

ISSUE BRIEF

FOR SECURITY AND PEACE: RATIFY START

Responding to the Critics

ARMS AND SECURITY INITIATIVE

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This backgrounder makes the case for a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (“New START”) between the United States and Russia and rebuts the key arguments from critics of the agreement. Specifically, it responds to nine assertions made by the Senate Republican Policy Committee (SRPC) in a report entitled “START Follow-on Do’s and Don’ts.” This report has been chosen because it is representative of the key arguments being made by New START critics.

The objections contained in the SRPC’s policy paper (see link, below)—and others like them—have been raised in the media and in discussions on Capitol Hill, and will continue to surface in the coming months during debates over the ratification of a new treaty.

START Follow-on Do’s and Don’ts, Senate Republican Policy Committee, September 2009

http://rpc.senate.gov/public/_files/093009STARTFollowonDosandDonts.pdf

1. “Don’t pay for what’s free,” argues the SRPC, asserting that Russia will be unloading delivery vehicles “with or without an arms control treaty.” Is this a legitimate assertion?

Along those same lines the Policy Committee complains that Russia has not “earned” further reductions, given its **continued nuclear links with Iran, among other issues.**

Reductions in Russian nuclear weapons are in U.S. interests; they are not a “gift” to Russia. And contrary to the SRPC’s assertions, Russia will not automatically pursue its currently planned reductions absent a New START agreement. In fact, even if the Russians unilaterally reduce their delivery vehicle numbers, the United States should lock in those reductions in the context of a binding, verifiable treaty. This is a unique opportunity that should not be passed up.

In addition, Russia’s links to Iran should be pursued in other fora, not as part of START talks; and a START agreement might help improve the environment for getting Russia to use its influence in pressing Iran to curb its nuclear ambitions. Furthermore, U.S. and Russian reductions envisioned in a New START agreement will have no bearing on either country’s ability to address developments in Iran’s nuclear program, wherever those developments may lead.

2. SRPC asserts that “In terms of operationally deployed warheads and operational delivery vehicles, both the United States and Russia are far below the START limitations.” Does this mean that there is no need to continue working for additional arms reductions?

No. Reductions made thus far are a good sign, but more work is needed. Reductions beyond current levels serve both U.S. and Russian security interests, and they need to be embodied in a binding, verifiable treaty, not the sort of informal, short-term commitment represented by the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT). For more on SORT, see point eight, below.

“Background Briefing for Reporters: The Follow-On to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty,” Arms Control Association, December 4, 2009

<http://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/STARTFollowonBackgroundBriefing>

3. “DO Address Russian Tactical Nuclear Weapons,” demands the SRPC, pointing out that there is “significant asymmetry between U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear arsenals.”

The administration will address this issue in separate talks. But by definition, START is about strategic weapons, and adding a whole new class of weapon to the discussions at this point is counterproductive and will only serve to muddle the negotiations and subsequent efforts to ratify a treaty.

Russian strategic nuclear weapons are the ones that pose a direct threat to the U.S. Although the SRPC is stressing the urgency of Russian tactical nuclear weapons now, the Bush administration did nothing to address this issue, and was not subjected to similar criticism by the SRPC.

4. “The United States still requires a credible and reliable nuclear deterrent,” asserts the SRPC. The document goes further, stating that “In summary, President Obama must

ensure that any U.S. nuclear force posture resulting from a START follow-on agreement reliably, credibly, and effectively assures allies, dissuades competitors, and deters adversaries.”

This is true in the short-term, but only if we define “deterrence” narrowly, as a way to dissuade other countries from using nuclear weapons against the U.S.

The SRPC’s much broader definition of deterrence (up to and including using nuclear weapons to blunt a conventional attack on an ally) needs to be abandoned. It is a recipe for retaining unnecessarily large nuclear arsenals indefinitely, an outcome that serves neither U.S. nor Russian interests.

The SRPC goes even further, asserting that “U.S. nuclear weapons dissuade potential peer competitors from military competition with the United States and from trying to acquire a nuclear capability comparable to the United States.”

This leads to an obvious question: What peer competitors? The only country that is a competitor in the nuclear sphere is Russia, and a New START will further reduce any threat from Moscow, however remote it may be at the moment. China has repeatedly asserted a “no first use policy.” Overall, their posture continues to be one of “minimum deterrent” strategy, with only about 40 long-range warheads able to hit U.S. targets. Reducing U.S. and Russian nuclear forces is likely to reinforce this policy, not spur a Chinese buildup.

“U.S. Conventional Forces and Nuclear Deterrence: A China Case Study,” Congressional Research Service, August 2006.

<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33607.pdf>

5. The SRPC accuses the Obama administration of putting the “cart before the horse” in negotiating the START Treaty before the Nuclear Posture Review is completed. Is this a legitimate complaint?

No. START expired in December, and ratification of a new treaty will take months. The Nuclear Posture Review is on a different schedule, but the two undertakings are related. In fact, as an August 2009 fact sheet from the Defense Department states, in order "to ensure that the U.S. negotiating positions are fully consistent with ongoing NPR analysis," the START negotiations and drafting of the NPR have been "closely coordinated."

It is important to get a New START in place before the May 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review conference to give U.S. leverage towards strengthening the NPT regime.

In any case, a New START (which will bring the range for strategic delivery vehicles to 500-1,100 and a range of 1,500-1,675 for their associated warheads) is a modest first step. The Nuclear Posture Review -- which should answer the question: "what are U.S. nuclear weapons for?" -- should set the framework for going further.

Regardless of the shape of the NPR, reductions on the level of the New START approach would be consistent with it -- unless one thinks current levels of U.S. nuclear weapons should be sustained indefinitely, a position that is not viable.

"The Nuclear Posture Review Debate," Anya Loukianova, Monterey Institute for International Studies, August 19, 2009.

http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_nuclear_posture_review_debate.html

6. "DON'T include unrelated items like Missile Defense," in a New START agreement, warns the SRPC.

The administration isn't linking missile defense to a New START agreement. And the SRPC knows it. They actually quote a State Department spokesman saying on June 22, 2009 that "the issues of missile defense and strategic offensive reductions should be dealt with independently.

These are two different issues." Yet the SRPC still complains that the administration is linking these issues.

The decision by President Barack Obama and Defense Secretary Robert Gates to reconfigure the European missile defense deployments was based on new information about the Iranian program. It was not a concession to Russia.

"Strengthening U.S. Commitment to European Security," Jenny Shin, Center for Defense Information, September 30, 2009.

http://cdi.org/program/document.cfm?documentid=4552&programID=6&from_page=../friendlyversion/printversion.cfm

"Obama Shifts Gears on Missile Defense," Cole Harvey, Arms Control Association, October 2009.

http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2009_10/missiledefense

7. The SRPC claims that "U.S. nuclear weapons have zero effect on North Korea and Iran's nuclear programs."

There is a major link between U.S. reductions and the Iranian and North Korean programs through the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Article 6 of the NPT states that: "Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament."

Following through on nuclear reductions makes it easier to build a coalition to pressure and encourage Iran and North Korea to end their nuclear programs.

Conversely, a U.S. policy of reserving the right to strike first in the name of "regime change" gives Iran and North Korea incentives to keep seeking their own nuclear weapons.

In addition, U.S. and Russian reductions are valuable in their own right, regardless of what Iran and North Korea do – for example, as a step towards strengthening their partnership to limit “loose nukes” and nuclear materials that might fall into the hands of a terrorist group.

“Towards 2010 and Beyond: Challenges for the NPT: Iran and North Korea,” Michael Spies, Disarmament Diplomacy, Spring 2010.

<http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd90/9oms2.htm>

8. In its examination of the START agreement, the SRPC suggests that the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) is a better approach to arms control than a New START would be.

The SORT treaty -- negotiated by Presidents Bush and Putin in 2002 -- did reduce deployed nuclear warheads, but it has serious flaws that render it virtually useless going forward: It has no verification procedures (it relies on procedures set down in the START agreement); and it expires at the end of December 2012. These and other limitations lead some arms control experts to [quip](#) that SORT is only “sort of a treaty.”

A careful look at SORT makes the case for a New START even stronger.

9. The SRPC argues that the United States should “DO nuclear modernization with any agreement requiring reductions. Reductions in the nuclear arsenal can only be made if there is great confidence that those weapons remaining actually work, which is a prerequisite for credible deterrence.”

The issue is whether there is a need to modernize U.S. nuclear weapons and the U.S. nuclear weapons complex.

JASON, an independent science advisory group, looked at this issue in November, and released a report finding that “lifetimes of today’s nuclear warheads could be extended for decades, with no anticipated loss of confidence.”

There is no need for a new nuclear warhead design akin to the proposed Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) that has been rejected by both Congress and the administration. And there is no need to invest billions in new nuclear weapons facilities, as the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration has proposed.

“Lifetime Extension Program,” JASON Program, September 9, 2009.

http://www.armscontrolwonk.com/file_download/213/JASON_LEP.pdf



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