

The End of Strategic Arms Control?

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An overview of the arms control field today gives a contradictory picture. On one hand, the United States and Russia are very upbeat about their relationship and claim that they do not consider themselves enemies or adversaries, which seems to present a good ground for cooperation on wide range of issues. On the other hand, very few of nuclear arms control or disarmament problems are being solved. The START II treaty has no chance of entering into force and there are virtually no prospects for a bilateral agreement that would set a limit on the number of nuclear weapons beyond the one set by START I, which is more than ten years old now.

The immediate reason for the lack of progress with the traditional arms control agenda is the disagreement about the future of the ABM Treaty and about the approach toward reductions of offensive weapons. The differences in the U.S. and Russian positions were clearly demonstrated at the Crawford summit meeting in November 2001.

The summit was marked by an announcement of seemingly radical reductions of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. During the summit, President Bush declared that the United States would reduce the number of “operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads” to a level between 1,700 and 2,200 over the next decade. Details of the reductions have not been released yet, but these numbers would be consistent with the intention to decommission all MX/Peacekeeper missiles and convert four Trident submarines into SLCM platforms, which was announced several months ago. Although the planned measures will represent a significant reduction of about 1300 warheads, it seems that there will be few, if any, reductions that go beyond that. Most of the rest of the reductions will be done either by “downloading” existing launchers or simply by not counting them. It is plausible, for example, that none of the strategic bombers will be counted as “operationally deployed.”

Russian president Vladimir Putin replied to the U.S. announcement by reiterating his proposal of November 2000, in which he suggested reducing strategic nuclear arsenals to a level of 1500 warheads on each side. However, he did not make a binding commitment to the reductions. Instead, Putin underscored that the proposal would become a reality if Russia and the United States have it “in a treaty form, including the issues of verification and control.” This

means that unless a treaty is signed, Russia will not consider the reductions undertaken by the United States as real.

This, of course, does not mean that the United States will not implement the announced cuts. However, the legal status of these reductions will remain unclear. It should be noted that the situation is markedly different from the one with tactical nuclear weapons unilateral initiatives of 1991. Although those initiatives also did not become a subject of a formal treaty, at that time neither side officially questioned the commitment of the other to carry on the promised reductions (which was exactly what Putin did this time).

The prospects for a binding agreement that would codify the reductions are very dim, even if it will include very modest verifications measures based, say, on START I procedures. Russia and the United States announced that they will work on an agreement of this kind, but left the summit with uncertainty about how they would to achieve it.

The outcome of the discussion about the future of the ABM Treaty was even more uncertain. Despite expectations of a breakthrough, Bush and Putin simply reiterated their old positions about the ABM Treaty being a “relic of the cold war” or a “cornerstone of strategic stability.” Details of a proposed compromise, which were leaked to the press before the summit, clearly showed that neither side seems to understand what a compromise may look like. Although the presidents agreed to continue consultations, it is not clear what kind of outcome these consultations can produce.

From the point of view of traditional arms control, the outcome of the Crawford summit is disappointing. The United States and Russia not only failed to overcome their differences, but also did not suggest a course of action that would help reconcile their positions in the future. The problems are exacerbated by highly politicized nature of the discussed issues (missile defense in particular), which raises the stakes and makes a compromise virtually impossible.

On the other hand, the lack of progress with the arms control agenda may reflect serious changes in the relationship between the countries and in the role that they assign to nuclear weapons. From this perspective, the results of the summit are encouraging, since they indicate that changes are indeed taking place.

It would be wrong to say that the two countries are ready to renounce nuclear deterrence or that the relationship between them could be characterized as a partnership. A closer look at various aspects of the U.S.-Russian relationship shows that in spite of recent rapprochement it still characterized by a significant degree of mistrust and has a fairly strong confrontational component. Nuclear deterrence is still considered an important component of the relationship. At the same time, what we see is that the long-admitted fact that the nuclear arsenals on both sides far exceed any reasonable requirements seems to have finally found its way into practical policies pursued by U.S. and Russian military and political institutions.

Among practical steps that reflect this development is the U.S. willingness to reduce its strategic nuclear arsenal unilaterally, regardless of whether Russia reduces its forces. The most telling example of the changing attitudes toward the traditional arms control agenda is the lack of U.S. reaction to the Russian threats to respond to missile defense development by either extending the service lives of its heavy ICBMs or deploying multiple warheads on its new Topol-M missiles. Nor does the United States seem concerned about setting limits on Russian nuclear testing program, as the debate about the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty indicates.

This may reflect understanding of the well-known inability of Russia to maintain its strategic forces at the current level and the existence of a “hedge” policy, which would allow the United States to get its forces back to Cold-War levels. At the same time, the readiness to forgo reciprocity in nuclear reductions and most verification measures that come with it indicates that the United States does not assign high priority to questions that were at the center of traditional U.S.-Soviet arms control agenda—limiting the military capabilities of the Soviet/Russian forces.

The attitude toward arms control in Russia is similar to that in the United States, although it may be driven by a different set of considerations. While the Russian military continues to underscore the importance of parity between strategic forces, the recent practical steps of the Russian leadership show quite clearly that parity is not considered vitally important. Among these steps are the decision to curb the deployment of new land-based missile and redirect the funds into conventional forces, unwillingness to revive the stalled START negotiation process, and the consistent refusal to find a compromise on missile defense. Although Russia admittedly has very little room to maneuver, if it was seriously concerned about the emerging disparities in strategic nuclear arsenals, it would have pursued somewhat different policies.

These developments in the U.S.-Russian relationship (which, it should be noted, predate the events of September 11 and the subsequent “westward turn” in Russian policy) seem to reflect the growing understanding of the changing nature of nuclear deterrence. During the Cold War, it was estimated that deterrence required thousands of weapons to inflict “unacceptable damage” to the adversary. While this logic remains largely unchallenged today, the number of weapons that would inflict “unacceptable damage” is most certainly in the low single digits for both sides. This makes the actual number of nuclear weapons that could be delivered relatively unimportant, as long as this number is greater than zero. As a result, the deterrence value of 1500 Russian nuclear warheads is not really different from that of 3500 warheads. Similarly, from Russia’s point of view it does not really matter whether the United States cuts its nuclear arsenal to 1700 weapons or leaves it at the level of 6000.

The reluctance to reduce nuclear arsenals is also understandable. Although both sides seem to realize that the number of weapons that they have far exceeds what is necessary for deterrence, neither is certain about exactly how far it can go in reducing their arsenals. Given these uncertainties and the absence of incentives for reductions provided by the logic of arms race, military and political institutions in both countries are unable to come up with a policy that goes further than maintaining status quo.

Since the arms control dialogue is largely irrelevant from the military point of view, other issues have replaced traditional military ones. These issues may have nothing to do with arms control and disarmament, but they come to dominate the dialog, which may not provide the best venue for addressing them.

Both current controversies—the need for a binding disarmament agreement and the ABM Treaty—seem to illustrate this point very well. The Russian military and political leadership seems to understand very well that development of a missile defense that would in any way interfere with the Russian capability to deter the United States is currently not technically possible. Preserving the ABM Treaty stopped being a question of military balance long time ago. Moreover, Russia’s policy strongly suggests that it is not interested in preserving the treaty for the sake of avoiding a precedent of unilateral withdrawal from a major international agreement (if it was interested, it would have agreed to a modification of the treaty, which would formally

preserve it). Rather, Russia considers the question of the ABM treaty as a matter of principle and sees this issue as a vehicle for asserting its position in international affairs.

The issue of weapons reductions is being treated very much the same way. A call for a comprehensive treaty that would include verification measures and control is hardly a practical policy. The problem is not only that an agreement of this kind is probably impossible (and maybe unnecessary). It is that Russian leadership seems to value an agreement of this kind not because it would set limits on nuclear weapons or destroys them, but because it would provide yet another way of showing that the United States considers Russia an equal partner. As a result, the traditional arms control agenda, whether it is preserving the ABM treaty or concluding a verifiable disarmament agreement, has been taken over by political issues that have nothing to do with arms control.

One conclusion that follows from this analysis is that progress on substantive arms control issues is virtually impossible. The United States and Russia are still operating within the old arms control negotiations framework, which provides few incentives for solving the problems that exist today. Both countries seem to understand that they need to replace this old framework with something new, but so far their efforts have stopped at a rhetorical level. Moreover, what we see today are attempts to approach new problems—the most important of which is building a non-adversarial U.S.-Russian relationship and moving away from the nuclear confrontation of the Cold War—as if they are simply “warhead counting” and “strategic balance” problems of traditional arms control.

In practical terms, no one should expect that missile defense or questions of strategic parity will disappear from the U.S.-Russia agenda any time soon, primarily because the underlying political issues, which are the real cause of the controversy surrounding these issues, cannot be resolved easily. If any successful agreement is possible here, it will have to address the political issues, rather than provide a technical arms control solutions. For example, a compromise on the ABM Treaty may include an agreement that would call for cooperative work on some components of missile defenses. Although practical importance of cooperation of this kind will be negligible, its political effect could prove sufficient for a compromise.

While traditional ABM Treaty and START-type negotiations remain deadlocked, progress can be made in areas that are not considered part of traditional arms control and therefore are not affected by political controversies. One of these areas is dismantlement of nuclear warheads and disposal of weapon grade fissile materials. If handled properly these areas may provide opportunities for real progress in reducing nuclear arsenals, which eventually may prove more important than traditional SALT and START approaches.

The traditional strategic arms control process may never recover from the end of the Cold War. Attempts to revitalize it by using the threat of a new arms race have largely failed, primarily because no arms race of the Cold War type is likely to materialize. On the negative side, this has left the United States and Russia with large nuclear arsenals and few ideas of how to cut them. On the positive side, the current problems of arms strongly indicate that the cold war confrontation is over. Of course, the United States and Russia are still far from overcoming all the problems they inherited from the Cold War. They seem to be making steps in this direction, but they have yet to build a framework that would allow them to deal with these problems effectively.

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