

Ending Bilateral U.S.-Russian Strategic Arms Control

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For more than 40 years, negotiators from Moscow and Washington have engaged in countless meetings about strategic arms control. Several bilateral agreements resulted from these talks during the Cold War, and several more have been achieved in the post-Cold War era, most recently in April 2010. Even though the net value of all of these agreements is open to doubt, there was at least some rationale for holding strategic arms control negotiations during the Cold War. That rationale no longer makes sense in the post-Cold War era, yet strategic arms control has remained a dominant part of U.S.-Russian relations. The continuation of bilateral strategic arms control has fostered the impression that the intense hostility of the Cold War era, pitting the Soviet Union against the United States, still characterizes U.S.-Russian relations. Far from helping bilateral ties, U.S.-Russian strategic arms control negotiations have inadvertently perpetuated a degree of tension and mistrust between the two countries over the past twenty years.

This does not mean that all U.S.-Russian discussions pertaining to nuclear weapons should end. Bilateral and multilateral efforts to safeguard nuclear weapons materials and components through the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program and related ventures have been extremely important and productive, and should certainly be continued. U.S.-Russian negotiations aimed at forestalling nuclear proliferation to Iran and other rogue states have also been important, albeit much less fruitful. Quite apart from the intrinsic value of CTR, U.S.-Russian-led actions to prevent sensitive materials and components from falling into unauthorized hands have been conducive to an amicable U.S.-Russian relationship, rather than being seen as talks between two adversaries. By contrast, strategic arms control originated as, and remains identified with, discussions between enemies. The continued central role of strategic arms control in U.S.-Russian relations has thereby helped to forestall a genuine U.S. “strategic partnership” with Russia.

Maintenance of Enemy Images

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were the only countries that held strategic arms control talks. The negotiations began at the end of the 1960s, by which time three other countries – Great Britain, France, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) – had openly acquired nuclear weapons. Neither then nor later did the United States contemplate holding strategic arms control talks with Britain or France. Both of those European countries were U.S. allies, not adversaries (even during the height of France’s Gaullist obstreperousness), and therefore the U.S. government did not worry about how many strategic nuclear weapons they had. Indeed, the United States provided extensive assistance over the years to Britain as it built and modernized its strategic nuclear forces, and U.S. officials secretly gave assistance to France in the 1970s in developing nuclear warheads suitable for modern strategic missiles. Strategic arms control talks came to be seen as something that took place solely between enemies, the opposing superpowers. China was an enemy of the United States until the early 1970s, but the PRC’s nuclear arsenal was minuscule compared to the Soviet Union’s. Hence, U.S. policymakers focused solely on negotiating treaties with the USSR.

The fact that strategic arms control talks were held only between the United States and the Soviet Union and no other countries indicates that the de facto criteria for holding such talks during the Cold War were twofold. First, the negotiating countries perceived each other as enemies and were actively prepared to engage in a nuclear war if necessary. Second, the magnitude of their nuclear arsenals was such that they dwarfed the arsenals of all other nuclear powers combined. Until the end of the 1980s, the United States and the Soviet Union were indeed enemies and saw each other as such, and each of them developed elaborate operational plans and immense strategic forces to fight a nuclear war against the other. The many thousands of strategic nuclear warheads and bombs deployed by the United States and the Soviet Union on intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and long-range heavy bombers vastly outnumbered the French, British, and Chinese arsenals combined.

In the post-Cold War era, U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces are still much larger than those of other countries (although the disparity with China has diminished considerably as a result of sharp cuts in the U.S. and ex-Soviet arsenals and the growth of PRC strategic forces), but the other prerequisite for holding strategic arms control talks – namely, that the two countries regard each other as enemies – was supposed to have ended once the Soviet Union disappeared. The continuation of strategic arms negotiations between Moscow and Washington over the past two decades has given the impression, if only inadvertently, that the United States and Russia still see each other as enemies. Over time, that perception has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, congealing a bilateral relationship that falls far short of the cooperative, friendly ties that were once envisaged. The talks themselves have helped to preserve mutual “enemy images.” Although the extreme hostility of the Cold War era has not returned, relations between the United States and Russia nowadays are still basically adversarial and seem likely to remain so.

Rationales and Purported Benefits

During the Cold War, the strategic arms control process was rationalized and spurred along by five main factors.

First, policymakers argued that strategic arms control was crucial in allowing the United States and the Soviet Union to fulfill their obligations under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which requires all parties to “pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.” According to this line of reasoning, strategic arms control treaties would demonstrate the U.S. government’s intention to comply with Article VI and would thereby give the United States greater leverage to achieve its non-proliferation objectives.

Second, advocates maintained that nuclear arms control treaties helped to stabilize the superpower strategic relationship, reducing the risk of misperceptions or miscalculations that might have heightened the risk of war. The treaties, the argument went, also reduced U.S. expenditures on strategic forces.

Third, advocates of strategic arms control emphasized the value of monitoring and verification provisions that, they claimed, allowed for greater transparency and enabled the United States to have a better sense of the status of Soviet strategic forces at any given point. The phrase “national technical means of verification” (NTM) was used in treaties to refer to the broad range of reconnaissance satellites, electronic-intercept platforms, and other secretive equipment that was used, along with espionage, by each side to acquire information about the other’s strategic forces. Starting with the 1972 Interim Agreement on the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (SALT I), each side pledged not to prevent the other side’s NTM from acquiring sufficient data to determine whether the opposing side was abiding by specific limits and provisions in the treaty.

Fourth, U.S. policymakers found the strategic arms talks a useful way of coping with domestic political pressure that might emerge on the question of nuclear weapons. Although the public rarely paid attention to strategic nuclear policy, anti-nuclear movements did arise on a few occasions during the Cold War, notably with the nuclear freeze movement in the early to mid-1980s. The existence of the strategic nuclear arms control talks with the Soviet Union was a useful way of trying to deflect pressure from these movements.

Fifth, an “epistemic community” (transnational network of scholars, public intellectuals, and professionals with specialized expertise) that arose around the strategic arms negotiations developed a stake in the talks, viewing them as something that would induce journalists and policymakers to seek their advice.

These same five factors, with surprisingly few modifications, have moved the process along in the post-Cold War era. At the April 2010 signing ceremony for New START (the name given to the latest Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), President Barack Obama asserted that “the United States and Russia—the two nations that hold over 90 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons—” bear a special obligation to exercise “responsible global leadership” in “keeping our commitments under the Nuclear Non-

Proliferation Treaty, which must be the foundation for global non-proliferation.” The new arms treaty, Obama added, “will set the stage for further cuts,” thereby demonstrating “America’s commitment to the NPT as a cornerstone of our security strategy.” The U.S. State Department published a fact sheet emphasizing that “the New START Treaty will enhance U.S. national security by stabilizing the strategic balance between the United States and the Russian Federation at lower levels of nuclear forces.” The fact sheet also claimed that “the new START Treaty’s verification provisions provide visibility into Russia’s nuclear forces and thereby help to mitigate the risk of surprises, mistrust, and miscalculations that can result from excessive secrecy or decisions based on worst-case assumptions. The Treaty will give us a vital window into the Russian strategic arsenal.” All of these statements could just as easily have been uttered during the Cold War-era negotiations.

Critique of the Supposed Benefits

Whether the benefits of strategic arms control are really as significant as they were alleged to be during the Cold War – or as they are purported to be nowadays – is highly questionable.

The supposed link between strategic arms control and the NPT is mostly in the minds of U.S. and Soviet/Russian leaders. During the Cold War, many non-nuclear states disputed the notion that the slow progress and modest results of U.S.-Soviet strategic arms control talks could be construed as fulfilling Article VI. The sharp reductions in U.S. and former Soviet strategic forces in the post-Cold War era stemmed, for the most part, not from bilateral arms control agreements but from decisions made by each government for its own interests. Yet, even these reductions were seen as inadequate by many developing countries.

Indeed, the State Department’s own fact sheet stresses that “the New START Treaty allows the United States to . . . maintain a safe, secure, and effective arsenal to deter any adversary and protect [U.S.] allies.” If the United States is indeed going to maintain a large and diverse nuclear arsenal indefinitely – an eminently sensible policy – how is the treaty going to appease all the non-nuclear countries that are supposedly clamoring for the U.S. government to fulfill Article VI provisions on nuclear disarmament? If in fact the treaty does not really restrict the United States or keep it from fielding the weapons it wants, the rhetoric about upholding Article VI is empty.

Moreover, even if some non-nuclear states did believe that Washington and Moscow were sincerely trying to fulfill their Article VI obligations, this would hardly cause the most refractory states to eschew nuclear proliferation. No country that has decided to acquire nuclear weapons – either during the Cold War or after – has based this decision in even the slightest way on the status of superpower arms control talks. Countries like Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran sought to acquire nuclear weapons for security reasons, not because of any umbrage they may have felt at the lack of progress in strategic arms control. If anything, the maintenance of huge nuclear arsenals by Washington and Moscow helped to curb, rather than promote, nuclear proliferation. The superpowers were able to offer nuclear guarantees to their allies

(nearly all of which therefore saw no need to build their own nuclear weapons) and to deter any would-be nuclear states from even contemplating a bid to overtake the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia as the chief nuclear powers.

With regard to the supposed stabilization of the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship, the connection again is not at all clear. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has claimed that “the principal U.S. objective in bilateral strategic arms control is to increase stability in the U.S.-Russian nuclear relationship at significantly lower levels of nuclear weapons.” But why is arms control needed to achieve this objective? Why not simply have each side decide for itself how low it wants to go and then just reduce its weaponry to that level? Most of the reductions in strategic forces over the past twenty years have indeed resulted precisely from this type of independent decision-making, not from strategic arms accords. During the Cold War, domestic politics may have compelled the two sides to want to maintain rough equality in strategic forces, both substantively and in appearance.

In the post-Soviet era, however, the erstwhile drive for equality seems quaintly bizarre. Who really cares nowadays whether Russia has fewer or more of a particular type of weapon than the United States possesses? The “strategic relationship” between the two countries is not going to be “destabilized” if one side or the other deploys a new strategic missile.

Indeed, there is considerable evidence that New START could actually lead to higher levels of Russian strategic forces rather than lower levels. Before the treaty was negotiated, Russian military officials had been planning to cut their forces to levels significantly below the numerical limits that were eventually set out in the treaty. The obsolescence of a sizable fraction of Russia’s strategic forces may still induce Russian commanders to go down to the lower numbers that were originally planned, but the treaty itself creates a perverse incentive to stay at higher levels.

The notion that strategic arms control is crucial to gain more information and transparency about Russian strategic forces is also spurious. The main nuclear threats nowadays come from the deployment of nuclear weapons by Pakistan, North Korea, and eventually Iran. Strategic arms treaties with Russia shed no light at all on these threats. Instead of bilateral arms control, the United States and Russia should be pushing for a regime of nuclear weapons transparency that would pertain to all the nuclear weapons states. Verification provisions that apply only to U.S. and Russian weapons are no more than a feel-good substitute.

If the purported benefits of U.S.-Russian strategic arms control are almost entirely fictional, the conclusion one might draw is that the main factors driving the process over the past twenty years have been threefold: political inertia, the desire of policymakers in both Washington and Moscow to pretend to be achieving a close bilateral relationship, and the tenacity of what remains of the strategic arms control epistemic community. The members of that dwindling epistemic community, such as Alexei Arbatov, have been strenuously arguing for the past two decades that strategic arms control remains vitally important, but it is hard to avoid the impression that they

are concerned mainly about their sinecure.¹ If strategic arms control negotiations were to end, their own expertise would no longer be avidly sought or needed.

Conclusion

In a strictly military sense, bilateral U.S.-Russian strategic arms control has not been an onerous burden on U.S. nuclear forces. The Obama administration is correct in saying that “the New START Treaty allows the United States to determine [its] own force structure, giving [it] the flexibility to deploy and maintain [its] strategic nuclear forces in a way that best serves U.S. national security interests.” The retention of maximum flexibility for U.S. strategic forces is laudable, and indeed any other posture would be irresponsible.

The real reason for halting all U.S.-Russian strategic arms talks is political, not military. Bilateral strategic arms control talks were a phenomenon peculiar to the Cold War. The United States and Russia should have moved beyond that phenomenon at the very start in 1991-1992. The delay of twenty years has been unfortunate, helping to reinforce tensions and acrimony in U.S.-Russian relations. Undoing that damage will take a considerable while, and the U.S. and Russian governments should therefore move promptly to halt all bilateral strategic arms control talks, do away with the strategic arms control treaties that are still in effect, and propose a negotiating structure that will encompass all of the nuclear weapons states. Putting an end to this obsolete feature of the Cold War will be of great benefit to U.S. security as well as U.S.-Russian relations.

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¹ See, for example, Alexei Arbatov, “U.S.-Russian Strategic Arms Control,” Working Paper, International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, March 2009