

Strong-Armed Tactics

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It seems that disarmament talks and treaties, one of the most promising areas of U.S.-Russian cooperation, might be removed from the bilateral agenda soon. The media reports that the U.S. has initiated a program to modernize the B61 tactical nuclear bomb with advanced guidance mechanisms and to mount it on F-16 and F-35 jet fighters. But at stake here is not simply the modernization of the United States' estimated 200 tactical bombs located in Europe. After all, Russia has five times more tactical nuclear weapons.

The problem is that the decision to modernize the B61 nuclear missile effectively indicates that the U.S. is backtracking on a goal that U.S. President Barack Obama had named as a top priority when he first took office: the impossible task of eliminating all nuclear weapons in the world. Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev proclaimed the same lofty goal 20 years ago. But it is not surprising that the declarations by both leaders were met with a healthy dose of skepticism.

If the Kremlin
were truly

worried about
the 200 U.S.
tactical nuclear
bombs
in Europe, it
would be trying
to negotiate
with
Washington
on reducing
both sides'
arsenals.

Former U.S. President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq taught the world a lesson that it already had known for decades: possession of nuclear weapons provides national security and serves as the great equalizer on the global arena. In a sense, it is like the famous long-barreled revolver that was popular in the Wild West of the 19th century. As the saying goes, "The Lord made all men different, but Samuel Colt made them equal." It is nearly impossible to convince states who are serious about becoming nuclear powers to give up their ambitions, but two presidential terms provides ample time for Obama to make significant strides toward reducing the nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and Russia, both of which hold 90 percent of all such weapons in existence.

After signing the New START agreement in 2010, Washington proposed negotiations to reduce tactical nuclear weapons. Strategic weapons are controlled by limiting the number of carriers: aerial bombers as well as missiles based on both land and submarines. But tactical nuclear weapons can be delivered by numerous means: bombs, cruise missiles, artillery systems and aircraft, which means that reductions can only be achieved by limiting the total number of nuclear warheads. In addition, monitoring compliance with future tactical arms reduction agreements would require allowing inspectors to monitor each country's nuclear warhead storage depots. That would be a windfall for diplomats because negotiating the terms for such inspections would alone take years. The U.S. proposed that the two countries start small by exchanging data on the number of tactical nuclear weapons each holds.

But Russia immediately balked at this suggestion, demanding that negotiations on tactical nuclear weapons begin only after the 200 tactical nuclear bombs located in Germany, Belgium, Holland, Italy and Turkey are removed. The problem is that NATO member states are divided on this question. Germany and Belgium would like to get rid of the nuclear weapons, while other NATO states believe the bombs provide crucial nuclear deterrence and collective security in Europe. In any case, long and arduous negotiations within NATO would be required before any bombs could be removed.

By making the removal of all U.S. tactical nuclear weapons located in Europe a prerequisite to talks, Russia effectively rejected the call for negotiations. Washington effectively confirmed that Russia's condition to remove all tactical bombs was a non-starter by announcing its program to and proceeded to upgrade its B61s. Obviously, those 200 nuclear bombs will now remain in Europe for a long time to come.

Pro-Kremlin analysts contend that although Moscow holds from five to 10 times as many tactical nuclear weapons located on Russian territory, their range is too limited to reach Washington and New York. But modern Western F-16s and F-35s could easily fly to Central or Eastern European countries, from which they could strike Moscow and St. Petersburg with tactical nuclear weapons. If the Kremlin were seriously worried about such a threat, however, it would have engaged in negotiations in hopes of achieving the removal of some of those bombs in exchange for additional reductions to Russia's nuclear arsenal. Yet the Kremlin is not looking for solutions. Rather, it is constantly searching for ways to draw the West into protracted and futile debate over imaginary problems to bolster its image as a major power and to manipulate the political landscape toward its own short-term and ill-conceived advantage. This means that it is highly unlikely that there will be any real results from discussion about reducing tactical weapons in Europe and Russia.

Even worse, the New START treaty, the crown jewel of Obama's nuclear reduction policy, might now be in doubt. Deputy Defense Minister Yury Borisov recently announced that the Moscow Institute of Thermal Technology, the manufacturer of the Topol-M, Yars and Bulava missiles, was taking a serious look at developing a railways-based nuclear missile program. These weapons were one of the greatest headache for Pentagon strategists in the late 1980s because, unlike silo-based missiles, they are difficult to detect from satellite surveillance. Railway-based missiles can be placed at virtually any point across Russia's vast territory and hidden from U.S. view. It is no coincidence that railway-based nuclear weapons were shelved 10 years ago to close that confrontational, Cold War chapter in U.S.-Russian relations. Thus, if an official decision is made to revive that system, it could destabilize the strategic balance between Russia and the U.S., especially since U.S. senators insisted on prohibiting the redevelopment of railway-based missiles as a condition for ratifying the New START.

As a result, the prospect for U.S.-Russian cooperation on nuclear arms reductions is as cloudy as ever.

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