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Don't Junk New START

By Steven Pifer

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U.S. Representatives Trent Franks and Doug Lamborn, writing in The Moscow Times on Feb. 12, called for the U.S. to withdraw from the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or New START. Their arguments do not stand up to serious scrutiny. Continued observance of New START is in the interest of the U.S. and Russia.

New START requires that each country reduce its strategic arms to no more than 1,550 deployed strategic warheads and no more than 700 deployed strategic missiles and bombers. These limits take full effect in February 2018.

The treaty constrains only deployed strategic weapons. It does not limit reserve strategic warheads or non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons. According to the Federation of American Scientists, the U.S. and Russia have total arsenals numbering about 4,500 nuclear weapons each.

The main Franks/Lamborn argument against New START appears to be that it limits only U.S. and Russian strategic forces, while other countries — they cite China, India and Pakistan — expand their arsenals. New START is a bilateral agreement, true.

Consider, however, third-country arsenals. China is believed to have 250 to 300 total nuclear weapons. The Indian and Pakistani arsenals each number less than 150 weapons, none on a delivery system that could reach the U.S. and few, if any, that could reach Russia.

If nuclear reductions proceed, at some point third countries, including U.S. allies such as Britain and France, should be brought in. But that is not necessary now. New START will leave the U.S. and Russia as nuclear superpowers head and shoulders above everyone else. In fact, Washington and Moscow could go beyond New START and cut their total arsenals in half — and each would still have at least eight times as many nuclear weapons as China or any other country. Third-country nuclear forces do not provide a valid reason to leave New START.

The second Franks/Lamborn argument deals with Russian compliance with arms control agreements, which they say raises doubts about whether Moscow will abide by New START's terms. New START just entered its fourth year of implementation, with the sides having already conducted more than 100 inspections. No one has suggested that Russia has violated the treaty. Indeed, Russia has already met the 1,550 and 700 limits.

Franks and Lamborn refer to questions about Russian compliance with the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. At least one of the questions often reported in the press — that the Russian RS-26 ballistic missile violates the INF Treaty — is spurious. The RS-26 has been tested to a range greater than 5,500 kilometers, which, by the definitions of both the New START and INF treaties, makes it a permitted intercontinental ballistic missile, not a prohibited intermediate-range ballistic missile.

There appears to be a more serious concern regarding whether the Russian military is developing a prohibited intermediate-range cruise missile. The U.S. government has raised this issue in diplomatic channels and must pursue it, but that does not provide a good reason to junk New START.

In the 1980s, the administration of President Ronald Reagan continued to observe the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Moscow, despite its concerns about Soviet violations of that agreement. The most egregious issue was a large radar located at Krasnoyarsk in Siberia. It took time, but diplomacy worked: The Soviets ultimately agreed to tear down the radar.

Franks and Lamborn go on to assert, "Russia may already be in violation of agreements related to tactical nuclear weapons." It is unclear what they mean by this. While there have been questions about Russian implementation of unilateral nuclear reductions that it announced in 1991 and 1992, there has never been a U.S.-Soviet or U.S.-Russian agreement on tactical nuclear weapons.

When discussing missile defense, the lawmakers cite Russian threats to withdraw from New START due to concern about U.S. missile defenses but say the Russian concern is groundless. They then suggest that Russian missile defenses provide a reason for U.S. withdrawal.

In reality, neither side's missile defenses pose a threat to the other's strategic forces. U.S. SM-3 missile interceptors lack the velocity to engage strategic ballistic missile warheads. While the U.S. maintains 30 interceptor missiles in Alaska and California to defend against future strategic missile threats from rogue states such as North Korea, they offer little protection against some 1,500 Russia strategic ballistic missile warheads.

Russia deploys about 70 interceptor missiles around Moscow. The U.S. military has never appeared particularly concerned about the capability of that system.

The U.S. and Russia will continue to pursue missile defenses. But given the technological challenges and cost, it would be many, many years before such defenses could pose any kind of threat to the other's strategic retaliatory forces. Missile defense does not offer a plausible pretext for either side to withdraw from New START.

The New START Treaty reduces U.S. and Russian strategic weapons that threaten the other country, gets rid of nuclear overkill, provides important transparency and predictability, and could reduce the costs of strategic forces in the future. The treaty remains very much in the interest of the U.S. and Russia.

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