

Obama's Nobel & START: Peacemaker arrives empty-handed

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There are many a smirk as US President Barack Obama flies to Oslo to be crowned Peacemaker of 2009, but it is the Russians who get the prize for taking the shine off Obama's trophy

Obama desperately needed a new nuclear arms treaty to replace START I to provide some justification for the Nobel Committee's gamble. The award in the face of US imperial wars and hubris is proving to be extremely embarrassing to everyone, left and right. In awarding the Nobel Prize to Obama on 9 October, the selection committee "in particular looked at Obama's vision and work toward a world without atomic weapons," giving him an out, if he could at least bring a nuclear arms treaty with him.

Instead, US inspectors packed their bags last week and left Russian nuclear sites unmonitored for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union almost two decades ago. The expiration of the treaty and stalled talks on a replacement dealt a blow to those in the Obama administration who had hoped to achieve at least this one tangible step before the president goes to Norway.

The Kremlin knows when it has a good hand, and it coolly played along with White House officials frantically trying to broker a signing ceremony for the new START treaty in the Czech Republic on 11 December, after Obama's visit Copenhagen for global climate treaty negotiations and his trip to Oslo. Keep in mind that the Czechs are gung-ho to be part of US missile plans for Europe, which are clearly aimed at Russia as much as any other state. How fitting to have the Russians grovel in Prague and cheer on the war president as the world's symbol of peace and goodwill.

But few children older than six or seven believe in Santa, and the supposedly "minor" details left to negotiate to make sure Santa arrives on schedule at the White House are in fact not so minor.

Moscow December 2009 is not Moscow July 1991, when START I was signed, just weeks before the coup which deposed Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, as the Soviet Union descended into chaos. The original START allowed for US inspectors to live near the country's primary missile production facility in Votkinsk in the Udmurtia republic, deep in the heart of Russia, and carry out intrusive inspections on demand, something which Gorbachev was in no position to demand from Bush senior.

The need to re-evaluate this lopsided one-way monitoring process just cannot be papered over. It amounts to whether Moscow will accept its subservient role in the US-run nuclear club or not. Russia wants to end the imbalance, while Washington wants to maintain and even increase its access to Russia military secrets.

The other issue — how many warheads and launchers each side will be allowed — probably could be settled without too much effort. The Russian government has said it is more than happy to reduce its strategic arms stockpiles by “several fold” if the US would only give up plans for Star Wars and its planned European bases. After all, what difference does it make if you can destroy the world twice as opposed to only once?

But, after Obama promised not to put its missiles in Russia’s backyard in September in order to clinch a deal with the Russians to allow NATO weapons and armies to pass through Russia on their way to Afghanistan, his sundry minions have gone out of their way to backpedal. The Czechs and Poles are increasing their troop numbers in Afghanistan, after all, and they are not easily mollified. Likewise, US and NATO officials continue to assure Ukraine and Georgia that they will soon be part of the happy NATO family, despite Obama’s obvious lack of interest in thereby further provoking the Russians. These unstated ploys are really just as much sticking points as the officially acknowledged ones.

START I was indeed historic. In 1985, at the height of the Cold War, the US and Russia possessed 23,000 and 39,000 operational warheads each. By 1995, these arsenals were more than halved to 11,000 and 16,000 respectively. When the Soviet Union was dissolved on 31 December, 1991, Russia and the former Soviet republics with nuclear capabilities (Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan) agreed, in the Lisbon Protocol signed on 5 December, 1994, to abide by the treaty until its expiry 15 years later. Daryl Kimball, Executive Director of the Arms Control Association, says that since the START I treaty was signed, the US and Russia have slashed their strategic nuclear arsenals even more. “Today, the United States deploys approximately 2,200 strategic warheads, and Russia deploys somewhere slightly above 2,200 strategic warheads today on a smaller number of strategic delivery vehicles.”

The treaty looked doomed as time ran out under US president George W Bush, who dismayed the Russians as he pursued a policy of confrontation and encirclement of Russia and launched war after war abroad. But Obama seemed to promise a less confrontation approach with his talk of “pressing the reset button” with Russia, and during his state visit to Russia last July, Obama and Medvedev agreed to hold talks dedicated to extending START I.

With Obama’s embarrassing dilemma — the Nobel Peace Prize and his vow to intensify the war in Afghanistan — he was keen to bring to Oslo at least a scrap of paper to justify the committee’s faith in him. The Russians, eager to change the trajectory of their relations with Washington, played along. However, to expect the Russians to lie down and play dead again was foolish on the part of Obama’s advisers. Sergei Markov, a United Russia State Duma deputy, said the main difficulty would be achieving a treaty that viewed Russia and the US as equals. “It was very difficult to negotiate a balance when in the Cold War the balance of power was 50-50, but in the 1990s it was 90-10 for the US. Today we are still far from equals,” he said, hinting at what might be the case if Russia continues its recovery and the US continues its decline.

But it is not just Russia that is the spoiler. Otfried Nassauer, director of the Berlin Information Centre for Transatlantic Security, said the US has also shown obstinacy on some issues for domestic political reasons. Obama needs at least seven Republican votes in the Senate to ensure ratification.

Anatoly Khranchikhin, an analyst with the Institute for Political and Military Analysis, said

the political impetus might be lost if talks run into next year. "It is just very hard to bring the interests of both sides into one place," he said.

As START I was due to expire, the US and Russian presidents issued a joint statement: "We express our commitment, as a matter of principle, to continue to work together in the spirit of the START treaty following its expiration, as well as our firm intention to ensure that a new treaty on strategic arms enters into force at the earliest possible date." In July, Obama and Medvedev agreed to reduce their stockpiles of nuclear warheads to 1,700 each within seven years, a START I Mark II if you like, though they did not sign anything.

So we can hope that Obama's shiny medal will at least remind him of this one small step he has made towards ridding the world of nuclear weapons, a goal that he has expressed more than once. During his visit to Prague in April, for instance, Obama pledged to push for ratification of the 13-year-old Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, much to the displeasure of many a US hawk.

Ironically, it may be easier to pursue his dream without a new treaty, which would need those pesky seven Senate Republicans to get it ratified. The Senate is notorious for balking at approving peace treaties, most notably, the 10-year-old Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines. Obama supported it back in 2006, but as president, apparently is unable to do anything about getting the Senate to ratify it. Bemoans Senator Patrick Leahy: "The administration's approach to this issue has been cursory, half-hearted, and deeply disappointing. One would hope that an administration that portrays itself as a global leader on issues of humanitarian law and arms control recognises this is an opportunity."

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