

PRC and US Future Participation in Arms Control

As far as the United States is concerned, bilateral arms control negotiations between the U.S. and Russia will remain the central focus of nuclear arms control efforts for the foreseeable future.

The prospects for U.S.-Russian arms control do not seem very good. The START II Treaty remains unratified, seven years after it was signed. It has been three years since the U.S. and Russia agreed in Helsinki to negotiate a START III Treaty. As we discussed yesterday, U.S. proposals to modify the ABM Treaty to allow deployment of a limited NMD system have cast a shadow on U.S.-Russian relations. Russia has so far refused to discuss modifications to the ABM Treaty, and some Americans advocate scrapping the treaty altogether in order to deploy an NMD system. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which nuclear arms control comes to a halt and even existing agreements fall apart.

Although I am depressed by this state of affairs, things may not be as bad as they seem. Let me offer a very different kind of scenario, one that we outlined in our 1997 study on the Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy.

Last month, acting President Putin and key military officials urged the Duma to ratify START II. A strong case can be made that START II is in Russia's interests, because it would constrain U.S. strategic forces far more than it would constrain Russia's. And because the Duma would make ratification contingent on continued U.S. compliance with the ABM Treaty, this would provide additional incentive for the U.S. to take Russia's views into account when making decisions about NMD. So there is a good chance that START II may be ratified soon—as early as this month.

START II is also in the interests of the United States. The huge force that the U.S. now deploys is unnecessary and wasteful, but Congress has prohibited the administration from reducing its forces below the START-I level unless Russia ratifies START II. The Defense Department fully supports START II, so the U.S. Senate should approve the minor modifications that were made to the Treaty.

Once START II is ratified, it would be possible to negotiate and sign a quick START III agreement this year. Although in Helsinki the U.S. and Russia agreed on a broad agenda for START III, in our report we advocated a treaty based on the existing START framework, which would lower the limit on deployed strategic warheads to about 2000.

There are indications that the Clinton Administration views this agenda with increasing urgency. The Administration is worried about its legacy, and some officials are advocating a major push to complete all outstanding arms control negotiations by end of Clinton's term of office. This could represent a major opportunity for progress.

The fate of START is tied to decisions about NMD. Unless this issue is resolved to the satisfaction of Russia, it will be impossible to make progress. Fortunately, the Administration understands this linkage, so there is a reasonable chance that President Clinton will not decide to deploy an NMD system. If Clinton defers a decision on NMD, as I hope he will, it would be in Russia's interests to quickly negotiate a START III Treaty. Russia would make clear that ratification and implementation of this treaty would be contingent of U.S. compliance with the ABM Treaty.

According to many reports, the U.S. would like to deploy 2500 warheads under START III, while Russia would favor a limit of 1000 to 1500. As was mentioned yesterday, the U.S. propose lower offensive limits in exchange for Russia agreeing to modifications to the ABM Treaty to permit a limited NMD system based in Alaska. Although there are obvious conceptual problems with such a deal, Russia might be better off with this deal than without it—if the alternative is much larger US offensive forces and no constraints on NMD. We should remember that Russia would be able to easily penetrate the proposed NMD system using various countermeasures, so it is not obvious that a deal is impossible.

So, perhaps a year from now we could have a START III Treaty, if the U.S. defers a decision to deploy NMD or if the two sides reach an agreement that allow a limited deployment.

Looking beyond START III, we believe that the next step should be to limit the total number of nuclear weapons and stockpiles of fissile material. Such limits would address three problems:

First, large stockpiles of non-deployed warheads create the potential for rapid and large-scale breakout. For example, the United States plans to maintain over 5,000 strategic warheads—and nuclear components to build another 5,000 warheads—in storage after START II is fully implemented, in addition to the 3,500 deployed warheads permitted by the treaty. Russia also probably has very large stockpiles of reserve warheads. These stockpiles generate concern that a country could increase the size of its strategic force very rapidly by simply

replacing warheads that had been removed from missiles and bombers under START.

Second, limits on warheads are the only way to limit tactical nuclear warheads, because most tactical warheads are not associated with a unique delivery system. The United States is concerned about the fate of Russia's huge stockpile of tactical warheads; Russia is worried about the deployment of U.S. tactical warheads in an expanded NATO. Both would gain from greater transparency regarding stockpiles of tactical nuclear weapons.

Finally, limits on warhead and fissile-material stockpiles could help reduce risks of theft or unauthorized use. Transparency measures would build confidence that warheads and fissile materials are secure. If security is lacking, transparency measures would help identify shortcomings and facilitate U.S.-Russian cooperation toward improving safeguards.

Once the United States and Russia have worked out a system of verification and transparency measures to account for warheads and fissile materials, we believe it would be possible to reduce the nuclear arsenals of both sides to about 1000 total warheads, including tactical and reserve warheads. Without system for accounting for all warheads, it difficult to see how we could achieve sufficient confidence to reduce to very low levels of nuclear weapons.

As we state in our 1997 report, we believe that the U.S. and Russia could reduce to 1000 total warheads without the participation of the UK, France, or China, so long as the forces of the other nuclear powers did not increase substantially in the meantime. Going below 1000 warheads would, however, require the participation of China.

So far I have mentioned limits only on the size of nuclear arsenals. But the operational readiness of nuclear forces is as important as their size. Ten years after the end of the Cold War, the United States and Russia each continue to maintain about 2,000 nuclear weapons on alert, ready to be launched within a few minutes. This posture is both unnecessary and dangerous—unnecessary because both sides have survivable forces that are more than sufficient for deterrence; dangerous because keeping weapons on high alert increases the risk of unauthorized or erroneous use.

We can do two things to improve this situation. First, we can engage in cooperative programs to monitor the launch of ballistic missiles and to provide reassurance that neither side is under attack. This has been officially proposed, but

I am not aware of much progress in this area, beyond the joint activities that occurred around the first of the year. It would be of great benefit, I think, to establish a permanent joint missile warning center.

Second, we can eliminate incentives for rapid reaction. Both countries should take their vulnerable forces—silo-based ICBMs, in-garrison mobile ICBMs and pier-side SLBMs—off alert. As long as vulnerable forces are ready for instant use, there will be strong pressure to launch them on warning of attack, as well as fears that these forces could be used in a first strike.

Survivable forces—submarines at sea and mobile missiles out of garrison—should be reduced to the minimum required for deterrence. Russia has already done this out of economic necessity. The U.S. could follow suit by, for example, deploying four submarines, armed with nearly 500 warheads, at sea. All subs should patrol on “modified” alert, in which it would take several hours to ready them for launch. This could be implemented quickly and unilaterally. Over time, we might be able to develop transparency measures to assure each other that these forces were not capable of rapid launch, although this is more difficult.

I would be interested to hear your views about this program. We are particularly interested in knowing at what point China might be willing to engage in multilateral nuclear arms control negotiations. We are aware of various statements on this point over the years, ranging from a factor of two reduction in U.S. and Russian forces, which has already occurred, to parity in U.S., Russian, and Chinese forces. We think that China must engage before parity is achieved, but just when and how is unclear. One idea is for China to have observer status in future U.S.-Russian negotiations; another is for China to unilaterally promise to cap its nuclear forces at a certain level while the U.S. and Russia reduce their forces. Related to this is China’s willingness to end the production of fissile material for weapons.

We are also interested in China’s plans for the expansion and modernization of its arsenal. If China continues to maintain a relatively small nuclear force at a low alert level, then Russia or U.S. should not be alarmed. Of course, India might react to any increase in the size or capability of China’s forces, and we would be interested in your thoughts on this.