

# WebMemo



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## Obama's Approach to Arms Control Misreads Russian Nuclear Strategy

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On April 8, after more than a year of negotiations, Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev belatedly signed a successor to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) in Prague. Nicknamed “New START,” this problematic treaty aims to reduce nuclear arsenals by 30 percent, limiting both countries to 1,550 accountable warheads and 700 deployed delivery platforms (land-based sites, missile submarines, and strategic bombers). In a unilateral declaration by Medvedev, Russia reserved the right to abrogate the treaty if it deems U.S. missile defenses a threat to its national security.

Though President Obama has announced that Russia is no longer the enemy, Russia still considers the U.S. its “principal adversary,” despite the Administration’s attempts to “reset” bilateral relations. U.S. policymakers need to examine Russia’s views on nuclear weapons and understand Russian nuclear doctrine as it is—not as U.S. arms control advocates wish it to be.

**The Russian Approach to Nuclear Arms Control.** At the signing of the START follow-on treaty, Medvedev reiterated the Russian position that “the treaty can only be viable” if does not “jeopardize the strategic offensive weapons on the Russian side.”<sup>1</sup> Medvedev essentially created a caveat that makes the Russian commitment to the treaty questionable at best, illustrating that Russia and the U.S. perceive nuclear arms control and doctrine very differently.

Though the Soviet Union collapsed 20 years ago, Russian national leaders, generals, and experts are still captive to a deeply suspicious worldview that

hearkens back to hundreds of years of Russian imperial policy.

Announcing the modernization of Russian nuclear forces in 2007, then-President Putin illustrated the Russian worldview by linking nuclear modernization to the U.S. war in Iraq: “Russia, thank God, isn’t Iraq [and] has enough strength and power to defend itself and its interests, both on its territory and in other parts of the world.”<sup>2</sup> For many in Russia, the U.S. is still *glavny protivnik* (principal adversary), and nuclear arms control does not mean any limits on its ability to maintain modern nuclear weapons. Yet Moscow strives to limit U.S. missile defense and strategic conventional capabilities.

As the Russian military doctrine published this spring illustrates, Russian elites view nuclear weapons not only as a way to protect Russia but as strategic tools used to escalate and end local and regional wars. Nor is Russia interested in President Obama’s vision of a world without nuclear weapons. In 2006, Putin emphasized the importance of Russia’s nuclear arsenal: “When looking at today’s international situation...Russia is compelled to realize that nuclear deterrence is a key element in guaranteeing the country’s security.”<sup>3</sup> The product of Soviet

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and post-Soviet strategy, current Russian policy is aimed at maximizing deterrence and offensive capability at minimal cost.

**Russia's Increasing Reliance on Nuclear Weapons.** In the coming years, tactical and strategic weapons will play an even greater role in this strategy. Since the end of World War II, Soviet and Russian leaders have demanded that the U.S. treat their state as a power of equal importance. Given Russia's comparatively small economy—approximately one-eighth of the U.S. economy—Russian leaders have framed equality through the lens of an adversarial U.S.–Russia relationship of mutual deterrence. This policy serves not only as an equalizer but as an essential consolidator of key constituencies at home, justifying the repressive Russian state apparatus.

Since the end of the Cold War, Russian conventional forces have grown increasingly inferior, pushing Russia to rely more than ever on nuclear weapons. Through diplomatic confrontations with NATO in Kosovo in 1999, two rounds of NATO expansion, and the Iraq war, Russian leaders have steadily escalated their rhetoric, making it clear that Russia's leadership still believes the U.S. is its principal adversary.

As a result, Russia views its nuclear force as central to its claim to be a superpower equal to the U.S. Its strategic triad, regulated by existing arms control agreements, consists of silo-based and mobile missiles of the Strategic Nuclear Forces, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers. What are not regulated by such treaties are Russia's

3,800–5,000 tactical nuclear weapons, which it sees as “nuclear equalizers,” further compensating for Russia's conventional inferiority vis-à-vis the U.S., NATO, and China.

Despite Russia's economic recession, Putin has repeatedly promised to boost military spending, including funding for nuclear modernization. Russia allocated \$37 billion to defense procurement in 2009, with a total of \$114 billion budgeted through 2011. But delays in the modernization of Russia's armed forces—from problems in missile R&D to under-staffing in research, development, and production—have pushed Russia to rely ever more heavily on nuclear weapons.

Current Russian military doctrine states that Russia requires:

Nuclear forces capable of delivering required damage to any aggressor state or a coalition thereof under any circumstances. The Russian Federation retains the right to use nuclear weapons in response to use against it and/or its allies, of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, as well as in response to wide scale aggression which uses conventional weapons in a situation critical to the national security of the Russian Federation.<sup>4</sup>

Going a step further, Secretary of the Russian National Security Council General Nikolay Patrushev declared that Russia may preemptively use nuclear weapons “against the aggressor in a critical situation...based on [intelligence] evaluation of his intentions.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Russia reserves the right

1. Barack Obama and Dimitry Medvedev, “Remarks at Pact Signing,” April 8, 2010, at [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/International/2010/04/08/Obama-Medvedevs-remarks-at-pact-signing/UPI-27651270750998](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/International/2010/04/08/Obama-Medvedevs-remarks-at-pact-signing/UPI-27651270750998) (April 8, 2010).
2. Tony Halpin, “Putin Says Russia to Get New Nuclear Weapons,” *The Times*, October 18, 2007, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article2687252.ece> (April 8, 2010).
3. Vladimir Putin, “Opening Address at Meeting on Developing Russian Nuclear Weapons Complex, March 30, 2006, quoted in Andrei Shoumikhin, “Goals and Methods of Russian Arms Control Policy: Implications for U.S. Security,” National Institute Press, August 2008, p. 42, at <http://www.nipp.org/Publication/Downloads/Publication%20Archive%20PDF/Russian%20Arms%20Control%20web.pdf> (April 12, 2010).
4. A. S. Dyakov, E. V. Myasnikov, and N. N. Sokov, “Process sokrashchenia yadernyx vooruzhenij i kontrol' nad nimi v rossijsko-amerikanskix otnosheniyax: sostoyanie i perspektivy” (Process of Nuclear Weapons Cuts and Control over Them in Russian-American Relations: Conditions and Perspectives), Moscow Physical-Technical Institute, Center for Study of Problems of Disarmament, Energy and Ecology, 2006, p. 15.
5. Vladimir Mamontov, “Meniaetsia Rossiya, meniaetsia i ee voennaya doktrina” (Russia Is Changing, and with It Its Nuclear Doctrine), *Izvestiya*, October 15, 2009, at <http://www.izvestia.ru/politic/article3134180> (November 2, 2009).

to the pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons, strategically or tactically.

**Flawed U.S. Arms Control Strategy.** The Obama Administration's arms control strategy to date has been rooted in an outdated 1970s arms control model and the idealism of the 1960s, both of which embrace a "getting to zero" approach of full nuclear disarmament while weakening missile defense in Eastern Europe.

In a world of global proliferation, and in the context of a Russian nuclear strategy premised on nuclear parity and mutually assured destruction, coupled with scaling down of U.S. defensive systems, this approach to arms control is doomed to fail.

**What the U.S. Should Do.** The U.S. should not simply accept a Russian strategic posture that is designed to threaten the U.S. and its allies. The U.S. should offer Russia an arms control and nonproliferation agenda that includes:

- A bilateral transition to the "protect and defend" posture;
- A Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (SORT II) that would encourage the development of nuclear forces that hold at risk the means of strategic attack; and
- A strategic defense cooperation treaty, including coordinated ballistic missile defense and pro-

grams for common defenses against chemical and biological weapons, cruise missiles, and aircraft delivering weapons of mass destruction.

Russia and the U.S. should also encourage additional countries, especially China, to enter into Intermediate Nuclear Forces talks. Finally, Russia should participate in a multilateral cooperative effort to address the threat of nuclear-armed terrorism. The U.S. and Russia need an alternate path to promoting stability and lessening the likelihood of military confrontation—a path that does not weaken U.S. security."

Unfortunately, the Administration has squandered a golden opportunity. It has signed a backward-looking treaty that codifies the adversarial balance of terror relationship that used to exist between the U.S. and Soviet Union and restricts the ability of the U.S. to deploy missile defense systems. The "New START" Treaty should therefore be rejected.

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