

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## Here's the Difference Between How Obama and Reagan Handled Nuke Negotiations

By Robert Joseph & Eric Edelman — April 3, 2015

President Obama's new national-security strategy places the highest priority on what he considers the urgent need to move forward with the so-called Prague agenda — derived from his 2009 address calling on the international community to move toward a world free of nuclear weapons. At that time, the call was seen by many as idealistic but generally harmless.

Now, as we approach the sixth anniversary of the speech, it seems dangerously naïve.

Russia's aggression in Ukraine, China's military rise while pressing territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific region, exploding Islamic extremism across the Middle East and North Africa, and Iran's growing dominance in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen are all raising questions about the credibility of longstanding U.S. security commitments to friends and allies that are grounded in nuclear guarantees. These commitments, as President Kennedy stated more than 50 years ago, required the United States to maintain a nuclear capability "second to none." If we failed to do so, there would be more nuclear proliferation, less stability, and a greater risk of war.

Since the 2009 Prague address, while the United States has cut its nuclear forces, those of possible adversaries have increased substantially. Under the 2010 New START agreement, despite the false hype that accompanied the treaty-ratification process, only the United States has had to reduce its forces. In fact, Russia has since undertaken a large-scale modernization and expansion program across the board, with new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), new ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and an upgraded bomber force. China, seemingly determined to replace the United States as the preeminent power in Asia, is also building up its nuclear arsenal as part of an aggressive effort that emphasizes additional asymmetric capabilities such as cyber and anti-space weapons that are designed to exploit U.S. vulnerabilities. North Korea has reportedly redoubled its efforts to increase its nuclear stockpile and missile force, including deploying a new road-mobile ICBM. And Iran, which possess the largest ballistic-missile

force in the Gulf, is now assessed to be only months away from a nuclear weapon once it decides to build it.

But perhaps the most direct challenge to the president's call for further nuclear reductions of up to one-third of the force allowed under New START is Russia's violation of the 1987 landmark Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Last year, the administration announced its finding that Moscow has tested a new ground-based cruise missile with a range prohibited by the treaty. When asked how the administration can advocate for further arms-control negotiations while Russia is violating a standing treaty and is refusing to take, or even discuss, corrective measures, its response is simple: Ronald Reagan negotiated the START Treaty while Russia was constructing the Krasnoyarsk radar in violation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

But the effort to seek more nuclear cuts and to spin Russian non-compliance by saying "We're just doing what Reagan did" doesn't hold up under scrutiny. The situations, foreign-policy approaches, and negotiating standards of the Reagan and Obama administrations are dramatically different.

President Reagan operated on the principle that the U.S. must negotiate from a position of strength. He recognized the need to block Soviet aggression wherever it occurred and contested Soviet advances by supporting opposition movements in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia, and elsewhere with arms and ammunition that took a tremendous toll on the Soviet Union and played no small role in its ultimate collapse. He undertook perhaps the largest offensive nuclear-modernization program in U.S. history to ensure a strong deterrent and established the Strategic Defense Initiative to pursue new technologies to protect the American homeland from a Soviet attack. He insisted that NATO continue with the deployments of Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles to counter the already deployed Soviet SS-20 missiles that threatened to de-couple the United States from the deterrence of threats to Europe.

In the arms-control arena, Reagan was equally tough. When Moscow threatened to pull out of the negotiations if the U.S. went through with INF deployments, he called the Russian bluff. Reagan deployed, and the Soviets walked out of the INF, START, and even Mutual

and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) negotiations in an effort to divide the alliance and promote partisan fissures in Western democracies, including the United States. But Reagan stood firm and NATO stood firm, owing to adroit alliance management and confidence that Reagan would not flinch.

In the START negotiations, Reagan insisted on real reductions in Soviet forces and effective verification measures to ensure compliance. “Trust but verify” was the motto — and perhaps also a reflection of his view of General Secretary Gorbachev as a negotiating partner. In Gorbachev, Reagan recognized a man who understood that, to survive, the Soviet Union had to undergo fundamental changes and could no longer afford to maintain its vast nuclear forces.

As for the Krasnoyarsk radar, Reagan insisted it be dismantled. And, before START was signed, Moscow had acknowledged the radar to be a violation of the ABM Treaty and had begun its dismantlement.

The contrast with President Obama in each of these areas couldn’t be starker. In the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine, the U.S. has withheld lethal defensive military assistance, fearing that such aid might be seen as “provocative” by Moscow. While Russia has built up its nuclear forces and increased the role of nuclear weapons in its defense doctrine, the U.S. nuclear deterrent has atrophied, hindered by funding delays and policy constraints such as the “no new nuclear capabilities” standard imposed on the Defense and Energy departments.

On missile defense, Russia has substantially increased spending on strategic defenses, while U.S. spending has declined precipitously. Every program designed to protect the American homeland from ballistic-missile attack has been canceled or reduced. The original European third site for ground-based interceptors was canceled, as was the development of the SM3 IIB missile that was to provide a similar capability under the phased adaptive approach. In both cases, the decision was intended as an inducement for Moscow to join in the Prague agenda. In both cases, it failed.

In arms-control talks, the Obama administration seems almost content to negotiate from a position of weakness. Whether with Russia or with Iran, the pattern is the same — U.S.

concessions are followed by more concessions without the other side giving up anything of lasting significance.

In this manner, Russia has by some criteria achieved nuclear superiority over the United States and Iran has become a nuclear-weapons threshold state by almost any definition. Both of these outcomes will have profound long-term strategic effects that will undermine U.S. security interests and those of our allies.

Ironically, in the hope of promoting nuclear disarmament, President Obama has taken other actions that undercut the prospects for future arms-control treaties for years to come. Many of the key monitoring provisions that were won in the START and INF negotiations under Reagan were given up in New START. And as for insisting on scrupulous compliance, the Obama administration took years to declare the INF violation, and it has not connected the call for further cuts with the need for Moscow to reverse that violation. If effective verification is abandoned and if there are no consequences for violating existing agreements, why would the Senate consent to ratify new treaties?

President Reagan understood this; President Obama apparently does not.

— Robert Joseph is a senior scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy; he was under secretary of state for arms control and international security, 2005–2007. Eric Edelman is a distinguished fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments; he was under secretary of defense for policy, 2005–2009.

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