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The New START Treaty and Russia's nuclear surge

Putin's strategic force grows while Obama's shrinks

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Russia is surging its nuclear capabilities. This may be surprising because the Obama administration's 2010 New START Treaty was supposed to have put a brake on such old Cold War bad behavior.

The U.S. State Department claimed that the treaty would require Russia to cut its strategic nuclear forces by about one-third. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismissed counterclaims by treaty critics who feared that it would not require Russia to make cuts, stating that such claims were a "perfect example" of how "analysts who just don't believe in arms control treaties at all from my perspective are, very unfortunately, slanting a lot of what they say." Yet, as former Vice Chairman of the Russian Duma Defense Committee Aleksey Arbatov later observed with obvious glee, "[New START] is essentially a treaty on limiting the American strategic forces."

When the treaty entered into force, Russia already was below New START's ceilings on deployed warheads and deployed delivery systems, and thus, would have to make no cuts in those systems. Indeed, since the new START Treaty came into effect, Russia has proceeded to build up its nuclear forces, not reduce them.

By mid-2015, in all three categories of nuclear capability limited by New START — deployed warheads, deployed delivery vehicles, and the combined number of deployed and nondeployed delivery vehicles, Russia had increased nuclear numbers to levels above those that existed when the treaty entered into force. In contrast, the United States has reduced its deployed nuclear forces in every category. As a result, the number of Russian deployed strategic nuclear warheads has surpassed American by 110 weapons. Amazingly, State Department annual reports on New START have failed to remark that Russian strategic nuclear forces are increasing under the treaty, not decreasing.

A disparity in deployed U.S. and Russian warhead numbers also is likely to come from Russia's exploitation of treaty loopholes. These are the result of how the treaty defines weapons that are accountable, and thus, limited under the treaty. Bombers are deemed to carry a single nuclear weapon when, in fact, they typically can carry many more. As a result, Russia's Sputnik News says Russia will have 2,100 actual deployed strategic nuclear warheads rather than the treaty's 1,550 ceiling. The Federation of American Scientists estimates that the actual number is approximately 2,500. Russia has announced it will produce at least 50 more Tu-160 nuclear bombers. Each reportedly can carry 12 nuclear cruise missiles, potentially creating another 550 unaccounted Russian nuclear warheads and bringing the total Russian number of deployed

warheads to about 3,000, almost twice the New START ceiling. In addition, Russia has announced its plans to modernize 98 percent of its ICBM force by 2021 and deploy eight new Borey-class submarines carrying new Bulava-30 submarine-launched ballistic missiles by 2020.

In contrast, the number of deployed U.S. warheads and delivery systems is apparently about to drop further. In late September, the Air Force announced 30 of the U.S. nuclear-capable B-52s had been denuclearized.

Russia may not intend to ever make any numerical reductions under New START. In February 2014, the director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Department of Security and Disarmament Issues, Mikhail Ulyanov, stated that U.S. missile defense deployment would create "a situation where Russia will be forced to exercise [its] right of withdrawal from the [New START] treaty." A year later, he said that Russia might withdraw because of U.S.-imposed Ukraine sanctions. If so, the only impact of New START will have been the reduction of U.S. nuclear forces.

Perhaps even more dangerous are Russian threats to use nuclear weapons first to support its military attacks on neighboring countries such as Georgia and Ukraine. President Vladimir Putin has warned that Russia was ready to alert its nuclear forces during its takeover of Crimea in 2014; other Russian officials have said openly that Russia was similarly ready to alert its nuclear forces during its military attack against Georgia in 2008. The use of nuclear forces in such an aggressive fashion is considered unthinkable in the West and in 2015, Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work said Russia "is literally playing with fire."

The accepted wisdom in Washington for more than two decades has been that the United States and Russia will cooperate in a benign new world order in the post-Cold War era. Western thinking about defense clearly has been geared to this optimistic presumption. Yet, Russia under Mr. Putin now pursues military aggression in Europe, increases its nuclear arsenal, makes nuclear first-use threats to U.S. allies, disdains new nuclear arms control agreements and violates previous agreements.

As the late Yogi Berra's said: "The future ain't what it used to be." A new, realistic understanding of the post-Cold War era must begin to underlie U.S. defense planning. Continued U.S. unilateral nuclear force reductions are likely to be viewed by Mr. Putin only as a sign of weakness and encourage him to even greater provocations.

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