

Future of Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces

In the Wake of Obama's Moscow Visit

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Now that US President Obama's visit to Moscow is over, what do we have at the bottom line?

First, the summit produced a framework document defining the number of strategic carriers quite broadly (500-1,100) and the number of nuclear warheads - in a narrower corridor (1,500-1,675). The limits are set by the US and Russian Presidents for their negotiating teams and can easily be adjusted in case the sides reach another consensus on the issue.

Secondly, Presidents Obama and Medvedev discussed the future of the US missile defense, but this part of the talks led to no definite agreements. All that was said was that the existing viewpoints would have to be taken into account. Moreover, by default the examination of missile defense was limited to just two - and not even the most important - of the hundreds of elements it actually comprises.

There were indefinite suggestions to go on discussing the possibility to cooperate in building the missile shield, jointly analyzing the XXI century missile challenges, and monitoring missile programs across the world. As a clear reference to North Korea and Iran, the two Presidents warned all the countries having missile potentials against missile technology proliferation.

Thirdly, Russia allowed the US Air Forces to use its airspace, leaving the general public oblivious to details of the deal.

The above are the practical results of the Moscow summit. Can the Russian side be satisfied with the parameters of the agreement on carriers and warheads? Yes and no at the same time. Given the current situation in the nuclear arms sphere (the condition of Russia's strategic nuclear forces, the level of development of the US missile defense and precision weapons, the magnitude of the return potential concealed by the START-1 Treaty) Russia should regard 1,700 warheads as the critical minimum. Why? Estimates show that with this number of warheads and the corresponding number of carriers the Russian nuclear forces can retain functionality after an attack by US high-precision weapons, launch on warning before nuclear warheads carried by US ballistic missiles reach Russia, penetrate the US missile defense (with some 800-1,000 warheads) and inflict unacceptable damage on the US. This is the essence of the nuclear deterrence.

The build-up of the US supersonic high-precision cruise missile potential and the development of the US missile defense capable of intercepting missiles at the boost phase and warheads after their separation from carriers undermine Russia's ability to launch on warning or deliver a retaliatory strike. In other words, the advancement of the US capability

to destroy the Russian nuclear forces in their positioning regions (on the ground, on strategic bombers at airfields, and on docked submarines) as well as to intercept Russian missiles and warheads creates such a situation that even having a certain number of nuclear munitions Russia will not be able to deliver them to target locations.

Experts project that until 2012-2015 the level of 1,700 munitions will be sufficient to keep Russia safe, but in more distant future either the US arsenals will have to be slashed or Russia's capabilities to safeguard its strategic nuclear forces will have to be upgraded to preserve the balance. The latter option appears unrealistic due to the overall negative situation in the Russian military-industrial complex and the current conditions and trends in the Russian strategic nuclear forces. What we witness at present is the degradation of Russia's military-industrial complex, the ageing of its missile arsenals, shortages of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium, and serious difficulties faced by Russian missile-manufacturing enterprises.

As the US Administration is fully aware of the state of Russia's strategic nuclear forces and the outlook for them, its consent to the proposed parameters of the arms reduction was not hard to extract. Speaking precisely, Washington simply tailored the parameters of the proposed cuts to its own military programs whose underlying strategy is to rely less on nuclear arms and more on advanced conventional weapons, especially cruise missiles and space-based, ground-based, and marine missile defense systems. At present the US leadership in conventional warfare goes unchallenged but the nuclear potentials of Russia, China, and other countries still preclude the global US dictate. As a result, the reduction of nuclear potentials plays into the hands of the US.

There are a number of reasons why at the moment Russia should exercise maximal restraint. First, the entire sphere of its national security is in disrepair. Russia needs a fundamental analysis of the international situation in the context of the current economic crisis and its own global strategy aimed at rebuilding the international security system. It should also make resolute efforts to restore its military-industrial complex. Secondly, the ongoing shifts in the domestic situation in the US must be taken into account. The US is struggling with the current global crisis, and Washington is in the process of rethinking its politics, both domestic and international. Russia should keep its finger on the pulse of the process and be ready to support the US President's steps whenever they are constructive. Thirdly, the uncertainty in the US-China-Russia triangle seriously factors into the situation. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRIC summits convened shortly prior to B. Obama's Moscow visit, and Beijing sided with Moscow at both forums. However, it is clear that China will be concerned over Moscow's de facto consent to the continuation of the US missile defense program and especially over the indications that Russia and the US might start implementing it jointly. It is natural for Beijing to regard the plan as a threat. Russia's opening its airspace to US military transit is also an alarming development from China's standpoint as Beijing probably suspects a correlation between the surge of the Tibet and Uyghur separatism and the presence of the US forces in Afghanistan. Attention should also be paid to the fact that China no less than other countries seeks strategic partnership with the US. Such partnership was offered to Beijing unofficially some time ago at a high level and has not been rejected so far.

China is likely to maneuver between the US and Russia, but only as long as Russia does not drop out of the top international politics league where it will remain only in case it manages to maintain nuclear parity with the US and nuclear superiority over China. While the US and

China mainly owe their geopolitical positions to their economic might, and their nuclear potentials only further strengthen their statuses, Russia's geopolitical standing is based on the proportions of its nuclear arsenal more than on anything else.

In any case, it is a positive result that the nuclear disarmament of Russia ended up being postponed. The Russian expert community has the time to analyze the situation and to formulate suggestions for the Russian leadership on the relations between Russia and the US in the military sphere.

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