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Obama's Russian Roadblock

By Richard Weitz

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U.S. President Barack Obama proposed in June to cut the U.S. nuclear arsenal by one-third and major reductions in tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe. Moreover, he called upon the international community to renew its efforts to prevent Iran and North Korea from developing nuclear weapons, to bring the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty into force and to make nuclear energy safer.

Three years ago, Russia seemed to share Obama's aspiration to move beyond Cold War nuclear postures, with both countries agreeing to limit their deployed weapons to 1,550 as part of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. In fact, Russia considers New START to be based on the core principles of modest and balanced reductions over an extended time period, adequate but not excessive verification measures and recognition of the connection between strategic offense and defense. These principles, Moscow believes, should be applied to all future arms control treaties.

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But Russian officials have since reaffirmed their hardline position, saying that Russia will not consider further cuts to its nuclear arsenal until the U.S. addresses issues affecting Russian interests, many of which may well be beyond the Obama administration's capacity to deliver.

One of Russia's main concerns is U.S. efforts to build up its missile defense system. Although experts have disputed the capacity of U.S. missile defense, Russian leaders are convinced that it could undermine Russia's nuclear deterrent.

Russian officials suggest that the U.S. is using the threat of a North Korean or Iranian attack on the U.S. with nuclear-armed missiles as a pretext to erect defenses against Russia. Despite Obama's assurances, Russia asserts that U.S. missile defense is actually intended to expand NATO's role in Europe, complicate Russian diplomacy and facilitate new U.S. military interventions in the future.

President Vladimir Putin has even warned that, left unchallenged by Russia's nuclear deterrent, the U.S. would be tempted to intervene militarily in more countries, as it did in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya. These concerns have driven Russia to demand that the U.S. sign a binding agreement that limits the speed, location and capabilities of its missile defenses and includes mandatory transparency provisions.

Another issue constraining nuclear disarmament is Russia's view that without nuclear weapons, its military capabilities would be no match for U.S. conventional forces. Indeed, many in Russia worry that a U.S. attack against Russia's nuclear deterrent and other defense assets that relies on the United States' growing stock of long-range, precision-guided conventional weapons would be as devastating as a nuclear strike.

These fears are exacerbated by Obama's declared intention to work alongside NATO in seeking to reduce the thousands of tactical weapons in Russia's arsenal, which dwarfs NATO's holdings of roughly 200 in Europe. Many in Russia view their country's dominance in tactical weapons as essential to offsetting imbalances in conventional weaponry. As long as the U.S. has tactical weapons deployed near Russia's border, Russian officials insist they will not initiate such talks.

Even if the U.S. managed to get Russia to the negotiating table, convincing the Kremlin to accept sizable cuts in its tactical nuclear weapon arsenal could require the U.S. to fulfill additional demands, such as limiting NATO's military concentrations and facilities near Russia's periphery. Moreover, Russian leaders demand that other nuclear-armed states accept comparable limits on their tactical nuclear weapons stocks.

Indeed, Russia wants to replace the predominately bilateral nuclear arms-control processes of the last 50 years with multilateral negotiations aimed at constraining the offensive capabilities of other nuclear states, including Britain, France, and China. But convincing these states to participate in arms reduction negotiations, much less to accept new constraints on their relatively small nuclear arsenals, would be difficult.

The fundamental challenge is that Russia's leaders do not share Obama's aversion to nuclear weapons. On the contrary, they believe that, while the likelihood of a nuclear war has fallen sharply since the Cold War, nuclear deterrence has become more valuable for Russia and other countries that are outmatched by Washington's conventional military power. This might prove to be an insurmountable obstacle to realizing Obama's vision of a world free of nuclear weapons.

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