The Jury Is Still Out

- Arms Control Today

Wade Boese and J. Peter Scoblic

If ratified and implemented, the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty signed May 24 by Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin will reduce the number of U.S. and Russian deployed strategic nuclear warheads by nearly two-thirds over a 10-year period.

More than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the treaty aims to demonstrate the decreasing hostility and budding friendship of the two former rivals, continuing the trend of reducing U.S. and Russian deployed strategic arsenals through codified agreements—a process that began with the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I). Indeed, the new treaty's warhead limits go below those of START II and are equivalent to those in the framework established for START III negotiations. In this sense, the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty represents progress.

At the same time, the treaty, which totals less than 500 words, repudiates key arms control principles and achievements, eschewing predictability and compounding the proliferation dangers from Russia's unsecured nuclear weapons complex. Furthermore, when the reductions are completed, each side will still deploy and store thousands of strategic nuclear warheads whose only purpose is presumably to target the other. Despite Bush administration statements that the United States no longer needs to match Russia warhead for warhead and that mutual assured destruction is being left behind, the number of weapons left in play by this treaty suggests otherwise. Bush's triumphant claim that the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty "liquidates the Cold War legacy of nuclear hostility" is decidedly premature.

Warhead Deployments

The treaty calls for the United States and Russia to deploy no more than 2,200 strategic warheads each by the end of 2012. Unfortunately, the treaty does not specify which warheads count toward the 2,200 limit, and the United States and Russia remain at odds over the issue.

The treaty does state that the warhead limit is based on previous Bush and Putin statements, including comments made at a November 13, 2001, joint press conference. That day, Bush said the United States would reduce its "operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads to a level between 1,700 and 2,200." Putin later replied that Russia would "try to respond in kind."

The Bush administration has said that "operationally deployed" refers to those warheads assigned to ICBMs, bombers, and submarines that are in active service but not to warheads associated with delivery vehicles that are being overhauled or undergoing repairs. Under the Bush administration's counting rules, the United States can deploy delivery vehicles that can carry several warheads, but only those warheads actually mated to the delivery vehicle at any given time will count toward the treaty's limit. For example, a 10-warhead ICBM with only one warhead actually on it would count as only one warhead even if nine warheads stored nearby could be loaded onto the missile relatively quickly.

Russia agrees that the limit refers to deployed (as opposed to stored or reserve) warheads, but it had sought rules that would count warheads according to the maximum number any deployed delivery vehicle could carry, provisions similar to those in START I. For example, a deployed missile

that could carry 10 warheads would count as 10 warheads regardless of how many warheads were actually on it.

The treaty does not address the counting issue, effectively allowing the United States to pursue its more liberal interpretation. The Russian Foreign Ministry has explicitly stated that it does not believe the treaty refers only to operationally deployed strategic warheads and has indicated that Moscow expects the issue to be discussed further in the implementation commission created by the treaty. The United States, however, apparently considers the matter closed.

If only operationally deployed warheads are counted, meeting the 2,200 limit will require both countries to take approximately 3,000-4,000 warheads out of service, meaning they must either be dismantled or be stored apart from their ICBMs, bombers, and submarines.

The chief value of reducing the number of deployed warheads is that it lowers the number of warheads ready for quick use, thereby lessening the risk of unauthorized or accidental launch. This is a significant advance, given that Russia's deteriorating early-warning capability could someday lead the Kremlin to mistakenly believe it is under nuclear attack and therefore launch a "retaliatory" strike. Even Russia's simple awareness of its decreased ability to detect an attack accurately could cause heightened tension during a crisis.

Little Predictability

During the roughly six months of treaty negotiations, the United States insisted that each country be free to do what it wants with its warheads and delivery vehicles to preserve the flexibility to field larger nuclear forces in the future if warranted or desired. For its part, Russia sought measures to make the reductions more permanent by calling for warhead and delivery vehicle destruction.

The Bush administration's position prevailed. The treaty does not specify what the United States and Russia are to do with the warheads removed from service or the delivery vehicles from which they are separated. Moreover, under the May 24 agreement, the two countries will be permitted to retain as many delivery vehicles as they like—without exceeding START I limits, which will remain in force until 2009—and, thereby, the capability to reload warheads from storage rapidly onto existing delivery vehicles. In fact, the Bush administration plans to keep at least 2,400 warheads in ready reserve, some of which could be redeployed in weeks or months and all of which could be redeployed within three years.

The result is that the treaty offers each side a great deal of flexibility but little ability to predict the other country's future force structure—a central purpose of arms control. Although neither START I nor START II, which never entered into force, mandated warhead destruction, both treaties required the dismantlement of delivery systems to make it harder for either superpower to redeploy warheads removed from service quickly. The START III framework that Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin agreed to in 1997 called for measures to destroy warheads to make reductions difficult to reverse.

The ability for either the United States or Russia to predict the other's force level accurately will also be hampered by the lack of a schedule for warhead reductions. This could undermine confidence that either side intends to carry out the reductions in a timely fashion, or at all. Whereas START spelled out specific benchmarks by which progress could be measured during implementation, the new agreement merely sets out an ultimate objective. Moreover, the date that the treaty's limit of 1,700-2,200 deployed warheads is to take effect—December 31, 2012—is also its expiration date.

Further undermining predictability is the uncertainty about how the reductions will be verified. The treaty states that START I, which has an intrusive and extensive verification regime, will remain in force. But the new treaty does not state that the START I verification regime will be used to confirm that the reductions are taking place.

In a May 24 joint declaration, the two presidents stated that START I will "provide the foundation for providing confidence, transparency, and predictability in further strategic offensive reductions, along with other supplementary measures, including transparency measures, to be agreed." But U.S. officials report as of the end of May that there have been no decisions on which elements of the

START I regime will be used to verify the new reductions.

In addition, START I and its verification regime are set to expire three years before the new reductions are to be achieved, leaving open the question of how final compliance with the new treaty's terms will be verified.

More Drawbacks

One strategic concern is that the treaty allows multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) on land-based missiles, reversing a significant accomplishment of START II. U.S. negotiators had long sought a ban on land-based MIRVs because they are both lethal weapons and attractive targets—a single ICBM could be used to destroy many enemy targets, but a single enemy warhead could destroy many warheads on the ground if they were mated to a single MIRVed missile. The result is destabilizing because in a crisis either side would be tempted to attack pre-emptively, calculating that it had to use its nuclear forces first or else risk losing them.

Although current U.S.-Russian relations make such a crisis scenario unlikely in the near future, Russia is expected to rely increasingly on land-based MIRVs to field its 1,700-2,200 warheads. This force posture could give the United States the potential for a first-strike capability—or could simply give the Russians this perception—particularly if the United States successfully fields an effective national missile defense.

From a proliferation standpoint, the treaty compounds the post-Soviet danger of "loose nukes." By permitting Moscow to store warheads removed from service rather than mandating their dismantlement, the treaty will add weapons to Russia's vast complex of nuclear-warhead and weapons-usable-material storage sites, some of which lack modern security, have poor accounting methods, and are protected by underpaid guards. Adding more warheads to be watched, as well as maintained, will increase the demands on a system that is already financially and technically challenged and that is already considered a potential source of nuclear weapons for terrorists or rogue states.

Indeed, with Washington and Moscow working toward friendlier relations, the warheads Russia keeps in storage—not the ones it deploys on its ICBMs, bombers, and submarines—may well be the greater nuclear threat to the United States.

Destination Unknown

If the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty is assessed solely for what it is, it can be welcomed as another step in reducing deployed U.S.-Russian strategic nuclear arsenals. But it is difficult to ignore what the treaty is not, as well as what it could have been, given warming U.S.-Russian relations and the outlines for START III. And, as discussed above, the new treaty could have unintended consequences whose danger is difficult to gauge at this time.

The terms of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty allow for the accord to be extended and improved, and the treaty establishes a Bilateral Implementation Commission that will meet at least twice per year. This body could serve as a forum to address some of the treaty's shortcomings.

Unfortunately, indications from the Bush administration, which initially opposed even codifying strategic reductions, suggest that this treaty will not be used as a stepping stone to further arms control and that the Bilateral Implementation Commission will not be used for much, at least not while George W. Bush is president. In fact, the Bush administration may see this treaty as its first and last arms control agreement. Commenting on the strategic reductions agreement and the upcoming U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, Secretary of State Colin Powell said May 15 that U.S.-Russian "strategic issues are taken care of now."

How the treaty will be perceived within the context of the global nuclear nonproliferation regime is an important issue that is unanswerable for now. Completion of the accord could be seen as another step by the United States and Russia toward fulfilling their Article VI nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty commitment to "pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the

nuclear arms race." Yet the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty's lack of provisions for dismantling and eliminating warheads as well as delivery vehicles contradicts a pledge made by the nuclear-weapon states in May 2000 to apply the principle of irreversibility to arms control measures.

Whether the treaty proves to be a net gain or loss for U.S. security and international stability depends in large part on how Russia chooses to deploy its remaining forces, how secure the storage or dismantlement of its downloaded warheads are, and how the relationship between Washington and Moscow evolves. Until such questions can be answered, a final verdict on the treaty's value will have to wait.