

The Illusion of Nuclear Disarmament. US-Russian START Treaty: A Comprehensive Flicker

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Two floundering presidents grabbed at a chance to show some results. No one will be happy, as always with compromises.

The US administration is preening itself on finally clinching a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russia, President Barack Obama calling it “the most comprehensive arms control agreement in nearly two decades”. It is to be signed in Prague 8 April, where Obama launched his campaign for a nuclear weapons-free world a year ago, and which was supposed to get a US missile defence base. Obama axed this, at least for the moment, to mollify the Russians.

Despite it being the only flicker of peacefulness out of Washington “in nearly two decades”, the reaction in the US is one of indifference or hostility as the right now latches on to each and every Obama initiative to show its displeasure over healthcare and other Obama-inspired liberal policies.

In Russia the reaction is sullen caution and hostility. Obama’s announcement was greeted officially only by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who warned that Russia reserved the right to withdraw from the treaty if it deems American missile defences a threat. Yes, Obama backed down a bit on the original Bush bases in the Czech Republic and Poland. But then all of a sudden, out of the wild blue yonder, Romania and Bulgaria said they would be getting them instead by 2015, and Poland invited the US to station troops there on a new base. What a coincidence. Despite the last minute addition of a few words as a sop to the Russians, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs Ellen Tauscher was quick to emphasise there would be “no constraints” on the expansion of interceptor missile deployments.

It will replace the 1991 accord which expired last December and looked like it would not be renewed at all, with growing alarm in Russia over the rapidly developing US missile defence system around the world, which looks very much like a US/NATO strategy to intimidate Russia rather than their supposed target Iran. The number of deployed strategic warheads will be reduced by 30 per cent to 1,550 and launchers by half to 800 on each side.

In a pointed jab at all the present and wannabe nuclear-armed nations, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Obama declaimed: “We call on other nuclear powers to follow the example of Russia and the United States and start reducing their nuclear arsenals.” The accord at least sends a positive message to members of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), at present on the skids, that Obama’s hope to rid the world of nuclear weapons is sincere. Britain and France, Iran and North Korea, Pakistan and India, but most of all Israel — take

note: Russia and the US are on track for once. And after last week's suicide bombing in Moscow, the two leaders may find common cause on non-nuclear terrorism as well, pushing them towards firmer joint action on certain other sources of terrorism.

Whether the Senate will ratify the treaty — a two-thirds majority is required — is a moot point. Already Republican Senator John Kyl wrote Obama that that is unlikely if there is even a mention of the “m d” words. However, Obama can hide behind words of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen: “Through the flexibility it preserves, this treaty enhances our ability to do that which we have been charged to do: protect and defend the citizens of the United States.” The White House has yet to release the actual “m d” wording. In any case, we have peacenik Ellen's word of honour that the US can still circle the globe with its bases.

Whether the Russian Duma will ratify it is also not clear. Emphasising its importance to the future of the NPT, Andrei Klimov, deputy chair of the State Duma's foreign affairs commission, said, “It's very important to have this deal, because it sets an example for other countries.” General Nikolai Makarov, the chief of Russia's general staff, also spoke in favour of the pact, saying it “will eliminate concerns on both sides and is fully in line with the security interests of Russia.” With his usual deadpan humour, Lavrov stated, “Nothing in this treaty contains clauses which would make it easier for the US to develop a missile shield which would pose a risk to Russia.”

But though Makarov supported Medvedev on the treaty, he also warned: “If the Americans continue to expand their missile defences, they will certainly target our nuclear capability and in this case the balance of forces will shift in favour of the United States.” This is in line with the Duma's resolution last month threatening not to ratify it. Says Konstantin Kosachyov, head of the State Duma committee for international relations, “If the connection between the strategic arms reduction treaty and missile defence is not exhaustively fixed by the sides in preparing the treaty this would automatically create obstacles for subsequent ratification,” he added.

In a taunt to Russia, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested Russia and NATO could work on a joint missile defence system. Kosachyov was not amused. “Unfortunately, I know nothing about NATO's missile defence system,” he said irritably. “I know a lot about the US missile defence system, but nothing about NATO's system.”

It's a crucial victory for the Nobel laureate, who convenes a 40-nation nuclear security summit in Washington on 12 April. For Obama, “not to sign a treaty before going into the Washington conference would be a huge blow to his credibility,” said Oksana Antonenko, a political analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. This pressure accounts for the minor concessions the US made to the Russians during the past few months.

Medvedev also needs something to show off in the run-up to 2012 Russian presidential elections. Despite misgivings, the Kremlin appears to have thrown in the towel and take whatever concessions it could squeeze out of an eager Obama before it was too late — basically, some face-saving “m d” words and a less intrusive inspection mechanism. There is no doubt that that is the logic at work, considering 73 per cent of Russians, in a recent poll, view Washington as “an aggressor seeking to establish control over all countries”, with Russian political leaders certainly part of that majority. For the rest of us, at least it provides some much-needed encouragement to the NTP.

The treaty in itself is not much of a step forwards. It doesn't address the underlying divergence in US and Russian nuclear strategies. "We face a very different strategic landscape from that in which previous arms control accords were negotiated," says Alexander Konovalov, president of the Institute for Strategic Assessments in Moscow. "America needs nuclear weapons less and less, because it is shifting its focus toward high-precision conventional weapons of both defensive and offensive types. Russia, on the other hand, depends increasingly upon its nuclear deterrent as the bedrock of our national security."

Russian security experts fondly recall that Cold War-era arms control began with the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which curtailed further work on defensive weapons. The logic of the subsequent SALT and START agreements was based on the certainty that neither side could defend itself from a nuclear attack and therefore had no choice but to negotiate controls on offensive weapons. But president George W Bush radically altered the strategic landscape by unilaterally pulling out of the ABM treaty in 2001.

In response to current US military aggression, Russia recently altered its military doctrine to lower the threshold for use of nuclear weapons. Experts say this growing reliance on nuclear forces suggests that the Russian military might resist further cuts, even though Medvedev has publically signed on with Obama's campaign to abolish nuclear weapons entirely.

The dilemma for the Russians is that they really have no need for these expensive, ageing albatrosses except as something to brandish at the US as it marches hither and yon, threatening and invading countries at will, and would be glad to see the end of them, if for very different reasons than the Pentagon, which has a bottomless pit of US dollars and, as Konovalov worries, is busy developing more precise toys.

The lurking fear among the Russians is that this treaty will be perceived as a sign of their weakness, encouraging further US arrogance. "It's always wonderful to see friendly handshakes all around," says RIA-Novosti's Pyotr Romanov. "But for those of us who remember the late cold-war era, when Gorbachev made concessions to meet American interests in order to break the ice, there's a wait-and-see feeling about this."

As Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Medvedev jockey for support in the presidential elections in 2012, the deal — if it gets through all the hurdles — could come back to haunt Medvedev. It may just fade away as more pressing problems, like Metro suicide bombings, take over the headlines. Or it may be the beginning of closer cooperation between the US and Russia on non-nuclear terrorism if Russia's Chechen wound continues to fester.

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