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A Flawed Approach to Arms Control: START Negotiations Will Not Serve U.S. Interests

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When President Obama announced on September 17 that he had decided to cancel a plan for putting missile defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland, he ignored repeated warnings from Members of Congress not to permit negotiations with Russia over strategic nuclear weapon reductions to also limit U.S. missile defense options.¹ Now, he is sending Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Moscow to discuss arms control issues with the Russian government.²

His earlier decision regarding missile defenses in Europe, however, makes it clear that there is not really anything constructive for the Secretary of State to discuss with the Russians, particularly in relation to a future treaty on reducing strategic nuclear arms. By ignoring the prudent advice from Congress and opting to subordinate the missile defense program to his arms control agenda and his desire to “reset” relations with Russia, President Obama has made it clear that the negotiations with Russia will result in a treaty that will not serve U.S. and allied security.

False START. The negotiations with Russia are designed to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which expires on December 5. Presidents Obama and Dmitri Medvedev pledged to reduce the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads on each side to between 1,500 and 1,675 and the number of strategic delivery systems to between 500 and 1,100.³

While President Obama wants to ratify the treaty before the expiration of START, it is not yet signed. Thus, he has created a circumstance where the U.S. negotiators are trying to reach an agreement against an

unrealistic deadline where they are certain to grant unwarranted concessions to the Russians. The announced cancellation of the missile defense systems for the Czech Republic and Poland is just such a concession.

Warnings from Congress. Obama and Medvedev adopted a joint statement⁴ on April 1 in London that committed both sides to negotiating on the issue of the “interrelationship of strategic offensive and strategic defensive arms.” This can be interpreted as code for stating that reductions in offensive strategic weapons must be accompanied by severe restrictions on defensive forces, and most particularly missile defenses. Consequently, the statement prompted multiple warnings from Members of Congress. For example:

- On June 25, the House of Representatives adopted an amendment to the Defense Authorization Bill (H.R. 2647) offered by Representative Michael Turner (R–OH) that would prohibit the expenditure of funds for the remainder of the current fiscal year to implement an agreement with Russia to reduce strategic nuclear forces unless the President certifies to Congress that the agreement “does not limit ballistic missile defense.”⁵
- On July 2, a bipartisan group of Senators wrote to President Obama that abandoning the missile

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defense systems in Europe through the START follow-on treaty negotiating process would risk their support for the treaty: “[W]e will be reluctant to support any agreement that is explicitly conditioned on U.S. abandonment of missile defenses in Europe or otherwise linked to a U.S. decision to curtail or abandon those defenses.”⁶

- On July 23, the Senate adopted an amendment offered by Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ) to the Senate version of the Defense Authorization Bill (S. 1390). This amendment expressed the sense of the Senate that the START follow-on treaty should not include any limitations on ballistic missile defense systems.⁷

A Flawed Approach to Arms Control. The U.S. Senate should come to the following realizations before the START follow-on treaty is submitted for advice and consent:

- The most effective strategic posture for the U.S. and its allies is defensive. Given that ballistic missiles are among the most appealing delivery vehicles for strategic weapons by states like Iran and North Korea, ballistic missile defenses are the most essential elements of effective defensive postures. President Obama, however, seems determined to take the U.S. in the opposite direction in order to curry favor with Russia and get an early agreement on the START follow-on treaty.
- The Obama Administration may make the argument that the text of the START follow-on treaty

will not contain any article that limits U.S. missile defense systems, which may well be true. But the Administration’s action to cancel the missile defense deployment in the Czech Republic and Poland in the face of Russian demands has established a clear linkage between the treaty and limitations on missile defense options. Such linkages will be as much a part of the treaty agreement with Russia as the text.

START Worrying. The Obama Administration’s unseemly haste in concluding the START follow-on treaty with Russia is resulting in a final product that fails the tests of national security and morality. Successful arms control is the result of a process that is pursued with care and patience.

During the Cold War, President Ronald Reagan took the time to persuade the Soviet Union of the wisdom of his “zero option” proposal regarding intermediate-range nuclear force (INF) missiles and that he would not accept a linkage between what would become the INF Treaty and limits on missile defense.⁸ Clearly, President Obama is pursuing a rushed approach on arms control with the Russians that President Reagan would recognize is fatally flawed.

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1. Press release, “Remarks by the President on Strengthening Missile Defense in Europe,” the White House, September 17, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-Strengthening-Missile-Defense-in-Europe (October 6, 2009).
2. Press release, “Secretary Clinton to Travel to London, Dublin, Belfast and Moscow,” U.S. Department of State, October 2, 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/oct/130189.htm> (October 6, 2009).
3. Press release, “Joint Understanding,” the White House, July 8, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/The-Joint-Understanding-for-The-Start-Follow-On-Treaty (October 6, 2009).
4. Press release, “Joint Statement by President Dmitri Medvedev of the Russian Federation and President Barack Obama of the United States of America,” the White House, April 1, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-Statement-by-President-Dmitriy-Medvedev-of-the-Russian-Federation-and-President-Barack-Obama-of-the-United-States-of-America (October 6, 2009).
5. GOP.gov, “Amendments to H.R. 2647—National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010,” at <http://www.gop.gov/bill/111/1/hr2647amendments> (October 11, 2009).
6. Senator James M. Inhofe (R-OK) *et al.*, letter to President Barack Obama, July 2, 2009 (available from the author upon request).
7. See OpenSecrets.org, “111th Congress Legislation: Senator Jon L. Kyl,” at http://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/bills.php?cycle=2010&cid=N00006406&type=I&bill_no=110362=111 (October 11, 2009).
8. See Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan’s Secret War: The Untold Story of His Fight to Save the World from Nuclear Disaster* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009), p. 335.