

NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT: US AND RUSSIA RESUME NEGOTIATIONS

Nuclear disarmament is back on the international agenda. On 24 April 2009, US and Russian delegations began negotiations in Rome with the aim of further reducing their strategic nuclear arsenals. As a first step, the START I Treaty, which will expire on 5 December 2009, should be replaced with a new agreement. Due to the narrow timeframe, this new arrangement can be expected to be rather limited. However, if more substantial measures are to follow, a whole range of stumbling blocks will have to be removed. The nuclear weapons-free world envisaged by US President Obama is bound to remain a vision.



President Obama und President Medvedev announce nuclear disarmament negotiations, 1 April 2009

Verifiable nuclear disarmament and arms control were assigned low priority during the presidency of George W. Bush. The new US president, Barack Obama, has restored these issues to the political agenda. Four key factors have contributed to the current situation where Washington and Moscow are returning to the issue of nuclear disarmament. First of all, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) on limiting strategic nuclear weapons, which took effect in December 1994, expires on 5 December 2009. While the US and Russia also implemented the Moscow Treaty in June 2003, according to which the two sides undertake to reduce their respective deployed nuclear warheads by about two thirds to between 1,700 and 2,200 by the end of 2012, this agreement – unlike START I – does not include any stipulations as to

delivery systems or any particular verification measures. Without START I, therefore, all verifiable nuclear arms control would come to a halt.

Secondly, both Washington and Moscow are under pressure to provide evidence of their own disarmament efforts with a view to the upcoming review conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in April 2010. Of the more than 25,000 nuclear warheads remaining on the planet, more than 90 per cent are in the hands of the US and Russia. If the two sides want to avoid another failure of the meeting of state parties to the NPT as in 2005, as well as a further weakening of the NPT, they will have to demonstrate that they are meeting their disarmament obligations under Article 6 of the treaty.

Otherwise, it will become increasingly difficult for them to get non-nuclear countries to commit to the NPT and to put an end to nuclear proliferation.

Third, there is now an international debate – triggered by the US – on complete nuclear disarmament. In his Prague speech of 5 April 2009, which referred to the long-term goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, President Obama positioned himself at the vanguard of this debate. Surprisingly, Medvedev also subscribed to this vision in his first meeting with Obama.

Fourth, and finally, the matter of nuclear disarmament and arms control is a suitable area for improving bilateral US-Russian relations, since this issue bears comparatively little potential for conflict. Obama is hoping for cooperation with Moscow in a number of international issues of mutual interest, such as preventing Iran from gaining nuclear arms.

The US and Russia do, however, also have diverging interests when it comes to nuclear policy. For Washington, nuclear weapons remain important instruments of security policy. However, their importance has strongly declined since the end of the Cold War. At the time, the US arsenal consisted of a total of about 22,000 nuclear weapons; today, that number stands at about 2,200 (However, the number of attributed warheads is significantly higher using START counting

rules). No new nuclear warhead designs have been developed since the early 1990s. Instead, the focus has been on improving conventional operational capabilities. This trend towards denuclearization in US security policy will continue under President Obama. Moreover, he feels committed to restoring the US's moral high ground. In a world with more and more conflicts, the US must engage to re-construct international order through cooperation. Nuclear arms control and disarmament is an important element in that regard.

For Russia, on the other hand, nuclear arms are important attributes of its self-ascribed role as a superpower. The conventional capabilities of the Russian armed forces are far below those of the US and NATO. The country's relations with China, which is an aspiring power also in terms of its nuclear force, are not devoid of friction. Therefore, nuclear deterrence is of great importance for the Russian leadership. Accordingly, the upgrading of the Russian nuclear force is being advanced purposefully. Medvedev has announced that it will be fundamentally modernized by 2020. As long as new disarmament treaties do not obstruct these intentions, they are welcomed by Moscow insofar as they can be leveraged for a visible demonstration of Russia's parity with the US.

A new treaty in 2009?

Obama and Medvedev have decided not to extend the START I Treaty for another five years – which would be feasible under one of the treaty's clauses – but to replace it by a new agreement altogether. Neither Washington nor Moscow are interested in continuing the extremely complex and cost-intensive verification measures established under START I. However, rapid action is required to avoid a situation where there is no verifiable arms control at all. In order for the new treaty to be ratified by the US Congress and the Russian Duma before START I expires, it would have to be submitted to both parliaments by August 2009.

It already seems clear today that the successor agreement to START I will only include limited disarmament measures. Due to time pressure, the negotiating delegations will have to focus on a few core issues. Non-strategic nuclear weapons will remain excluded; missile defense will likely only play a marginal role at most. The simplification of verification measures will therefore be at the center of attention.

Presumably, moreover, both parties will agree new upper limits of around 1,500 nuclear warheads on about 700 strategic delivery systems of each side. This figure is only marginally less than the one agreed by both sides in the Moscow Treaty. Such a ceiling would permit the US to avoid far-reaching decisions on issues such as the decommissioning of its strategic triad consisting of land-based missiles, ballistic-missile submarines, and long-range bombers, which would certainly be necessary in the case of lower limits. In fact, the Obama administration is unable to make such decisions before it has completed the Nuclear Posture Review requested by the US Congress and expected to be submitted by the end of 2009. Russia, for its part, could easily reconcile a cap of 1,500 strategic warheads with its current modernization plans, which envisage a total of 1,400 to 1,600 warheads, mainly on new delivery systems.

Controversial issues

The two sides have varying priorities when it comes to disarmament. The main goal of the US is to reduce the number of nuclear warheads, but it already shows flexibility to also include delivery systems; Russia aims to concentrate on delivery systems. In other words: Washington is relying more upon the Moscow Treaty, which reduced nuclear warheads, while Moscow is arguing on the basis of START I, which concentrated on delivery systems and covered nuclear warheads through specific counting rules for the number of warheads on certain delivery systems. There are two underlying controversial issues here: The first is the inclusion of non-deployed nuclear warheads that can be used as part of strategic systems; the other is the inclusion of strategic delivery systems carrying conventional warheads.

The US is currently planning to retain around 1,500 nuclear warheads in reserve. Due to efforts by the Bush administration, these were not included in the Moscow Treaty. As long as the US nuclear infrastructure remains relatively weak – so goes the argument that in the past has been supported not only by Republican, but also by Democratic legislators – the US needs to store nuclear warheads in order to preserve its strategic flexibility. Russia does not maintain any reserves for its Strategic Rocket Forces. Accordingly, Russia demands that arms control measures should cover all strategic nuclear weap-

ons. This is mainly due to Russia's concern that Washington might otherwise rapidly equip its delivery systems with an increased number of warheads, in a move that Russia would be unable to counter with comparable measures.

Much the same is true for matters involving strategic delivery systems carrying conventional payloads. Such systems are part of the US, but not the Russian arsenal. The US B-1 long-range bomber is no longer equipped with nuclear arms, but only carries conventional weapons. In addition, four Trident submarines have been modified to carry conventionally-armed cruise missiles. Furthermore, for the future, Washington retains the option of equipping long-range ballistic missiles stationed on Trident submarines with conventional payloads. For the time being, Congress has stopped such "Prompt Global Strike" projects, which are aimed at targeting terrorists better over long distances. The Pentagon, with the support of the State Department, is requested to complete a report by September 2009 that should discuss the advantages and risks of equipping strategic delivery systems with conventional warheads. Russian experts regard strategic conventional delivery systems as a matter of serious concern, since the US could re-equip these platforms with nuclear warheads, or conversely, use them to attack strategic targets in Russia with conventional armaments. Ultimately, both sides will have to agree on a compromise including elements of both START I and the Moscow Treaty, and therefore covering both warheads and delivery systems.

Important documents

- ▮ [START I Treaty](#)
- ▮ [Moscow Treaty](#)
- ▮ [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#)
- ▮ [Parameters set by Obama and Medvedev for new disarmament talks on 1 April 2009](#)
- ▮ [George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, Sam Nunn, "Toward a Nuclear-Free World", 15 January 2008](#)
- ▮ [Prague Speech by President Obama, 5 April 2009](#)

Further disarmament efforts

The reduction of nuclear arms to be expected from a follow-up agreement to the START Treaty will most likely be largely cosmetic in nature. As envisaged by Obama and Medvedev, such an agreement should only constitute an interme-

mediate step towards more substantial nuclear disarmament measures. In order to achieve more drastic disarmament efforts, however, a series of complex nuclear issues would have to be taken into account, which is why such negotiations can be expected to be extremely difficult.

One important area will be the matter of *missile defense*. Russia has vociferously protested the planned deployment of US anti-ballistic missiles in Poland and of a radar system in the Czech Republic (cf. [CSS Analysis No. 12](#)), which are part of the US global missile defense shield. It is true that Obama is less enthusiastic than George W. Bush in pursuing the missile defense project, and seems to be amenable to compromise. Furthermore, the economic and financial crisis is also affecting the US defense budget, causing delays in the development of a system whose use-

fulness remains far from proven. Nevertheless, Washington will probably not give up on the entire missile defense project altogether. One should keep in mind that the whole system encompasses not only the planned defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic, but also interceptors as well as radar stations that are to some extent already deployed in Alaska and California. The dangers emanating from Iran and North Korea, which the missile defense system is supposedly intended to counter, have not been averted. Domestically, Obama must be considerate of the Republican senators, whose support will be required for the ratification of a new disarmament treaty. If no cooperative Russian-US effort should come about in this area and Moscow should continue its (limited) defense projects, ballistic missile defense systems will further constrain the reduction of both sides' respective strategic offensive systems as long as these defenses remain national as opposed to those that are based on international cooperation.

A further aspect is the matter of *extended deterrence*. The US will continue to require sufficient nuclear weapons to demonstrate credible extended nuclear deterrence within the framework of NATO, but also towards its allies in Asia. Of particular interest in this context from a European perspective are non-strategic nuclear arms. So far, Moscow has demonstrated little interest in including

these in arms control initiatives. With its more than 3,000 combat-ready systems in this category, Russia currently enjoys a numerical advantage compared to the 1100 US-systems, including 150-240 US nuclear weapons stationed in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Turkey. Hence, the US as well as its European allies have a fundamental interest in including weapons of this category in arms control measures. However, Moscow regards its numerical superiority in non-strategic nuclear arms as compensation for its inferiority in terms of conventional forces.

A withdrawal of all US nuclear weapons from Europe as a result of new disarmament treaties would indeed benefit Russia. On the other hand, it would create problems for NATO, since the new alliance members, at any rate, still value

the US nuclear presence in Europe as a necessary element of deterrence towards Russia. Also, those NATO countries where US nuclear weapons are stationed appreciate the related information advantage as to US nuclear planning. Finally, one of the reasons for stationing US nuclear arms in Europe has always been to prevent nuclear proliferation within the alliance. A withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Turkey, coinciding with the development of an Iranian nuclear bomb, would certainly further promote the surreptitious debate already underway on the Bosphorus about developing an independent nuclear capability.

One issue of importance to both Washington and Moscow is the matter of *distancing other nuclear powers*. They do not want their disarmament measures to serve as incentives for other nuclear states, especially China, to engage in a nuclear arms race. Therefore, one point to be discussed at the negotiations following a START successor agreement will be at which level of disarmament the other nuclear states are to be included in the talks. Another important aspect is the matter of *nuclear infrastructure*. Countries that have highly capable infrastructures can afford deeper cuts in their nuclear arsenals. They can respond rapidly and flexibly even to unforeseen changes in the strategic environment. However, in the US, the capabilities of the respective laboratories and other installations in this field are not re-

garded as being very high, since the stagnation in nuclear arms development in recent years has caused the finest minds to turn elsewhere.

In case of further-reaching disarmament moves, targeting would also need to be adapted. The current US operational plans targeting Russia's and China's as well as other countries' bases for nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons as well as their respective political and military command and control centers and arms industries could no longer be sustained. Finally, difficult questions arise in the matter of the *composition of the strategic forces*. Should the US, for example, be limited to 1,000 warheads, it likely would have to sacrifice completely one element of its strategic triad.

With a view to the enormous challenges for nuclear disarmament beyond a START successor agreement, it is reasonable to assume that a nuclear-free world will remain a vision. The realization of that vision would require the involvement of all official and unofficial nuclear powers in the disarmament process; the construction of an extremely intrusive verification regime with the participation of all countries in order to discover clandestine rearmament efforts; and effective sanctions against any country caught pursuing nuclear programs in secret. Obama's speech in Prague strengthens the moral authority of US endeavors towards non-proliferation, but will hardly influence the substance of the imminent concrete disarmament negotiations.

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