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Time to Put an End to MAD

By Samuel Charap

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With the U.S. Senate vote in late December to provide consent to ratification and the second reading in the State Duma on Friday, the New START arms control agreement is now only a few steps away from coming into force. The two governments should be proud of their accomplishment, especially given the critical need to restore mutual inspections after more than a year's pause since the original START expired.

But as long as mutual nuclear deterrence defines the relationship between the United States and Russia on nuclear issues, future arms deals will likely prove far more difficult to negotiate and be subject to even greater domestic political resistance. To change these dynamics, instead of pursuing a further round of numerical cuts, Washington and Moscow should consider using the next treaty to renounce deterrence.

New START proceeds from the Cold War-era doctrine that one side's nuclear stockpiles deter the other from attack because both maintain a devastating second-strike capability — a situation captured by the phrase "mutually assured destruction," or MAD.

This doctrine made sense when Moscow was the capital of an ideological, expansionist global superpower that the United States considered its mortal enemy. But this is clearly not the case with Russia today, even according to its fiercest critics. Indeed, the basic premise of MAD — that barring the threat of nuclear destruction, one side would actively take aggressive steps against the other — is absurd in the post-Cold War environment since a situation when either country would threaten to use the weapons against the other is both politically and militarily unimaginable.

Although the Cold War ended 20 years ago, deterrence still defines U.S.-Russian relations on nuclear issues, and this is the main reason for the bilateral and domestic friction surrounding arms control issues. Many of the difficulties the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama faced in convincing Republican senators to vote for New START — especially fears about the treaty's implications for missile defense — as well as Russia's reliance on tactical nuclear forces in an attempt to "compensate" for its comparative weakness in conventional forces reflect this outdated premise.

If both sides could agree to definitively forswear deterrence, these roadblocks would disappear. Missile defense would automatically become a nonissue for the Russian side, which continues to insist on linking strategic offensive and defensive weapons out of fear of the consequences of losing a second strike capacity. In addition, neither side would need to keep tactical nuclear weapons in the European theater, making an agreement to address this Cold War legacy much more realistic to obtain. With legally binding assurances that neither side views the other as a nuclear rival, deeper cuts in strategic arsenals are also possible.

For renunciation of the principle of mutual nuclear deterrence to be credible, such a treaty would also have to address the threat that many believe that MAD eliminated: the possibility that, absent the threat of massive retaliation, one side would try to control the other's political system. A nondeterrence treaty could therefore oblige each side to respect the other's sovereignty.

Abolishing deterrence would provide benefits to both sides outside of the bilateral arms control context. Russia could redirect the billions it spends on new missile programs to social and economic modernization and infrastructure projects. In turn, the United States could reallocate the resources spent maintaining deterrence to focus on genuine nuclear threats from Iran and North Korea.

Moreover, the dividends that reset can deliver will likely be limited as long as deterrence is maintained. During the Cold War, deterrence was part and parcel of a geopolitical rivalry that created a climate of extreme mistrust. That broader rivalry is gone, but the mistrust continues, in part because deterrence defines the relationship on nuclear issues.

The disputes between Washington and Moscow, whether they concern Russia's human rights record or U.S. policy toward Russia's neighbors, could be better addressed if the two sides agree to do away with mutual nuclear deterrence through a legally binding, verifiable agreement, which could also form the basis for future weapons reductions. Such a step would represent a radical departure from the status quo, but its time may well have come.

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