

When Fewer Nuclear Arms Means More Security

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The Russian parliament and U.S. Senate both ratified the New START treaty, which reduces and sets limits to the number of strategic nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles, but there are plenty of people from both sides who are not happy about the treaty.

In Washington, the main naysayers are President Barack Obama's opponents whose main goal is to kick him out of the White House in 2012. The treaty also infuriated lobbyists for the U.S. military-industrial complex who had financial interests in prolonging the arms race.

Russia also has its critics of the treaty. Of course, they are not the opponents of President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, nor lobbyists of the country's military-industrial complex. They are the so-called super-

patriots who are always ready to defend the motherland against the intrigues of the enemy and thumb their noses at those damn Yankees.

For example, Liberal Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky claims that New START substantially weakens Russia's military power. Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov said any reduction of nuclear potential will undermine Russia's security. Retired General Leonid Ivashov warns that New START is disastrous for Russia because it does not address U.S. superiority in conventional arms — above all, its high-precision weapons — that undermine Russia's security.

Mimicking U.S. Republicans, State Duma deputies have appealed to the country's leaders to speed up modernization of Russia's nuclear forces and for the Kremlin to monitor Washington's plans to build a missile defense system in Europe and the removal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons located on U.S. bases in several NATO-member countries.

Of course, it is possible to nitpick endlessly and find shortcomings in New START, but it is clear that the treaty will benefit both countries. The treaty will lead to a significant improvement in U.S.-Russian relations and to greater opportunities for cooperation in various spheres. It also opens the way for further talks between Moscow and Washington on military issues, particularly the thorny question of a joint missile defense system for Europe. If an agreement can ultimately be reached on joint missile defense, Russia, the United States and NATO will become true partners. What's more, New START enables Russia to save huge amounts of money, allowing it to proceed with plans to modernize its conventional arms.

Another positive result of the agreement is that it helps ease tensions on a global scale. It sends a signal to the other nuclear powers, as well as to countries like Iran that understand the geopolitical benefits of joining the nuclear club, that the two largest nuclear powers are serious about reducing their nuclear arsenals.

The message from New START is also important to a whole generation of people who have little understanding or memory of the bilateral arms reductions treaties of the past. I recently gave a talk to young Indonesian diplomats, and they asked why a small country like England has nuclear weapons but Indonesia is prohibited from having them. I referred to the results of World War II and the whole basis for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty of 1968 — mainly, that the treaty recognized five nuclear powers (the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China). But given the inherent inequality that five countries are nuclear while all the other 184 signatories are bound to remain non-nuclear, Article 6 of the treaty commits the nuclear powers to reducing their nuclear arsenals and to eventually achieving "complete disarmament." The young Indonesian diplomats were unaware of World War II, let alone the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Now that a positive precedent has been set with New START, it will be easier to persuade other governments to join the disarmament process. In fact, it is time that such talks became not just bilateral, but multilateral, and that the participants base their negotiations on common sense.

Some critics point to the fact that New START doesn't account for nuclear warheads held in reserve that could be deployed on missiles in the future. So what?

According to the treaty, both Russia and the United States can have 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 delivery vehicles. The first question is: Where are they going to mount these warheads if the number of strategic missiles is limited? The second question is: Even if a

certain number of U.S. delivery vehicles can accept multiple warheads, does this mean Washington would be more tempted to launch a pre-emptive nuclear first strike against Russia?

In my opinion, it is clear that even if Washington somehow ends up with 100 more nuclear warheads than Russia and builds a missile defense system, neither the United States nor Russia will ever launch a nuclear attack against the other. There is no reason to do so. Why should Russia incinerate New York or Miami, or the United States obliterate Moscow or Sochi? What's more, no matter how supposedly impenetrable a missile defense system either side might build, the risk of receiving at least one retaliatory strike is close to 100 percent. Who would ever take this clearly unacceptable risk?

China offers a vivid example of the myth that only strict nuclear parity can provide deterrence. For decades, China had only a negligible nuclear deterrent — a dozen or so nuclear warheads, primitive delivery vehicles and no missile defense system to speak of — and no country every thought seriously about launching a nuclear first strike against China. Moreover, during this time of nuclear nonparity with the Soviet Union and the United States, China was able to invest the money it saved on nuclear armaments into its own economic development so that in less than 30 years it became a superpower that everybody respects, fears and listens to more than Russia.

Unfortunately, over the past decade China has shown that it wants to increase its nuclear arsenal and capabilities. It would be much better if China slowed down those plans and joined disarmament talks instead.

In the end, why should Russian conservatives get so worked up over what they see as imperfections in New START? It would make more sense to focus on the country's pressing domestic problems. After all, it was those problems that broke a once-great superpower into pieces in 1991. The nuclear parity with the United States that the Soviet Union spent so much energy and money achieving — at such great cost to the welfare of the people — did nothing to stave off the Soviet collapse. On the contrary, the Kremlin's obsession with nuclear parity was one of the main reasons that caused the country to collapse.

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