia's suspension of participation is a signal that, if the US and NATO continue to arm Ukraine, Putin could, and would both ramp up and maybe even use Russia's nuclear weapons, that's as abhorrent as the two countries' insistence on possessing them in the first place.



A single nuclear weapon can destroy a city and kill most of its people."

## A single weapon.

**Meanwhile:**

### Ukraine's reactors face new threats

A year ago, we warned of the significant and unacceptable risks to Ukraine's 15 nuclear reactors, should they become caught up in a war zone as a consequence of an invasion by Russia. A year later, those risks have become a reality. And in recent days, the scares and close calls have ramped up again.

A missile strike or loss of cooling water are just two of the many scenarios that could lead to a nuclear power plant disaster in Ukraine. Others include loss of electricity supply, human error or sabotage. The conditions of war just make any and all of these outcomes far more likely.

The head of Germany's Federal Office for Radiation Protection, Inge Paulini, who warned that an incident at one of Ukraine's nuclear power plants would have, *"far-reaching consequences as long as the war continues."* And yet, she pointed out, *"this danger already seems to be receding into the background of public awareness."*

**Indeed, it has been a consistent pattern in the press not to take nuclear power risks seriously. Instead, the media publishes story after story, planted there by a well-orchestrated worldwide nuclear industry campaign, about the benefits of expanding nuclear power.**

The Ukrainian energy ministry would seem to agree. Even in the midst of this devastating war, it has made a deal with the American company, Westinghouse, to purchase two new AP1000 reactors. It is of course unrealistic to envisage these actually being built during a war and, if ever operational, they would simply become additional lethal targets.

In Ukraine, we have seen Russia routinely attack the electric grid, leading to periodic loss of offsite power at all four of Ukraine's nuclear power plant sites. Zaporizhzhia, in the contested southeastern part of the country, has experienced multiple disconnections from the grid. So far, the diesel generators have functioned until offsite power was restored. But they are reliant on a steady replenishment of fuel, which could be impeded were the plant to come under siege.

A ready supply of cooling water is also essential so the drain down of the Kakhovka Reservoir is a serious concern. Why this is happening is unclear, but it is thought to be a possible Russian military tactic to flood strategic areas, making them impassable to advancing Ukrainian troops.

The unimaginable stress that continues to be experienced by the depleted workforce at Zaporizhzhia adds to the possibility of a fatal human error. Human error was at the root of both the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear power plant accident in the United States and the 1986 Chernobyl Unit 4 explosion in Ukraine, without the contributing stress factor of war conditions.

The proximity of cruise missiles to nuclear plants is a nightmarish disaster waiting to happen, even if they are on their way to other targets, for now. But whether deliberate or accidental, a serious assault would release potentially enormous amounts of dangerous radioactive isotopes into the environment.

The reason damage from a nuclear power plant disaster is so serious is in part due to the longevity of the radioactive isotopes released, and also because the fall-out deposits these into the food chain by contaminating water, soil, crops and livestock.

Some of the enduring health outcomes include thyroid cancer, birth defects, still births, neonatal deaths, leukemias — especially among children — cancers and cardiovascular disorders. However, it should be noted that studies have also found elevated rates of leukemia in children living close to routinely operating nuclear power plants.

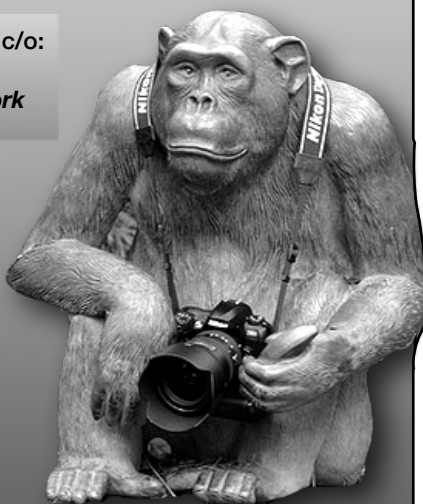
The international response so far has come mainly from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has called for safe zones around Ukraine's nuclear power plants but so far has been unsuccessful in instituting these. And safe zones, while an essential first step, only prevent disaster resulting from a direct hit but are ineffective against loss of grid access or human error.

Apart from being pre-deployed radiological weapons, nuclear power plants must, for safety reasons, be shut down when embroiled in a war. In Ukraine, where 50% of the country's electricity is supplied by nuclear power, this means plunging an already terrified population into greater misery. The lesson learned is that nuclear power, due to its inherent dangers, cannot serve as a reliable energy source. We must reject it as we do nuclear weapons and turn to other, more benign and renewable ways of supplying electricity.

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