START I Replacement

The End of Cold War Disarmament

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Negotiations on a new strategic arms control treaty, proposed by Russian President Vladimir Putin in July 2006, are likely to be a challenging but fascinating exercise. The new treaty, which for convenience we may dub START+, is supposed to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), set to expire in December 2009. If successful, these negotiations could provide a stable long-term framework for the U.S.-Russian strategic nuclear relationship.

START+ will likely uphold the key feature of its predecessors, addressing the first-strike capability of each side by limiting the number of deployed warheads via special accounting methods. In this sense, it could become the last page in a decades-long exercise in arms control that began with the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) in 1972. In principle, a more ambitious task could be set: limiting and reducing the entire nuclear warhead stockpile, including reserve warheads. For now, that task is hardly feasible for political reasons; nevertheless, a more modest, but also more achievable, goal is still worth the effort.

Depending on the limit on nuclear weapons it establishes, START+ could also be the last bilateral strategic arms treaty Russia signs with the United States. Russian officials have already hinted in the past that because U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals are approaching the combined limit of the other three "official" nuclear states (Great Britain, France, and China), these latter parties should also begin considering participation in some kind of arms control agreement.

Fifteen Years in Search of a New Treaty

Negotiating a replacement for START I has been long overdue. START I was considered

outdated even before it was signed, thanks to the pace of events in the last years of the Cold War. In the spring of 1990, the United States and the Soviet Union briefly considered abandoning negotiations midway in order to negotiate a new treaty, but instead decided to finish the job and adopt a special Joint Statement outlining key provisions of a follow-up treaty.

Subsequent attempts to negotiate a new agreement more in tune with post-Cold War realities have, by and large, failed. In 1993, START II added some flexibility to START I by allowing reductions through "downloading" – the practice of removing warheads from delivery vehicles without actually eliminating missiles or aircraft. In Russia, however, START II was considered skewed on so many accounts in favor of the United States that it was never enforced. The Russian parliament ratified START II only in 2000, four years after the United States did, but linked it to the fate of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM). In 2002, the day after the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty, Russia declared START II null and void. START III consultations were launched by the 1997 Helsinki Joint Statement but abandoned by the end of 2000.

The 2002 Treaty on Offensive Strategic Reductions (SORT), or Moscow Treaty, sought to decisively break with the Cold War model of detailed and highly prescriptive treaties. According to the original proposal of U.S. President George W. Bush, the document was envisoned as a parallel to the 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) on tactical nuclear weapons.

Although the final product was called a treaty, its substance remained that of a political statement. Maximum flexibility meant poor verifiability. The promise to negotiate a verification and transparency system for the new treaty was never realized, and START I's verification system has only limited applicability to the Moscow Treaty. If START I is allowed to expire in 2009, there will be no instrument to confirm that parties actually abide by the Moscow Treaty's only tangible provision – limiting U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals to 2,200 warheads each by the end of 2012. In the long run, the Moscow Treaty cannot serve as an underlying framework for a lasting strategic relationship.

In the last fifteen years, several failures and very limited successes in the bilateral arms control process demonstrate that, just as in the past, any arms reduction treaty entails a choice between keeping one's own freedom to act and limiting the freedom of the other side. In the past, each side tended to sacrifice the former to achieve the latter. START II tried to have both and failed. The Moscow Treaty was an experiment of a different sort, which tried to allow maximum freedom to both sides. This, however, is also unlikely to result in a lasting reduction of arms.

The chief task of START+ will be to combine the flexibility in nuclear posture planning that the end of the Cold War afforded with the level of transparency and predictability achieved in the last Cold War agreement, START I. START+ could address this dilemma by combining a relatively permissive framework with a reasonably detailed verification and data exchange system adopted from its predecessor. One cannot expect the degree of permissiveness allowed by the Moscow Treaty, however; it is likely that some restrictions on deployment patterns and modernization will have to be preserved.

The negotiating game is likely to be tense, and almost every proposed change could entail a concession to the other side. Consequently, each side will carefully weigh what it wants to propose, possibly leading to a smaller number of changes than one would logically expect. Almost every bargain will force the sides to consider abandoning the game altogether: to use the threat of withdrawing from negotiations and allowing START I to elapse without a proper replacement.

Specific Tasks for START+

Without a doubt, neither Russia nor the United States is motivated by abstract concerns. Their interests are more mundane, and negotiations will center on several practical issues. On the surface, the START+ talks should be easy because elements of START I that are no longer needed can just be removed. In reality, the task might not prove so easy.

There is little doubt that Russia will want to remove the START I ban on increasing the number of warheads on existing types of ballistic missiles. Without the right to put more warheads on new Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), which currently carry only a single warhead, it will be difficult for Russia to maintain an arsenal that is almost comparable to that of the United States. Russia might agree to drop this demand if SORT+ establishes a new limit on warheads significantly lower than that of the Moscow Treaty (for example, between 1,000 and 1,500 warheads), but that scenario does not appear likely.

The United States, for its part, will want to preserve the downloading rights established by the Moscow Treaty in order to reduce the number of warheads on its delivery vehicles. There is no reason for Moscow to object to this, but it will probably attempt to render downloading irreversible. Russia may pursue this goal by resurrecting an earlier proposal that missile platforms designed for greater numbers of warheads be eliminated, a proposal the United States would likely again reject.

The United States also plans to replace nuclear warheads on some missiles with conventional ones. This is likely to prove contentious because the launch of a conventional missile from a submarine could be mistaken for the launch of a nuclear missile. It remains to be seen whether procedures could be devised to address that risk. It seems it would be easier to establish such procedures for land-based ICBMs than sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs); conventionally-armed ICBMs could be deployed only at certain bases and subject to inspections to ascertain that they are not equipped with nuclear warheads.

Another item on the agenda will be the preservation of START I's verification system. Although Russia is likely to uphold the continuation of START I's verification system, it might explore ways to make it less cumbersome and expensive. The Russian proposals will probably be similar to the ones considered for the ill-fated START III. Reportedly, these proposals included a reduction of the number of short-notice inspections and their replacement by "visits," a less taxing version of the inspections mandated by START I.

Although the United States will probably agree to simplify START I verification

rules, it will almost certainly have controversial proposals of its own: for example, the introduction of certain elements of the U.S. START III proposal regarding the transparency of warhead stockpiles, including tactical nuclear warheads. Russia rejected these proposals in 2000 and would likely reject them again.

A serious controversy will probably emerge over the use of inspections to verify the number of warheads on ballistic missiles. Neither side is satisfied with the current procedures, yet these inspections are likely to be central to the future treaty if it includes broad downloading rights.

As always, missile defense issues will generate major controversy. This time, there is a new problem to add to the traditionally difficult agenda: the possibility that the United States could deploy its interceptors in Poland, right at Russia's border. At the moment, it is impossible to predict if Russia will press its position to the point of allowing START I to expire without replacement or choose to postpone negotiations on missile defense until more opportune times, perhaps until the impact of missile defense on the strategic balance becomes more defined.

Chances for Success

Paradoxically, START+ is needed primarily because the nuclear balance has played a secondary role in the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship during the post-Cold War era. To keep nuclear weapons in their proper marginal role, the nuclear balance has to be stabilized and made predictable. Because START I belongs to a different time period, and the Moscow Treaty is simply not up to the task, this balance could be successfully maintained by START+.

In spite of many potential complications on the path to success, the chance that START+ could be successfully negotiated appears to be significant. Precisely because U.S.-Russian relations are no longer dominated by mutual deterrence, the balance is much more flexible than it used to be and allows for a considerable numerical gap and flexibility in final arrangements. The fact that under the Moscow Treaty Russia assented to significant uploading capability for the United States testifies to the degree of mutual concessions that are possible today but were unthinkable fifteen years ago. Whether these chances are translated into success at the negotiating table depends solely on the political and military leadership of Russia and the United States.