

## STRATEGIC NUCLEAR REDUCTIONS

### I. The Issue

In 1986, at the height of the U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons build up, the two countries possessed almost 64,000 nuclear warheads.<sup>1</sup> Today, the United States and Russia still maintain a combined total of approximately 11,400 strategic nuclear warheads (i.e., warheads associated with either intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) or submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs)).<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, since the early 1990s, both countries have been working to dramatically reduce these huge arsenals. But these efforts need to be strengthened so that the United States and Russia can truly liquidate the legacy of the Cold War, as President Bush has said he is determined to do.<sup>3</sup>

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), which entered into force in 1994, required that both countries cut their numbers of launch vehicles—missiles, bombers, and submarines—so that neither side possessed more than 6,000 strategic warheads, according to START counting rules. The START I treaty provided a great boost to world security by providing rigorous verification and monitoring steps to ensure that both sides were living up to the terms of the treaty. That said, the treaty did not address the fact that both sides could continue to maintain an unlimited number of warheads in storage or reserve.

In January 1993, Presidents Bush and Yeltsin signed START II, agreeing to cut strategic forces to 3,000-3,500 warheads by 2003. Notably, START II would have banned deployment of multiple-warhead land-based missiles. However, START II was never ratified.

Finally, at the March 1997 Helsinki summit, Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin agreed on the basic elements of START III, which was to cut strategic arsenals to 2,000-2,500 warheads on each side. They also agreed to explore limitations on tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>4</sup>

In the 2000 presidential campaign, then-Governor George W. Bush promised to dramatically reduce the U.S. strategic arsenal. Upon assuming office, President Bush began working to fulfill that promise, stating in November 2001 that the United States would cut its strategic arsenal to 1,700-2,200 strategic warheads, as had been recommended in the Nuclear Posture Review.<sup>5</sup> President Putin also proposed that Russia dramatically cut its strategic arsenal, calling multiple times for the U.S. and Russia to agree to go below 1,500 warheads each.

In May 2002, the United States and Russia agreed in the Treaty of Moscow to “reduce and limit strategic nuclear warheads...so that...the aggregate number of such warheads does not exceed 1,700-2,200 for each Party” by December 31, 2012, the date on which the treaty expires.<sup>6</sup> The Bush administration heralded the treaty as a great advance, ushering in a new strategic relationship between the United States and Russia. Critics, however, questioned the

claim stating that it would not reduce the arsenals quickly or deeply enough; its implementation could not be thoroughly monitored and verified; and it did not require that warheads removed from deployment be eliminated, rather than stored. The treaty did, however, provide for the establishment of a Bilateral Implementation Commission, which the treaty requires to meet twice a year,<sup>7</sup> which might make up for some of the deficiencies in the treaty.

With the signing of the Treaty of Moscow, the United States and Russia have abandoned the START II treaty and will not be proceeding with negotiations toward a START III treaty. However, the START I treaty will remain in force, including its verification and monitoring procedures, until 2009.

The Senate, on March 6, 2003, adopted a resolution giving that body's advice and consent to the ratification of Treaty of Moscow, subject to certain conditions and declarations. The conditions require the President to submit two annual reports to the Senate Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations, with the initial reports due July 30, 2003.

One report, due every February 15, is on how Cooperative Threat Reduction assistance can best help Russia "implement the Treaty efficiently and maintain the security and accurate accounting of its nuclear weapons and weapons-usable components and material." This report should help the Congress deal with the concern that once Russian nuclear warheads are deactivated they may not be as well protected from theft as they are when they part of the active force.

The other report, due every April 15 and relating to implementation and verification, must contain information on:

1. Current strategic nuclear weapons forces.
2. The parties' current strategic offensive reduction plans.
3. The parties' plans for achieving the required reductions by the end of 2012.
4. Improvements in verification or transparency, made or proposed, that will assure each party of the other's intent and ability to make the required reductions by the end of 2012.
5. Implementation lessons that have been learned from START verification measures, together with the consideration being given to extending the START verification regime beyond 2009.
6. The possibility that either party might not achieve the required reduction by the end of 2012.
7. Efforts either to address concerns about reductions being made on time or to improve treaty implementation.

The Senate's declarations stated its intent regarding various matters, including:

1. Encouraging the President to continue strategic reductions to the lowest level possible consistent with national security requirements and U.S. alliance obligations.
2. The expectation that the Senate Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations will be offered regular briefings on matters relating to implementation.
3. Urging the President to seek to establish cooperative measures to provide "improved confidence regarding the accurate accounting and security" of each

other's *nonstrategic* nuclear weapons and to provide Russia with assistance in accounting for and securing its *nonstrategic* nuclear weapons.

4. Encouraging the President, to the extent feasible and consistent with national security and U.S. alliance obligations, to make strategic force reductions faster than required.

To fulfill the promise of the Treaty of Moscow, the Congress should consider taking the following additional steps in order to enhance and strengthen the treaty:

- Elimination vs. Storage of Warheads: Consistent with U.S. obligations under Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which requires the nuclear powers to negotiate in good faith toward complete nuclear disarmament,<sup>8</sup> and consistent with national security needs, warheads removed from operational deployment should be required to be verifiably dismantled rather than put in storage.
- Operational Status of Nuclear Weapons: Presidents Bush and Putin should be encouraged by Congress to direct their defense and military leaders, in joint consultation and collaboration, to (1) devise changes in the operational status of their nuclear forces that would reduce toward zero the risk of a launch through miscalculation or accident and provide each President with greater launch decision time; and (2) to include in their deliberations consideration of immediately deactivating all warheads scheduled for reduction.<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted that significant reductions in nuclear arsenals also have occurred outside the treaty process. In the wake of the August 1991 Moscow coup and along with START negotiations, the first President Bush took 450 Minuteman II missiles and all strategic bombers off alert, unloading warheads from the latter and storing them in depots. In response, Russia announced the deactivation of 503 ICBMs and pledged to keep bombers at low readiness levels. Both countries took off alert ballistic missile submarines that were to be retired under START I.

## **II. Recent Legislation**

- Section 1031 of the Bob Stump National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2003” (Public Law 107-314) requires the administration to consider accelerating plans to reduce the U.S. strategic nuclear force to 1,700-2,200 warheads by the end of 2012. That section also requires the Pentagon to prepare an assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of reaching that level by 2007.

### III. Obstacles

- While the United States and Russia have agreed to dramatically cut their deployed strategic warheads, the two countries have not agreed to dismantle weapons removed from deployment.
- Keeping thousands of Russian nuclear weapons in storage increases the likelihood that some weapons will be stolen or purchased from unscrupulous insiders.
- No agreement exists to reduce the threat of tactical nuclear weapons—one of the most likely weapons of mass destruction for terrorists to attempt to acquire.
- In the absence of effective transparency and verification measures, the two countries may end up being very unclear as to the level and pace of each other's reductions, as is the case today with respect to Russia's nonstrategic nuclear weapons.

### IV. Q & A

**Q. The Treaty of Moscow limits to 2,200 the number of “strategic nuclear warheads” that the United States and Russia are permitted on December 31, 2012. What is a “strategic nuclear warhead” and why does the United States characterize the limit as applying only to “operationally deployed” warheads?**

**A.** Article I of the treaty puts the 2,200 limit on “strategic nuclear warheads, as stated by [President Bush] on November 13, 2001 and as stated by [President Putin] on November 13, 2001 and December 13, 2001 respectively.” The Article-by-Article Analysis that Secretary Powell enclosed with his letter of submittal of the treaty to President Bush stated how the United States interprets the treaty in light of President Bush's statement, as follows:

The United States will implement Article I as stated by President Bush on November 13, 2001: “... the United States will reduce our operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads to a level between 1,700 and 2,200 over the next decade, a level fully consistent with American security.” U.S. negotiators noted to their Russian counterparts that ... in using the term “operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads” the United States means reentry vehicles on ICBMs in their launchers, reentry vehicles on SLBMs in their launchers onboard submarines, and nuclear armaments loaded on heavy bombers or stored in weapons storage areas of heavy bomber bases. The United States also made clear that a small number of spare strategic nuclear warheads (including spare ICBM warheads) would be located at heavy bomber bases and that the United States would not consider these warheads to be operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads.

... [U]nder the Moscow Treaty, the United States will limit its strategic nuclear warheads based on the actual number of warheads on missiles in their launchers and at bomber bases (other than spare warheads). (Footnote omitted.)

Thus, the U.S. definition of “strategic nuclear warheads,” as used in the treaty, seems to include only warheads that are either (1) loaded on ICBMs or submarine-based ballistic missiles “in their launchers,” or (2) loaded on or stored near heavy bombers (except for spares). Apparently, a warhead stored right next to an ICBM in its silo would not be counted.

**Q: Why does Russia continue to maintain a nuclear arsenal that is far in excess of its defense needs?**

**A:** In many ways, Russia, as well as the United States, is still locked in a Cold War pattern. Both countries built up arsenals of tens of thousands of weapons in the Cold War to deter the other from attack and to use in the event of a nuclear war. In this era of greatly improving U.S.-Russian relations, it seems only reasonable that the two countries should work to dramatically and verifiably reduce their nuclear arsenals. It is hard to imagine—though terrifying to contemplate—a scenario in which either side would launch hundreds or thousands of nuclear weapons (all of them many time larger than the Hiroshima bomb) at the other or another country. As long as the two countries have such large numbers and keep them ready to launch in mere minutes, the world will have to live with that possibility, which would most likely occur as the result of an accident, a miscalculation during an international crisis, or an unauthorized launch.

**Q: What can the United States do to help Russia reduce its arsenal of nuclear warheads?**

**A:** The United States can work to fulfill the promise of greatly improved U.S.-Russian relations by demonstrating that as Russia reduces its nuclear arsenal, the United States will do likewise. The Treaty of Moscow is a step in the right direction, but supplemental steps need to be taken to ensure that the treaty results in a dramatically improved situation when it comes to the size and security of the Russian nuclear arsenal.

The United States can also help the Russians safely store and eliminate Russian nuclear warheads through the Cooperative Threat Reduction program (also known as Nunn-Lugar).

**Q: If a terrorist acquired a nuclear warhead from the Russian arsenal, could the weapon be detonated?**

**A:** The electronic security features on a Russian strategic nuclear weapon probably would prevent terrorists from detonating it. But a terrorist group could remove the fissile material from the warhead and fashion a crude nuclear weapon that could still cause tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of deaths. The situation regarding older Russian tactical nuclear weapons is much different. They may lack sophisticated security locks, may be much more easily transported, and, thus, present a more immediate deadly threat.<sup>10</sup>

**V. Talking Points**

- The United States should be doing all it can to ensure that Russia verifiably reduces its huge nuclear arsenal and is able to safeguard the warheads until they are dismantled.
- As long as Russian maintains a nuclear weapons arsenal excess of its defense needs, the risk of terrorists or “rogue” states getting their hands on these bombs will be too high.
- The United States and Russia can take steps to strengthen the Treaty of Moscow that will not slow its entry into force.

- As the U.S. and Russia seek to build a cooperative, less dangerous strategic relationship, the most effective way to build trust regarding nuclear reductions is through a process whereby each tells the other when, how, and how deeply it will make cuts and then allows the other to see first-hand that those actions are carried out.
- On May 1, 2000, as part of the 2000 nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty review conference, the United States and Russia, along with the three other NPT-recognized nuclear weapon states, reiterated their “unequivocal commitment to the ultimate goals of a complete elimination of nuclear weapons and a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”<sup>11</sup>
- Russia and the United States are still locked in a Cold War pattern. Both built up arsenals of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in the Cold War, but in this era of greatly improving U.S.-Russian relations, it seems only reasonable that the two countries should work to reduce those arsenals to levels below the thousands allowed for by the Treaty of Moscow. It is hard to imagine—though terrifying to contemplate—a scenario in which either side would launch hundreds or thousands of nuclear weapons (all of them many times larger than the Hiroshima bomb) at the other or at another country. As long as the two countries have such large numbers and keep them ready to launch in mere minutes, the world will have to live with that possibility, which would most likely occur as the result of an accident, a miscalculation during an international crisis, or an unauthorized launch.

## **VI. Factoids**

- During the Cold War, the United States and Russia built a total of over 125,000 nuclear warheads. In 1986, at the height of the U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons build up, the two countries possessed almost 64,000 nuclear warheads.<sup>12</sup>
- The United States and Russia still possess approximately 95% of the world’s nuclear warheads.
- Under the Treaty of Moscow, the United States and Russia plan to reduce their operationally-deployed strategic nuclear arsenals to no more 2,200 warheads.
- The Treaty of Moscow does not:
  - Establish mechanisms for transparency or verification.
  - Set forth schedules for removing warheads from operational deployment.
  - Require the destruction or dismantlement of any warheads or missiles or other launch systems.
  - Place any limits on the number of nuclear warheads that Russia or the United States can build, deploy, or store—except that neither is allowed to operationally deploy on a strategic system more than 2,200 on December 31, 2012.
  - Place any limits on nuclear warheads—no matter how large—as long as they are not operationally deployed on strategic launch systems on December 31, 2012.

## **VII. Applicable Treaties, Legislation, and Other International Agreements**

- Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (Treaty of Moscow)<sup>13</sup>
- Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I)<sup>14</sup>

- Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) Nuclear Notebook, “Global Nuclear Stockpiles, 1945-2002,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Nov./Dec. 2002, Vol. 58, No. 6, pp. 103-104, accessed at: <http://www.thebulletin.org/issues/nukenotes/nd02nukenote.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See Arms Control Association, “Current U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces” and “Current Strategic Nuclear Forces of the Former Soviet Union,” accessed at: <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets>.

<sup>3</sup> This paper deals primarily with strategic nuclear reductions. For more information on tactical nuclear weapons, please read the issue paper on that topic that is also included in this *Reference Guide*.

<sup>4</sup> For background and texts of the START I and II treaties and the proposed START III, see Arms Control Association, Factsheets on START I, II, and III at “Strategic Arms Control and Policy,” accessed at: <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets>.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the Nuclear Posture Review, see GlobalSecurity.Org, “Nuclear Posture Review [Excerpts]”, accessed at: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> See the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (Treaty of Moscow), accessed at: <http://justice.policy.net/proactive/newsroom/release.vtml?id=30768>

<sup>7</sup> Article III of the treaty.

<sup>8</sup> On May 1, 2000, as part of the 2000 Nonproliferation Treaty review conference, the United States and Russia, along with the three other NPT-recognized nuclear weapon states, reiterated their “unequivocal commitment to the ultimate goals of a complete elimination of nuclear weapons and a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.” Governments of China, France, Russia, UK and the United States, “NWS - Joint Statement at NPT 2000,” May 1, 2000, accessed at:

[http://www.iaea.or.at/worldatom/Press/Events/Npt/npt2000\\_nws\\_statement.pdf](http://www.iaea.or.at/worldatom/Press/Events/Npt/npt2000_nws_statement.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Such a step has been promoted by former Senator Sam Nunn. For more information, see Sam Nunn, “Keynote Address at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2002 Non-Proliferation Conference,” November 14, 2002, accessed at: [http://www.nti.org/c\\_press/speech\\_samnunn\\_1114.pdf](http://www.nti.org/c_press/speech_samnunn_1114.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> See the paper entitled “Tactical Nuclear Weapons,” in this publication.

<sup>11</sup> Governments of China, France, Russia, UK and the United States, “NWS - Joint Statement at NPT 2000,” May 1, 2000, accessed at: [http://www.iaea.or.at/worldatom/Press/Events/Npt/npt2000\\_nws\\_statement.pdf](http://www.iaea.or.at/worldatom/Press/Events/Npt/npt2000_nws_statement.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) Nuclear Notebook, “Global Nuclear Stockpiles, 1945-2002,” *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> See the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (Treaty of Moscow), accessed at: <http://justice.policy.net/proactive/newsroom/release.vtml?id=30768>.

<sup>14</sup> See “Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I),” accessed at: <http://www.state.gov/www/global/arms/starthtm/start/toc.html>

<sup>15</sup> See “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” accessed at: <http://www.state.gov/t/np/trty/16281.htm#treaty>.