

# Arms Control in the Context of Current US-Russian Relations

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The war in Kosovo may be the final nail in the coffin for the sputtering US-Russian bilateral arms control process. Deep cuts in nuclear weapons, an anticipated dividend of the end of the Cold War, have been on hold for years while the START II Treaty languishes in the Russian Duma. Both countries continue to deploy more than 6,000 strategic nuclear warheads. With Russian parliamentary and presidential elections set for December 1999 and June 2000, followed by presidential and congressional elections in the US in November 2000, hopes for serious bilateral negotiations are seemingly on hold for several more years. Depending on the outcome of elections in the two countries, negotiated bilateral deep nuclear cuts could join Stanley Kubrick's famous film as science fiction for the year 2001. How did we end up in this situation a decade after the end of the Cold War, and can anything be done?

## **What Happened?**

No single event or policy decision has led to the current impasse. Rather, a series of factors contributed to the stalemate. The Clinton administration argues that the delay has been caused by the failure of the Russian Duma, dominated by communist and nationalist forces, to ratify START II. This is partially true. The Duma has not ratified START II, which the US has made a precondition for negotiations on START III. But this only raises two more interesting questions: why is negotiating START III dependent on START II ratification, and why has the Duma refused to ratify START II?

The argument for linking START III negotiations to START II ratification is that it provides Russia an incentive to ratify the treaty. This rationale never made much sense, in that it turned over control of the arms control agenda to hard-line forces in the Duma (START II, in contrast, was negotiated largely before START I was ratified by either side). It makes less sense now, since START II is dead for the foreseeable future in the Russian parliament because of NATO actions in Kosovo and approaching elections.

There are many reasons that the Duma has refused to ratify START II, and the political complexion of the Russian parliament is only part of the story. The terms of the treaty itself are problematic for Russia, because the shift in force structure required by the treaty would actually make it necessary for Russia to build up its forces to reach START II levels. START II makes sense for Russia primarily as a step on the way to START III, so

an agreement on the content of START III would make it far less likely that the Duma would continually delay ratification for political reasons.

More fundamental reasons for the ratification delay are a series of policies and events that have led elites from across the political spectrum in Russia to oppose foreign policy cooperation with the US. To understand why a wide range of Russians is concerned, even alarmed, by American policies, it is necessary to start from two basic premises. The first is that the period of more or less total cooperation between 1989 and 1993 was inevitably unsustainable in the long run. It was hardly likely that in the space of a few years the Soviet Union/Russia would move from being the "Evil Empire" to an ally like Great Britain that could always be counted on to back US foreign policy. Russia is going through a serious crisis and a difficult attempt to navigate the "triple transition" of democratization, marketization, and the building of a new state after the Soviet collapse. It is not surprising that Russia defines its interests differently than the US on some important issues, and this does not mean Russia is being difficult, intransigent or evil, or that a new Cold War is looming.

The second premise is that Russian elites do not assume that American policies are benign. Although it may seem obvious to American policymakers that policies such as NATO expansion, national missile defense and the war in Kosovo do not threaten Russia, this is not how things necessarily look from Moscow. The reason is rooted in what international relations specialists call the "security dilemma:" an action taken by one state to enhance its security, even if not intended to be aggressive, can be perceived by another state as threatening. The idea should be familiar to those who warned during the Cold War that we had to assess Soviet capabilities, and not their stated intentions.

Seen in this light, it is not surprising that Russia is worried by the expansion of NATO, both geographically and in terms of missions (i.e., Kosovo). We also should not find it remarkable that Russian foreign policy elites, in the military and elsewhere, believe that US missile defense programs are directed at least in part against Russia. A leaky Russian early warning system and a crumbling military, combined with American military strength and US plans to maintain a nuclear "hedge" against a possible threat from Russia in the future, contribute to Russian concerns.

Of course, American foreign policy cannot be determined solely by the concerns of Russia, or any other state. At the same time, policy should not be made in a vacuum, independent of consideration of how it affects other important countries. It would be a mistake to write Russia off entirely, either as too weak or as a lost cause, because cooperation with Russia is still important for American national security.

### **Why Russia and Arms Control Still Matter**

Russia's economic crisis, and the related weakness of the Russian central state, makes it impossible for Russia to pursue a policy of matching US and NATO nuclear and conventional strength. Indeed, current trends suggest that the Russian nuclear arsenal

may decline to 1,000 strategic nuclear warheads or less by 2010. It is not inevitable, however, that the Russian nuclear arsenal will slowly decay if the US simply waits. Particularly in the absence of START II constraints on multiple warhead ICBMs (land-based missiles), Russia could probably maintain a force of around 4,000 warheads for at least the next decade, both by extending the service life of existing systems and by bringing some new ones on line. For example, Russia could put multiple warheads on its new ICBM, the Topol-M (SS-27). Russia faces some hard choices in allocating its military budget, but nuclear weapons have high priority and certainly will continue to remain central to Russian planning.

Russia also still possesses thousands of tactical nuclear weapons. These systems are not subject to formal treaty limits, although mutual reciprocal steps--initiated unilaterally by President Bush--were taken by the Soviet Union and the US in the fall of 1991 to drastically cut these systems. A Russian Security Council meeting on April 29, 1999, in a move widely interpreted as a response to NATO actions in Kosovo, adopted a decree on the further development of tactical nuclear weapons. Pressure is also building in Russia for renewed nuclear testing. Both Russia and the US are signatories of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), but it has not been ratified in either country. Whether the US ratifies the CTBT, and the results of the upcoming September 1999 Special Conference on the treaty, are certain to influence whether Russia backslides on this issue.

The issue on which Russia continues to matter the most to American security is non-proliferation. The leakage from Russia of fissile materials, or other proliferation risks such as biological, chemical, or missile technology, is one of the most important American national security concerns. Although cooperation has been difficult, programs such as the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program have benefited both the US and Russia and helped stop the spread of "loose nukes." Thus, across a range of issues, mutual cooperation still matters, despite Russia's current weakness and ongoing economic problems.

### **What Can Be Done?**

In the aftermath of the Kosovo conflict, and the US decision to proceed with national missile defense, cooperation with Russia on arms control and disarmament certainly will be difficult. This is especially true in an election year. Still, there are some measures, big and small, which could at least keep the bilateral relationship on this issue from unraveling completely, and could even move things forward. START II has almost no chance of being ratified by the Russian Duma before the second half of 2000. If the US would like to ensure that reductions continue below START I levels (over 6,000 warheads), then it needs to either drop its insistence on START II ratification prior to START III negotiation, or propose mutually verifiable reciprocal reductions. In the post-Cold War world, the military or political rationale for maintaining more than several thousand strategic nuclear weapons is unclear (indeed, the roughly 20 Chinese ICBMs

capable of hitting the continental US are viewed by the US as a serious threat and deterrent).

Given the state of current US-Russian relations, and the priority given by the Clinton administration to other foreign policy issues, such a breakthrough is probably not in the cards. A smaller step that could be taken would be the lifting by Congress of the legislative mandate that the US maintain START I force levels until Russia ratifies START II. Without changing this legislation, the size and cost of the US strategic nuclear force will continue to be determined not by Congress and the President but by the Russian Duma (and Russian voters in the upcoming elections). The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the US could save \$10-20 billion over the next decade by reducing US forces to START II levels.

Another important arena for continuing US-Russian joint activity is in the area of early warning cooperation. Russia now has a partially blind early warning system, which is not in the US interest because it heightens the risk of accidental war. Proposals to share US early warning data are useful and should be pursued, but Russia will still be wary of receiving filtered data. Additional efforts to conduct joint work in the area of early warning and missile defense, such as the RAMOS (Russian American Observation Satellite) program (which unfortunately may be cancelled by the US), should also be continued. Even the transfer of older US technology, with proper precautions, may be feasible and would help reduce the risk of accidental nuclear war.

Senate ratification of the CTBT also would send a very positive signal to Russia that would almost certainly end pressures in that country for renewed nuclear testing. Conversely, failure of the US to ratify would strengthen the hand of advocates of Russian testing. Senate ratification also would give the US voting power at the crucial CTBT Special Conference in September 1999. More generally, greater engagement beyond the two countries' executive branches, particularly between legislators (the Congress and the Duma and the Federation Council), could help sustain a cooperative relationship through a potentially difficult period.

Finally, particular attention must be given to keeping the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program alive and adequately funded. Although widely hailed in both countries as the most successful program in US-Russian nuclear cooperation, CTR is currently in danger of being terminated because of legal obstacles to renewing the CTR implementation agreement. Both sides are apparently looking for a solution, given the importance of these programs. There are a wide range of new initiatives being promoted, including the purchase of additional Russian highly-enriched uranium (HEU), assistance to Russia's "nuclear cities," and greater efforts to consolidate and secure fissile materials at a limited number of nuclear sites. These programs, which are central to American non-proliferation efforts, can only succeed with the investment of political and financial capital.

**Conclusion**

US-Russian relations are going through a bad patch, and the coming election season in both countries will surely present multiple opportunities for distraction and demagoguery. But there remains a fundamental mutual interest in reducing the nuclear danger, and in ensuring that fissile materials and other lethal technologies do not proliferate to other states or sub-national groups. Indeed, proliferation is probably the most fundamental potential threat to the US. Working this problem requires working with Russia. The US has a significant interest in Russia maintaining firm control over its nuclear materials, and cooperating to achieve mutual reductions in our extensive nuclear arsenals. Dealing with the nuclear legacy needs to remain central to American-Russian relations.

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