

The ABM Treaty: The End of One Saga and the Start of Another

PONARS Policy Memo No. 218

Prepared for the PONARS Policy Conference
Washington, DC
January 25, 2002

Nikolai Sokov

Monterey Institute of International Studies

December 2001

The November 2001 summit between Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin marked the end of the lengthy saga of the ABM Treaty. After years of intense conflict, the situation is curiously peaceful: Russia has clearly indicated that it would not initiate a major crisis; the buildup of strategic nuclear weapons is completely out of the question.

Still, the passing of the ABM Treaty ushers in an era of uncertainty because the parameters of the future U.S.-Russian political-military relationship is not entirely clear. The main risk is no longer a direct confrontation between the two powers, but a crisis generated by misperception, misunderstanding, or even provocation that might upset the emerging atmosphere of partnership. The next several years appear particularly delicate and require careful handling. New opportunities have generated excessive optimism, including plans to quickly and even hastily, do away with such traditional elements of the relationship as nuclear deterrence and existing arms control treaties. Prudence dictates a considerably more cautious attitude toward these traditional elements, or old problems may return with a vengeance.

Bypassing Deterrence

The Bush administration has announced that, with the Cold War over, the logic of nuclear deterrence no longer needs to dictate relations between the United States and Russia. Although the intent is commendable, the premises are questionable. That the situation of mutual deterrence was exclusively the property of the Cold War is far from obvious. Rather, it is more likely a property of nuclear weapons; that is, it is explicitly or implicitly present among *any* two or more nuclear powers. The nuclear capability of one state should almost automatically generate security concerns on the part of another and trigger a response—the creation of the ability to deter the use of nuclear weapons against itself.

A long track record of cooperation and trust is needed to make states “forget” about their nuclear arsenals so that their presence no longer affects their relationship. Such a situation exists within NATO, but it required the presence a common enemy and a very high level of political and economic integration. Theoretically, nothing prevents the United States and Russia from achieving the same stage; they even have a common enemy now—international terrorism. In

fact, the movement in that direction began earlier. For example, in the late 1980s the Soviet Union abandoned the concept of mutual assured destruction in favor of assured unacceptable damage, and in the 1990s, Russia, according to some reports, reduced the criterion of unacceptable damage (the number of deliverable warheads) by at least half.

Still, expecting that nuclear deterrence could be wished away in a few short years or by the political declarations of two presidents would be excessively optimistic. In fact, the rather mild Russian opposition to the expected U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty is apparently rooted in the conviction that it will be able to maintain deterrence capability vis-à-vis any defense system the United States can realistically create in the foreseeable future. Reliable nuclear deterrence can even be said to have facilitated the new U.S.-Russian relationship by helping to reduce security concerns that otherwise could have generated suspicions and stood in the way of cooperation on more important matters.

Eliminating deterrence is certainly not the most urgent task on the U.S.-Russian agenda. Even under the best possible circumstances deterrence is likely to remain part of the U.S.-Russian relationship for many years, and paying attention to possible Russian sensitivities would be prudent. As Russia gradually integrates into the Atlantic community, the situation of mutual deterrence will die away almost on its own. The propensity, instead, to ignore deterrence and pretend that nothing can upset the relationship might derail progress on political, economic, and international issues.

Arms Control Treaties

Another excessively optimistic concept is the notion that the United States and Russia no longer need arms control agreements, at least not the new ones. At the November 2001 summit and during U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell's visit to Moscow in December, the United States gave a distinctly cool reception to Russian proposals to conclude a new treaty, emphasizing that the START I data exchange and verification provisions are sufficient to monitor progress in unilateral, parallel reductions.

Contrary to U.S. expectations, however, Russia is likely to respond to the abrogation of the ABM Treaty by withdrawing from START I or at least some provisions of that treaty, possibly including those that pertain to data exchange and verification. Shortly before the November 2001 summit, the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Ivanov, clearly indicated Russia's intentions, saying that if the ABM Treaty is a relic of the Cold War, then verification provisions of START I and other treaties should also be regarded as such. In other words, some kind of a chain reaction may occur, where the U.S. desire to dispose of an "inconvenient" treaty might affect other agreements that the United States still sees as useful.

Neither the United States nor Russia need arms control agreements like those made during the Cold War. In the past, emphasis was on quantitative and qualitative limitations; with very limited exceptions, the two countries are no longer as much concerned about the numbers and the capabilities of each other's nuclear arsenals. Instead, transparency provisions that used to have a supporting role have acquired greater significance. The absence of reliable information can create conflicts where none are intended or even anticipated.

The situation with tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) is indicative of the problems that might emerge with regard to strategic weapons. An informal regime, which unilateral, parallel

statements by Presidents George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev created in the fall of 1991, governs TNW; no provisions exist for data exchange or verification. As a result, one can often hear, even from official sources both in the United States and in Europe, estimates of the size of the Russian TNW arsenal that are excessively high. The narrowly missed scandal over the suspected deployment of TNW by Russia in Kaliningrad oblast that a single article in January 2001 generated, illustrates the dangers that lie ahead if Russia acts on its promises to dispose of at least some provisions of START I. At the same time, Washington displays optimism with regard to the continuation of START I that is difficult to explain.

The value of transparency in the coming years is difficult to overestimate. Without it, U.S.-Russia relations will remain extremely vulnerable to misinterpretations and misperceptions, whether unintentional or motivated by parochial political agendas in either country. That the two governments address this issue as early as possible is vital. The following steps seem advisable:

- The nuclear arms reductions announced by the presidents should be codified in a bilateral agreement.
- The United States and Russia should create high-level working groups, reporting directly to the presidents, that concentrate on issues of strategic stability, exchange of information about the implementation of reductions, and review all issues of concern that might arise in the future.
- The two governments should negotiate a new, revised data exchange and transparency regime to replace the ones that exist under START I and other treaties. The existing regimes are, indeed, imperfect. They are excessively detailed, rigid, and probably too expensive; in this regard, the Russian desire to revise them is understandable. However allowing an important function of the arms control process, transparency, disintegrate simply because Cold War-type negotiated agreements are no longer fashionable or needed would be a mistake.

Third Countries' Nuclear Arsenals

The bilateral nature of the ABM Treaty causes excessive concentration on the bilateral U.S.-Russia nuclear balance. The planned reduction of U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, however, increases the military and especially political relevance of the nuclear weapons of other countries, in particular China, to some extent Great Britain and France, and, in a more distant future, India. China attracts particular attention in this regard because that country reportedly has plans to both modernize and expand its strategic nuclear arsenal. The number of its nonstrategic nuclear weapons even today is an important factor in Russian security calculations. With the caveats described above, simplifying and partially dismantling the bilateral U.S.-Russian arms control regimes might be relatively easy, but addressing the multilateral nuclear balance, possibly through multilateral arms control agreements, is increasingly important.

Last summer, Putin proposed to establish an aggregate level of 4,000 strategic nuclear weapons for all five declared nuclear states with the United States and Russia allocated 1,500 warheads each and the remaining 1,000 warheads distributed among the other three nuclear states. Although China officially announced that it would study that proposal, privately Chinese officials say that the level that would be left for them after the French and British arsenals might

be too low. The Chinese government is actively preparing for future multilateral arms control negotiations that should codify the size of its future nuclear arsenal.

Multilateral nuclear balance is inherently more complicated than the bilateral one, and imagining how it could rest on nonbinding, unilateral statements of intention is difficult. For example, not Russia, but instead China, might view the future U.S. missile defense system as a threat, but the Chinese response, both qualitatively and quantitatively, might engender concerns on the part of Russia, while the Russian response to Chinese policies might, in turn, generate concerns in the United States. Other scenarios are possible as well—for example, if, contrary to the previous scenario, Russia and China continue to expand military cooperation, the United States might become concerned about the *combined* Russian-Chinese capability. Additionally, by the end of this decade China might become concerned about India's nuclear capability.

Discussing all possible scenarios, some of which are more likely than others, is futile. The bottom line is the same in each case: gradually, probably by the middle of this decade, the need for codification of a multilateral nuclear balance will increase. Transparency will be an even greater concern; that sufficient transparency can be achieved on an informal basis is doubtful.

Conclusion

The death of the ABM Treaty probably marks the end of an era of traditional, Cold War-type arms control, but hardly the end of the arms control process as a whole. The nuclear balance should still be managed, although probably in less stringent, formal ways than before. Transparency, achieved through data exchange, inspections, visits, and consultations, is more needed than ever, or suspicions and misperceptions may stand in the way of the trend toward U.S.-Russia cooperation and integration of Russia into the Western community of states. Although traditional formal negotiations may no longer be necessary, the two countries should be able to clearly state and address their security concerns, and at least some institutional mechanism is needed. Increasingly, the United States and Russia should start thinking about other nuclear states and design ways to achieve strategic stability in a more complex, multilateral context.

Nuclear war is no longer an issue or a concern for either the United States or Russia. However the mere presence of nuclear weapons remains a matter of concern. Complacency is simply dangerous. If nuclear arsenals are left unregulated, if existing agreements, no matter how outdated and inconvenient, are allowed to lapse without adequate substitution, then the risk of crises in the bilateral relationship will increase. Mutual nuclear deterrence is likely to become history, but the period of transition is likely to be rather long and, above all, should be carefully managed—not because the United States and Russia fear each other or might again become enemies, but simply to prevent the negative impact of nuclear weapons on other, more important areas of cooperation.