

Next Steps on New START

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U.S. and Russian negotiators, with a push from Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, have concluded the most important strategic nuclear arms reduction treaty in nearly two decades. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which will be signed in Prague April 8, puts Washington and Moscow back on the path of verifiable reductions of their still-bloated Cold War nuclear arsenals and renewed cooperation on other vital nuclear security priorities.

The treaty would limit each side to no more than 700 deployed strategic nuclear delivery vehicles and 1,550 deployed strategic warheads, which is 30 percent below the existing warhead limit. Just as importantly, New START would replace the 1991 START verification regime, which expired last December, with a more effective and up-to-date system to monitor compliance for the 10-year life of the new pact.

New START will restore strategic stability and predictability. It is a concrete example of U.S. and Russian action on disarmament that will bolster support for measures designed to strengthen the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) at the May review conference.

The conclusion of the treaty after a year of intensive, up-and-down U.S.-Russian negotiations is a significant diplomatic achievement for the Obama team. Yet, the signing of New START is only the first step toward the president's goal of reducing "the number and the role of nuclear weapons" worldwide.

New START will still leave the United States and Russia with thousands of excess nuclear weapons that are liabilities in the effort to curb proliferation and combat terrorism. Obama and Medvedev should announce their readiness to resume consultations on the next round of nuclear arms reductions. As Hillary Rodham Clinton suggested during a January 2009 hearing on her nomination as secretary of state, such talks should be broadened to include the verifiable elimination of all warhead types: deployed and nondeployed, strategic and nonstrategic.

To boost momentum at the upcoming NPT meeting, Obama and Medvedev should also invite the world's other recognized nuclear-armed states to engage in a high-level dialogue on how to make their nuclear capabilities more transparent, create greater confidence, and move toward the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons.

Most immediately, the administration must undertake a smart, government-wide effort to mobilize the Senate to consider and approve the new treaty before year's end—a task made all the more difficult by partisan rancor on the president's domestic agenda.

To succeed, the overwhelming national security value of New START and the dangers of delay or defeat of the treaty must be made clear. The White House already demonstrated the strong and visible backing for the treaty from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as key Republican national security figures, including former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger. Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), the ranking member of the Foreign Relations Committee, has said he will help the committee "work quickly to achieve ratification of the new treaty."

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The administration must continue to make it clear that concerns raised by other Republican senators, including Jon Kyl (Ariz.), about limitations on U.S. missile defense programs and the verifiability of the new treaty have already been addressed. Obama resisted 11th-hour Russian proposals for limitations on U.S. plans for missile interceptor deployments designed to counter Iran's short- and medium-range missiles; New START limits only U.S. and Russian strategic offensive weapons. As previous U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control agreements did, New START will merely acknowledge the offensive-defensive relationship in the nonbinding preamble.

Kyl, who in 2003 praised the brevity of the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty and called START and its monitoring provisions a "700-page behemoth" that "would not serve America's real security needs," now bemoans the loss of certain START verification practices. In reality, New START features a more effective, transparent verification method that demands quicker data exchanges and notifications than its predecessor. It modifies or eliminates costly practices not directly relevant for today's post-Cold War needs. New START will also include new and innovative techniques to identify each side's strategic delivery vehicles and verify with high confidence actual warhead deployment levels.

Despite a 10 percent increase in the administration's funding request for nuclear weapons infrastructure modernization, Republican senators have also suggested that verifiable U.S.-Russian strategic arsenal reductions would be imprudent without even greater funding increases and the pursuit of a "modern warhead." In fact, the U.S. nuclear weapons labs have more than enough resources to maintain the reliability of all major warhead types through their ongoing Life Extension Programs. New-design warheads and the renewal of nuclear testing are technically unnecessary and would undermine the U.S. nonproliferation effort.

Delaying action on the follow-on to START and rekindling U.S.-Russian nuclear competition is unwise and dangerous. New START promises to enhance U.S. and global security by further reducing excess Cold War strategic nuclear weapons.

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