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Reset Regret: Obama's Cold War–Style Arms Control Undermines U.S.–Russian Relations

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In March 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, with a red button symbolizing a new “reset” policy with the Russian Federation. Prophetically, and as a result of an incompetent translation, the letters on the button read “overload” instead of “reset.”

The Obama Administration’s “reset” policy has been merely a list of concessions to a regime in Moscow that is seeking Soviet-like superpower prestige and status through forced nuclear equality with Washington. This approach has far-reaching negative implications for U.S. security and foreign policy as well as for the security of U.S. allies. The problems associated with Obama’s Cold War–style arms control approach are particularly apparent in the areas of strategic arms, missile defense, and short-range nuclear weapons.

New START: Limiting the U.S. Arsenal, Preserving Russian Strategic Forces. The Obama Administration’s approach to arms control with Russia puts the United States on a path that could undermine U.S. strategic superiority and the international stability it provides. It essentially fails to recognize the need for an arms control policy that is compatible with a defensive strategic posture in response to greater proliferation pressures—the “protect and defend” strategy as articulated by The Heritage Foundation.¹

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), effective February 2011, is an excellent example. This treaty, a centerpiece of the Obama Administration’s “reset” policy, is fundamentally dis-

advantageous for the United States. It forces the U.S. to cut its strategic forces significantly. The Department of Defense will have to bear costs associated with New START’s implementation, such as building new specialized storage sites, adding unnecessary expenses to the already overstretched defense budget.

Under New START, Russia is allowed to *expand* its nuclear arsenal. This is a surprising outcome given that Russia needed this arms control agreement more than the United States. The Russian economy and military–industrial complex cannot support Russia’s strategic forces at their current level.

U.S. Missile Defense: Next Casualty of “Reset”? The Administration also may be jeopardizing U.S. and allied missile defenses. The preamble of New START is the Trojan horse that establishes a link between strategic offensive and defensive weapons. This connection enables the Russians to threaten withdrawal from the treaty if the United States continues to expand its ballistic missile defenses.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov and other senior Russian representatives stated in May that “START may become a hostage of the

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so-called U.S. European Phased Adaptive Approach.”² The Russian Foreign Ministry’s incensed June reaction to the participation of U.S. missile cruisers in Black Sea naval maneuvers with Ukraine is just a preview of missile defense protests to come.

Moreover, the Obama Administration is conducting negotiations with Moscow that may lead to curtailment of U.S. missile defense. The U.S. House of Representatives is clearly aware of this danger, as its version of the defense bill contains a provision that would prevent the Administration from spending any funds on providing the Russian Federation with sensitive U.S. missile defense technology. It is also imperative that the United States does not accept any limits on its ballistic missile defenses.

Allied Politics and Disparity in Tactical Nuclear Weapons. The Administration’s approach to the “reset” policy with Russia creates the impression that it effectively recognizes Russia’s zone of privileged interests in the former Soviet empire and beyond. At times, it seems that the Administration is more committed to the “reset” policy with Moscow than to U.S. friends and allies.

First, the Obama Administration announced the decision to change U.S. ballistic missile defense plans—the so-called third site for missile defense—in Poland and the Czech Republic in the most embarrassing manner: on the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland. Second, as *The Telegraph* reported in February, the United States agreed to provide the Russians with sensitive information about the U.K.’s Trident submarines—Britain’s strategic deterrent—to win Russia’s agreement to

New START, despite earlier objections of the British government.³ The real test of these sensitive relationships, however, will come as Moscow and Washington negotiate short-range (tactical) nuclear weapons.

The U.S.–Russian strategic relationship has always been lopsided in Russia’s favor when it comes to tactical nukes. According to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation’s January report, the United States retains only about 200 of its estimated 500 short-range nuclear weapons in Europe.⁴ Russia has deployed 5,390 short-range nuclear weapons, including artillery shells, gravity bombs, short-range missiles, air-launched and sea-launched cruise missiles, nuclear land mines, ship-to-ship missiles, and torpedoes, according to the “Russian Nuclear Forces, 2011” report of Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris.⁵

Any agreement to restrict the numbers of these weapons will be extremely difficult to achieve, especially because the Administration gave away all its leverage during New START negotiations. The Russians already set preconditions for even beginning tactical nuclear weapons negotiations. “It would be better to start from withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe and from dismantling related infrastructure,” said Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov’s February statement.⁶

In the context of this disparity and the importance the Russians assign to short-range nuclear forces, the United States should strive for effective verification and a transparent regime in which both countries can adequately protect their security in

1. Baker Spring, “Congressional Commission Should Recommend ‘Damage Limitation’ Strategy,” Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 2172, August 14, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2008/08/Congressional-Commission-Should-Recommend-Damage-Limitation-Strategy>.
2. RT, “Moscow May Quit START over US Deploying Missile Shield in Europe,” May 16, 2011, at <http://rt.com/politics/nato-missile-defense-medvedev> (June 20, 2011).
3. Matthew Moore, Gordon Rayner, and Christopher Hope, “WikiLeaks Cables: US Agrees to Tell Russia Britain’s Nuclear Secrets,” *The Telegraph*, February 4, 2011, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/wikileaks/8304654/WikiLeaks-cables-US-agrees-to-tell-Russia-Britains-nuclear-secrets.html> (June 20, 2011).
4. Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, “U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe Fact Sheet,” January 2011, at http://armscontrolcenter.org/policy/nuclearweapons/articles/US_Tactical_Nuclear_Weapons_Fact_sheet/ (June 20, 2011).
5. R. Norris and H. Kristensen, “Russian Nuclear Forces, 2010,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January/February 2010, p. 79.
6. RT, “Fulfillment of New START Depends on US Missile Defense Plans—Foreign Ministry,” February 7, 2011, at <http://rt.com/politics/ryabkov-start-nuclear-plans> (June 20, 2011).

the rapidly changing, multi-threat international environment.

Time to “Reset” Arms Control with Russia. In return for New START and other concessions, the Obama team expected to fundamentally change its relationship with Moscow. In June 2010, the United States was able to pass the fourth round of sanctions against Tehran’s regime through the United Nations Security Council, and Russia annulled the sale of the S–300 anti-aircraft missile systems to Tehran. These were valuable accomplishments. Yet in August 2010, Russia supplied enriched uranium to Iran’s civilian reactor in Bushehr, violating the spirit of the sanctions and handing the ayatollahs a victory in the face of increasing international pressure. The reactor began initial operations in May 2011.

It is a serious error to negotiate Cold War–style arms control treaties that give the Russians an undeserved appearance of parity with the United States. Rather, the Administration should focus on taking full advantage of Russia’s offer of cooperation in countering nuclear terrorism—something in which both countries have a significant interest.

Most important, cooperation between the United States and Russia should be aimed at adjusting nuclear postures to 21st century challenges. This includes adopting defensive nuclear postures and coordinating deployments of missile defense systems to address shared threats. That way, each country would be permitted to control the missile defenses in its possession to meet its security needs

while providing opportunities for cooperation, even where there may be differences of opinion regarding what constitutes a genuine threat.

However, Russian demands for operational control of U.S. missile defenses or a sectional divide regarding the protection of European allies against ballistic missiles should be rejected.

A Realistic “Protect and Defend” Strategy. Instead of focusing on Cold War–style arms control, the United States and Russia should adopt fundamentally defensive strategic postures based on the “protect and defend” strategy. This defensive posture would employ offensive and defensive forces, both conventional and nuclear, to defeat any strategic attack on the U.S. and its allies. In addition, it would offer opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation based on a realistic assessment of Russia’s intentions and capabilities rather than on futile hope and nonexistent change.

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