

Evaluating the U.S.-Russia Nuclear Deal

The White House and Kremlin can't seem to agree what's in it, but it appears to restrict U.S. missile defense efforts and has no limits on Russia's tactical nukes

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Today President Obama will sign a new strategic arms reduction treaty with Russia. Official Washington is already celebrating the so-called New START Treaty in the belief that it reduces forces below the 2002 Moscow Treaty levels and "resets" U.S.-Russian relations in the direction of greater cooperation. But the new treaty—whose actual text and accompanying legal documents were not released before the signing ceremony in Prague—may not accomplish these goals.

The administration's "fact sheet," for example, claims that the treaty will reduce the number of strategic weapons to 1,550, 30% lower than the 2002 treaty. But New START has special counting rules.

For example, there are reportedly 76 Russian strategic bombers, and each one apparently can carry from six to 16 nuclear weapons (bombs and cruise missiles). Nevertheless, and unlike under the Moscow Treaty, these many hundreds of nuclear weapons would count as only 76 toward the 1,550 ceiling. Consequently, the New START Treaty includes the potential for a large increase in the number of deployed strategic nuclear weapons, not a reduction.

The administration claims, as Under Secretary of State Ellen Tauscher stated emphatically on March 29, that "There is no limit or constraint on what the United States can do with its missile defense systems . . . definitely, positively, and no way, no how . . ." Yet our Russian negotiating partners describe New START's constraints on missile defenses quite differently.

On March 30, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in a press conference after the G-8 foreign ministers meeting in Canada that there are obligations regarding missile defense in the treaty text and the accompanying interpretive texts that constitute "a legally binding package." He also stated at a press conference in Moscow on March 26 that "The treaty is signed against the backdrop of particular levels of strategic defensive systems. A change of these levels will give each side the right to consider its further participation in the reduction of strategic offensive armaments." Kremlin National Security Council Secretary Sergei Prikhodko told journalists in Moscow on April 2 that "The United States pledged not to remodel launchers of intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-based ballistic missiles for firing interceptor missiles and vice versa."

The New START restrictions on missile defense as described by Russian officials could harm U.S. security in the future. For example, if the U.S. must increase its strategic missile defenses rapidly in response to now-unforeseen threat developments, one of the few options available could be to use Minuteman silo launchers for interceptors, either at California's

Vandenberg Air Force Base or empty operational silos elsewhere. Yet, if the Russian description of New START is correct, doing so would be prohibited and the launchers themselves probably will be eliminated to meet the treaty's limitation on launchers. U.S. officials' assurances and Russian descriptions cannot both be true.

Another claim for New START is that possible concerns about the limitations on U.S. forces must be balanced against the useful limits on Russian forces. Yes, this argument goes, the U.S. will have to reduce the number of its strategic delivery vehicles—silos, submarine tubes and bombers—but in the bargain it will get the benefit of like Russian reductions.

This sounds reasonable. According to virtually all Russian sources, however, New START's agreed ceiling on strategic nuclear delivery vehicles will not require Russia to give up anything not already bound for its scrap heap.

The aging of its old Cold War arsenal and the pace of its strategic nuclear force modernization program means that Russia will remain under the New START ceiling of 700 deployed launchers with or without a new treaty. Whatever the benefit to the U.S. agreement to reduce its operational strategic force launchers, it is not to gain reciprocal Russian reductions. No such reciprocity is involved.

Some hope that New START's amicable "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations will inspire Russian help with other issues, such as the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs, where they have been less than forthcoming. This is a vain hope, as is demonstrated by the past 40 years of strategic-arms control: Innovative strategic force agreements and reductions follow improvements in general political relations. They do not lead to them.

Finally, for many the great locus of concern about Russian nuclear weapons lies in its large arsenal of tactical (i.e., short-range) nuclear weapons. According to U.S. officials, Russia has a 10-to-one numeric advantage. In 2002, then Sens. Joe Biden and John Kerry, and the current White House Science Adviser, John Holdren, expressed great concern that the Bush administration's Moscow Treaty did not limit Russian tactical forces. One might expect, therefore, that New START would do so; but the Russians apparently were adamant about excluding tactical nuclear weapons from New START.

This omission is significant. The Russians are now more explicit and threatening about tactical nuclear war-fighting including in regional conflicts. Yet we still have no limitations on Russia's tactical nuclear arsenal. The problem may now be more severe than in 2002, but concern seems curiously to have eased.

This brief review is based on the many open descriptions of the treaty by U.S. and Russian officials. Given the apparent inconsistencies on such basic matters as whether the treaty requires weapon reductions or allows increases, or whether missile defenses are limited or untouched, the Senate will have to exercise exceptional care in reviewing the actual language of the treaty documents before drawing conclusions about their content.

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