

# U.S.-Russian Strategic Arms Control

## Back to the Future?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 59

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*September 2009*

After a seven year hiatus, the United States and Russia have resumed active dialogue on a new strategic arms reduction agreement to replace the 1991 START I treaty, which is due to expire on December 5, 2009. During their July 2009 summit, U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev issued a joint statement outlining the basic content of this future agreement. The statement reflected the interest of both administrations in successfully reaching an agreement by December. Indeed, between April and early July, U.S. and Russian diplomats already had concluded four formal rounds of consultations during a cumulative two weeks of meetings. This ambitious timeframe represents a certain progress; during the Cold War, negotiating a similar text would have taken months, if not years.

### **A New Interest**

In the early 2000s, the prevailing opinion in the United States was that bilaterally negotiated nuclear arms control was a thing of the past. Arms control agreements limited the U.S. military's freedom of action. Moreover, many anticipated a decline in the Russian arsenal to several hundred deliverable strategic warheads regardless of Moscow's international obligations, because of Russia's own economic concerns. In other words, it was not in Washington's interest to enter into lengthy strategic arms control negotiations and, in so doing, risk accepting irksome restrictions and intrusive transparency measures in exchange for something that could be achieved without any agreement.

Eight years after George W. Bush's administration abandoned the U.S.-Russian Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, however, Washington has exhibited a renewed interest in bilateral strategic arms control negotiations. This revived enthusiasm is based on a number of factors. First, Article VI of the global Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which remains a high priority for the United States and Russia, requires nuclear powers to conduct negotiations on nuclear disarmament. The expiration of the START I Treaty, without replacement, will provide potential proliferators with a pretext for their own efforts to erode the NPT. If a new agreement is not concluded, Moscow and Washington will undoubtedly find themselves as the targets of criticism during the next NPT Review Conference in spring 2010. Hopes for improving the NPT regime at the conference could thus evaporate.

Second, the United States accords new weight to the use of diplomacy in pursuit of its strategic goals. Under the Bush administration, the United States often seemed to sincerely believe that nonproliferation goals could be achieved without complicated and painstaking multilateral diplomacy, but rather through a combination of regime change and missile defense technology. The events of 2003-2008 proved these assumptions wrong; a policy of forcible regime change has come to be seen as costly, counterproductive, and not always feasible, while the capabilities of missile defense technology have yet to be suitably demonstrated.

Third, the quality of the U.S.-Russian relationship still necessitates such bilateral agreements. Historically, strategic arms control has played a stabilizing role in bilateral relations, not only by regulating mutual nuclear deterrence, but also by offering a permanent channel for diplomatic interaction. It has survived several major crises, including Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first round of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's eastern enlargement, and the war in Kosovo.

Strategic arms control might be disregarded today if the United States and Russia had been able to develop a true partnership after the Cold War (Western allies, after all, have no need for nuclear arms control). However, the trajectory of U.S.-Russian relations has gone in the opposite direction; especially since the mid-2000s, relations between Moscow and Washington have steadily degraded, leading the United States and Russia nearly to direct confrontation in August-September 2008. The need for the stabilizing influence of strategic arms control is again evident.

Fourth, Russia's economic recovery has cast doubt upon the previous decade's downward estimates for the country's nuclear arsenals. In recent years, Russia has conducted flight tests of maneuverable strategic warheads, a new type of intercontinental ballistic missile (R-24), and two new types of submarine-launched long-range ballistic missiles (*Sineva* and *Bulava*). It has also launched a new Borei-class strategic nuclear submarine. The expiration of START I in December 2009 leaves U.S. military planners without a uniquely intrusive verification regime at a time when Russia's nuclear forces are being revitalized. Without a new agreement, the United States and Russia will have to rely on unilateral, national technical means, which are unlikely to provide the same level of confidence and transparency as a negotiated arms control verification regime.

Finally, both presidents have personal reasons to conclude a new treaty. Medvedev needs to consolidate his domestic political standing; he can help do this by building new and improved relations with the United States while negotiating an important international agreement. Obama, too, needs a foreign policy success in order to establish his own credibility in international relations and show that he does not depend solely on the foreign policy heavyweights on his team.

Together, these factors make a compelling case for successful negotiations, although the present momentum could be cut short if the domestic political environment in either country changes dramatically in the coming months.

## **The Challenges Ahead**

U.S. and Russian interest in negotiating a new strategic arms reduction treaty does not automatically guarantee a successful result. Both sides need to overcome serious differences and disagreements in a short period of time. After six years of no meaningful strategic arms control dialogue, Washington and Moscow have undertaken the ambitious task of negotiating a treaty in just eight months (START I, by comparison, took eight years).

This short window for negotiations is complicated by two other factors. During the negotiation of START I and other agreements, U.S. and Russian negotiators conducted dozens of rounds of formal multi-week talks. By comparison, the post-START I treaty is being negotiated during rounds of short “consultations” that have lasted only a few days each. This schedule does not compensate for the shortage of time and, in fact, further compresses the time spent in negotiations.

The second problem is the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, a document that determines the status, structure, and targeting of U.S. nuclear forces. The current review is to be concluded by December 1, 2009, a few days before the expiration of START I. Hence, the Obama administration is discussing a nuclear arms reduction agreement with the Russian government unsure of the United States’ nuclear priorities. Without a complete review, the United States faces difficulties in formulating its negotiating position, making it highly unlikely that a meaningful treaty can be concluded before the expiration of START I.

To date, U.S.-Russian consultations have been held behind closed doors, and little is known about their substantive points. Publicly, however, Russia has stated its priorities as the codification of interdependence between strategic nuclear reductions and missile defense; the prohibition of strategic nuclear deployments outside of national territories; and the prohibition of non-nuclear strategic delivery vehicles. In the joint statement issued at the July summit, the United States generally accepted the first two priorities and agreed to continue consultations on the third. It remains unclear, however, how a highly sensitive issue like missile defense will be incorporated into the new document. Additionally, Washington will probably try to remove from the restrictions strategic delivery vehicles reoriented for non-nuclear missions (like bombers).

Missile defense and non-nuclear delivery vehicles may be challenging issues, but others may be even more difficult to settle. These other issues can best be simplified to

the questions of how to count and how to reduce. The United States and Russia are in different stages of modernizing their strategic forces. In Russia, the bulk of the deployed strategic missiles and bombers were produced before the collapse of the Soviet Union, and a majority of them must be decommissioned in the coming decade. Moscow is thus interested in negotiating lower ceilings in order to avoid having to invest too much in producing and deploying new systems to replace decommissioned ones.

The United States' systems will last longer, and its deployed arsenal is also larger than Russia's (approximately 1,200 delivery vehicles to 800). Washington may thus want to maintain higher ceilings in order to keep relatively modern systems operationally deployed. Further reductions also could require making significant changes to targeting policy, but this cannot happen before the completion of the Nuclear Posture Review. In the July 2009 joint statement, the upper limits for the future agreement were set at only slightly lower levels than existing U.S. deployments, confirming Washington's hesitance to pare down its arsenal further (1,100 delivery vehicles with 1,675 associated warheads).

This asymmetry may well revive old disagreements, with Russia insisting on START I-style counting rules. According to Moscow, not only should operationally deployed weapons count against treaty limits, but so should, for example, nuclear submarines in dockyards. The United States, on the other hand, will likely be interested in narrower rules that permit it to exempt a considerable number of warheads from treaty restrictions. One such option would be to count only operationally deployed systems, excluding a system if it is located in a base or dockyard.

The method of weapons reduction presents another sticking point. Since Russia will have to eliminate its outdated missiles and bombers anyway, it is free to seek the physical elimination of over-quota delivery vehicles, either by destroying them or using them to deliver satellites into orbit. The United States, by contrast, may wish to insist on less radical methods. Delivery vehicles slated for elimination could be transferred to non-nuclear missions; for instance, their stages could be stored for later use to make anti-missile interceptors. Another option would be to download warheads, removing several from a delivery vehicle, while maintaining a necessary minimum. During the negotiation of the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (SORT, or the Moscow Treaty), Russia objected to the generous use of downloading. The Kremlin was concerned that downloaded warheads could rapidly be returned to carriers.

Verification is another serious problem. Both sides agree on the need to have an efficient verification regime. At the same time, they want the new regime to include a streamlined version of START I verification, which is considered needlessly complicated and expensive. However, negotiating numerous difficult technical details will require long meetings between subject experts, for which the recent framework for consultations does not leave sufficient time.

## **How to Move Forward**

Even a brief consideration of the existing challenges suggests that the conclusion of a new agreement before the expiration of START I will be a miracle. The United States and Russia will probably have to think about intermediate options, both to demonstrate

progress and to maintain necessary momentum for further talks.

The most logical solution would be to prolong START I for a period of time and to continue talks without the pressure of a fast-approaching deadline. This option may not be possible legally, however, since the Treaty's Standing Consultative and Inspection Commission (SCIC) has failed to adopt a formal decision in advance to prolong the agreement, as required by the Treaty's provisions.

The second option would be to produce an "easy" document like the 2002 Moscow Treaty. At only three pages long, however, SORT does not contain any verification provisions, counting rules, or methods of reduction, making this option an unappealing one. Such a document would inevitably be interpreted as a reflection of the Obama administration's failure to adopt a more creative approach to strategic arms control than that of its predecessor, or to overcome the latter's negative legacy. Moreover, a short document will not save Russia and the United States from international criticism and will hardly help them mobilize support for strengthening the NPT regime. Finally, the Moscow joint statement's content is too ambitious to be accommodated by an agreement similar to SORT.

The third option is to negotiate a framework agreement that will contain relatively detailed, but basic, provisions for a future full-scale treaty. Such an agreement would demonstrate that the United States and Russia have made considerable progress but, at the same time, that they take their disarmament obligations seriously and do not want to rush another empty document.

The major deficiency of this option will be the absence of any legally binding strategic arms control agreement after START I expires in December. SORT, which is based on the START I verification provisions, would also be left up in the air. However, this could be solved with a voluntary commitment from both sides to continue observing START I verification provisions for a limited period of time until a replacement agreement has been negotiated.

*PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York.*