

The Future of U.S.-Russian Nuclear Relations A Rip Van Winkle Approach?

PONARS Policy Memo No. 276

*Alexander Pikayev
Carnegie Moscow Center
October 2002*

The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT, or the Treaty of Moscow) signed by U.S. president George W. Bush and Russian president Vladimir Putin during their Moscow/St. Petersburg summit in May 2002, marks the de facto end of traditional U.S.-Russian negotiated strategic arms control. In sharp contrast to previous agreements, the Moscow Treaty is very short (only three pages long) and it does not contain any definitions of what exactly should be reduced. In addition, counting rules and verification provisions are absent. Provisions of the 1991 Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START I) agreement might be used as a verification mechanism in the Moscow Treaty reductions, but only until 2009, when START I is set to expire. What will happen when START I expires, has yet to be determined.

In the U.S.-Russian Declaration, signed alongside the Moscow Treaty, both sides agreed to establish a Consultative Group for Strategic Security headed by both powers' ministers of foreign affairs and defense. It was intended to discuss the issues that remained unsolved by the 2002 document. Since May, however, the group has only met once at a September meeting in Washington, D.C. Reportedly, during the meeting, the ministers failed to discuss strategic nuclear matters and, instead, concentrated on other topics, such as Iraq and Georgia.

Lack of interest in the follow-up strategic nuclear dialogue, demonstrated in both capitals, could be explained by either exhaustion from the intensive bilateral talks that took place between summer 2001 and spring 2002, or deeper factors. Indeed, the late 1990s deadlock in the START-ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) arena has been solved in a way that could be considered as giving a green light to national priorities. The United States was able to withdraw from the ABM Treaty without immediate, dramatic negative consequences. Regarding strategic nuclear weapons, the Pentagon secured its own nuclear posture review, developed in 2001.

As for the Russians, in exchange for the ABM Treaty, they were able to effectively abandon START II. The Treaty prohibited MIRVed (multiple independent targetable reentry vehicles) ICBMs, the cornerstone of Russia's strategic triad. Their rapid decommissioning would have required making a hard choice. Either Moscow would have to go into massive—and expensive—procurement of single-warhead, land-based missiles in order to maintain relatively high START II ceilings, or the Kremlin might have decided to save limited resources by refusing a significant increase in new missile production, thus accepting an unprecedented downturn in its strategic nuclear deployments.

Now, without START II, Russia could prolong the lifetime of some of its deployed MIRVed ICBMs; this would help to maintain higher ceilings in the cheapest way possible. Also, procuring new MIRVed ICBMs can compensate for the decommissioning missiles. It will lead to further savings: similar levels of forces can be maintained by a lesser number of MIRVed ICBMs than single warhead missiles. Therefore, less new missiles would need to be produced.

The Treaty of Moscow provides both sides with a solution to their most pressing needs in strategic nuclear and missile defense areas. Now, the key question is whether the United States and Russia will return to bilateral discussions for a new agenda in their nuclear relations, or if they will choose what could be referred to as the Rip van Winkle approach, where to avoid burdening nuclear relations by discussing new topics, they would limit themselves to talking about compliance with the START I Treaty.

The Rip van Winkle approach could address a basic controversy in modern U.S.-Russian nuclear relations. It seems that both Moscow and Washington have finally realized that their relationship has radically shifted away from the traditional Cold War paradigm. At the same time, they still have to maintain deterrence relations, not because of political confrontation, but primarily due to the existence of their significant nuclear stockpiles. A certain risk remains: that deterrence relations could have a negative impact on the political dialogue in general. Thus, one could argue that the less the sides discuss how they should regulate bilateral nuclear deterrence, the more opportunity they would have to prevent nuclear deterrence from negatively affecting their broader political relationship.

Addressing a new agenda in future bilateral nuclear dialogues could also be problematic purely due to a lack of adequate diplomatic tradeoffs in which Moscow and Washington might be interested. During the talks preceding the Treaty of Moscow, the Pentagon consistently opposed negotiating any possible measures aimed at limiting U.S. responsive forces. Such measures were likely considered unacceptable constraints, which would unnecessarily limit freedom of action in defining and modernizing the U.S. nuclear posture. While the Russians were interested in such limitations, they evidently lacked a diplomatic bargain strong enough to stimulate the United States to change its tough position.

Regardless, Moscow is interested in continuing the post-SORT talks primarily due to its interest in addressing the issue of the U.S. responsive forces. It seems that Russia has so far attempted to use a START I provision, like counting rules, to gain possible U.S. concessions on this matter. However, this tactic failed during the SORT talks, and there are even fewer reasons to expect that it could bring any successes after pressure to sign a new treaty has gone.

When Moscow realizes that its tactic of using START I as a venue to gain U.S. concessions on its responsive capabilities do not work, Russia's commitment to the 1991 Treaty could erode. Additionally, START I prohibits Russia from using the relatively cheap option of maintaining its responsive capabilities by deploying additional warheads on existing types of missiles. Although at this moment it seems unlikely, under certain scenarios these factors might result in pressure for an earlier expiration of the START I Treaty.

Hypothetically, in order to achieve their goals, the Russians could put their last chip on the negotiating table—tactical nuclear weapons. Until recently, Moscow has generally resisted the idea of tactical nuclear arms control. The Russian military believes that tactical nukes should not be included in the U.S.-Russian arms control dialogue. Furthermore, facing historically low levels in Russia's conventional manpower, tactical nuclear arms could be increasingly

considered as both a deterrent and a war-fighting option in scenarios involving conflicts with medium-size Asian powers—sources of perceived threat to vital Russian national security interests. This might further constrain Moscow's willingness and ability to discuss measures controlling tactical nuclear weapons.

In sum, the United States lacks interest in a potential post-SORT dialogue since Washington has already gained all it wanted from Moscow. Thus, there is no reason for the United States to make any concessions the Russians are eager to gain. At the same time, Russia is interested in follow-up talks, but is not yet ready to put new diplomatic chips, like tactical nuclear weapons, on the potential negotiating table. Russia's recent attempts to capitalize on some START I provisions in order to gain limits on U.S. responsive forces might potentially undermine the Treaty. After realizing that there is no chance to limit U.S. responsive forces by diplomatic means, Moscow could demand to modify the START I-type rules in order to obtain the freedom of action necessary (i.e. deploying additional warheads on existing missiles) for building up Russia's own responsive capabilities.

Taking into account the risks associated with the possible resumption of the U.S.-Russian strategic nuclear dialogue, a cautious approach is recommended including the steps below.

- Until a deadline close to the 2005 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, both Moscow and Washington will have to carefully review their priorities in the bilateral dialogue and goals they could expect to achieve realistically. During the coming year or so, it would probably be better to avoid reaching for substantial progress.
- In the meantime, the United States and Russia should concentrate on a positive agenda. Particularly, they need to focus on such measures as cooperative threat reduction, cooperative development of missile defense that goes beyond mere confidence building, and issues like opening a Joint Data Exchange Center in Moscow.
- Moscow and Washington should discuss measures that could help alleviate both powers' concerns regarding risks of dealing with Asian threats in an environment where their interests may not coincide. Particularly, cooperation between the militaries operating in the Caucasus and Central Asia should be considered a top priority. If confidence is established there, the Russians could begin to justify enhancing transparency in their tactical nuclear capabilities vis-à-vis the United States.
- In order to maintain START I until 2009 and ensure the continuation of its verification regime after that date, both sides might have to consider relaxing some START-imposed restrictions before the Treaty expiration. For instance, they could agree to use them only in the context of the START I compliance, like they are already doing with regard to the document's counting rules.