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Nuclear disarmament after New START

The US-Russian treaty on reductions of strategic nuclear forces, signed in April 2010 in Prague, returned the practice of arms control to the sphere of bilateral relations and opened the way for a new round of nuclear disarmament negotiations. As far as actual reductions of strategic arsenals are concerned, the New START treaty is a relatively modest agreement – the ceiling of 1,550 warheads it has established is only about 30 per cent lower than the one the United States and Russia agreed on in the Moscow Treaty of 2002. Also, most of the reductions would be made possible by a change in the counting rules, which assign each strategic bomber a single operationally deployed warhead. As a result, neither Russia nor the United States will have to make significant changes to the structure of their strategic forces or to their modernization programmes.

The New START treaty is nevertheless a very important milestone on the way towards deep reductions of nuclear arsenals. The treaty imposes legal obligations on the two largest nuclear weapon states to reduce their strategic forces. Most importantly, it provides a legal framework for transparency and accountability of this process. Also, the data exchange and verification mechanisms developed in New START could support very deep nuclear reductions.

Another important achievement of the New START treaty is that it has resolved a number of issues that have complicated US-Russian arms control efforts in the past – missile defence, upload potential, and strategic launchers with conventional capabilities. Although the United States and Russia will continue to have disagreements about these matters, the approach adopted in New START could provide a foundation for resolving the disputes, if both sides have the political will to do so.

Missile defence is the most difficult issue to deal with, since the United States and Russia diverge dramatically

in their views of its potential role in national security. For the United States, missile defence has become an essential element in the National Security Strategy for dealing with threats from emerging hostile regimes. Russia, on the other hand, has been accusing the United States of building a missile defence system to undermine Russia's strategic forces, a charge that the United States denies.

New START addresses Russia's concerns by including a statement that recognizes the relationship between offensive and defensive forces, giving it a formal ground for protesting against any potential expansion of the US missile defence system. At the same time, the treaty acknowledges that the missile defence systems that exist today do not undermine the capabilities of offensive forces. Since this situation is unlikely to change, these statements establish a balance, even if a somewhat fragile one, that allows the United States to continue development of missile defence systems and at the same time provides Russia with assurances that this system would not be directed against itself.

Cooperation on missile defence could also help settle the issue. While there are some differences between the ways in which Russia and the United States and its NATO allies see this cooperation, all parties expressed their interest in working together on elements of the European missile defence system. This cooperation in itself could help all parties better understand the nature of emerging missile threats, as well as the limits of a missile defence capability in dealing with them.

Other provisions of the New START treaty, which put a ceiling on the number of non-deployed launchers and count conventionally armed strategic launchers against the treaty limits, will help to ensure that neither party could use these systems to circumvent the treaty, and have therefore provided a degree of stability in the bilateral relationship. In particular, they address Russia's

concerns about the US upload potential, which at one point were threatening to become a major point of contention in the negotiations.

Now that the work on the New START treaty is largely completed, the United States and Russia will assess their further nuclear disarmament steps. New START was initially intended to be an interim agreement that would open the way for a more comprehensive deal that would have to address other issues on the bilateral disarmament agenda – from tactical nuclear weapons to non-deployed nuclear warheads. Also, Russia would probably also want a stronger limit on missile defence deployment to be included in any future arms control deal. Negotiating such a comprehensive follow-on agreement, however, would be an extremely difficult task.

On the issue of tactical nuclear weapons, Russia has already reiterated its long-standing position, which includes the withdrawal of US nuclear forces from Europe as a precondition of any talks on the matter. Since the United States and its NATO allies confirmed the centrality of these nuclear weapons for the alliance during the recently completed NATO Strategic Concept review, no progress in this area can be expected for some time. Dismantlement of non-deployed nuclear warheads would require the development of comprehensive transparency and verification measures for which neither country seems to be ready at this time. Finally, it is highly unlikely that the United States would be willing to establish any limits on its missile defence programme. These difficulties, while they will complicate any future new agreement and narrow the room for a compromise, should not preclude progress in addressing each of these issues individually. As the example of missile defence demonstrates, cooperation in this area could address the concerns about missile defence much more effectively than any firm negotiated limit on the capability of defence systems. Similar solutions could be found in other areas as well.

On tactical nuclear weapons, the thrust of the efforts of Russia, the United States, and NATO should be on building on the commitments already made to remove these weapons from operational units and consolidate them at centralized storage facilities. These steps would emphasize the extremely limited military utility of tactical nuclear weapons, which has been openly discussed by NATO and implicitly admitted in the new

Russian Military Doctrine. The efforts to control tactical weapons should concentrate on the safety and security of nuclear warheads, rather than on the role these weapons could play in the military balance. To facilitate progress in this area, NATO could start by making its tactical arsenal more transparent and by inviting Russia to verify the consolidation that has been already completed.

The discussion of non-deployed nuclear warheads should also be focused primarily on the safety and security of the warheads that are in storage and awaiting dismantlement, rather than on the capability of the United States and Russia to increase the number of weapons in their arsenals. The experience of the past US-Russian cooperative programmes, in particular the lab-to-lab programme and the Trilateral Initiative, shows that these programmes could provide the much-needed understanding of the capabilities of nuclear complexes that would make it possible to address most of the concerns that might appear in the nuclear arms control context.

New START might be the last arms control agreement between the United States and Russia. This would be a measure of the success of the treaty, since that would mean that it had created a strong legal and institutional framework that could support deeper reductions of nuclear arsenals.

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