

Americans support arms control talks with Russia and China

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Introduction

Many experts agree that during the Cold War, American public opinion was an important factor in shaping the trajectory of arms control talks between the United States and the Soviet Union (Graham 1989; Knopf 1998; Rosendorf, Smetana, and Vranka 2021). It was the mounting public pressure that led to the declarations of moratoria on nuclear testing in the late 1950s and the adoption of the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963 (Wittner 1998). Two decades later, attendees of massive anti-nuclear demonstrations in New York and other U.S. cities demanded the cessation of arms races between the two nuclear superpowers, giving new impetus to the resumption of arms control negotiations between Washington and Moscow. Eventually, these negotiations resulted in the adoption of major U.S.-Russian arms control agreements that served as the cornerstone of global strategic stability in the late 1980s and during most of the post-Cold War era.

Today, however, arms control architecture finds itself in an existential crisis, and the specter of nuclear arms races looms large over great power relations. Earlier this year, Moscow suspended its participation in the New START Treaty, the last existing arms control agreement that sets limits on U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals (Diaz-Maurin 2023). Soon after, Russia deployed tactical nuclear weapons in neighboring Belarus and revoked its ratification of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (Kuramitsu 2023). At the same time, there have been credible reports that China, unconstrained by nuclear arms control agreements, is on the way to expanding its nuclear arsenal considerably (Kristensen, Korda, and Reynolds 2023). While experts continue debating the feasibility of future nuclear arms control (Allison and Herzog 2020; Bugos 2022; Claeys and Williams 2022; Rogers, Korda, and Kristensen 2022; Santoro 2023; Nelson and O’Hanlon 2023; Kühn and Williams 2023), can we expect the U.S. public to back Washington in engaging in any such initiatives with Moscow and Beijing?

To address this question, we designed an original survey of public views on nuclear arms control and fielded it to a representative sample of the U.S. population.¹ Our results suggest that while U.S. citizens have limited knowledge of specific nuclear arms control agreements, they generally find it to be an important aspect of U.S. security. The respondents overwhelmingly supported arms control talks with both Russia and China. This support is clearly bipartisan and mostly driven by concerns about nuclear war and its potential impacts. At the same time, many Americans express concern about the risk of Russia and China noncomplying with their arms control obligations.

Limited knowledge, great importance

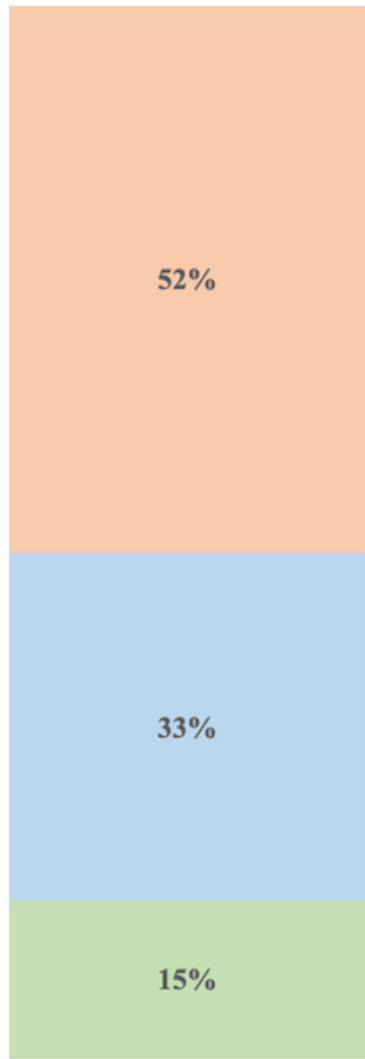
In the survey, we first wanted to examine to what extent the American public even knows about the existence of nuclear arms control treaties. Earlier studies have found that even during the Cold War, the U.S. public had rather limited knowledge of nuclear arms control, despite high interest in the subject of nuclear weapons in general (Graham 1988). When asked about the New START Treaty signed by U.S. President Obama and Russian President Medvedev in 2010, only 15% of our respondents positively knew what the New START treaty dealt with (see Figure 1). About half of them stated that they had not heard of this treaty at all. One-third had heard about the treaty before, but they were not sure what it was about. On the other hand, when we provided our respondents with several options, more than one-third of them correctly stated that the goal of the treaty was to limit and reduce the number of nuclear weapons.

After we informed the respondents about the general content and aims of the New START, we asked them whether they believed the treaty was important for the security of the United States or not. In this regard, the answer was unequivocal: a total of 94% of respondents found the treaty important, and almost half of them even found it to be “very important” (see Figure 2).

¹ We worked with an international polling company IPSOS to field the survey to 1,000 U.S. adults between September 25 and October 5, 2023. The sample was representative of gender, age, and region with respect to the general U.S. population.

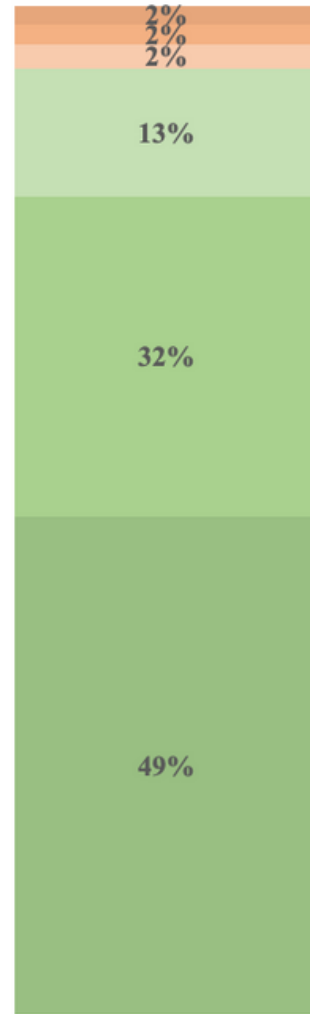
Figure 1. Knowledge of the New START Treaty

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- I have not heard of the New START treaty
- I heard about the New START treaty, but I am not sure what this treaty is about
- I know what the New START treaty is about

Figure 2. Importance of the New START Treaty



- Very unimportant
- Unimportant
- Slightly unimportant
- Slightly important
- Important
- Very important

Support for arms control talks

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Given the prevalent belief about the importance of the New START treaty, would Americans also support new arms control initiatives with U.S. main strategic competitors? With respect to Russia, we asked whether the respondents agreed or disagreed that the United States should negotiate with the Russian Federation on a new nuclear arms control treaty that would replace the current New START treaty after it expires in February 2026. Regarding China, we asked whether the United States should negotiate a new arms control treaty with this nuclear-armed state. Half of the respondents in the sample first received questions about U.S.–Russia arms control and the other about U.S.-China arms control to ensure that the order of survey items did not affect the responses.

Our findings are in line with much of the Cold War public polls (Platt 1982; Graham 1989): Americans do tend to support nuclear arms control in times when tensions among great powers are high. Only 14% of the respondents stated that they do not agree with the potential U.S. attempt to negotiate with the Kremlin on the New START replacement; almost one-third even stated that they “strongly agreed” with such an approach (see Figure 3). The support for U.S.-China arms control talks was even slightly higher: 88% of respondents were in favor, and some 38% even expressed a “strong” agreement with such a policy.



Importantly, the support for nuclear arms control appears to be bipartisan. In Figure 4, we show the support for U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China arms control initiatives broken down by the self-expressed political leaning of our respondents. Although Democrats were clearly more enthusiastic in their support for arms control with Russia than Independents and Republicans, the overall agreement in all groups is within the range of 84% to 88% (see Figure 4). For arms control with China, the overall support among Republicans and Independents stays within the 84% to 85% range and goes up to 93% among the Democrats (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. Support for arms control with Russia by partisanship

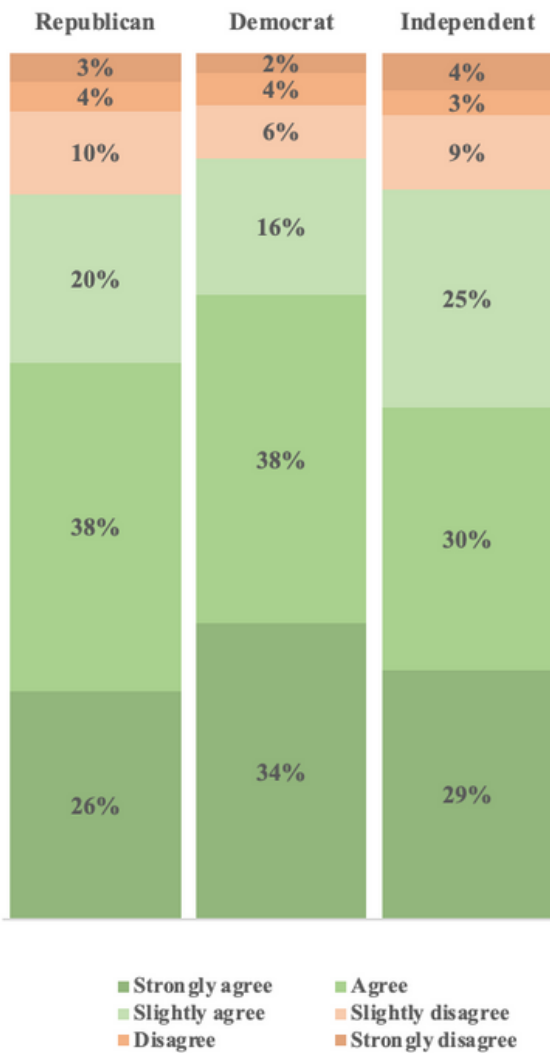
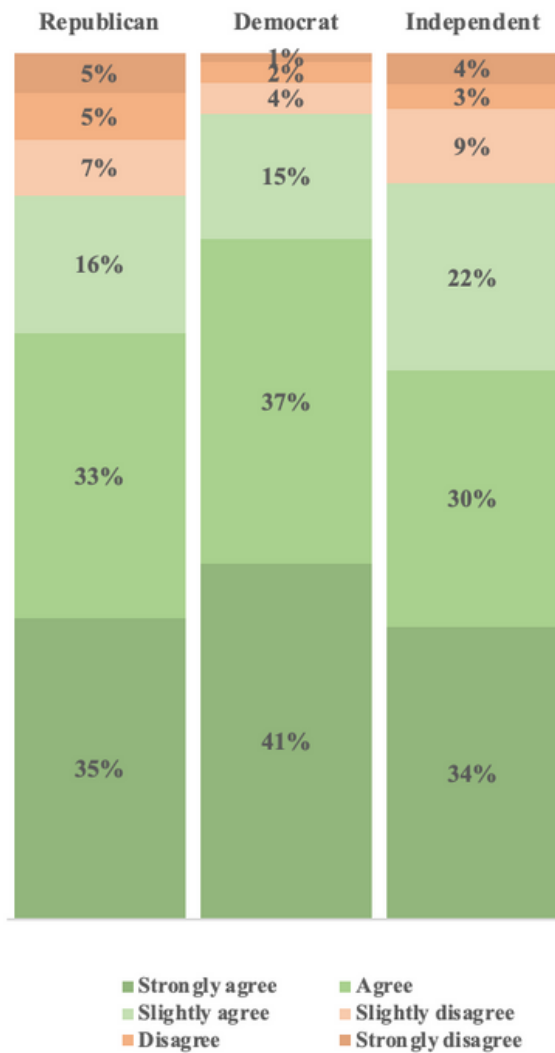


Figure 5. Support for arms control with China by partisanship

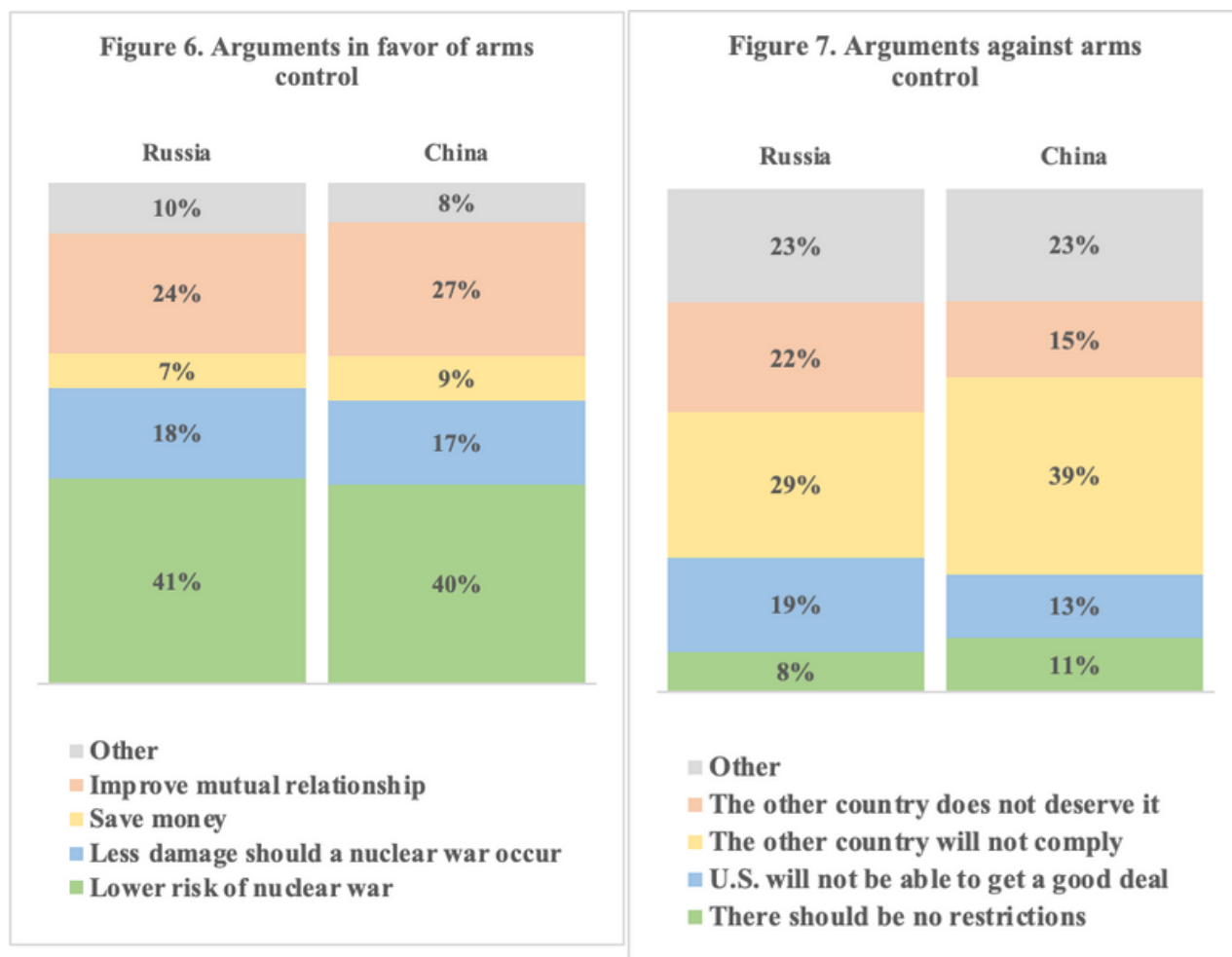


Disaggregating the arguments

Why do we see such a high support for nuclear arms control among U.S. citizens? And why does a small minority of Americans reject these initiatives? After our respondents indicated their policy preferences, we asked them follow-up questions about the most compelling reasons for their agreement or disagreement with arms control talks.

As we show in Figure 6, the arguments in favor of arms control were fairly similar for Russia and China. The dominant argument was that a lower number of nuclear weapons achieved through arms control agreements decreases the risk of nuclear war.

The two other arguments derived from the original arms control theory (Schelling and Halperin 1961; Larsen 2002)—that arms control could decrease damage should a nuclear war occur and that it could save money for the United States to be used for other purposes—received somewhat lower but still substantial support in our survey. About a quarter of our respondents believed that arms control agreements should be used primarily as a means to improve the mutual relationship between the countries that sign them.



We saw a bit more variation when it comes to arguments against pursuing new arms control initiatives (see Figure 7). For both Russia and China, the dominant concern of arms control opponents was that these two countries would cheat on the terms of the prospective arms control agreement. This concern was more prominent in the Chinese case (39%) than in the Russian case (29%). Conversely, with respect to Russia, 22% of our respondents were concerned that Moscow does not deserve to be talked to because of its behavior towards Ukraine or NATO countries, including the United States. The corresponding concern about Chinese behavior against Taiwan (and “us”) was selected comparatively less often, but it still received substantial support (22%).

In both cases, there was a nontrivial percentage of respondents (19% for Russia, 13% for China) who believed that the most compelling reason not to engage in arms control is that the current U.S. administration would not be able to negotiate good terms of the deal for the United States. About one-tenth of respondents in each country selected the “nuclear superiority” argument that there should be principally no treaty restrictions on the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal

Implications for future arms control efforts

In June 2023, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan made a clear statement that in spite of numerous issues in the mutual relationships, the United States was willing “to engage in bilateral arms control discussions with Russia and with China without preconditions” (The White House 2023). The findings of our public opinion survey suggest that if such an initiative leads to serious arms control negotiations with either of these countries, the policy of the current administration could find sizeable bipartisan support in the United States.

However, our survey data also shows that despite the attention nuclear weapons have been receiving in mainstream media since the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the U.S. public still has rather limited knowledge of nuclear arms control. Even if Americans intuitively tend to support policies that aim to establish some level of control over the world’s largest nuclear arsenals, due to the complex and rather technical nature of nuclear arms control, these attitudes are likely to be quite susceptible to change through “elite cues” from experts and politicians (Gilens and Murakawa 2002; Guisinger and Saunders 2017). The fate of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—commonly known as the “Iran nuclear deal”—should serve as a warning that with the appropriate framing, even nuclear arms control agreements can easily become a subject of political polarization in domestic debates. Our results suggest that the concerns about non-compliance are particularly pronounced among Americans and could easily be taken advantage of in political messaging. As such, arms control advocates aiming at the broader public should be ready to provide arguments about the logic of arms control built on effective verification and monitoring—a logic that seeks to maintain strategic stability particularly in the security environment marked by enmity and deep distrust between nuclear-armed states.

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