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The United States Must Not Concede the Russian Position on Tactical Nuclear Weapons

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In December 2010, the Senate's resolution of ratification to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) imposed a condition to begin a next round of arms negotiations on tactical nuclear weapons systems between the Obama Administration and Russia. It is essential that the Administration does not make concessions to the Russians that would put U.S. and allied interests in Europe and around the world at risk. To remove U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from forward bases in Europe would be such a concession. This wrong-headed step has been recently recommended by Ambassador Richard Burt, co-chairman of the Global Zero Russia–North Atlantic Treaty Organization Commission.¹

Sweeping Disparity. While the United States maintains about 200 tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, Russia has thousands. Russia's lack of transparency and its failure to honor its commitments under the 1990s Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, aimed at reducing or eliminating some portions of U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, make precise estimates impossible. In addition, Russia maintains substantial nuclear weapons production capability, while the United States let its nuclear weapons infrastructure atrophy.

Structural weaknesses in Russia's conventional forces have caused an important shift in its nuclear posture. Tactical nuclear weapons are seen as a substitute for conventional forces in some scenarios.

They are also seen as a tool of blackmail. Moscow has repeatedly threatened nuclear targeting and preemptive nuclear attacks against the United States and its allies, including deploying its short-range nuclear-tipped Iskander ballistic missiles to the Kaliningrad region bordering NATO allies Poland and Lithuania if the United States proceeds with its missile defense deployments. Under some circumstances, Russia sees its tactical nuclear weapons as a means of de-escalation.²

Preconditions on Negotiations. In the past, Russia has clearly articulated its demands before negotiations on tactical nuclear weapons even began. On February 6, 2011, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said negotiations should start with U.S. withdrawal of its tactical nuclear weapons from Europe and dismantling related infrastructure to ensure greater predictability and transparency. This is a position that has been rejected by every previous U.S. Administration. The Global Zero Commission effectively endorses Russia's position and assumes that this withdrawal would open doors for further reductions.

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Such an outcome is unlikely. The only Russian objective with regard to tactical nuclear weapons is to get U.S. weapons out of Europe. Giving this to them up front would eliminate any incentive for Russia to negotiate in good faith in the future. Leaving the asymmetry in this class of weapons aside, due to Russia's variety of tactical nuclear weapons, dual-use capability of delivery systems, and its history of arms control treaty violations, the United States would have to negotiate an unprecedentedly intrusive verification regime along with any reductions or ceilings. Russia has always rejected tactical nuclear arms control and the weapons verification regime that such a process would require. The United States does not have any comparable diversity of types and delivery options for its tactical nuclear weapons.

Further, constraints on basing tactical nuclear weapons in Europe make no sense, because the Russians have weapons systems—unlimited by New START—capable of reaching western Europe from locations outside Europe. These include the Backfire bomber, the new Su-34 fighter bomber, and the R-500 cruise missile. The latter is reported to have a range prohibited by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF)—up to 2,000 km.³ The number of such systems will probably increase as the Russians begin to exploit New START loopholes such as a weak verification regime or a bomber accounting rule that permits all the bombs on any single bomber to count as only one bomb under the warhead limit. For the Russians, it would take only a matter of hours or days to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons to the European theatre. For the United States, however, it would be very difficult to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons to Europe, for political and technical reasons.

Russia would like to link any tactical nuclear weapons agreement to limits on U.S. conventional

capabilities, missile defense, and the deployment of arms in space. The Obama Administration is specifically conditioned to exclude U.S. missile defenses from tactical nuclear weapons negotiations. It is hard to see what leverage the Obama Administration would actually use to address all the asymmetries in Russia's tactical arsenal in a verifiable manner.

New START's Bad Precedent. The Obama Administration already demonstrated its negotiating incompetence during New START. While the treaty imposes equal limitations on both parties, the United States is required to remove from operational status or destroy many more systems than Russia over the course of the next six years. The Obama Administration began with more negotiating leverage in terms of strategic nuclear weapons—only to give it away and negotiate a treaty that practically mandates unilateral disarmament and imposes sweeping restrictions on U.S. missile defenses.

The United States has even less negotiating leverage on the tactical weapons side. Therefore, it would be misguided to zero-out U.S. short-range nuclear weapons or withdraw them from Europe. The credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence would come under further question if the U.S. took such steps.

In addition, this would be bad news for NATO members. According to Frank Miller, special assistant to President George W. Bush and senior director for defense policy and arms control on the National Security Council staff:

Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, nations which currently host U.S. nuclear weapons and which are actively seeking their removal, have, therefore, failed the new allies, the United States, and the Alliance. By seeking to force the removal of nuclear weapons from NATO Europe, they would remove from the new members the symbolic security they

1. "US, Russia Should Remove Tactical Nukes from Forward Bases in Europe—Experts," ITAR-TASS, February 4, 2012, at <http://www.itar-tass.com/en/c154/334253.html> (February 7, 2012).
2. Jacob W. Kipp, "Russia's Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons," Foreign Military Studies Office, May 2001, at http://www.ciaonet.org/cbr/cbr00/video/cbr_ctd/cbr_ctd_06.html#txt19 (February 7, 2012).
3. Ilya Kramnik, "The Iskander: A Story of a New Face-off," RIA Novosti, October 10, 2008, at <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20081110/118218596.html> (February 7, 2012).

once so deeply believed they themselves needed.⁴

No Agreement Without U.S. Strength. According to the Senate's resolution of ratification, the President must submit a report to the House and Senate Committees on Foreign Relations and Armed Services describing the steps taken to reach an agreement on tactical nuclear weapons with the Russian Federation and analyzing the reasons why such an agreement has not yet been reached. It is not difficult to envision the basic message of the report: There is no agreement because the Russian Federation is not interested in one while it increases the emphasis on its tactical nuclear weapons arsenal in

its nuclear posture. An agreement to address this massive disparity in tactical nuclear weapons will be difficult to achieve unless the United States negotiates from a position of strength.

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4. "NATO's Nuclear Future: The Alliance's Posture Review, Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe and Arms Control," The Brookings Institution, June 19, 2011, p. 24, at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2011/0719_nato/20110719_nato_nuclear.pdf (February 7, 2012).