The Value of New START Verification

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The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), signed by Presidents Obama and Medvedev in Prague April 8, will increase U.S. and global security by significantly reducing the nuclear threat from Russia, provide transparency and predictability about Russian strategic forces, and bolster U.S. efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons to terrorist groups and additional states.

The promise of further, verifiable reductions in the huge Cold War nuclear arsenals has already enhanced U.S. credibility in efforts to rally global support for urgent nonproliferation efforts, yet the full benefits of New START for U.S. security can only be realized after the treaty is ratified and enters into force. This is particularly true for restoring the transparency of Russian strategic forces lost when the original START expired in December 2009. Absent the new treaty’s extensive verification provisions (see summary below), the United States will steadily lose clarity on the current status of the most lethal potential threat it faces: Russia’s strategic nuclear arsenal.

A long list of current military leaders and former senior national security officials in both Republican and Democratic Administrations have endorsed New START (see: Why New START is Essential to U.S. National Security: What Bipartisan National Security Officials Are Saying). One important reason for this support is that New START reestablishes a robust system of monitoring and data exchanges regarding the world’s largest nuclear arsenals.

Nevertheless, a handful of critics are seeking to raise concerns about New START and delay its ratification. For example, Paula DeSutter, former Assistant Secretary for Verification, Compliance, and Implementation, alleges in a July 12 lecture published by the Heritage Foundation that New START is “much less verifiable” than START I.

Such concerns are unwarranted and comparing the verification provisions of the two treaties misses the point. As the full Senate examines New START in the coming weeks, it is important to consider the several common-sense reasons why New START’s verification system is essential for U.S. security:

**New START is effectively verifiable.**
The updated system of information exchanges and enhanced on-site inspections under New START would provide high-confidence that Russia is complying with the new, lower limits on deployed strategic nuclear warheads and delivery systems. That the treaty was negotiated in close consultation with, and sensitive to the requirements of, U.S. defense and intelligence agencies helps explain why it has received such broad-based support.

**START I was then, New START is now.**
Superficial comparisons of the two treaties’ verification systems are misleading. The verification system of START I was designed to monitor compliance with a different treaty, with a different (and more complex) set of limits, in a different political context. The country being monitored and its nuclear weapons complex were significantly larger and less well understood than now. There were 70 facilities in four countries then subject to inspection, many never previously seen by U.S. personnel on the ground. There are now only 35 facilities in one country to be inspected, many quite familiar to U.S. inspectors from past visits. New START’s more streamlined and up-to-date verification system should be judged by its capabilities to provide confidence that the respective
parties are complying with the specific limits of the new treaty, not the different limits of the one that has expired.

**Trust but verify.**

There is a reason President Reagan’s favorite Russian proverb, “trust but verify,” is so often quoted. Absent effective verification, arms control agreements are unlikely to provide confidence that the parties to the agreement are in compliance. Without such confidence, the value of arms control for reducing tension and safely lowering defense expenditures is severely limited. For example, the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) of 1972 contained no verification provisions; massive violations by the Soviet Union occurred before the ink was dry, but their scope was only fathomed much later.

Mindful of the lessons of arms control history, the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which eliminated an entire category of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons, and the 1991 START agreement, which cut strategic nuclear arsenals in half, contained comprehensive verification provisions. In both cases, robust verification protocols provided each side with high confidence the other was implementing the treaty-mandated reductions and limitations.

The 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) mandated further, significant cuts in deployed U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear warheads. Yet President George W. Bush and his team, including Paula DeSutter, decided not to pursue any new means of verifying SORT-mandated warhead reductions, instead relying on derivative evidence of compliance based on START I’s verification provisions for attributing warhead numbers from launcher limits.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration did not seek to negotiate a new treaty before leaving office or even to extend START I’s verification system to bridge until 2012 when the SORT limits would apply. As a result, President Obama was handed a strategic arms control verification regime scheduled to self-destruct before the end of his first year in office.

The Obama administration negotiated New START in record time, but not before the expiration of START I in December 2009 ended on-the-ground access by U.S. inspectors to Russian strategic nuclear deployment sites.

Until New START is approved by the Senate, insight into the only potential existential threat the United States faces will continue to diminish.

**There is no substitute for the information provided by New START verification**

While “national technical means” such as satellite surveillance provide the foundation for understanding and evaluating information collected on Russian strategic forces, cooperative measures such as notifications, data exchanges, and on-site inspections are essential building blocks in providing high confidence that treaty obligations are being met. The Cold War provides numerous examples of how verification provisions can help identify suspicious activities, provide opportunities to resolve issues based on erroneous assumptions, or take appropriate and timely action in response to violations.

**If you’re worried about Russian nuclear forces, you better keep a close eye on them.**

Critics of New START seem to argue that Russia is already planning to reduce its strategic nuclear forces below the warhead and delivery vehicle limits negotiated, whether or not the new treaty enters into force, so there’s no point in locking in lower levels. At the same time, when it comes to discussing New START verification, they hypothesize bizarre scenarios such as Russia deploying missiles on launchers that were not designed to hold them or deploying MIRVed ICBMs on heavy bombers. Critics also worry that the Russians will slip additional warheads on missiles that are listed as having fewer warheads, escaping the notice of on-site inspectors.

If one is really worried about such implausible scenarios, one should be more rather than less eager to return U.S. weapons inspectors to the sites where such violations could occur.

Others who once argued against rigorous verification of nuclear arms reductions with Russia now suggest that the new treaty may not provide enough. Senator Jon Kyl, who in 2003 praised SORT for
its brevity and called START I and its monitoring provisions a “700-page behemoth” that “would not serve America's real security needs,” now says about New START that “it's not clear that the treaty’s verification provisions are adequate.” Kyl and others warn that the Senate should not “rubberstamp” New START.

The Senate has been diligent in taking a close look at New START, with the appropriate committees already holding 14 hearings and scheduling two more on all aspects of the treaty, examining all of the relevant reports in the process, including the National Intelligence Estimate on the verifiability of the pact and the reports on Russian compliance with past and present treaties. However, this due diligence should be followed expeditiously by debate on the floor and a vote by the full Senate. Partisan political considerations should not be allowed to threaten national security by delaying New START ratification and compromising our ability to assess Russia's strategic nuclear capabilities.

The danger of delay was succinctly highlighted by General Kevin Chilton, U.S. Strategic Forces Commander, in Senate testimony June 16: “Without New START, we would rapidly lose insight into Russian strategic nuclear force developments and activities, and our force modernization planning and hedging strategy would be more complex and more costly.”

START I—and its Cold War-era verification system—expired in December 2009. New START would fill the verification gap with a streamlined set of verification procedures – taking advantage of past precedents established by the original START, but adding innovations better suited to the specific limits of the replacement agreement.

**Conclusion:** Without ratification and entry into force of New START, there will not be an effective, treaty-based monitoring system for Russia’s strategic nuclear forces. The Senate should heed the vast majority of U.S. national security experts who are calling for ratification of New START and its comprehensive approach to verification as soon as possible. We are sitting in the front row, but with the curtain closed; we need to get on with the show. - GREG THIELMANN

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**New START Verification Provisions at a Glance**

- Regularly updated **data exchanges** are required across a range of systems and activities (Protocol: Part Two). These exchanges facilitate understanding, enhance confidence in force estimates, and provide the basis for more productive resolution of differences.

- An extensive list of **notifications** is provided in the treaty. For example, movement of forces into and out of deployed status must be announced within five days (Protocol: Part Four, Section II) and Russia must notify the United States 48 hours in advance when a new ICBM or SLBM leaves the Votkinsk missile production facility (Protocol: Part Four, Section III), enhancing the prospects that such movements will be captured by satellite surveillance. Notifying such events reduces tension, avoids misunderstandings, and facilitates the monitoring of compliance. By receiving tip-offs of relevant activities, the sides can better target their technical collection assets and correctly assess non-hostile activity.

- **On-site inspections** provide information unavailable in comparable quality through other means. New START allows 18 on-site inspections annually (Protocol: Part Five, Section VI), fewer than START, but offering a higher percentage of the total number of sites to be inspected considering the far smaller strategic forces infrastructure possessed by Russia today.

Moreover, unlike START, the new treaty allows inspectors to perform multiple activities during each visit. Permissible inspection activities include: confirming the number of re-entry vehicles on deployed ICBMs and deployed SLBMs; confirming numbers related to non-deployed launcher limits; counting nuclear weapons onboard or attached to deployed heavy bombers; confirming weapon system conversions or eliminations; and confirming facility eliminations.
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The new treaty outlines two types of inspections: Type One inspections allow for the inspection of sites with deployed and non-deployed strategic systems (10 per year); Type Two inspections allow for inspection of sites with only non-deployed strategic systems (eight per year).

- **Unique identifiers** are assigned to each ICBM, SLBM, and heavy bomber for the first time in a strategic arms control agreement. These identifiers will be included in applicable notifications. Inspectors have the right to read the unique identifiers on all designated ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers located at the inspection site during on-site inspections (Protocol: Part Five, Section VI).

- **Confidence-building measures** help promote transparency and predictability. For example, both states have agreed to exchange annually on a parity basis telemetric information on up to five ICBM and SLBM launches from the previous year (Protocol: Part Seven). Another example is the conducting of exhibitions to demonstrate the distinguishing features and to confirm technical characteristics of new types or variants of nuclear delivery vehicles or former nuclear delivery vehicles (Protocol: Part Five, Section VIII).

- A forum for compliance discussions, the **Bilateral Consultative Commission**, is established to facilitate compliance and cooperation. This body will meet twice a year in Geneva, unless otherwise agreed. Issues regarding compliance or implementation of the treaty may be raised in this body by either side (Protocol: Part Six).

For additional analysis, see: *ACA Threat Assessment Brief: New START Verification: Up to the Challenge* (PDF) May 17, 2010.

- Russia
- New START
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