Little Progress Made at START/ABM Talks

The first round of U.S.-Russian "discussions" on START III and the ABM Treaty ended August 19 without any apparent progress, casting a shadow on the Clinton administration's plans to resolve treaty issues before June 2000, when it will decide whether to deploy a limited national missile defense (NMD) system. During the talks, which began August 17 in Moscow, Russia continued to argue that NMD deployment would upset strategic stability and spark a new arms race. The Russians did propose, however, that the sides deploy a maximum of 1,500 strategic warheads each under START III instead of the 2,000-2,500 limit agreed to by Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin at the Helsinki summit in March 1997. Further consultations on these issues are planned for September in Moscow.

In an attempt to get their bruised relationship back on track after the Kosovo conflict, the United States and Russia had agreed at the June 18-20 Group of Eight summit in Cologne, Germany, to hold discussions on START III and the ABM Treaty this summer. (See ACT, June 1999.) Building on this progress, Vice President Al Gore and then-Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin announced at the conclusion of their July 27 meeting in Washington that discussions on these issues would begin in Moscow the following month. The consultations, which were conducted by John Holum, Clinton's nominee for undersecretary of state for arms control and international security affairs, and his Russian counterpart, Grigory Berdennikov, took place despite the August 9 shake-up in the Russian government in which Yeltsin fired Stepashin, later replacing him with Vladimir Putin.

Although the United States did not propose specific amendments to the ABM Treaty during the talks, senior Russian officials made their position quite clear. "We do not see any variant which would allow the U.S. to deploy a [NMD] system and at the same time maintain the ABM Treaty. If this takes place, talks on a START III treaty will be ruined, as well as the existing START I and START II agreements," said Berdennikov on August 19. Furthermore, he warned that NMD deployment would compel Russia "to raise the effectiveness of its strategic nuclear armed forces and carry out several other military and political steps to guarantee its national security under new strategic conditions."

These views were echoed by Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, head of the Russian Defense Ministry's department for international military cooperation. "The ABM Treaty is the basis on which all subsequent arms control agreements have been built. To destroy this basis would be to destroy the entire process of nuclear arms control," he said August 20. Despite this rhetoric, the United States and Russia once again characterized the ABM Treaty as a "cornerstone of strategic stability" in an August 19 press release.

Concerning nuclear reductions, the United States and Russia "reaffirmed" their readiness to begin official negotiations on START III as soon as the Russian Duma ratifies START II. The sides also noted their strong commitment to the START II ratification process and the treaty's entry into force. Russia's proposal to lower START III levels stems from the concern that it will have to downsize its strategic forces over the next decade because of obsolescence and mounting economic problems. However, there is no indication that the United States is considering reductions below the 2,000-2,500 warhead level agreed to at Helsinki.