

Analysis

The “Post-START” Treaty: Goals and Implications

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Abstract

With the new administration of Barack Obama coming to power, Russia managed to re-engage the U.S. in arms control negotiations. The “post-START” treaty is expected to bring Moscow status as a global great power, strategic stability and parity with the U.S., as well as security and economic gains. Despite existing differences between the two sides, the new treaty offers a win-win situation, which makes agreement probable. Nevertheless, the “post-START” treaty is unlikely to cause spill-over effects that change the overall dynamics of Russian-American relations. Similarly, it cannot be taken for granted that the treaty paves the way for further disarmament. Rather, it may stand out as the main – and only – achievement of the “reset” policy.

Moscow Waits a Long Time to Re-engage the U.S. in Arms Control

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s only tangible claim to great power status was its nuclear parity with the U.S. Despite all its weaknesses, the Russian Federation remained the only state capable of inflicting ruinous damage on the United States. Moscow perceived its nuclear weapons as a cornerstone of its security policy and the ultimate guarantee of its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the turbulent 1990s. During the presidencies of George Bush senior and Bill Clinton, Washington demonstrated a deep understanding of Russian over-sensitivity in the sphere of strategic stability, conducting endless negotiations with regard to strategic arms reductions (amendments to START II and preparations for START III). The U.S. found it useful to reduce the Russian nuclear arsenal and gain a considerable degree of control over it. Moscow, for its part, attempted to bargain using the issue of START II ratification.

After George W. Bush took office, he overturned the status quo inherited from the Cold War. His opposition to arms control stood out as one of the key features of the US’s growing unilateralism. Two major blows to Russian–U.S. nuclear parity (and indirectly strategic stability) came from the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty (announced in December 2001, effective in June 2002) and, paradoxically, the SORT treaty (referred to also as the Moscow treaty). The parameters of SORT made it merely symbolic – the level of reduction remained imprecise (between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads), the structure of the nuclear triad was not defined, and the treaty lacked verification measures. In practice, the U.S. began unilateral arms control, adjusting the posture of its nuclear forces to the needs of global primacy, promoting, for example, the concept of a global strike capability. Plans to deploy a missile defence

shield followed, with elements positioned in Poland and the Czech Republic, provoking angry reactions from the Russian elite. American analysts went so far as to proclaim the dawn of American nuclear primacy, arguing that the poor conditions of the aging Russian nuclear arsenal combined with an effective missile defence system would render Russia’s second strike capability useless. However exaggerated, such opinions indicated the growing asymmetry in Russian–American strategic relations.

Since then, Russia has strived to reverse both tendencies – to gain influence over American missile defence plans and strategic forces. The need to return to strategic arms control was one of the key issues of then-President Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich security conference. These efforts to re-engage the U.S. in arms control talks succeeded when Barack Obama won the presidency. The arms control lobby in the American policy-making community gained the upper hand. Resuming arms reductions talks with Russia fits perfectly with Obama’s conception of a nuclear-free world order. Negotiations on the treaty replacing START I, which expires in December 2009, dominated the “reset” agenda. Several rounds of talks followed, starting in May 2009, and during the July summit in Moscow, both presidents agreed upon the basic parameters of the new “post-START” treaty.

The Goals Behind the “Post-START” Negotiations: Status, Security and Economic Gains

The “post-START” treaty goes beyond the zero-sum logic that has dominated Russian–American relations for the last several years. The new agreement may create a win-win situation. Nevertheless, it is still Russia that has more to gain from the new treaty, if it manages to push through its proposals. At stake from Moscow’s

point of view are status, strategic stability and nuclear parity with the U.S., as well as security and economic gains.

Securing great power status remains one of the key driving forces behind Russian foreign policy. Concluding a treaty that confirms Moscow's nuclear parity with the U.S. and strengthens strategic stability would be a powerful symbol of Russia's return as a global great power, second only to the U.S. and in particular spheres, to no one. At the same time, it would confirm the wisdom of Russia's policy resisting President Bush's unilateralism.

Strategic stability vis-à-vis the U.S. is another element of Russia's self-image and the cornerstone of its security policy in the global dimension. Although Moscow cannot afford to maintain numerical parity with the U.S. (and the new treaty envisions differentials in the levels of warheads and carriers), it is still obsessed with qualitative equilibrium. Pressing for the U.S. to re-engage in arms control, maintain strategic stability and limit missile defence plans, Russia has raised the issue of its national security, which has remained ambiguous. It has always been doubtful whether a modest American mid-phase missile defence system would be able to upset strategic stability between Russia and the U.S., given the former's vast nuclear arsenal. However, Moscow has been wary of the possibilities of expanding the system, which, in turn, would give the U.S. a kind of primacy (although it is questionable whether even an expanded system could deprive Moscow of its second-strike capability).

Expected economic gains are another motive behind Russia's desire to secure the "post-START" treaty. The objective is to reduce the costs of maintaining and modernizing the Russian nuclear arsenal. Moscow cannot afford to replace all its warheads and missiles with new models, and it faces difficulties in developing such weapons.

Although it gives more benefits to Russia, the U.S. is also interested in concluding the new treaty for several reasons. An agreement that reduces the Russian arsenal combined with verification measures will give the U.S. a degree of influence over the Russian nuclear arsenal and current information. Washington also expects concessions in other spheres.

American support for the treaty goes beyond immediate advantages. The new administration perceives it as the first step in realizing the *idée fixe* of President Obama – establishing a non-nuclear world. The strength of the arms control lobby and the partial failure of the missile defense idea are also responsible for U.S. engage-

ment in the "post-START" negotiations. Finally, the administration is seeking desperately for a clear-cut success in its foreign policy.

Negotiations – Perspectives for Narrowing the Differences

All of the factors presented above have not made the negotiating process easier. Both sides face a time limit (START expires on 5 December), but important differences still persist. It is obvious that Russia and the U.S. will not manage to ratify a new treaty by 5 December, but signing a treaty would be enough (and the two sides might find a way to have it enter into force before it is ratified).

The key differences separating Russia and the U.S. can be summed up as follows: rules for counting warheads and carriers; linking offensive and defensive weapons; conventional use of strategic weapons and "downloading" possibilities. Russia would prefer to maintain the basic structure of START, which implies an irreversible reduction in the number of nuclear warheads to a certain ceiling (the Russian Federation opposes storing warheads in depots). Russia aims to keep in place the quantitative limits on delivery vehicles (strategic bombers, intercontinental missiles, submarines carrying ballistic missiles). The United States prefers to impose limits only on those warheads which are actually installed on delivery vehicles, while being able to keep the remaining warheads in storage. This would allow it to equip some delivery vehicles with conventional weapons, while at the same time retaining the ability to flexibly expand the nuclear arsenal, a possibility that causes Russia serious concern.

Agreement on the basic parameters of the "post-START" treaty, signed during July's presidential summit, has not done much to solve these basic problems. The parties agreed to reduce the number of warheads to 1,500–1,675 over a period of seven years. The agreement also provides for a reduction in the number of weapon delivery vehicles to 500–1,100. The agreement states that the new treaty should include provisions concerning the relationship between the offensive and defensive strategic potentials, without specifying what form such provisions should take.

The (Limited?) Impact of the "Post-START" Treaty on Russian-American Relations

Although the differences have not been resolved yet, the U.S. seems to have significantly facilitated negotiations by dropping plans to deploy a missile defense system in Central Europe. This policy shift opens the way for

both sides to adopt a common position on the issue of linking offensive and defensive potentials. Nevertheless, it still has not determined Russia's stance – whether it pushes for new concessions or steps back and agrees to some of America's proposals. Nevertheless, even given the persisting differences, the probability of concluding the “post-START” treaty remains high. But two further questions remain open: ratification by the U.S. Senate and the overall impact of the expected agreement on Russian–American relations.

The opposition to the “post-START” treaty seems to be relatively stronger in the U.S. Particular constituencies oppose specific provisions, which are perceived as concessions going too far, even if they do not reject the treaty itself. President Obama will face a difficult task in convincing the Senate to ratify the treaty, especially if Moscow pursues its assertive policy. In Russia, most observers view the treaty as necessary, while the Kremlin maintains complete control over the Duma.

The implications of the “post-START” treaty for bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington are far more speculative. The arms control issue is the easiest to address among all the problems overshadowing the Russian–American relationship. The question of whether the new treaty will change the overall dynamics of post-Cold War Russian–American relations remains open. The U.S. seems to expect the “post-START” treaty to act as a catalyst and to spill-over into other spheres. Nevertheless, equally probable is that the treaty remains the only achievement of the “reset” policy proclaimed by the Obama administration. The relative convergence of both parties' interests observable in the arms control area does not exist in other fields. Most telling is the wide divergence in the two parties' approach toward the post-Soviet space.

Implications for Global Arms Control

The implications of the “post-START” treaty go beyond the Russian–American bilateral relationship. Judging

from the point of view of arms control and disarmament, the return of Russia and the U.S. to a legal framework is more important than the reductions themselves. The levels of warheads will probably remain above 1,500 (SORT treaty envisioned the level of warheads between 1,700 and 2,200), which means that there still is over-kill capacity on both sides.

Nevertheless, contrary to the expectations of the Obama administration and Obama himself, the new treaty may not open a new era of arms control and disarmament, and may not move the global process of arms control forward. On the margins of post-START negotiations, Russian representatives including President Dmitry Medvedev, outlined their evolving approach to arms control. Moscow wants to broaden the scope of existing strategic talks, proposing to adjust the nuclear arsenals of lesser powers (China, France and the UK) in line with Russian–American cuts in order to maintain the distance in case of further cuts (as in the Washington 1922 treaty on sea power). Another proposal is the multilateralization of the INF Treaty. Such a stance suggests that Russia aims to freeze the current situation in the sphere of strategic weapons rather than pursue a “nuclear zero” option.

Conclusions

The main paradox is that whereas it is Russia that has more to gain from the “post-START” treaty, it is the U.S. that is behaving as if it needs the treaty more urgently. The Obama administration needs a spectacular success that it can deliver to the American public as proof that its post-Bush foreign policy is on the right track. The Kremlin may try to take advantage of such a situation by toughening its negotiating stance. On the other hand, Russia must realize that a treaty perceived as weakening American national security will undoubtedly fail in the U.S. Senate, which obviously is not in Russia's interest.

About the Author

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Further reading

www.armscontrol.org – the web-page and on-line edition of Arms Control Today

www.carnegie.ru – the web page of the Carnegie Foundation in Moscow, with the best expertise on Russia's nuclear policy