

Short-Term Compromises and Long-Term Dangers for Russian-American Security Cooperation

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Russia's current economic and military weakness should not make anyone complacent about the long-term potential for a resurgent Russian threat to international security. Now is the time for the United States to take the initiative in insuring that as Russia rebuilds its economic capacities it does not channel them into threatening military programs. One way to achieve this goal is by making sure that the United States does not take actions now that bolster the position of people in Russia who will support policies inimical to US interests once the country recovers its economic and military strength.

On a number of major policy issues, the US government has recently achieved seemingly valuable compromises--either with the Yeltsin administration or with elements of the US national security establishment. In the first category these compromises include Moscow's agreement to revise the 1972 Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty to allow for development of Theater Missile Defenses (TMD) and Russia's apparent acquiescence in the enlargement of NATO. In the second category is the Stockpile Stewardship and Management Program, an effort by the Clinton administration to win endorsement from the US nuclear weapons laboratories of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in return for generous federal support for nuclear weapons research and development. Viewed in the short-term perspective, these compromises look like political successes. In the long term, however, they pose the dangers of reigniting a nuclear arms race and hindering the Russian economy's attempt to overcome the Soviet legacy of militarization.

A New Nuclear Arms Race?

The United States deploys the world's most powerful conventional ground, air, and naval forces. The only thing that could undermine its unparalleled military preponderance and pose a real threat to US citizens is nuclear weapons. Thus, one would expect the US government to put a high priority on reducing the role of nuclear weapons in international security--and, to some extent, it has done so. Pursuit of the START and Comprehensive Test Ban treaties are important steps in the right direction. But other US initiatives threaten to undermine the goal of limiting nuclear weapons. In particular, the development of highly capable theater missile defenses and the continuing design of new nuclear weapons are likely to give the Russian nuclear weapons complex a new lease on life, at a time when both Russian and US interests would be better served if it passed away.

The expansion of NATO into eastern Europe, and US reluctance to forswear deployment of its nuclear weapons there, also threatens to reignite a nuclear arms race. These initiatives have made Russian military planners and the nuclear weapons complex take a new interest in tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield use. Unlike the old Soviet Union, Russia now has an explicit policy of "first use"--it reserves the right to initiate the use of nuclear weapons even in situations where it does not face the threat of nuclear attack. Pro-reform politicians such as Aleksei Arbatov find it difficult to criticize Russia's new interest in tactical nuclear weapons, given the poor state of its conventional forces and the potential threat of an expanded, nuclear-armed NATO. US policy has contributed to a remilitarization of Russian thinking to such an extent that even liberal newspapers such as Moscow News have published articles with detailed "bean counts" of the future military balance between Russia and the newly expanded NATO.

When Boris Yeltsin endorsed the NATO-Russia Founding Act at the May 1997 Paris summit, Western governments interpreted his action as an apparent acquiescence to NATO's decision to offer membership to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. But Yeltsin and his defense and foreign ministers have continued to assert that Moscow could not agree to NATO's expansion because it threatens Russia's interests. In Paris Yeltsin seemed to go beyond mere acceptance of the inevitable, however, by making an especially conciliatory gesture: he promised to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons targeted against the European members of NATO. Yeltsin's pledge was evidently an impromptu response to the spirit (spirits?) of the moment. Its content was unclear, even incoherent, as was obvious to viewers of the president's remarks as broadcast on Russian television. He seemed to be promising to separate the nuclear warheads from the missiles. That gesture was apparently motivated by Yeltsin's belief that the Founding Act included a NATO commitment not to deploy nuclear weapons to the East. NATO officials quickly insisted that it provides no such guarantee, thus making Yeltsin's pledge seem doubly foolish.

Back home, Yeltsin's performance at the NATO summit was widely ridiculed in the Russian press. The front page of one popular weekly showed the president armed with a giant fountain pen, seeking in vain to shoot down "Super NATO"--NATO's secretary general Javier Solano, flying across the sky dressed as Superman. Many opposition politicians denounced Yeltsin, including General Aleksandr Lebed, a possible presidential successor, who claimed that Russia was "signing an act on its own capitulation." Defense minister Igor Sergeev announced plans to enhance Russian military capabilities in the already heavily armed Kaliningrad military district, bordering on Poland.

Theater Missile Defenses

The idea of keeping warheads separate from their delivery vehicles is, nevertheless, a sensible one, and a number of Russian and American commentators have advocated it. Russia's military leaders are likely to resist such an initiative, however, as long as the United States continues its ambitious pursuit of highly capable theater missile defenses--a major barrier to the denuclearization of Russian military policy. Russian officials have consistently expressed concern about the threat that new TMD systems--particularly the Army's Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and the Navy's Theater Wide system--pose to the integrity of the ABM

Treaty. Many in the United States assume that the ABM Treaty's importance has declined with the end of the Cold War, but most Russian analysts insist that it is still the necessary foundation for carrying out strategic arms reductions.

Last March, at a summit in Helsinki, the US and Russian presidents signed an agreement demarcating the limits of testing and development of theater defense systems. Although presented as a compromise agreement that reinforces each side's commitment to the ABM Treaty, the actual details reveal that the Russian president conceded all main points to the US position, undermining the stand taken by his own negotiators. In particular, Yeltsin abandoned Russian opposition to space sensors such as "Brilliant Eyes" and geographical deployment limits. The agreement prohibits testing TMD systems against targets with a speed greater than five km/second. But according to published analyses by both Russian and US scientists, such tests would still provide the basis for designing a system to intercept strategic missiles (which travel at 7 km/second). The use of space-based sensors allows for radar coverage of very large areas: three of the Navy's planned Theater Wide systems could cover the continental United States.

The "compromise" agreement on theater systems permits all of the current US programs to go ahead. With the US potential to develop a national strategic defense system from TMD components--and with Republicans openly advocating such a system--Russian military planners would be reluctant to reduce their forces much below the levels of the current START II treaty. Moreover, without the guarantee provided by strict compliance with the spirit of the ABM Treaty, Russian legislators would be unwilling to ratify START II itself. As Russia's defense minister recently stressed, if the Helsinki compromise ends up undermining the ABM Treaty, "we might be involved again in rounds of the arms race, and it will be difficult to talk of further arms reductions."

The logic is familiar from the era of the Soviet-American arms race: If theater defense systems possess the capability for wide area defense of the continental United States, even if not intended to do so, they would undermine Russia's confidence in the ability of its forces to retaliate after a US first strike. Russian military planners would feel obliged to deploy larger forces than would be necessary in the absence of US defenses--and US planners would in turn advocate an increase in their forces. In addition, in order to insure the ability of its missiles to survive an attack by an adversary possessing missile defenses, Russia could adopt a strategy of launch-on-warning or launch-under-attack--something many observers believe it has already done. Such sensible initiatives as lowering the alert status of Russian and US forces, or detaching warheads as Yeltsin seemed to promise, would be undermined by US pursuit of defenses. Russian military analysts argue, for example, that separating warheads from missiles would make them more vulnerable to a preemptive US attack, one that could be launched with more confidence if the US deployed missile defenses to hinder a Russian retaliation. Russian fears of a potential US first strike may seem far-fetched, given the overall improvement in relations between the countries since the end of the Cold War. But reports that Russian nuclear forces went on high alert just a few years ago in response to the pre-announced test launch of a missile off the coast of Norway suggest that such fears should be taken seriously.

Threats to the Comprehensive Test Ban

Despite laudable US efforts under the Nunn-Lugar program, Russia's nuclear industry is poised to revive nuclear weapons development at any point. The minister in charge is Viktor Mikhailov--a man who made his views on nuclear weapons clear even in the title of his autobiography: I'm a "Hawk." In 1992 Mikhailov nearly convinced Yeltsin to lift the moratorium on nuclear tests that the Russian president had declared.

Because the United States had never reciprocated Mikhail Gorbachev's unilateral test ban during the mid-1980s, Mikhailov argued, Russian capabilities had deteriorated greatly. Yeltsin agreed to prepare the Novaya Zemlia test range for new tests. Only when the Clinton administration came into office and agreed to stop US tests and pursue a Comprehensive Test Ban did Yeltsin change his mind. Now the administration is on the verge of squandering the important leverage it holds over the Russian nuclear program. Mikhailov and his colleagues in the Russian nuclear weapons complex would like nothing more than a pretext to resume a robust nuclear weapons design program.

Unfortunately the Stockpile Stewardship and Management program provides the ideal pretext. Developed as a means of buying the support of the US nuclear weapons laboratories for the Comprehensive Test Ban, it provides the labs an annual budget of some \$4.5 billion--more than they ever spent in any given year to design nuclear weapons, even at the height of the Cold War. Recent evidence, made available to the Natural Resources Defense Council under the Freedom of Information Act, reveals that the labs are not only maintaining the US stockpile but developing new designs of nuclear warheads. Russian analysts have criticized the Department of Energy's plans to develop and test micro-fusion devices, ignited by high explosives, as a violation of the test ban treaty's prohibition on nuclear explosions. Such behavior on the part of the US nuclear weapons establishment makes it difficult for Russian reformers to bring their own nuclear industry under control.

Conclusion

Among major US national security interests, stemming the proliferation of nuclear and conventional weapons and demilitarizing the Russian economy should rank near the top. Recent US initiatives, however, pose long-term threats to those interests. Political compromises with the US nuclear weapons labs to allow design of new nuclear weapons threaten to undermine the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and provide a pretext for the revival of Russia's nuclear weapons complex. US pursuit of theater missile defenses, even if conducted with Boris Yeltsin's blessing, could convince Russian military officials to adopt dangerous countermeasures or at least hinder the process of nuclear reductions.

A long-term US strategy to avert the danger of a future Russian threat and the proliferation of nuclear and conventional weapons would feature three components:

1. an effort to stigmatize nuclear weapons by reducing their role in US and NATO security policy;

2. bolstering the position of Russian proponents of military reforms and demilitarization of the economy by refraining from actions that undermine them--such as expansion of NATO to Russia's borders and promotion of US arms sales in the region; and
3. a continuation of the process of conventional arms reductions and pursuit of a nuclear weapons-free zone in Europe.

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