

A GOOD START

On the first anniversary of his Prague speech outlining his vision of a world without nuclear weapons, US President Barack Obama announced the conclusion of a new bilateral arms reduction treaty with Russia that will limit each country's respective strategic nuclear weapons stockpiles to 1,550 warheads.

A phone call between Obama and his counterpart Dmitry Medvedev on 26 March finalised the negotiations, and Obama returned to Prague on 8 April for the formal signing ceremony.

Yet is remarkable that more than one year into his presidency, Obama's disarmament and arms control strategy is still determined by his predecessor's legacy.

He has been working hard to convince allies and friends of the US interest in substantive cooperative partnerships as opposed to fleeting coalitions with willing governments. He engaged personally in re-setting relations with Russia and his administration pursued an intense high-level diplomatic agenda. He reached out to states and their citizens—particularly in the Middle East—in an effort to prevent new wars from erupting, remove the nuclear Sword of Damocles from the region and to present a more multi-faceted West than radical Islamists would allow.

But thus far, Obama has little to show for all the energy and resources invested. With his intentions partially hijacked by the global economic meltdown—another legacy inherited from his predecessor's policies—and by the need for maximal political investment in health care reform, Obama



US President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev sign the New START treaty, Thursday, 8 April, 2010, at the Prague Castle in Prague.

is perceived by many international leaders as a Utopian, but essentially edental leader. Dealing with an economy on a fragile rebound and having overcome highly emotive, Republican opposition to healthcare reform, Obama demonstrated his buoyancy and, most importantly, that he can deliver on his vision.

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Off to a New START

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) is a modest step in terms of the actual reductions that will be achieved. For Medvedev, the signing will be his first major foreign policy achievement as President. The document will have a significant bearing on Russia's nuclear force planning as it faces major investments and deployments of new delivery systems just to maintain the status quo. It will basically maintain parity in delivery systems with the USA at little additional cost.

There was also an important psychological factor at play for the Russians as the Americans discovered during the negotiations: Russians hated the START 1 treaty for its conclusion just months before the collapse of the Soviet Union. In their mind, the acceptance of that treaty's intrusive verification regime symbolised the country's international weakness in 1991.

On the other hand, the New START treaty's less stringent verification regime therefore not only reflects the new security environment, but it also recognises a partnership between equals, thereby restoring Russia's formal superpower status.¹ For Obama, the treaty symbolises the promised return to verified arms reductions. It also represents an important stepping stone towards rebuilding relations with Russia.

Less than meets the eye

The New START treaty, which will have a 10-year life span, specifies three aggregate limits for warheads and launchers:

- (1) a total of 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads each on deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and bombers;
- (2) a combined limit of 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, SLBM launchers, and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments; and
- (3) a separate limit of 700 deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments.

The latter limit means that each side can only have up to 100 non-deployed strategic delivery systems. Its inclusion reflects the Russian concern that previous force reduction treaties did not fully address this component of the respective nuclear

arsenals nor included verification provisions for them. The United States has a far greater capacity than Russia to redeploy such strategic systems.

According to a White House fact sheet,² the limit on strategic warheads is 74% lower than the limit of the 1991 START treaty and 30% lower than the deployed strategic warhead limit of the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (known as SORT or the Moscow Treaty). In addition, the new strategic nuclear delivery vehicle limit is less than half than that of the START 1 treaty. Even though the cuts in the new bilateral arms control agreement are real, the actual figures may be less than those suggested by the White House. This stems from complex counting rules, which combines those of the START 1 treaty and SORT, and the arms reductions already achieved to date by both countries.

However, as all three treaties operate on different counting principles, the respective ceilings are not really comparable. Moreover, Moscow has rejected the US counting method under SORT. Taking these elements into account, the US-based Union of Concerned Scientists calculated the US and Russian ceilings for warheads and delivery systems under the respective treaties as follows:³

Treaty	Country	Warheads	Delivery vehicles
START 1	USA	5,576	1,198
	Russia	3,909	814
SORT	USA (2009 data)	2,202	798
	Russia (2010 data)	2,504	566
New START	USA and Russia	1,550	800 (700 deployed)

A further element of confusion in the New START treaty is that whereas each warhead on deployed ICBMs and SLBMs counts toward the limit of 1,550 warheads, a deployed heavy bomber equipped for nuclear armaments only counts as a single warhead even though one type (B-52) can technically carry up to ten nuclear-tipped air-launched cruise missiles. Strategic bombers can be configured for nuclear and non-nuclear roles. The US Air Force currently deploys 216 long-range bombers, of which 60 are designated for nuclear missions.

Considering that the non-nuclear aeroplanes can be reconfigured for nuclear missions, it is

¹ Jake Tapper, 'Nuke Treaty Talks Almost Fell Apart Last Month; After Russians Kept Insisting on Linking Missile Defense, Obama Told Medvedev He'd Walk', ABC News (blog), 26 March 2010.

² Key Facts about the New START Treaty, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 26 March 2010.

³ Union of Concerned Scientists, 'New START Treaty', Fact Sheet, 26 March 2006.

not known at the time of writing whether all 216 bombers are counted as warheads or just the 60 that are presently configured for nuclear delivery. According to the most recent SORT data, Russia holds 75 strategic bombers with a total of 838 warheads.⁴ It should be added that both the START 1 treaty and SORT had confusing approaches towards determining bomber/payload numbers.

Depending on the counting variation applied, the number of warheads that will be actually destroyed under the New START treaty may vary considerably and could be very low (100–200 items). As to delivery vehicles, Russia is already well under the New START ceiling. The United States has fewer than 100 operational items to destroy.

A return to verification

It is interesting to note the new agreement's direct lineage from the START 1 treaty rather than SORT. The Bush Administration had no appetite for complex implementation oversight, which often requires prolonged negotiations to resolve all technical details. Therefore, the greatest reward of the New START treaty may be the reintroduction of formal verification regimes in arms control. At the 26 March announcement, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton harked back to former President Ronald Reagan's signature phrase: 'trust, but verify', adding that 'verification provides the transparency and builds the trust needed to reduce the chance for misunderstandings and miscalculations'.⁵

Although Russia demanded less intrusive verification rules and was unwilling to share the same amount of telemetry data on its missile tests as in the 2001 agreement, it hailed the irreversibility, verifiability and transparency of the New START treaty.

Ratification, the next challenge

Ratification will be a major hurdle for the Obama Administration. It requires a two thirds majority of 67 votes in the US Senate. The presence at Obama's announcement of Defence Secretary Robert Gates, a Republican, and Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was a first round in that debate. The possibility of bipartisan support for the New START treaty definitely exists.

Veteran promoter of nuclear disarmament, Republican Senator Richard Lugar, has commend-

ed the efforts of the US and Russian negotiation delegations and wishes for early ratification of the treaty. There are plans to have the process completed before the end of 2010.

Missile defence will play a crucial part in the ratification debate in both countries. Russia's insistence on having it part of the package almost derailed the negotiation. Obama, however, refused to allow himself to be pinned down on earlier announced dates to finalise negotiations, including the highly symbolic date of 5 December 2009 when the START 1 treaty expired. His publicised threat to walk away from the negotiations over Russia's insistence on including language that would link offensive and defensive systems, expressed during a phone discussion with Medvedev on 18 February, will serve to weaken the argument by treaty opponents in the US Senate.

On the Russian side, negotiators were under great pressure from the military to secure limitations on US missile defence deployments. However, in contrast to previous negotiation cycles, the military complex's influence on state decisions has waned. Medvedev also needed his first achievement, especially before Obama's nuclear summit and the NPT review conference next month. Notwithstanding, during the press conference announcing the treaty, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov threatened that Russia might denounce the New START treaty in case of major deployment of missile defences.

Now missile defence is mentioned in the treaty's preamble only, which has allowed him to refer to a legally binding linkage between offensive weapons and missile defence systems. In general, the Russian ratification debate seems to revolve around the perception that Russia made more concessions to the United States for little in return. But General Nikolai Makarov, the chief of Russia's general staff, endorsed the treaty, stating that it is fully in line with Russia's security interests. He emphasised that the treaty represents a diplomatic and political compromise rather than a victory for one side.⁶

Another central factor in the ratification debate will be the maintenance of the reliability of US nuclear forces. Obama has already anticipated the challenge by including funds in his Fiscal Year 2011 budget towards extending the viability of existing stockpiles. In an address in February, Vice President Joe Biden promised an annual \$1bn increase over the next five years towards stockpile maintenance.⁷

⁴ Robert S. Norris, Hans M. Kristensen, 'Russian nuclear forces, 2010', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (January–February 2010), p. 76.

⁵ US Department of State, Announcement of the New START treaty, Transcript, 26 March 2010.

⁶ Ellen Barry, 'As Obama Hails Arms Pact, Applause in Kremlin Is Faint', *New York Times*, 26 March 2010.

⁷ 'The Path to Nuclear Security: Implementing the President's Prague Agenda', Remarks of Vice President Biden at National Defense University, 18 February 2010.

After a good start, now for the follow-on

The New START treaty means that President Obama has taken charge of his own security agenda. Meanwhile, he has moved ahead even further by declaring a new nuclear strategy for the United States. The treaty gives him an advantage for the nuclear summit on securing nuclear materials that he is hosting on 12-13 April. He has demonstrated a commitment to nuclear weapons reductions as promised in his Prague speech last year, and can now call upon other nations to address the other aspects of nuclear weapons security.

Obama and Medvedev will have a similar advantage at the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in May. Both leaders are displaying an inclination towards making progress on the commitment towards disarmament as requested under

Article VI, and it will be harder for critics to block progress on the other pillars of the NPT. In addition, the New START treaty also hints at a partnership between the US and Russia to address the question of Iran and of North Korea.

Whether opportunities for further nuclear arms reduction will present themselves is far from certain. Despite its name, the New START treaty was negotiated on a cold war template. Incremental steps down from the newly agreed ceilings on strategic nuclear weapons will be close to impossible, because the relative importance of non-strategic nuclear weapons will rise and the relatively small arsenals of the other nuclear weapons powers will acquire new significance in international relations.

Therefore, the next step may well be comprehensive global nuclear disarmament—or nothing.