

### The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) At a Glance

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The May 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), also known as the Moscow Treaty, commits the United States and Russia to reduce their deployed strategic nuclear forces to 1,700-2,200 warheads apiece. This warhead limit takes effect and expires on the same day, December 31, 2012. After this date, both sides are free to decrease or increase the size of their deployed strategic forces.

**Background:** President George W. Bush entered the White House in 2001 vowing to cut U.S. nuclear weapons to “the lowest possible number consistent with our national security.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Russian President Vladimir Putin supported lowering deployed U.S. and Russian strategic forces to less than 1,500 warheads. At that time, U.S. and Russian arsenals each contained close to the 1991 START I limit of 6,000 “accountable” warheads apiece,<sup>2</sup> but the Kremlin’s forces were projected to decline more rapidly and deeply because of financial and technical limitations.



Department of Defense

President George W. Bush

The two presidents differed on how to pursue smaller forces. Bush advocated unilateral reductions so the United States could readily alter the size and composition of its arsenal over time. But Putin favored codifying reductions in a treaty to help preserve some parity and predictability between the United States and Russia. Facing persistent pressure from both the Kremlin and top U.S. lawmakers, the Bush administration agreed to negotiate a legally-binding accord.

Nonetheless, the final product conformed closely to the Bush administration’s predisposed positions of minimizing constraints and maintaining flexibility. In March 2003, the Senate approved the treaty 95-0, and it entered into force June 1, 2003. SORT contains only five articles and totals less than 500 words.

**Reductions:** Unlike past strategic arms control agreements between Moscow and Washington, SORT does not specify which warheads are to be reduced or how reductions should be made.

The treaty states that the two sides will limit their strategic forces in accordance with earlier statements made by Presidents Bush and Putin.<sup>3</sup> These vague statements allow each side to interpret and implement its reductions as it sees fit. The United States has stated the treaty limits the number of warheads on its “operationally deployed” intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), as well as warheads loaded on heavy bombers or stationed at heavy bomber bases. Some spare strategic warheads stored at heavy bomber bases, however, are not counted against the treaty limit. Moscow has not publicly stated what warheads it considers limited by the treaty. A May 2005 Department of State report noted, “Russia could use the U.S. definition...or some other counting method to quantify its reductions.”<sup>4</sup>

There is no limit on how many strategic warheads the United States and Russia can keep in storage or reserve.<sup>5</sup> On July 9, 2002, then-Secretary of State Colin

Powell testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “The treaty will allow you to have as many warheads as you want.”

No warheads or delivery vehicle must be destroyed under the accord. Past strategic treaties spelled out precise destruction obligations and processes for eliminating delivery vehicles to ensure that “reduced” warheads could not be quickly redeployed. No previous accords mandated actual warhead destruction, but then-Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin agreed in March 1997 to explore warhead destruction as part of the two countries’ next reductions treaty.

SORT has no interim reduction levels or sublimits. The United States, however, has repeatedly stated it intends to lower its strategic warheads to 3,500-4,000 by 2007. Russia has not revealed any interim goals.

The treaty also does not regulate or constrain how deployed warheads are fielded. “Each party shall determine for itself the composition and structure of its strategic offensive arms,” the treaty declares. In effect, this means the United States and Russia can continue deploying multiple warheads on a single ICBM—a configuration banned by the 1993 START II accord. However, START II never entered into force and Russia repudiated the agreement on June 14, 2002—a day after the United States withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty outlawing nationwide strategic ballistic missile defenses.

**Verification:** SORT has no provisions for assessing compliance. The Bush administration argued against such provisions, citing improved U.S.-Russian relations. Instead, the two sides said they would rely on the 1991 START verification regime for verifying implementation. However, START I expires December 5, 2009, three years before the SORT limit takes effect. The two governments agreed in the spring of 2006 to launch a working group to address START’s expiration.<sup>6</sup>

The treaty established the Bilateral Implementation Commission (BIC) as a confidential forum for discussing SORT implementation issues. The BIC meets twice per year.

In conjunction with SORT, the United States and Russia also created the Consultative Group for Strategic Security to explore additional strategic arms matters. Under this framework, the two sides formed three working groups, including one on “offensive transparency.”<sup>7</sup> This group met only four times—the last time in January 2005—before it was disbanded.

**Withdrawal:** Either party may withdraw from the agreement after providing a three months’ notice of its intent to do so. Atypical of most arms control treaties, the withdrawing party does not have to justify its action.

#### ENDNOTES

1. President Bush made this remark at a May 23, 2000 press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, DC.

2. The term accountable reflects the fact that the warhead figure is not precise. Instead, START I counting rules attribute a certain number of warheads per type of deployed delivery vehicle notwithstanding its exact capacity. For example, heavy bombers that are not

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equipped to carry long-range nuclear air-launched cruise missiles are counted as carrying only one warhead, regardless of the number of bombs or short-range missiles that they actually carry.

3. The statements cited by the treaty are:

- 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."
- President Putin on November 13, 2001: "Russia is stating its readiness to proceed with significant reductions of strategic offensive arms. That is why today we are proposing a radical program of further reductions of [strategic offensive arms], at the least by a factor of three, to the minimum level necessary to maintain strategic equilibrium in the world."

- President Putin on December 13, 2001: "A particularly important task in these conditions is to legally formalize the agreements that have been reached on further drastic, irreversible, and verifiable reductions in strategic offensive arms, which we believe should be at the level of 1,500-2,200 nuclear warheads for each side."

4. Department of State, Annual Report on Implementation of the Moscow Treaty, 2005," May 20, 2005.

5. Washington announced in June 2004 that it plans to almost halve the total U.S. nuclear stockpile (deployed and non-deployed) of roughly 10,000 warheads by 2012.

6. The U.S. delegation to the working group is headed by Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Robert Joseph, while the Russian side is led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak.

7. The other two working groups were devoted to missile defense and tactical (battlefield) nuclear weapons.

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