

Russia obtains an extension to the START-3 treaty

Witold Rodkiewicz

Less than a week after the inauguration of President Joe Biden, the US and Russia agreed to a five-year extension of the strategic nuclear arms treaty (which the US calls New START, and Russia START-3), which would otherwise expire on 5 February this year. On 20 January (the US president's inauguration day), the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs signalled that Moscow was ready to prolong the treaty, and the next day the White House's spokesman confirmed that the new administration would also seek to extend the agreement, in line with Biden's pre-election promises. After intensive diplomatic contacts (the Russian delegation held talks in the State Department and the secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev held a phone call with the US President's national security advisor Jake Sullivan), the American ambassador to Moscow, John Sullivan, and the Russian deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, exchanged notes on the matter. The extension of the treaty was also the focus of the new US president's first telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin, during which the two leaders also declared their readiness to continue talks on arms control and security. On 27 January, both houses of the Russian parliament ratified the extension at record speed (within one day), and on 29 January Putin signed the ratification document. Handing it over to the US on 3 February completed the entire process: in accordance with US procedures, the consent of Congress is not required for ratification to be completed.

Commentary

- Russia was very keen on extending the START-3 agreement for two reasons. First, the current ruling elite in Russia is afraid of falling into an unlimited arms race with the United States. The USSR's defeat in its confrontation with the West was a key experience which shaped the elite's political and strategic thinking, and it does not want to repeat the mistakes of the Soviet leadership, including engaging in an arms race against an economically stronger opponent. As Deputy Minister Ryabkov, who is responsible for relations with the United States at the Russian Foreign Ministry, put it, extending the treaty "will secure for us predictability of US programmes in the strategic sphere in the medium term". Secondly, the significance of the treaty is symbolic, as it legally enshrines Russia's position as an equal partner of the American superpower. Strategic armament is one of the few spheres in which Russia has maintained parity with the US, hence it serves as an important attribute of its superpower status.
- Preserving the treaty was so important to the Kremlin that it was ready to make significant concessions in October 2020 to maintain it, and agreed to two conditions put forward by the Trump administration. The first concerned the length of the extension:

Moscow consented to limit the extension to just one year, instead of the maximum five-year period allowed by the treaty. The other referred to freezing the number of all nuclear warheads (and not only those on strategic carriers). The Trump administration set further conditions, including the introduction of a verification system for the number of frozen warheads; however, this led Moscow to abandon any further attempts to reach an agreement. This decision was also taken in the context of the growing likelihood that Biden would win; during his campaign he unambiguously stated on several occasions that he was ready to extend the treaty unconditionally.