

START: Overcoming Remaining Challenges

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Author Biography

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Abstract

During the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, the governments of Russia and the United States could not agree on how to codify their balance of strategic offensive nuclear forces after the existing Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START) expired on December 5, 2009.¹ The United States and Russia are currently engaged in negotiations to replace START with a new treaty before the end of this year.

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Introduction

During the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, the governments of Russia and the United States could not agree on how to codify their balance of strategic offensive nuclear forces after the existing Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START) expired on December 5, 2009.¹ The United States and Russia are currently engaged in negotiations to replace START with a new treaty before the end of this year.

Then U.S. President George H.W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev signed START on July 31, 1991, after a decade of contentious negotiations and only months before the USSR's disintegration. The accord required both countries to decrease their strategic holdings to 6,000 nuclear warheads on a maximum of 1,600 strategic delivery systems (land- and sea-launched ballistic missiles or long-range bombers) by December 5, 2001. START did not come into force until December 5, 1994, after the parties agreed that Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine would serve as legal successors to the Soviet Union for the purposes of the treaty. START's initial duration was set to fifteen years, but the parties could agree to its extension for successive five-year periods. Each side also has the right to withdraw from the treaty by giving the other party six months notice. Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin negotiated a START II treaty that would have required deeper reductions, but the Russian Duma and the U.S. Congress failed to agree on mutually-acceptable terms of ratification.

Strategic delivery systems for both countries include the three main components of the traditional nuclear triad—land-based Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and long-range heavy bombers. All three systems are capable of attacking targets at great distances (over 5,000 kilometers), allowing a delivery platform based in Russia to reach the United States and vice-versa.

The Quest for Strategic Flexibility

Bush administration officials valued strategic flexibility to adjust the U.S. nuclear arsenal rapidly to meet unanticipated strategic challenges as well as to avail of technological opportunities. They considered comprehensive strategic arms control treaties largely irrelevant in a world in which threats from transnational terrorists and states of proliferation concern had become more important than fears of a confrontation between Moscow and Washington. Instead, they relied upon other measures such as export controls, interdiction, and sanctions to ensure international security. However, American officials did not entirely repudiate traditional arms control measures. Administration representatives argued that the implementation of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT or Moscow Treaty), signed in May 2002, would suffice to place the U.S.-Russian bilateral strategic arms control relationship on a stable basis despite complications arising from the treaty's lack of verification measures and other ambiguities associated with the two-page document.

U.S. Policy to Date

During the 2008 presidential campaign, then-Senator Barack Obama promised to pursue negotiations to reduce U.S. and Russian nuclear force levels. This policy was tested immediately following Obama's inauguration when Russian President Dmitry Medvedev made his November 5th threat to target countries in northeast Europe with Iskander short-range missiles if Washington did not scrap the ballistic missile defense (BMD) deployments planned for Poland and the Czech Republic.² Upon assuming office, President Obama directed a "reset" of bilateral relations, spearheaded by the U.S. Department of State. This comprehensive re-positioning of Washington's Russia policy—which administration officials also expect will involve major changes in Russia's foreign and defense policies—is envisaged to include renewed attention to arms control issues; specifically, the negotiation of an accord to replace the START treaty. Official talks to this end began on April 24, 2009.

The opening of the negotiations for START followed a very positive reception to President Barack Obama's Prague speech earlier that month reaffirming the U.S. commitment to eliminate nuclear weapons, which President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin have both endorsed. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the "new momentum for disarmament"³ represented by the start of the Russia-America talks. The two governments are aiming to sign a replacement accord this Fall. This would allow legislative bodies in both countries to examine and ratify the

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new text by December 2009. However, it is far from certain whether the parties will be able to overcome the major arms control differences separating them by the December deadline; nevertheless, Presidents Obama and Medvedev had high hopes to finalize the treaty text during a July 2009 meeting in Moscow.

White House officials hailed the July 6–8, 2009 Russian-American summit as an overall success, pointing to the numerous agreements reached while conceding that it would be impossible to "solve everything in two days."⁴ Presidents Obama and Medvedev signed several documents at the meeting, including a joint understanding that commits the United States and Russia to reduce their strategic warheads to a range of 1500–1675 and their strategic delivery vehicles to a range of 500–1100.⁵ Moscow and Washington would be required to meet these limits within seven years after the new treaty enters into force. The two leaders also agreed to resume military contacts suspended after the August 2008 Georgia war, reached a deal allowing coalition forces to transport lethal equipment and troops bound for Afghanistan through Russian territory and airspace,⁶ and committed to jointly analyzing "ballistic missile challenges of the 21st century,"⁷ and to intensify their dialogue regarding the establishment of the Joint Data Exchange Center for missile launches.

Many issues continue to divide the two sides and these issues may preclude, or at least hinder, the conclusion of an agreement to replace START. For example, Obama and Medvedev disagree regarding Russia's recent dismemberment of Georgia and, more broadly, Moscow's policies towards countries it considers as its "near abroad," such as Ukraine and the Central Asian states. In addition, the presidents were unable to reach consensus regarding the proposed deployment of U.S. BMD components in Poland and the Czech Republic. Although the U.S. administration has not yet made a policy decision on this issue, President Obama declined to link the BMD system with the current START negotiations—the preferred position of his Russian interlocutors.

The Russian Angle

Russian negotiators are pushing for a new, formal treaty that would replace START and supersede SORT.⁸ The Kremlin wants the new accord to be legally binding and more detailed than SORT, which it perceives as insufficiently constraining to ensure predictability and parity in the Russian-American strategic nuclear relationship. For example, Moscow favors firm limits on the number of U.S. nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles, as well as restrictions on their possible long-term deployment in

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foreign countries (e.g., to exclude the deployment of U.S. strategic bombers in former Soviet bloc countries near Russia). They also want to be able to increase the number of warheads aboard some Russian missiles, have fewer limitations on the movements of their existing nuclear forces (e.g., Russia's road-mobile Topol-Ms), and enjoy greater freedom to modernize their nuclear forces to ensure their ability to overcome the expanding U.S. ballistic missile defenses network.⁹

Russian officials are open to eliminating some of START's more burdensome implementation requirements, if only to reduce the expenses associated with meeting these provisions (especially those associated with the costly short-notice inspections).¹⁰ Russian negotiators and their American counterparts generally support retaining some of the detailed verification and data exchange provisions that have long characterized strategic arms control agreements rather than adopting the less formal transparency regime favored by the George W. Bush administration.¹¹ In addition, Russian representatives would like to require the United States to eliminate warheads removed from its active stockpile rather than simply placing them in storage, which makes them potentially available for re-entry into the operational force. Putin and other Russian leaders have long complained about Washington's policy of placing "aside a couple of hundred superfluous nuclear warheads for a rainy day."¹²

Ongoing Negotiations

The April negotiations which took place at the residence of the U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom in London, although largely symbolic, resulted in the adoption of two declarations and a clarification of the two sides' initial negotiating positions. The first communiqué addressed the issue of strategic offensive weapons,¹³ while the second was concerned with the general framework of U.S.-Russian relations including various arms control issues and regional security.¹⁴

By adopting a bilateral arms control declaration that underscores the long-term goal of destroying nuclear weapons as a whole, Washington and Moscow pledged to engage in a gradual process aimed at achieving new and verifiable reductions of their strategic arsenals. A new legally-binding agreement will be a part of this paradigm.

One of the most important issues dividing the two parties is which warheads to count. The United States still objects to the Russian proposal to count warheads that are in storage or are being refurbished. However, Russian officials have repeatedly voiced concerns that Washington could quickly "re-upload" these warheads if the occasion arises.¹⁵ Russian and

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American diplomats must also agree on which prohibitions, restrictions, and other provisions already present in START, should be included in the new accord. Moreover, they need to establish the number of warheads that each side is permitted to retain.

The new agreement will contain a bilateral ceiling of 1500–1675 warheads, only a moderate reduction in the ceiling established by the 2002 Moscow Treaty (2200–1700 warheads). However, once the new treaty is enacted, U.S. officials intend to open talks to cut arms more deeply.¹⁶ Russian military commanders worry that such measures could destabilize strategic parity between Moscow and Washington and add that any accord, which reduces the number of allowable warheads below 1500 would have to include provisions for restricting U.S. missile defense. Critics of Obama, who has articulated a broad nonproliferation agenda, including the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons, urge the administration not to conclude a successor agreement to START until the Nuclear Posture Review, a document which establishes policies and strategies for the U.S. nuclear deterrent, has been completed and assessed by Congress. One report argues that it would be "ill advised" to consider cuts below 1700 warheads in a START follow-on agreement due to "the immense advantage the Kremlin enjoys in nonstrategic weapons and the threat they pose to the former Soviet republics and American allies on Russia's littoral."¹⁷ Nevertheless, the joint statements adopted by the American and Russian Presidents in London and Moscow clearly demonstrate that both sides would like to reduce the number of strategic nuclear weapons in the future.

Success not Guaranteed

Although it is difficult to foresee possible solutions to many outstanding technical issues, in the past, factors external to the agreement have posed serious obstacles to the conclusion of a strategic arms control accord. Some observers note that bilateral strategic arms control negotiations further U.S.-Russian relations. However, usually the causality is reversed. Positive overall ties determine the success of arms control negotiations. The history of the past several decades shows that rather than using arms control discussions as a vehicle to improve bilateral ties, oftentimes success in arms control requires good bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington.

Historically, disruptive external factors included disagreement on other aspects of arms control as well as unrelated and unconnected international security issues. For example, divergent views on NATO enlarge-

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ment and the Kosovo war led the Russian Duma to postpone ratification of START II. Likewise, Russia's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan prompted the U.S. Senate to refuse to ratify SALT II.

Russian and American leaders already have identified other concerns that could impede START negotiations. These issues encompass missile defense, mid-range nuclear missiles, short-range tactical nuclear missiles, conventional military force reductions, and questions regarding the strategic forces of other nuclear states. Geopolitical issues, which have the potential to derail the strategic weapons negotiations, include further NATO enlargement, Russian policy toward other former Soviet republics, especially Georgia and Ukraine, as well as differences between Washington and Moscow regarding Iran.

Policy Prerogatives Moving Forward

The Obama administration has yet to conclude the policy review of U.S. missile defense. Decisions in this regard partially hinge on the progress of Iran in developing dual-use nuclear and missile technologies. President Obama's letter to his Russian counterpart underlined the link between U.S. missile defense and the Iranian threat.¹⁸ In the same missive, Obama noted that, should international efforts achieve the goal of rolling back Tehran's attempts to develop missile and nuclear weapons, in which Washington ascribes an important role to Moscow, the need for an American missile defense system would decline in tandem.

In the best-case scenario, the two governments would cooperate on the Iranian issue. Initial steps in this regard were taken at the Moscow summit when Presidents Obama and Medvedev pledged to jointly evaluate the threat posed by Tehran. This approach may help to avert the near-term danger posed by Tehran developing indigenous nuclear weapons and establish the basis of a long-term partnership in other nonproliferation areas.

The focus on nuclear arms control could further the "reset" of American policy towards Russia. However, history demonstrates that problems in unrelated spheres of the U.S.-Russian relationship frequently hinder progress in bilateral arms control negotiations if the former are not addressed promptly. These disagreements may increase the likelihood that misunderstandings could inadvertently lead to missed opportunities for mutually beneficial arms reductions.

About the Author

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