

Russian Policy and the Potential for Agreement on Revising the ABM Treaty

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Little mystery surrounds Russian policy toward US proposals to revise the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to develop a national missile defense (NMD). Moscow views the ABM treaty as the foundation of strategic stability and a necessary condition for maintaining the broad array of agreements on controlling weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the means for their delivery, including existing and potential START treaties, the 1991 agreements on tactical nuclear weapons, the Nonproliferation Treaty, and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).

Furthermore, Russia views the American premise for NMD--that the US is threatened by the acquisition of WMD and missile technology by certain states--as implausible. Of the threats named by the US, Russian analysts consider only one--North Korea--somewhat plausible, and they argue that the US can rely upon existing Theater Missile Defense (TMD) systems and developing technologies such as Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) to deal with North Korea, especially given the extensive regional cooperation with its allies in the Asia Pacific.

The key to understanding Russian policies, the potential for agreement on ABM modification, and likely Russian countermeasures in the event of non-agreement is more complex than Russia's familiar public posture. It requires understanding Russia's new security and military doctrines, the significant and complex role nuclear weapons play in defense policy, the relation between Russian conventional and nuclear capabilities, and the Putin administration's priorities for economic reform.

Russia's New Security Concept and Military Doctrine

Russia's new Security Concept of January 2000 does not rule out that unnamed countries might pose a threat to the territorial integrity or sovereignty of Russia and its neighbors. At the root of this shift is an assessment that: 1) NATO's conventional capability has increased because of enlargement while Russia's conventional military capabilities have continued their post-Soviet slide; and 2) after Kosovo, NATO is more inclined to use military force for non-defense missions in the European region.

As a result, the new Russian military doctrine (still a draft but expected to be approved by Putin soon) has lowered the threshold for nuclear use. Press reports of this development

have been exaggerated: throughout the 1990s Russian military policy allowed for the first use of nuclear weapons in the event of non-nuclear attacks that threaten Russian territory and sovereignty. More important than the precise wording is the analysis that lies behind the carefully worded doctrine. In June 1999 Russia held military exercises that simulated a conventional military attack on Kaliningrad from Poland, and reported that the attack was successfully defeated and the conflict de-escalated only with resort to nuclear weapons.

In the last few years, Russian analysts have come to the conclusion that: 1) Russia's conventional military forces are insufficient to defeat external aggression; and 2) nuclear weapons can play a role in defense and de-escalation, as well as deterrence. In the 2000 military doctrine, the role and range of missions of Russian nuclear forces has expanded beyond deterring global war.

Russia therefore has not adopted a genuine second-strike stance, in part because of the greater demands of multiple and sub-strategic missions. Current Russian nuclear strategy counts on some 200 deliverable warheads to threaten unacceptable damage to American society. The strategy does not rely upon riding out a US attack and so is not a true second-strike strategy. The bulk of Russian analysts do not support the need for a logic of war-fighting per se, but when pressed about the need for deliverable warheads in this range, they fall back upon arguments that credibility requires convincing the adversary that one has a war-fighting capability, even if Russian analysts themselves do not adopt that thinking. The implication, of course, is that the number of deliverable warheads matters a great deal to credibility. If deliverable numbers matter, NMD can threaten the strategy.

Furthermore, because nuclear weapons have come to play a role in Russian thinking about defeating, controlling, and de-escalating regional conventional conflicts, the numbers of deliverable warheads available at the strategic level matters all the more. Use of nuclear weapons to deal with regional war contingencies is quintessential warfighting thinking, and the idea of de-escalation makes very strong demands on credibility and retaliatory options.

Complications in Russian Opposition to NMD

Not all Russian critics of US NMD would be unhappy if the US abrogated the ABM treaty, because it would provide support for arguments against arms control and complaints that Cold War era treaties do not meet Russia's defense requirements. While these critics were able to hold up ratification of START II during the 1990s, their position weakened in late 1999. After the success of Putin's hastily conceived Unity (Edinstvo) party and of other parties that have favored ratification, they no longer control the Duma. On April 14th the Putin leadership managed to achieve START II's long-delayed ratification.

While this new support for START II does not necessarily mean support for ABM modification, Putin and the political forces that support him have some clear political incentives for negotiating on ABM. First, Putin seeks an issue on which to improve relations with the US. He cannot compromise on Chechnya: he has defined it as a fundamental issue of Russian national security, territory, and sovereignty, and he has ridden forceful and uncompromising prosecution of the war to electoral victory. In order to contain Western criticism and prevent further deterioration in relations, he needs some other issue to improve the atmosphere. Putin is not an isolationist, nor cut in the Stalinist mode of Soviet autarky: from what we have seen of his economic ideas Russia will continue to pursue some form of economic reform and international economic interaction. To do that he needs not merely a non-hostile, but a supportive US. One idea he has pursued to mend relations is cooperation with NATO, and the other idea is to push arms control.

Second, START II creates a reason for Putin to pursue START III. If Russia follows START II counting rules and restrictions, the number of Russian warheads on strategic delivery vehicles will probably number between 1000-1500 by the end of the decade. Given Putin's economic program and priorities, it is in his interests to cap and stabilize Russian strategic nuclear spending, basically by relying upon production and deployment of the new Topol-M missile, some upgrading of Delta class SSBNs (nuclear submarines) equipped with SS-N-23 missiles (the decision to resume production of these missiles was made in October 1999 and a test was conducted in late March), and maintaining a heavy bomber force with greater reliance on Air-Launched Cruise Missiles (ALCMs). All of this appears possible with START II, and feasible given Russian capabilities: the question is whether Putin can get the deal to stabilize Russian expectations and planning. Too many decisions about modernization and procurement have been put off or kept interim during the 1990s: with Soviet era nuclear forces reaching the end of their service life in the early 21st century, the Russian leadership needs a stable basis for making some long-term decisions.

However, START II ratification in turn makes no sense from the Russian perspective except as the way to get on to START III. Russia cannot sustain START II levels at acceptable economic cost. It is in Russian interests to move on to START III to get agreement on lower levels, and to get a system for stability, predictability and verification. Given Putin's priorities for economic reform and conventional military restructuring, START III is valuable to his government for no other reason than it holds out a way to modernize strategic nuclear weapons in a cost-effective way.

This creates a third incentive for Putin to negotiate on ABM, because the real object of these defense spending decisions and priorities is not the nuclear force, but the reform and funding of Russia's conventional forces and defense-oriented economy. Chechnya is not a success story for Russia's military: it has exposed just how weak, underfunded, and tottering Russia's conventional military forces are. Public discussion does not acknowledge this, but the Russian security and defense elite knows that political and economic resources have to be focused upon Russian conventional forces.

This combines with an emerging economic strategy for reform and growth that will focus at least in part on reviving sectors of the defense industry--primarily those with export potential, with central importance for modern conventional forces, and with promise for development of advanced technology capabilities and spin-offs. To do this, Putin needs to be able to stop worrying about nuclear balances and focus on conventional forces and painful economic choices.

Russian threats that any ABM modification intrinsically must destroy the system of bilateral strategic arms control therefore contain an inescapable contradiction. Russia has broad political, economic, and security interests in a START III treaty, as long as the US remains vulnerable to Russian nuclear weapons. START II, START III and NMD are closely linked. This suggests that there is a price that is worth ABM modification given Russia's package of political, economic, and security concerns. The question then is what is that price.

The Emerging Russian Position

The baseline consensus that seems to be emerging in Russian discussions has two premises. First, Russian security will for at least the next decade rely primarily on nuclear weapons, with a form of launch-on-warning with 200 deliverable warheads, escalation control and de-escalation potential through a form of flexible response, and the need to deal simultaneously with US/NATO and China. Second, agreement with the US on START III is better than unilateral measures for sufficient retaliatory capability. Current projections for Topol-M based modernization are a defense budget in the range of 5-6% of GDP, which is a small sum given the size of Russia's economy, but a huge burden on a weak economy about to embark upon a new direction in economic reform. The burden cannot be sustained at a higher rate while also enabling the leadership to pursue reform of its conventional forces and its economy.

Russian analysts therefore focus on the following as desirable elements of a force deployment by 2010. A moderately successful Russian economy can be expected to support production and deployment of 25 to 30 Topol-M missiles per year through the decade, providing a force of 300 by 2010. Combined with reliance on Delta class SSBNs with modernized SS-N-23 missiles (carrying 4 warheads each in current plans but with a potential capability of as many as 10), and a small force of aging but reliable bombers (including 11 acquired from Ukraine in exchange for reduction in Ukraine's energy debt), and extending the service life of other inherited Soviet forces (including SS-18s and SS-24s)--one arrives at the best projection of a force of 1000-1500 under START II restrictions and counting rules. This force is on the edge of providing an acceptable retaliatory capability if the ABM treaty is maintained. It provides sufficient capacity for deliverable warheads against both the US/NATO and to deal with existing and projected Chinese nuclear missile capability against Russia.

With even a limited US NMD, the calculations change in two respects. First, to counter limited US defense systems, Russia seeks to MIRV the Topol-M. In part, this is simply to

increase the numbers of warheads against US defenses, but it is also to achieve the advantage of launching, for example, only 100 3-warhead missiles rather than trying to coordinate the launching of 300 separate missiles to penetrate defenses. The Topol-M has been tested with side-maneuver technology to complicate the ability of US defenses to track multiple warheads from single missiles at the crucial stage of defenses.

Second, Russian analysts assume that the Chinese response to a US NMD will be to increase production of missiles into the hundreds. As a result, if Russia takes seriously the need for a nuclear force that can deter and de-escalate in conflicts both with the US/NATO and with China, the required numbers of deliverable warheads increase. Thus, in the event of even a limited US NMD, Russia may need to deploy up to 2500 warheads. To achieve a force of that size while still engaging in the kind of force modernization now in its earliest stages, Russia will need to MIRV Topol-M/SS-27s with 3 warheads, and might seek to increase the allowed warheads on SS-N-23s above the current level of 4 per missile.

In addition, to assist the survivability of Russian forces to enhance their credibility in the face of US defense, Russian analysts assume that at least a portion of Russian ICBMs in ten years will have to be mobile. The Topol-M can be deployed in a mobile basing mode, and SS-24s can be brought back to that status.

To deal with the reduced effectiveness of strategic forces in the face of defenses and more stringent requirements vis-à-vis a larger Chinese missile force, along with the kind of regional deterrence and de-escalation mission developed in the newest security concept and military doctrine, some Russian analysts discuss the option of returning to reliance on tactical nuclear weapons, and possibly deploying intermediate range missiles to cope particularly with the problem of China in the Far East. The point of these proposals is partly the numbers themselves, but is even more a response to the perceived need to enhance the credibility of escalation options and reinforce the capabilities for de-escalation missions, in both Europe and the Far East.

The Most Likely Package of Compromises

In the past couple of months, the shape of a possible deal on ABM Treaty modification has begun to emerge. It is clear that merely re-designating the site allowed under the ABM Treaty from North Dakota to Alaska is in the range of potentially acceptable treaty modifications. Security Council secretary Sergei Ivanov signaled this during his Washington DC visit. This possibility has been cast in terms of a limited capability against a specific threat (North Korea) without a direct challenge to Russia, thus making it not a true national missile defense. This makes it easier to justify, and combined with verification procedures on interceptor production and deployment, it might be workable.

A more difficult question is whether moving the interceptor site to Alaska requires additional treaty changes that create the potential for true national missile defense and provide the basis for "breakout" capability. The option raises alarms in Russian analyses

because of the issue of sensors and improved detection, tracking, and targeting capabilities, including possible space-based systems.

The first concern is political: if Putin is to sell any ABM treaty modification he must be able to make the case that the change is not national missile defense. It would be wise to call this compromise option something like "Area Missile Defense" to help him make the case.

The second concern touches upon political issues, but is also military and technological. Upgrading tracking capabilities and creating new technologies and sensors for discriminating between warheads and countermeasures makes it difficult to see how a verification system could guard against the US developing a capability for very quickly breaking out of an ABM treaty revision. That is, it is easy to count interceptors and observe where they are deployed to check that the system is limited and directed against North Korea. It is not apparent how one defines differences in anti-ballistic missile systems that allow for detecting, tracking, and discerning nuclear warheads. Such capabilities can at least be easily adapted quickly, and might even be useful for a broad range of contingencies even if designed and deployed for the limited North Korea scenario. With an enhanced detection and tracking system in place it would be much easier to quickly change a limited area defense to a national defense by increasing production and deployment of interceptors.

Furthermore, even if one were to overcome technical obstacles and establish a regime to verify qualitative limits on these advanced technologies, the current chilly state of US-Russian relations creates problems for the prospect of verification measures which would have the effect of revealing American technological advances and capabilities. One area in which such a component of a verification regime might be built is Shared Early Warning, on which some promising progress has been made.

The prospects for such a regime would appear to hinge on the shape of the Putin leadership. The indications are that Putin thinks not merely in terms of a strong and competent state, but has non-democratic and illiberal instincts. It will be very difficult to justify sharing information necessary for stringent qualitative technological verification regimes with a Russian government that is simultaneously using advanced technology to monitor citizens' use of the internet, or limiting the communications and free speech that would enable Russian society to come to its own conclusions about Chechnya.

On the other hand, if Putin establishes a stronger Russian state the US could be more confident than it was during the Yeltsin regime of greater control and accountability. Therefore, US participation in such an ABM verification regime should be conditional on the reliability of the Russian system. Unlike during the Yeltsin era, Russia will not be allowed to make excuses for non-compliance. One of Russia's complaint against the West is that it has been marginalized from important security circles and not treated as a great power. Given the vital importance of advanced technologies for future security and defense systems, Putin can be told (and is very likely to understand) that accountability is a measure of Russia's status as a great power.

Finally, the year 2000 may be the moment when Putin could get crucial political and military groups to agree to such a deal. With the elections behind him and a four-year term ahead of him, Putin will have time to invest political capital in unpopular cooperation with the West. The Duma will want to move very quickly to a START III deal, now that Russia is constrained by a disadvantageous and expensive START II. Putin will probably also enjoy enough support from important elements of the military to compromise on ABM in pursuit of START III: Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev and his associates want to move forward on advanced and flexible versions of the Topol-M, including MIRVing and mobile basing. Russian conventional military players do not have a direct stake in START III. They do, however, have an interest in capping and stabilizing nuclear modernization spending and getting Putin behind their own priorities for modernizing conventional technology and deployments. Since, as I have already suggested, Putin's own economic program appears to favor at least sectors of conventional modernization priorities, an ABM revision that left the prohibition on "national" missile defense intact and allowed an "area" missile defense might be something that could be endured.

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