

Renovating U.S. Strategic Arms Control Policy

by Richard D. Sokolsky

Key Points

Decisions on the next phase of strategic force reductions and how to achieve them will have to await the resolution of larger issues related to the future of the U.S. strategic force posture and national missile defense. Once the Bush administration completes its Nuclear Posture Review, however, it will need to decide whether to continue the Cold War-style strategic arms reduction process or explore alternatives for reducing nuclear threats to national security and transforming the U.S.-Russian strategic relationship.

The traditional arms control process of negotiating legally binding treaties that both codify numerical parity and contain extensive verification measures has reached an impasse and outlived its utility. Moreover, new U.S. strategic priorities will require changes in the ends and means of arms control policy.

The United States and Russia should embrace a radically new framework to achieve deeper reductions in strategic nuclear forces. The centerpiece of such a reform agenda should be arms control through unilateral and parallel unilateral measures. To jump-start this process, the administration should give top priority to repealing legislation that prohibits the Nation from unilaterally reducing strategic forces until START II enters into force.

Unless the United States embraces a more flexible and innovative approach to strategic arms control, progress will be stymied in developing a nuclear weapons posture for the new security environment.

There has been a tectonic shift in the strategic landscape since the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) negotiations concluded in the early 1990s. The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact are defunct. America and Russia are no longer enemies and the nuclear arms race between the two countries is, for all intents and purposes, over. The threat of a surprise nuclear attack has all but vanished along with any plausible scenario between the two countries that could escalate to a nuclear war. The strategic warning time for reconstitution of a credible conventional military threat to Europe can now be measured in years. The likelihood that Russia could marshal the economic resources for clandestine production of new nuclear weapon systems on a militarily significant scale is extremely remote. The most serious security threats emanating from Russia today—poorly safeguarded nuclear warheads and materials and the potential proliferation of such material and expertise to states of concern—reflect profound weakness. Simply put, the proliferation risks attendant to a Russia in the throes of a long-term structural crisis are a far more serious security threat than SS-18 heavy missiles destroying U.S. intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in a preemptive first strike.

Consideration of future nuclear arms control options must also take into account long-term trends in Russian strategic force levels. With or without arms control agreements with the United States, Russia will not command the necessary resources over the next 10-15 years to sustain the number of deployed warheads (1,500) it proposed for START III.

Moreover, economic constraints, combined with growing obsolescence, will also lead to a steep decline in its nonstrategic nuclear weapons. Russian production of strategic weapon systems has fallen dramatically over the last decade. Moscow currently produces a negligible number of ICBMs per year and will not be able to produce these systems fast enough to offset the growing obsolescence of its ICBM forces. Further, infrastructure and resources are lacking to sustain these decaying missile systems indefinitely or to support significant increases in force structure. The other two legs of the Russian strategic triad are in even worse shape. Since 1990, the last year that Russia produced any new ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), the number of SSBNs has dropped precipitously and will decline even further as older submarines are retired. The heavy bomber force consists largely of older Bear bombers; Russia has produced only a few strategic bombers since the early 1990s and is unlikely to produce any new heavy bombers in the near future. In sum, Moscow faces the prospect of deep disinvestment in strategic nuclear forces for the next decade and probably beyond.

The Scorecard

The record over the last decade of both traditional and nontraditional arms control measures is largely one of initial successes followed by unfulfilled promises and missed opportunities to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security policy and bilateral security relations.

START I led to the elimination of nuclear weapons on the territory of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus and to the accession of these countries to the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)

as nonnuclear weapons states (NNWS). If START I reductions are fully implemented on schedule (by December 2001), the treaty will have brought about the irreversible elimination of hundreds of Russian strategic delivery systems and about a 40 percent reduction in the number of strategic warheads deployed by both countries. START II, which was signed in 1993, would further reduce the number of strategic warheads deployed by the United States and Russia to 3,000–3,500 each—about a two-thirds cut from 1990 levels.

Nonetheless, completion of START I has been a slow process and since 1993 the strategic arms reduction process has been stymied. It took almost a decade to negotiate START I, 3½ years to gain its entry into force, and 7 years to implement the required reductions. Although START II was negotiated in less than 12 months, it has yet to enter into force and is likely to remain in limbo for some time, since the Duma has attached conditions to ratification related to the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that the Senate is likely to reject. Although the two sides agreed in principle in 1997 to levels of 2,000–2,500 warheads in START III, discussions have yielded little progress. Meanwhile, the United States has been bound for several years by domestic law to maintain 6,000 deployed strategic warheads until START II enters into force. Perversely, therefore, the United States is retaining 3,500–4,000 more warheads than the Pentagon says it would need under START III.

By contrast, nontraditional arms control measures—unilateral and reciprocal initiatives, cooperative threat reduction programs, policy declarations—have produced substantial and quick benefits over the last decade. These include reductions in U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear weapons; the cancellation of several major U.S. and Russian strategic weapon systems; improved safety and security for Russian nuclear warheads and fissile material; the downsizing of Russian nuclear weapons infrastructure; and, in connection with START I, the deactivation or elimination in the former Soviet Union of almost 5,000 strategic nuclear warheads, nearly 600 ballistic missile launchers and silos, and nearly 500 ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs).

Traditional Arms Control

Both the traditional and nontraditional approaches to arms control have a mix of advantages and disadvantages. In the past, the traditional arms control approach of carefully negotiated, legally binding treaties has been well suited to influencing how Russia reduced its nuclear forces and to ensuring that those reductions became permanent, were verified with a high degree of confidence, and were implemented according to an agreed schedule. Although these benefits are not insignificant,

over the last decade the reduced threat perceptions in U.S.-Russian relations have outpaced progress in strategic arms control

they must be viewed within a broader context that takes into consideration a number of factors critical to the successful negotiation of arms treaties.

Stability. Formal treaties have provided incentives for Moscow to put less emphasis on systems such as the SS-18 that were considered destabilizing during the Cold War. It is questionable, however, whether the Cold War concept of strategic stability based on the principle of mutual assured destruction is still relevant now that Russia is no longer a strategic threat and there is virtually no risk of surprise nuclear attack or a crisis that would threaten rapid nuclear escalation. At one time, “forcing the Russians to sea” was a worthy goal. That said, Russia’s heavy ICBMs are a wasting asset, given the overwhelming proportion of the U.S. strategic force posture that is deployed on SSBNs that are not vulnerable to ICBM attack. Of far greater importance in today’s strategic environment than the ratio of SS-18 warheads to U.S. ICBM silos is that both the United States and Russia have the flexibility to size, structure, and operate their strategic postures in accordance with their threat perceptions, military requirements, and financial and operational constraints.

Irreversibility. Formal treaties help lock in the benefits of arms control and would be useful if a hostile leadership reemerged in the Kremlin. Physically destroying strategic systems renders them incapable of being used again and legally binding obligations are more difficult to reverse than political commitments. Historically, Washington was most concerned that Moscow not exploit arms control treaties to achieve a significant military advantage; hence, we sought to negotiate practices that would mitigate the risks of treaty circumvention and breakout. The value of such measures, however, has declined significantly, particularly in light of Russian economic constraints and declining strategic capabilities and the improved U.S.-Russian relationship. Further, for the United States, the importance of preserving maximum operational flexibility and programmatic freedom of action should be weighed against the importance of achieving irreversibility in nuclear weapons reductions.

Verification/transparency/predictability. Formal treaties establish a host of practices that help to reduce uncertainties regarding compliance and implementation. These procedures were valued in the past because they reduced the risk of miscalculating military intentions and capabilities and helped to shape a more structured and predictable strategic relationship. Whether this Cold War paradigm makes sense in the current strategic environment is increasingly open to question, particularly with respect to the requirement for “stringent verification,” since the American desire to preserve operational flexibility and reduce verification/implementation costs and burdens outweighs concerns over large-scale Russian cheating. Indeed, in the current context, robust transparency measures may be a suitable alternative to intrusive verification.

A problem with the traditional nuclear arms control process is that it is slow. Indeed, over the last decade the reduced threat perceptions in U.S.-Russian relations have outpaced progress in strategic arms control. Consequently, both countries are now maintaining far more strategic weapons than they need or want. In addition, the process of negotiating formal arms control treaties can create an adversarial environment and, by perpetuating the notion that mutual vulnerability to massive retaliation is central to a stable relationship, is incompatible with efforts to forge a more positive strategic relationship. Moreover, the U.S.-Russian relationship is more multifaceted

Richard D. Sokolsky is a visiting fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. Mr. Sokolsky may be reached by phone at (202) 685-2249. The author wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Dunbar Lockwood in the preparation of this Strategic Forum.

now than it was during the Cold War, when arms control was the main instrument for building cooperation. Today, the possibilities for cooperation are more numerous, and there are downsides to allowing arms control to dominate the relationship, among them the risk of feeding Russia's superpower pretensions. Finally, by assuming such a high domestic political profile in both countries, formal arms treaties are often expected to shoulder more weight than they can bear.

Nontraditional Measures

Unilateral or parallel unilateral measures are well suited to making fast progress and providing flexibility for both sides in implementation. In addition, such measures can be preferable to formal arms control if intrusive verification and other detailed measures are not critical, desirable, or feasible. For example, under current START II rules, the U.S. force of 95 B-52H heavy bombers would count as 1,900 warheads against an overall ceiling of 2,000–2,500 accountable warheads. Clearly, if the United States wishes to retain most or all of these B-52Hs for conventional missions, it must get some relief from START II counting rules. It would be much easier, faster, and cheaper to attain relief through transparency and confidence-building measures than negotiations with Russia on START III.

At the same time, informal arms control is not without risks and uncertainties. One disadvantage is the absence of verification provisions, which sometimes creates concerns about compliance. Also, it is easier to walk away from informal understandings than from legally binding treaty commitments. In addition, as the United States and Russia move to lower warhead levels, the number of warheads the United States would consider of military significance if not constrained by a formal arms control regime would decrease. Furthermore, the United States could face international opposition to unilateral initiatives. Russia values the status and prestige afforded by formal arms control negotiations, although a recent statement by President Vladimir Putin held open the possibility of parallel unilateral reductions. Likewise, U.S. allies and most other countries probably prefer formal arms control treaties, and may see a U.S. decision to pursue unilateral arms control as another indication

that America has abandoned cooperative approaches to international security. Finally, congressional opposition and legal constraints could make unilateral reductions in strategic nuclear weapons difficult to achieve.

the United States no longer needs highly intrusive verification to be confident that it can monitor deployed strategic force levels

These problems and disadvantages need to be weighed against the benefits of informal arms control. Some of the obstacles to new arms control practices can be overcome with energetic U.S. leadership and adroit diplomacy. In addition, concerns about informal arms control should be placed in a broader context that reflects current strategic realities.

First, the benefits of formal arms control treaties are less important today than in the past, in light of the changed strategic environment and Russia's economic constraints and plummeting number of delivery platforms for nuclear weapons.

Second, the United States no longer needs highly intrusive verification to be confident that it can monitor deployed strategic force levels. The United States will continue to possess for the indefinite future the intelligence capabilities, with national technical means (NTM) alone, to detect in a timely manner any covert Russian actions that could alter the strategic balance in a militarily significant manner. Likewise, because of the length of time it would take Russia to pose such a threat, the United States would have ample time to take effective countermeasures.

Third, unilateral reductions in strategic weapons could be accompanied by transparency measures (for example, data exchanges and reciprocal visits to military facilities) that would help alleviate concerns absent a formal START III agreement.

Fourth, many items on the future U.S.-Russian nuclear agenda—such as tactical nuclear and nondeployed warheads—simply do not lend themselves to formal arms control treaties, at least in the near term, because of technical, verification, and operational problems. In addition, there are steps each side

could take to reassure the other of its intentions and to reduce the risk of an inadvertent nuclear war that are better suited to unilateral or reciprocal initiatives.

Fifth, if the administration decides to deploy a national missile defense (NMD), unilateral reductions in U.S. strategic forces could allay Russian concerns.

Finally, there is little common ground today in U.S. and Russian arms control goals. The United States does not believe that the negotiation of a new arms control treaty is a *sine qua non* to reducing the threat of nuclear war or to enhancing stability. By contrast, Russia seeks further strategic arms reduction agreements to constrain U.S. military capabilities and to maintain its own perceived superpower status. Russia wants to limit U.S. operational flexibility, and perceives U.S. efforts to maintain this flexibility as threatening. These differences, along with growing disparities in strategic nuclear capabilities, will complicate efforts to craft arms control treaty provisions that can reconcile conflicting goals.

A New Paradigm

None of the features of the Cold War landscape remains the same, yet little has changed in American thinking about strategic arms control with Russia. Future strategic arms control policy toward Russia should be driven by two considerations. First, how does it contribute to broader national security objectives, in particular reducing the threat of nuclear weapons and meeting the most serious threats we are likely to face in the strategic environment of the 21st century? Second, how does it contribute to the kind of long-term relationship we would like to have with Russia and to reducing the prominence of nuclear weapons in this relationship?

From this perspective, the logic of traditional arms control appears to be out of step with the times, and U.S. nuclear arms control policy needs to be renovated. Indeed, many of the assumptions and principles underpinning classical arms control are now incompatible with broader U.S. national security and foreign policy goals. Russia is no longer our enemy, yet the traditional arms control approach generally presupposes and fosters an adversarial environment. We want a relationship with Russia based on trust, understanding, and cooperation, where nuclear weapons play a

greatly diminished role—if they play any role at all. However, the traditional approach to arms control, with its emphasis on numerical parity, has the perverse effect of raising the salience of nuclear weapons in our relationship, to the detriment of more important issues on our bilateral agenda. Curbing the spread of weapons of mass destruction requires U.S. leadership and credibility, especially in meeting its nuclear disarmament obligations under the NPT. But the formal arms control process is deadlocked and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, causing many countries around the world to question the U.S. commitment to nonproliferation and nuclear disarmament and undermining the U.S. ability to advance its nonproliferation agenda. Finally, traditional arms control theology remains fixated on reducing the negligible threat of deliberate nuclear attack and ignores more serious threats to stability, such as mismanagement of nuclear operations and practices, that are not susceptible to instruments in the traditional arms control toolbox.

What are the implications of the foregoing assessment for the general direction of U.S. nuclear arms control policy toward Russia? The United States puts too much emphasis on first strike stability, numerical parity, number of deployed warheads, and stringent verification as metrics for judging the benefits, costs, and risks of nuclear arms control options. In a new strategic environment, the United States should have new objectives and priorities. These include improving U.S.-Russian political relations; reallocating resources from maintaining unnecessary nuclear force structures to developing capabilities to meet new threats; bolstering U.S. nonproliferation efforts; downsizing Russia's nuclear weapons production infrastructure; improving the security and safety of nuclear warheads and fissile material; and reducing the risk of nuclear crises or conflict through miscalculation.

Accordingly, the United States should put more weight on nontraditional arms control and cooperative threat reduction and less emphasis on formally negotiated treaties. Unilateral or coordinated unilateral reductions in strategic nuclear weapons should be at the core of this transformation agenda. Other items on this agenda should include early deactivation of strategic systems that would be eliminated under START II, expanded sharing of early warning information and data on the status of nuclear postures, increased assistance to Russia

under the cooperative threat reduction (CTR) program for the elimination of strategic systems, and intensified U.S.-Russian dialogue on strategic policies, programs, and force postures. The goal of this strategy should be to help put both sides on the path of de-linking their strategic forces from one another and transforming a nuclear relationship that no longer serves broad U.S. national security interests.

The administration does not need to complete the Nuclear Posture Review before it begins to restructure U.S. strategic arms control policy. Currently, the prospects for breaking the logjam in the START process remain dim at best. Entry into force of START II is likely to remain hostage to the vagaries of U.S. domestic politics, while progress on a

the United States should begin promptly to reduce strategic nuclear forces unilaterally to levels commensurate with national security requirements

START III agreement is likely to founder over conflicting U.S. and Russian priorities and the complex and contentious issues that are on the negotiating table.

Rather than continue pursuing a process that is bound to move at a glacial pace or, more likely, remain deadlocked, the new administration should give top priority to repealing current legislation that prohibits the United States from making unilateral reductions in its strategic forces until START II enters into force. Once this legislation has been repealed, the United States should begin promptly to reduce strategic nuclear forces unilaterally to levels

commensurate with national security requirements, beginning with the deactivation of the 50 Peacekeeper ICBMs.

Thus, a more effective U.S. arms control strategy for the future would first make immediate unilateral changes in our strategic force posture, which would almost certainly elicit a comparable Russian response.

In the medium term, the United States would agree on transparency measures related to these reductions and other changes in U.S. nuclear plans and operations. Such actions would reassure Moscow that Washington is not seeking to exploit Russian weakness to gain unilateral military advantages.

In the longer run, some of these unilateral steps could be converted into legally binding commitments if we determined at that time that formal treaties were both necessary and feasible, given the overall strategic environment.

The United States has not reached a new consensus on the strategy and purposes of nuclear arms control with Russia since the end of the Cold War. Not surprisingly, therefore, the old bipolar nuclear arms control logic and assumptions continue to govern the U.S. approach. Traditionally, strategic arms control has focused primarily on trying to negotiate legally binding treaties that enshrined strategic stability, numerical parity, and stringent verification. It is far from clear, however, that these criteria should continue to guide decisions about what type of arms control measures the United States should pursue in the future. Most importantly, the philosophy and practice of traditional arms control are no longer contributing effectively to the goal of reducing threats to U.S. national security. New strategic priorities will require changes in the ends and means of classic arms control policy. Unless the U.S. approach to nuclear arms control is guided by a more innovative and forward-looking vision, it may well be doomed to increasing irrelevance or, even worse, could undermine rather than strengthen national security.

The Institute for National Strategic Studies publishes books, monographs, and reports on national security strategy, defense policy, and national military strategy. For information on NDU Press visit the Web site at: <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/press/ndup2.html>. INSS also produces *Joint Force Quarterly* for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the journal can be accessed at: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/index.htm.

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

Stephen J. Flanagan
Director

Robert A. Silano
Director of Publications



The Strategic Forum series presents original research by members of the National Defense University as well as other scholars and specialists in national security affairs from this country and abroad. The opinions expressed or implied in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or any other governmental agency.

NDU PRESS

William R. Bode
General Editor

George C. Maerz
Supervisory Editor