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The START treaty

By Keith B. Payne

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On July 6, 2009, President Obama and Russian President Medvedev signed a "framework agreement" to serve as the foundation for a new U.S.-Russian strategic arms control treaty that will replace the expired 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). Since July, U.S. and Russian negotiators have worked to finalize a new START treaty. Once signed, the Constitution requires that the treaty go to the U.S. Senate for advice and consent. It is safe to say that the Senate will not "rubber-stamp" a new START treaty.

On what basis should the Senate judge the new START treaty? One popular approach is a strict numbers game. If the new number of permitted nuclear weapons is lower than the old number, the new treaty is deemed a success. This measure would be appropriate if reducing the number of nuclear weapons were the pre-eminent goal of U.S. policy.

But, of course, it is not. As the late, great nuclear theorist Herman Kahn once noted, "The objective of nuclear-weapons policy should not be solely to decrease the number of weapons in the world, but to make the world safer -- which is not necessarily the same thing."

Policies that seek to reduce the number of nuclear weapons but fail to advance the fundamental goal of U.S. and allied safety confuse ends and means -- arms control agreements first and foremost are to enhance our security, not simply to reduce the number of weapons.

In the quest for security, numbers can matter but so, too, do many other broader factors. When the Senate takes the measure of the new START treaty, these broader factors must be included along with the usual discussion of numbers and verification requirements.

For example, any worthy new START treaty must contribute to the U.S. capability to deter attacks and assure allies. The capability to deter enemy attacks, especially attacks with weapons of mass destruction, is the priority requirement for U.S. forces. And assuring allies about their security via the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" is critical to preserving our security alliances and also to reducing allied incentives to acquire their own nuclear weapons -- i.e., it is essential to the goal of nuclear nonproliferation.

If the new START agreement promotes the U.S. ability to deter and assure while also verifiably eliminating unnecessary weapons, it might well deserve the Senate's blessing.

How can a treaty contribute to deterrence and assurance? It can do so by promoting the survivability and diversity of U.S. strategic nuclear forces. These are basic requirements for U.S. forces. Why? U.S. forces cannot reliably deter attacks and assure allies if the U.S. arsenal itself is vulnerable to attack. And U.S. forces must be sufficiently diverse to pose a credible deterring threat to the wide spectrum of targets that opponents value most.

Survivability and diversity were critical for deterrence during the Cold War and perhaps even more so now given the variety of potential threats and opponents.

Consequently, any new START agreement must maintain U.S. nuclear forces that are sufficient in number and are sufficiently diverse and survivable to ensure that no opponent can conceive of a successful strategic attack on the United States. Those force characteristics will contribute to deterrence and also should help to discourage China or Russia from seeing any merit in arms racing.

In contrast, if a new START agreement undermines a suitably diverse and survivable U.S. nuclear arsenal, it might undermine our ability to deter war and invite opponents to undertake challenges they otherwise would not consider. That would be dangerous indeed. We should keep in mind Benjamin Franklin's wise admonition: "If you make yourselves sheep, the wolves will eat you."

In addition, strategic threats can emerge quickly and unexpectedly. Iran once was considered an "island of stability" in the Middle East. If the world were on a steady course toward a peaceful order, we could afford treaties that lock in ever-tighter restrictions on our forces and a dwindling production infrastructure. But that is not the world in which we live.

U.S. nuclear forces and production capabilities must be sufficiently resilient year in and year out to deter attacks and assure allies in the context of dramatic political and technical change. In the future, as countries such as Russia, China, North Korea and Iran acquire ever more deadly weapons, we and our allies undoubtedly will want the U.S. nuclear deterrent to keep pace. Consequently, any new treaty must help promote the U.S. capability to sustain and adapt its deterrence arsenal to shifting international threat conditions.

Finally, the new treaty must not hinder the U.S. capability to defend against third-party attacks. Russian officials and commentators have publicly demanded that the new START treaty include limitations on U.S. defenses against ballistic missile attack. In fact, some now claim that the United States has frozen its deployment of long-range defensive interceptors as a concession to Russia and that there is an "understanding" that the number of U.S. defensive interceptors will be limited by the new START treaty.

If true, the new START treaty already is fatally flawed. In the Cold War we limited missile defenses in deference to similar Soviet demands and the belief that our own vulnerability promoted deterrence "stability." This decision killed support for virtually all forms of U.S. strategic defense and ultimately led to our near-complete vulnerability -- even to the primitive modes of terrorist strategic

attack launched on 9/11.

We should never again agree to limit U.S. defenses that can usefully protect against plausible attacks.

When the Senate considers a new START treaty, the measure of its merit will be far more than a simple numbers game. If the new treaty verifiably reduces unnecessary forces, facilitates the goals of deterrence and assurance via the survivability, diversity and resilience of our strategic forces and production infrastructure -- and in no way limits U.S. defensive capabilities -- the Obama administration's new START treaty may be deemed worthy of support. If not, then not.

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