

## The Next Step in Strategic Arms Control

- [Arms Control Today](#)

September 1997

By Spurgeon M. Keeny, Jr.

Following up on the Helsinki summit, a package of agreements was signed in New York September 26 that addresses the Russian Duma's concerns about the fairness of START II and the Senate's concerns about the impact of the ABM Treaty on theater missile defense (TMD) systems. It remains to be seen whether these linked measures will persuade the Duma to ratify START II and amendments to the ABM Treaty and the Senate to ratify amendments to both treaties. Although aspects of the agreements are disappointing from an arms control perspective, the overall package deserves support if it allows START II to enter into force and preserves the ABM Treaty, which are both essential to progress in further strategic arms reductions.

The agreements relating to START II have been crafted to respond to the Duma's complaints that the originally mandated elimination of land based, multiple warhead missiles would have forced Russia to build, at great expense, a large number of new, single warhead missiles in order to maintain parity with the United States at the 3,000 to 3,500 warhead level by 2003. This fundamental objection has been answered by extending the treaty's implementation period five years to the end of 2007, and by the Helsinki commitment to negotiate a START III treaty, after START II enters into force, with a new ceiling of 2,000 to 2,500 warheads at the end of 2007.

The delay in implementing START II, however, postpones the actual destruction of the powerful land based, multiple warhead missiles until the end of 2007. This provides Russia an insurance policy against collapse of the reduction process or U.S. repudiation of the ABM Treaty. To prevent this delay from undercutting the major accomplishment of START II—the elimination of the destabilizing Russian SS 18 and SS 24 and U.S. MX ICBMs—these missiles will have to be "deactivated" by the end of 2003. Together, these new provisions give Russia an alternative to a costly buildup of missiles, and the United States can secure removal of the most dangerous component of Russia's operational forces on roughly the START II time schedule. To underscore the linkage, Russian Foreign Minister Primakov made clear in an exchange of formal letters that the deactivation would not take place unless START III is completed "well in advance" of that deadline.

The agreements sustain the ABM treaty's central objective of severely limiting national missile defense (NMD) systems, but kick down the road final resolution of the demarcation line between future high performance TMD and NMD systems. Except for space based interceptors, anything called a TMD system is permitted—even though it might have significant capabilities against strategic warheads—provided only that it is not tested against a target traveling more than 5 kilometers per second. Each party can also judge whether its future TMD systems are treaty compliant—hardly a desirable precedent for arms control. It remains to be seen whether this flexible interpretation will simultaneously satisfy Senate boosters of ballistic missile defense who oppose any constraints on TMD or NMD systems and Duma critics who see Russian deterrence threatened by highly capable TMD systems. The treaty can accommodate this relaxed approach, provided neither side aggressively exploits its highly permissive provisions—the United States by undertaking large deployments of highly capable TMD systems and Russia by arming its TMD systems with nuclear warheads. At the signing, Primakov underscored that the agreements do not fully resolve the interpretation of the treaty.

## The Next Step in Strategic Arms Control

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

---

In the Duma, the START II ratification debate will occur under the cloud of NATO expansion, which, despite the successful negotiation of the NATO Russian Founding Act, is seen across the Russian political spectrum as a provocative security threat. Unfortunately, Senate hearings on NATO expansion will parallel the Duma's consideration of START II. In this connection, any administration commitments on future expansion of NATO to include states of the former Soviet Union, which President Yeltsin has labeled as unacceptable, will seriously diminish prospects for the Duma's approval of START II.

The Duma now has before it a reasonable response to its concerns that offers a weakened Russia continued nuclear parity with the world's one remaining superpower. If the Duma seizes the opportunity, the Senate can reduce by 75 percent the Russian strategic nuclear arsenal by acting positively on START II amendments and START III. To complete the package, the two legislatures will also have to accept the controversial compromise amendments to the ABM Treaty, which meet the perceived U.S. need for advanced TMD systems while retaining the treaty's central objective which is fundamental to both U.S. and Russian interests. If the Duma or the Senate choose to reject the package, the prospects for START II and further nuclear reductions are indeed bleak.

**Source URL:** <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1997-09/features/next-step-strategic-arms-control>