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New START: From Russia with Glee

Official numbers confirm what Obama officials denied: New START requires reductions only by the U.S.

The results of the [data](#) exchange on U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear weapons required under the New START treaty were released by the State Department on June 1. They demonstrate conclusively the truth of what treaty skeptics had said for months: The treaty brought the United States nothing in terms of lowered Russian force numbers.

In promoting the treaty to the Senate and the American people, the Obama administration claimed that New START provided the great benefit of reducing U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear warheads by 30 percent — from 2,200 warheads each to 1,550 warheads each. It also placed a ceiling on the number of deployed American and Russian strategic launchers (missiles and bombers) at 700 each. Both sides are required under the treaty to be at or below these ceilings by 2018. The catch here, and the undoubted source of considerable amusement in Moscow, is the now-indisputable fact that only the United States must make actual reductions under New START.

As of February 5, the day the treaty came into force, Russia already was below the ceilings mandated by the treaty both for deployed strategic nuclear launchers and for warheads. On the first day of the treaty, the number of Russian launchers stood at 521, well below New START's ceiling of 700, and the number of accountable warheads stood at 1,537, below the new ceiling of 1,550. Rather than reducing its forces, Moscow would have to build them up to reach the new limits. In fact, according to the Russian defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, Russia will strive until the year 2028 to build up to New START's limit on strategic launchers. In contrast, the United States must make reductions, including a 25 percent cut in deployed strategic launchers.

Senior members of the Obama administration denied this inconvenient truth for many months leading up to the Senate's ratification of New START in December 2010. To acknowledge that Russian force levels already were below New START ceilings would have been to admit that the U.S. was the only side required to make reductions and would have raised questions about the treaty's value. It would have contradicted the popular claim that New START would require 30 percent reductions from both parties.

In fact, not much work was needed to conclude that the Russians would be giving up nothing. Numerous Russian officials and commentators said openly before the treaty was ratified that Russia already was below New START's ceilings and would go lower still as it continued to withdraw its aged Cold War strategic nuclear systems. Russia has for some time been in the process of swapping out its old systems for newer models, and its replacement rate cannot keep up with the deactivation of its outdated systems — so Russia's force numbers would have dropped with or without New START. Thus, Russian officials happily noted that only the U.S. would have to make reductions.

Secretary of State Clinton denied this now-obvious fact before the Senate Armed Services Committee and charged that American treaty skeptics making such observations “just don’t believe in arms-control treaties at all and from my perspective are very unfortunately slanting a lot of what they say.” Similarly, when the since-retired senator Kit Bond (R., Mo.), then vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, observed that only the United States would have to make force reductions under New START, the State Department contradicted him publicly, stating, “The Treaty does not force the United States to reduce unilaterally.”

Negotiations are all about compromise — you have to give something to get something, right? Apparently not when it came to the reductions required by New START. As Russian defense expert Vladimir Dvorkin acknowledges openly, “Russia does not need to reduce anything. Only the U.S.A. will have to reduce its arsenals.” Earlier he and a senior Russian official, Alexei Arbatov observed, “The United States did not seek to eliminate, reduce, or limit any of the other side’s weapons or programs in particular (such as, for example, Soviet or Russian heavy ICBMs or mobile missiles, which were the focus of talks in previous times).” No, indeed. There is a lesson here that should not be lost when expansive claims are next made about the administration’s arms-control achievements and skeptics are chastised. As Ronald Reagan said, “Trust but verify.”

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