

# The Death of Arms Control: Popular Myths About What Russia Can and Will Do

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To some, the title of this memo might seem an overstatement. After all, Russia is engaged in two sets of important arms control negotiations. The CFE-2 talks are nearing completion and the Russian side seems reasonably satisfied with the outcome. Russia and the United States have officially launched consultations on the START III treaty and modification of the ABM Treaty after yet another failure in the continuing saga of START II ratification. Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR), Materials, Protection, Control and Accountancy Programs (MPC&A), and Y2K cooperation are also firmly on track.

## **Changes in Russia's Approach to Arms Control**

This optimistic picture, however, conceals several new developments which signal change in Russia's approaches to arms control. These are:

1. A reassessment of Russia's role in the world and associated reassessment of arms control priorities. Simply put, the political and military establishment finally reconciled itself with the notion that Russia is not a superpower and will not be one in the foreseeable future. Consequently, its priorities should be changed to fit its new place in the world.
2. As a great (rather than super-) power with weak conventional armed forces, Russia needs a different mix of nuclear weapons than the Soviet Union did-- in particular a greater emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons, which the Soviet Union sought to reduce and even eliminate. The strategic arsenal should be smaller, but technologically more advanced and versatile, i.e., usable in both "central deterrence" (versus the United States) and in a regional context.
3. Arms control agreements and regimes inherited from the Cold War era, as well as the early 1990s agreements that follow the same logic, do not necessarily address Russia's interests. This includes, for example, the informal 1991 regime limiting tactical nuclear weapons and the START II and future START III treaties, which concentrate on the "central" strategic relationship with the United States. This also includes a number of export control regimes which are seen as too restrictive. While the Soviet Union's interest in strict export control regimes might have been natural, many doubt that Russia's more limited international role warrants the same approach.

4. The criteria of acceptability for new arms control agreements are stricter than before; of special value is "untied hands," i.e., Russia's ability to pursue policies, whether in arms acquisition or arms export, which fit the current definition of its national interest. Since the regimes inherited from the Soviet Union are often seen as excessively restrictive, there is a strong inclination to revise them. The preferred method of revision is through negotiations, but there are now fewer inhibitions to unilateral revision if negotiations are unsuccessful.

5. The Russian approach to international security regimes stresses the interrelationship of issue-areas (linkages). Cooperation on arms control and nonproliferation regimes is dependent upon cooperation from the West on issues that are important to Russia, such as economic assistance. For example, credits from the IMF are viewed as a measure of the propensity of the West to cooperate with Russia and, accordingly, a tougher line of the West in this area is likely to lead to a tougher line of Russia regarding security regimes.

The area which might witness the greatest changes in the next few years is nuclear weapons and nuclear arms control. The Russian nuclear arsenal is undergoing considerable changes. Most likely, Russia will continue to move toward a relatively small, but very modern and viable strategic force that will guarantee that it retains second-strike capability under the most unfavorable circumstances. The future posture will be different from the Soviet one (for example, it will stress single-warhead silo-based ICBMs and mobile ICBMs with one or at maximum three warheads). The Russian military does not appear to be concerned about numerical parity with the United States.

The nuclear arsenal is also likely to feature a strong substrategic component. Pressure to return nuclear warheads to sea- and land-based tactical delivery vehicles has been steadily growing for several years. These weapons are supposed to compensate for the massive and irreversible superiority of NATO's conventional armed forces, as well as to counterbalance conventional forces of neighboring states. NATO has become a particularly acute concern in the aftermath of the war in Yugoslavia, which in the eyes of the Russian military demonstrated that NATO can resort to force without too many inhibitions and that Russia is not secure unless it can threaten to resort to nuclear weapons. To an extent, this view was reinforced by American experts who, trying to allay Russian concerns, explained that Russia can feel safe because no one in their right mind would use force against a nuclear power. These statements were interpreted to mean that nuclear weapons are the only reliable guarantee of security.

### **Arms Control Agreements and Russian Interests**

The Russian political-military establishment is not averse to arms control agreements, but only if they are compatible with the transition toward its new posture. However, the security regimes inherited from the Soviet Union and concluded in the early 1990s are not necessarily conducive to these goals.

For example, the 1991 informal regime on tactical nuclear weapons prevents the substrategic arsenal which is now seen by Russians as desirable. Tactical nuclear weapons were reduced by unilateral statements of George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev in the fall of 1991 (in January 1992 Boris Yeltsin confirmed and slightly expanded Gorbachev's statement). Among other elements, these statements provided for the withdrawal and partial elimination of all tactical nuclear weapons except those that are air-based. According to available information, Russia continues to implement its obligations on the elimination of a significant portion of warheads for tactical delivery systems.

START II demands that Russia eliminate the bulk of its strategic weapons even as it lacks resources to quickly build a new, modern posture. A combination of the breakout potential under START II and the proposed national missile defense (NMD) system can allow the United States to quickly negate Russia's second-strike capability. The breakout potential under START II emerges because the United States will have to eliminate only a handful of its weapons while the rest will be simply "downloaded" (i.e., the number of warheads on them will be reduced). Russia, in contrast, will conduct the bulk of reductions by elimination, whereas downloading will be limited. Theoretically, the United States can return warheads to its delivery vehicles while Russia will have very few systems for uploading. Furthermore, Russian experts suspect that the proposed US limited and "thin" NMD system can be quickly expanded by the simple addition of several hundred interceptors, turning the currently foreseen "thin" defense into a "thick" one. START III is supposed to compensate for these shortcomings, but the price--agreement to American-proposed modifications to the ABM Treaty-- might be too high, in the Russian view.

The assumption that underlies the US approach is that economic constraints will push Russia toward reductions. It is commonly assumed that Russia will have no more than 1,000 to 1,500 warheads on strategic delivery vehicles; many predict a figure below 1,000. Consequently, Russia is expected to sign on to ABM Treaty modification in order to obtain START III.

The priorities of the Russian political-military establishment appear to be different, however. No matter how severe Russia's economic constraints, the Russian military frames its choices in other terms. They do not believe that the United States can be persuaded to agree to a deal that is acceptable to Russia. Absent a "good" agreement, it is considered more to Russia's advantage to let the United States unilaterally withdraw from the ABM Treaty. In this respect, Russian statements that the ABM Treaty should remain the cornerstone of strategic balance should be taken seriously rather than as mere rhetoric or a negotiating tactic.

The benefits the Russian military expects to yield from the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty are twofold. First, Russia will be able to pursue modernization programs without asking "permission." For example, it can MIRV road-mobile Topol-M ICBMs if such a decision is made (which is not preordained). Second, Russia will have the "moral" right to revise other international regimes, such as the 1991 informal regime on tactical nuclear

weapons. In other words, the United States will "set the example" that international agreements are not completely sacrosanct, and then the international and especially domestic scene will be more permissive for this kind of action.

The idea of modifying the ABM Treaty was never popular in Russia, especially among the military. Still, until the war in Kosovo prospects for an exchange of START III for ABM Treaty modifications were strong. In the summer of 1998 a meeting of the Security Council adopted decisions that provided for a START II and III-compliant strategic posture. All excessive systems were scheduled for early elimination and Russia was supposed to retain only single-warhead ICBMs and a limited number of submarines with SLBMs sufficient for a low aggregate level of warheads. By early 1999 this became exactly what Russia wanted in exchange for concessions allowing the United States to deploy an NMD. START II was ready for modification by early April.

### **Kosovo Fallout**

The situation changed dramatically with the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. START II ratification failed and, more importantly, the meeting of the Security Council in April reopened some options with respect to nuclear arms modernization that seemed to be foreclosed less than a year earlier. It was decided to extend warranty periods for MIRVed ICBMs, overhaul Delta III submarines in the Far East that had been scheduled for early retirement, and buy heavy bombers from Ukraine. The service life of submarines depends on periodic overhauls (usually called "medium-level repairs" in Russia). Reportedly, the Russian military planned to retain the SSBN fleet only in the North, consequently it was no longer necessary to spend money on the overhaul of the older-class SSBNs in the Pacific. The decision to conduct "medium-level repairs" with respect to Delta III's in the Pacific means that they will remain in service for another five to seven years. In other words, Russia was preparing for a situation where only START I will remain in force.

One should not feel too optimistic about the Cologne Joint Statement that launched the ABM-START III consultations. Reportedly, the military was not consulted. According to different versions, either the Russian delegation in Cologne overstepped its instructions or these instructions were written without the participation of the military. After consultations began, the military acquired a strong desire to shape the outcome. In the military's views, the difficulty with getting IMF funding only confirmed that the West, especially the United States, was not willing to cooperate; this further reduced Russian willingness to accommodate it on arms control matters. In the early fall, the renewed fighting in Chechnya and Dagestan increased the military's status and influence in domestic politics as well as the propensity of civilian authorities to be more sensitive to their position.

The opposition to concessions is not limited to the military. After Kosovo, the Russian elite has reached something resembling a consensus with respect to security policy. Underlying this opposition is suspicion that Boris Yeltsin might sign an agreement that would be to Russia's disadvantage. Consequently, even if the agreement is signed over

the objections of the military, it will not be ratified. In other words, little if anything is possible until after presidential elections in Russia, which are scheduled for June 2000. This means that the United States is likely to adopt the decision to deploy an NMD without Russia's endorsement.

Finally, it is important to understand that Russian opposition to hasty arms control agreements is predicated on long-term planning. If the economic situation improves under the next administration, Russia will complete the transition toward a smaller, but also modern and highly viable strategic force. This will take time, of course, and old MIRVed ICBMs, which Russia will be able to retain in the absence of START II and START III, will help to smooth the transition (according to some estimates, Russia can keep up to 4,000 warheads on strategic delivery vehicles until 2010).

Of course, it is possible that the economic situation will not improve, but in this case, many say, strategic balance will no longer matter because Russia might cease to exist. In other words, the Russian establishment tends to put all its money on one bet: either things will become normal or the country will not survive.

Russia's freedom of action, which is supposed to increase after the United States abrogates the ABM Treaty, has even broader implications, including for export control regimes. Had Russia been a superpower, it might be interested in tight restrictions on arms and technology transfers. But as a "rank-and-file" great power in severe economic distress, it has an interest in expanding trade. Although major regimes, such as the Nonproliferation Treaty, MTCR and other equivalent ones are rarely questioned (although in the last few years even they are coming under attack), many restrictions are now viewed as excessive and imposed by the United States in order to undercut Russia's high-tech sectors, which are almost uniformly concentrated in the defense industry.

Thus, there are strong incentives to avoid what is seen as a "false pretense" of arms control. This attitude is especially characteristic for the military, which strongly advocates a "direct and honest" approach to negotiations. They simply refuse to see value in "political games," even if those are important, for example, to maintain the appearance of the commitment of the United States and Russia to nuclear disarmament--which is vital for the continuation of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. One can detect here sentiments similar to those that existed in the United States in the early 1980s: no agreement just for the sake of agreement.

In view of all this, the optimism of the Clinton administration is unfounded. Chances are that the ongoing ABM-START III consultations will not produce an agreement, but even if it becomes possible to persuade Boris Yeltsin to sign one, it will not be ratified and will have to be abandoned or renegotiated.

## Implications for US Policy

Two assumptions around which current US arms control policy is built appear questionable.

1. Russian policy is driven by economics. Without doubt, Russia will continue to welcome assistance through CTR, MPC&A, and other similar programs. But they are seen as much in the American interest as in Russia's, and their role as a lever to influence Russian behavior is often overestimated. With respect to the shaping of strategic and substrategic posture, economic constraints are even less powerful. In fact, some suggest that implementing some types of agreements might be more expensive for Russia--e.g., START II and ABM Treaty modifications.

Furthermore, Russia's financial dependence on the West is decreasing as assistance is being reduced and IMF funding is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. After the IMF failed to provide funds for debt relief in late September 1999, some commentators in Russia even suggested that Russia might benefit from sovereign default: in their opinion, freedom from debt could compensate for the costs of Western anger and loss of confidence in Russia, especially since foreign investment is negligible anyway.

2. Russia values traditional forms of arms control because they provide the appearance of equality to the United States and help maintain its great power status in international relations. In reality, the Russian elite seems to have reconciled itself to a lower status and no longer supports these goals, as the Soviet Union did. The shaping of the new posture demands that some arms control and export control regimes be revised. Even though arms control remains the preferred option, it is no longer accorded the same value. "Untied hands" are equally if not more attractive to a significant portion of the Russian elite.

The possibility that the system of arms control regimes could begin to unravel presents new, unusual challenges for US national security policy. It appears important to keep Russia within this system. Its active and willing participation continues to be important for the viability of the nuclear nonproliferation regime, MTCR and elimination of chemical and biological weapons. In this sense, the loss of Russia will mean the loss of these regimes.

The situation is not completely hopeless, however. It is likely that under a new government Russia will return to negotiations, and it will become possible to fashion new arms control agreements. The immediate challenge is to pass through the next year and a half (the cycle of elections in the two countries, first in Russia and then in the United States) without irreparable losses. Most likely, there will be no modification of the ABM Treaty and no START III. Or, if it becomes possible to sign such agreements, they will be unratifiable. Though it is not currently considered, this possibility must be seriously addressed by US policymakers.