Pressing the Nuclear Reset Button

- Arms Control Today

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The Cold War ended nearly two decades ago, but U.S. and Russian leaders have missed opportunities to implement agreements that would have achieved deeper, irreversible cuts in their nuclear and missile stockpiles. As a result, their nuclear weapons doctrines and capabilities remain largely unchanged, and mutual suspicions linger.

Beginning with their inaugural meeting April 1, Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev have the opportunity to reset the U.S.-Russian relationship with the negotiation of a new and far-reaching nuclear arms reduction treaty before the year's end. If a new treaty is not concluded and the 1991 START is allowed to expire as scheduled on Dec. 5, there will effectively be no limits on the two country's still bloated nuclear stockpiles.

START helped end the Cold War by slashing each country's strategic warhead deployment capability from about 10,000 to less than 6,000 and limiting each country to no more than 1,600 strategic delivery systems. START still provides far-reaching inspections and data exchanges without which neither side can confidently predict the size and location of the other's nuclear forces. Although the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty calls for a lower number of deployed strategic weapons-no more than 2,200 each by Dec. 2012-it expires the same day the treaty limits take effect and provides no additional verification provisions.

The loss of START would add another dangerous irritant to already strained U.S.-Russian relations, which is why Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov agreed last month that a START follow-on agreement is a priority for both sides. But they should aim to do more than simply extend the 18-year-old START or modestly trim the size of their deployed arsenals because current U.S. and Russian nuclear capabilities are so very much out of step with present-day realities.

According to their 2009 START declarations, the United States has 550 land-based ICBMs, 432 sea-based missiles on 14 submarines, and 216 bombers, which together can deliver 5,576 warheads. Russia possesses 469 nuclear-armed land-based ICBMs, 268 sea-based missiles on eight submarines, and 79 nuclear-capable bombers, which together can deliver 3,909 warheads.*

In practice, not all of these systems are "operationally deployed," and many missiles and bombers carry less than a full complement of warheads. As a result, the United States is believed to deploy at least 2,200 strategic nuclear warheads, with a comparable number of warheads in reserve. The exact number of deployed Russian strategic warheads is not available but is believed to be between 2,000-3,000. In addition, Russia has at least 2,000 additional nonstrategic nuclear bombs available for use and another 8,000 in reserve or awaiting dismantlement. The United States has several hundred nonstrategic nuclear bombs for possible "battlefield" use.

Such massive nuclear arsenals are more of a liability than an asset because they breed mistrust and worst-case assumptions among other states. By maintaining many of them ready for quick launch to deter a surprise attack by the other, they also perpetuate the risk of war by miscalculation. Given that no other country possesses more than 300 nuclear warheads and that nuclear weapons do not serve any practical role in dealing with non-nuclear adversaries or terrorists, deep reductions to 1,000 total warheads each are possible and prudent.

To do so, each side must be bold and willing to adjust earlier positions. Russia should be willing to support more intrusive warhead monitoring and verification approaches, defer its missile modernization programs, and agree to data exchanges on nonstrategic nuclear weapons, which remain unregulated by any treaty.

For its part, the United States should retire a significant portion of its strategic delivery systems as well as agree to verifiable limits on the number of warheads that may be loaded on any given delivery system. If Washington pursues plans to convert a few strategic missiles to carry conventional warheads, the two sides should simply agree to count them as nuclear warheads to avoid verification hurdles.

The START follow-on agreement should also mandate a streamlined system of START-style data exchanges and on-site inspections, plus warhead monitoring techniques that could give each side sufficient confidence that neither side is skirting the treaty.

Dramatically deeper U.S.-Russian reductions would also allow Obama to fulfill a campaign pledge before his first term ends: “Initiating a high-level dialogue among all the declared nuclear-weapon states on how to...move toward meaningful reductions and the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons.”

Neither side should allow the contentious issue of possible U.S. missile interceptors in eastern Europe to impede progress toward deeper offensive nuclear reductions. It is clear that the system is still unproven, would have a very limited capability against Russian missiles, and is years away from possible deployment. This allows time for Moscow and Washington to find cooperative approaches to counter Iran’s potential missile threat and possibly agree to limits on the overall number of strategic interceptors.

Restarting the U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control process could dramatically reduce the overall number of nuclear weapons, improve global cooperation to help meet other nuclear threats, and help repair frayed U.S.-Russian relations. The time to begin is now.

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*Revised April 1, 2009 to reflect 2009 START declarations rather than 2008 figures.