

# The Myths About Unilateral Nuclear Arms Reductions

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The idea that unilateral reduction of nuclear arms is preferable to the traditional but slower process of negotiated formal arms control treaties that dominated US-Soviet/Russian relations for three decades is becoming increasingly popular. Closer scrutiny suggests that this idea is based on a number of false assumptions, and that unilateral reductions--albeit beneficial in principle--are fraught with hidden costs that might turn the whole endeavor on its head.

The perceived advantages of unilateral reductions can be summarized in the following ways:

- Unilateral parallel steps can be adopted and implemented quickly whereas negotiations take too long and always lag behind arms modernization and buildup.
- Formal agreements are always based on compromises, which turn maintenance of and even elimination of weapons into an expensive exercise. Unilateral reductions can be more cost-effective. The US, for example, has to spend millions of dollars to convert Ohio-class submarines into carriers of sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) to satisfy START I (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) requirements, without which the cost of conversion might be almost negligible.
- Negotiated reductions are no longer needed, because unlike the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Russia will reduce its nuclear arsenal anyway, so there is no risk that the absence of arms control treaties would result in a new arms race.
- In the absence of geopolitical and ideological enmity, the US-Russian relationship can be reasonably transparent (especially if Russia becomes a democratic, market state), thus treaties are no longer needed as a means of transparency: in fact, US assistance programs provide for a considerable degree of "unilateral" transparency (that is, US access to Russian facilities without equal Russian access to US ones).

Paradoxically, these assumptions (about the advantages of unilateral reductions) satisfy both liberal proponents of arms control and their conservative opponents. Conservatives claim (not without reason) that Russia does not deserve "special treatment" and that equality of nuclear arsenals, which treaties have to provide by default, is no longer of interest to the United States and is not worth sacrifices or concessions. For liberals, the 1990s represent a "lost decade" in terms of nuclear arms reductions, and they view

unilateral statements, similar to those George Bush, Sr. pioneered in 1991 with regard to tactical nuclear weapons, as a way out of the impasse. It was, in fact, liberals who promoted unilateralism in the first place.

Similar sentiments are popular in Russia as well, especially among the military. Some of them, instead of fearing US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, actually welcome it as a pretext for Russia's withdrawal from a host of other arms control treaties. Whether unilateralism will in fact yield the expected benefits is not the point here: the US government does not have to be concerned about the possible losses of Russia; instead, it should pay attention to the losses the United States might incur if unilateralism prevails.

### **Negotiations Do Not Take Long--Political Decision Does**

Negotiations do not take as much time as they seem. The lion's share of time is consumed by domestic debates and the political decision to enter serious negotiations. START I, for example, with all the drama of breakthroughs and retreats, took only three and a half years (from the December 1987 US-Soviet summit to its signing in mid-summer 1991). This period included a seven-month break in late 1998 and the early half of 1989 during the transition from the Reagan to the Bush administration. Even the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT II), which formally lasted from 1973 to 1979, were in fact conducted in fits and starts with total time devoted to "real" talks in Geneva amounting to no more than three years. The intervals were devoted to a stalemate in the United States in the run-up to 1976 elections, and then in 1977 to the Carter administration's attempt to revise the earlier framework agreement (while the Carter proposal may have been better, it certainly slowed down the process). Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) negotiations took only two years to produce a complex and effective treaty--it took a long time for nuclear states to make the decision to ban nuclear tests and an even longer time to ratify it (the process is far from over yet). START II, depending on what is taken as the starting date, took between seven and twelve months. Yet again, ratification proved a problem: first it was delayed by sorting out the Soviet nuclear legacy (the status of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus), and then by Russia's reluctance to ratify the treaty. Delayed ratification resulted from what might be called the "excessive effectiveness" of the Bush administration, especially Secretary of State James Baker, who was able to secure so many concessions that it practically doomed the treaty's chances in the Russian parliament.

In sum, claims about the inevitable length of the process of negotiations are sometimes little more than a pretext to avoid confronting domestic political challenges. Undoubtedly, the political costs of a treaty can be considerable--even insurmountable--but the foreign policy instrument (negotiations) should not be blamed for politicians' reluctance to use it.

### **Cost-Effectiveness Can Be Expensive**

Proponents of unilateralism often fail to understand that US freedom from inconvenient treaty restrictions means similar freedom for Russia. Some of the things the US is likely to do will not be to Russia's liking: for example, conversion of Ohio ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) for SLCMs could be seen by Russia as destabilizing since it has feared these weapons for a long time. Similarly, some Russian moves toward cost optimization might not be to the liking of the United States.

Today, the optimal cost-cutting strategy for Russia is through an agreement with the US on deep reduction of nuclear arsenals (Russia favors the level of 1,500 warheads on strategic weapons). Preferences might change considerably, however, if no agreement is signed and the United States unilaterally withdraws from the ABM Treaty, as some more radical American proponents of unilateralism prefer. As Russia will be seeking a cheap response (increasing effectiveness from its shrinking nuclear arsenal), it might be to its advantage to withdraw not only from START II, but also from START I. Both treaties are even today perceived as too expensive: START I was negotiated by the Soviet Union, which could afford many options that Russia cannot afford today, while START II was negotiated at a time when the economic crisis was expected to end soon.

Outside the framework of treaties, Russia can: increase the survivability of mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by changing the combat patrol routine (it is strictly prescribed by START I); deploy more than one warhead on new Topol-M ICBMs (prohibited by START II and legally difficult under START I); keep MIRVed ICBMs (prohibited by START II); and introduce other limited modernization options the US will find difficult to detect in the absence of verification mechanisms (such as compulsory exchange of telemetry data under START I). More radical measures might include such steps as deploying long-range air-launched nuclear cruise missiles (ALCMs) on medium bombers. According to START I, only heavy bombers can carry these weapons, but Russia has only a handful of those and cannot build more because it would be too expensive. Outside treaty limitations, it can utilize the large number of medium bombers it has inherited from the Soviet Union.

In other words, it will become possible to have "the same bang for a smaller buck:" even at reduced funding, Russia can keep more warheads in its nuclear arsenal. The level of 1,500 warheads that it proposes for START III is calculated under treaty rules, but outside them, the number can probably be somewhat higher and, most important, the nuclear triad will be more survivable and have a better defense penetration capability.

The central mistake of proponents of unilateralism is obsession with the numbers: 6,000 warheads for START I and 3,500 warheads for START II. They contend that Russia will not withdraw from START I because it cannot support even the 6,000 level and certainly cannot deploy more than that. In reality, numbers mean very little. The key variable is not the size but the effectiveness of the arsenal. Without treaty constraints Russian can do more to maintain the effectiveness of its arsenal, and if the United States begins to withdraw from treaties, there is little incentive for Russia to abide by them. The true

value of the existing treaties is in hundreds and even thousands of small, "invisible" provisions that only experts know. For example, START I is the only treaty that stands in the way of possible Russia-Chinese cooperation in strategic weapons, such as sale of technology and delivery systems. Without START I, cooperation might increase since China is concerned about the American missile defense system and is prepared to pay for Russian technology.

These options are routinely overlooked by American and even many Russian experts. Even possible withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty--to which, until recently, some Russian military representatives used to refer--is often misinterpreted. This option is usually interpreted as "anti-European"--as if intermediate-range missiles would be deployed against Europe (as was the case in 1980s). Instead, if production of these missiles is resumed, they are more likely to be deployed in Chukotka, in the northeastern corner of Russia, from where they can cover the western third of the United States (deployment in that area was planned in the mid-1980s until it was decided to give the INF Treaty global instead of just European coverage).

### **See Nothing, Hear Nothing, Say Nothing**

It is far from obvious that Russia will undertake all or even some of the actions listed above. It may do nothing and instead calmly reduce its weapons within the framework of existing treaties. Indeed, the optimal policy for Russia would be to delay reaction by at least several years, proceeding from the premise that an effective and robust national missile defense (NMD) will not appear for at least five or (more likely) ten years, and concentrate on improving its economy. But it is worth keeping in mind an important point: in the absence of treaties, Russia will have the right to act the way it wishes and the US will not know what is happening. The advantages of unilateralism, therefore, should be weighed against the costs of low transparency. What might seem a victory today (the absence of a substantive Russian response to NMD) might turn into a defeat by the end of the decade.

Transparency and predictability will be the greatest losses from the triumph of unilateralism. Existing treaties provide for the exchange of an unprecedented volume of information about the status of nuclear forces, various activities (such as maneuvers, some types of combat patrol, etc.), production, and modernization. These provisions will be the first victim of the dismantlement of arms control regimes, even if nothing else happens. In fact, Russian uniformed military leaders do not even conceal (especially in private conversations) that this would be the main reason why US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty might be used by Russia as a pretext to terminate other agreements. The recent controversy around the suspected transfer of Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Kaliningrad oblast is a sobering illustration of how the US-Russian and NATO-Russian relationship might look like in the future. In a sense, it does not even matter whether nuclear weapons were transferred to Kaliningrad oblast or not: it is more important that the United States cannot reliably verify facts.

The autumn 1991 exchange of unilateral statements on tactical nuclear weapons reduction is often seen as an example of the advantages of circumventing negotiations, when in fact it represents a missed opportunity to conclude a legally binding, verifiable treaty. The absence of a formal regime created potential sources of misunderstanding, mutual suspicion, and conflict. The Kaliningrad controversy is only the latest (and more public) example of angry recriminations over tactical nuclear weapons in the last several years. One can easily imagine the scale and number of similar controversies if strategic nuclear arsenals will be affected by the same lack of information that tactical weapons are.

### **Mixed Methods Bring Stronger Results**

Unilateral reductions are not necessarily counterproductive. Rather, they can lead to negative outcomes if the story begins and ends with unilateral statements. Similarly, negotiations are not always an ideal option either. A mix of these two instruments--unilateral initiatives and negotiations--can probably yield a better result than either course alone: in 2001 (as in 1991), unilateral, preferably parallel declarations about the intention to reduce nuclear arsenals are appropriate. But unlike in 1991, the new declarations should be immediately followed by consultations and preferably negotiations to conclude an agreement--whether a formal treaty, an executive agreement, or at least a joint statement--to formalize unilateral measures and provide for the most essential element: transparency, data exchange, confidence-building measures, and perhaps verification. In this way, the new Bush administration will be able to replicate the positive experience of the preceding Bush administration, and at the same time avoid the negative aspects, such as an unratifiable START II Treaty or the lack of transparency on tactical nuclear weapons.

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