

Bush–Putin summit fails to bury the Cold War

Ken Luongo & Ian Davis

BASIC Notes, 22 May 2002



British American Security
Information Council

The new nuclear arms reduction treaty to be signed by Presidents Bush and Putin is being hailed as the start of a new era in Russian-American relations. The willingness of each side to reduce its long-range nuclear warheads by two thirds in the next decade, to between 1,700 to 2,200, coupled with the imminent creation of a new NATO-Russia Council, prompted Jack Straw to note that we are witnessing “the funeral of the cold war”. But this characterization is deceptive, as the heart of the cold war nuclear danger is still beating.

At only three pages, the treaty is an important but minimalist document that significantly scales back oversized nuclear stockpiles but does not mandate permanent reductions. In keeping with the Bush administration’s desire to preserve maximum nuclear flexibility, the deal contains no requirement to destroy retired warheads, places no prohibition on missile defence systems, allows either side to return to any force level it desires after 10 years, and lets either side pull out with 90 days’ notice at any time. On the American side some of the weapons will be dismantled, but most will be placed in storage adding to an already bulging reserve stockpile.

While the danger of a nuclear exchange between Washington and Moscow may recede yet further, post Cold War security threats remain as real and pressing as ever. Top of the list of nuclear dangers is potential ‘leakage’ of fissile material from Russia’s vast and often ill-guarded nuclear weapons complex, which reportedly has enough nuclear material available for building another 40,000 nuclear weapons.

To accomplish the monumental objective of “liquidat[ing] the legacy of the cold war”, as President Bush asserted, far more attention and resources must be devoted to help Moscow keep control of its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and technologies.

Another acute worry is the security of Russia’s arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons. Following the precedent set by the arms control negotiations of the Cold War the deal struck by Putin and Bush places no limitation on tactical nuclear weapons. Tactical or ‘substrategic’ nuclear weapons have smaller yields than strategic nuclear weapons and are designed for battlefield use. The United States has just over 1,000 of these weapons while Russia’s arsenal is not known but is believed to number between 4,000 and 12,000.

Concerns persist that the size, the lack of effective controls over their storage, and absence of a reliable inventory, make these weapons vulnerable to theft by terrorist or criminal groups. These fears have multiplied since September 11th with many analysts holding that one source of an Al-Qaeda nuclear bomb would be Russia’s arsenal of tactical nukes. A recent CIA report argued that, “The [Russian nuclear weapons] security system ... may not be sufficient to meet today’s challenge of a knowledgeable insider collaborating with a criminal or terrorist group.”

Resistance on the part of Moscow and Washington to limits on tactical nukes reflects a common feeling that these weapons still have a role to play in their respective military planning. The United States is seeking to assign new missions to its tactical arsenal, principally for use against “rogue states” who may be developing chemical and biological weapons (CBW). The US Department of Energy is currently seeking funding for a new low-yield nuclear weapon for use against underground bunkers and CBW facilities. This thinking was laid out in the recently released US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which calls for a smaller, but more flexible, US nuclear arsenal. Russia seems to be relying on these battlefield weapons more as strategic arsenals are reduced. So, while the overall number of warheads will be reduced in the short term, the missions of the remaining weapons may be expanded.

The Bush-Putin Summit offers a historic opportunity for the two presidents to further build on the post-cold war foundation of cooperative security between the United States and Russia. Sadly it seems that this opportunity will not be fully exploited this week. Given that the Russian arsenal is lying on Europe’s doorstep, Britain and the other EU Member States must now do more to assist with the improved security and safe disposal

of these remaining nuclear weapons and materials. It would certainly be unwise to leave the job to Moscow and Washington alone.

Ken Luongo is Executive Director of the Russian-American Nuclear Security Advisory Council (RANSAC) and Ian Davis is Director of BASIC.