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The START follow-on negotiations: Russians focus on delivery vehicles

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U.S. and Russian negotiators have been trying to forge a follow-on agreement to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) since mid-May, and a major [announcement](#) on the interim results of these talks is expected at the summit between Presidents Obama and Medvedev on July 6-8.¹ Rose Gottemoeller, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, and Anatoly Antonov, Chief of Security and Disarmament Issues, have met three times but have refrained from officially divulging the details of these negotiations.²

[Comments](#) made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov following the conclusion of negotiations in Moscow on May 20 indicate that Russia is paying close attention to how the follow-on agreement will impact not only nuclear weapons numbers, but also the overall strategic postures of the two countries:

“The general principle of a new treaty should be the equal security of both sides and the preservation of parity in the sphere of strategic stability ... This cannot be guaranteed without taking into account the situation in the sphere of missile defense or the deployment of weapons systems in space, as well as plans to create non-nuclear warheads.”³

To be sure, one of the most important points in negotiations will be the issue of strategic delivery vehicles, because Russian officials have insisted on their reduction. President Medvedev recently underscored the importance of this issue in a [speech](#) delivered at Helsinki University, commenting that a new treaty “must limit both the means of delivery of nuclear warheads as well as the actual number of warheads.”⁴ As a basic arms control matter, mutual reductions in delivery vehicles are thought to increase stability by ensuring strategic parity and demonstrating a commitment to disarmament. This brief will discuss the important role that the strategic delivery vehicle issue plays in the START follow-on negotiations and in potential future arrangements.

Background

[START](#) permits the Soviet Union, succeeded by Russia,⁵ and the United States to have no more than 6,000 accountable nuclear warheads attributed to deployed strategic delivery vehicles,⁶ which are

categorized as follows: (1) Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and their associated launchers; (2) Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) and their associated launchers; and (3) heavy bombers.⁷ The agreement allows a total of 1,600 deployed strategic delivery vehicles for each side. As of January 2009, the United States had 1,198 deployed strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, and Russia had 814.⁸ Unlike START, the later Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT, or Moscow Treaty signed in 2002) established specific limits on the numbers of deployed nuclear warheads, but did not address delivery vehicles. START is set to expire in December 2009, and along with it, the limitations on related strategic delivery vehicles as well as the associated monitoring and verification regime. Without a replacement treaty, mistrust and insecurity over strategic arsenals could further worsen relations between the two countries and open up loopholes within which new deployments could be made.

Concern over conventional warheads

The Bush Administration's 2001 Nuclear Posture Review ([NPR](#)) increased the flexibility of U.S. strategic forces and broadened their range of potential targets.⁹ The development of Prompt Global Strike (PGS) grew up within this doctrine.¹⁰ While PGS lacks a set [definition](#), it is generally understood to refer to the ability to rapidly deliver precision strikes against valuable targets in denied areas anywhere in the world.¹¹ Strategic missiles, previously reserved for nuclear missions, were to be tipped with conventional warheads.

PGS has been championed by Marine Corps General James Cartwright,¹² the former head of the Strategic Command (STRATCOM) and now the Vice Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Under the Bush Administration, the Pentagon planned to replace a number of nuclear-armed Trident D-5 SLBMs with conventional warheads. This plan, however, was [rejected](#) by Congress in 2006 due to concerns that deployment would create ambiguity in U.S. nuclear posture.¹³ In early 2007, General Cartwright, in coordination with the Air Force Command, [unveiled](#) plans to have a land-based Conventional Strike Missile (CSM) built by 2014.¹⁴

Moreover, the PGS concept has included potential plans for an Advanced Hypersonic Weapon ([AHW](#)), which would ride a two-stage rocket into space and then "separate and glide to a target up to 6,000 kilometers away in less than 35 minutes."¹⁵ As such, the AHW concept has raised military concerns about whether the weapon would be [compliant](#) with the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, or whether it would be affected by START or its follow-on treaty, depending on how the weapon is further developed.¹⁶

START [limited](#) the number of strategic delivery vehicles, regardless of whether they would carry conventional or nuclear warheads,¹⁷ a criterion Moscow would like to [retain](#).¹⁸ Although the Bush Administration sought to alter these terms and count only operationally-deployed nuclear warheads, the Obama Administration has so far been vague on this issue. In an [interview](#) with Interfax News Agency in May, Assistant Secretary Gottemoeller indicated that delivery vehicles will be included in the negotiations. She refused to comment, however, when asked about conventionally-armed delivery vehicles specifically.¹⁹ Both sides have reportedly agreed to keep silent about the progress of negotiations, making it difficult to determine the Administration's position.

The root of Russia's current objections

In an [interview](#) with *Arms Control Today* late last year, Sergei Kislyak, Russia's Ambassador to the United States, explained why Russia places such importance on delivery vehicles: "One of the most important things for us is that [the START follow-on] addresses delivery vehicles because you have to be sure that

the deployment modes of both sides would not be any more threatening than they are now. Hopefully, they will be less so, more predictable, and at a lower level.”²⁰

Underpinning Russian concerns regarding U.S. plans for PGS is a fundamental distrust of America’s strategic intentions. Russian leaders fear that the potential for the United States to rapidly expand its conventional and other strategic capabilities will lead to an eventual gross imbalance between Russian versus U.S. and allied strategic postures. The latest [version](#) of Russia’s National Security Concept released on May 12, 2009 states that one of the primary threats to Russia comes from:

“a policy of some of the leading foreign countries, intent on achieving superiority in the military sphere, first of all in strategic nuclear forces, by development of precision, information, and other high-tech means of conducting armed struggle, [the production of] strategic armaments [for] non-nuclear equipment, unilateral formation of global antimissile defense systems, and the militarization of space.”²¹

According to the Concept, Russian leaders consider these plans, along with the eastward enlargement of NATO since the end of the Cold War, to be elements of an overall strategy by the United States to attain strategic dominance and thus threatening Russian national security.²² They see Russian nuclear forces as a counterbalance to U.S. conventional strategic superiority, as most explicitly seen in the U.S. ability for global strike; so U.S. efforts to further develop their global strike capability will be explicitly linked in Russian minds to nuclear negotiations. The Russians also fear that conventionally-armed strategic delivery vehicles could later on be used to strengthen America’s uploading [capability](#), the ability to “quickly increase the number of deliverable warheads by bringing back and deploying reserve warheads.”²³ Foreign Minister Lavrov highlighted this issue alongside concerns over warhead stocks in an [interview](#) in February with the *Voice of Russia*²⁴ and in his [speech](#) at the Conference on Disarmament in March.²⁵ President Medvedev reiterated this concern in his speech at Helsinki University in April.²⁶

A concern that has been expressed in the U.S. Congress has its mirror within Russia. Russian strategic forces remain on a launch-on-warning status. The launch of a conventionally-armed strategic warhead could be construed by Russian early warning systems as a nuclear attack and could set off a response.²⁷

Ramifications for verification measures

Conventionally-armed delivery vehicles, if not counted in a follow-on treaty, would also complicate its verification protocol. At a bilateral meeting in London before the April 2009 G20 Summit, Presidents Obama and Medvedev [announced](#) their intention to negotiate a new treaty to “include effective verification measures drawn from the experience of the Parties in implementing the START Treaty.”²⁸ At her confirmation hearing in January, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the Obama Administration would seek to continue monitoring and verification provisions in a follow-on agreement.²⁹ Gottemoeller said during her [interview](#) with Interfax that these provisions should be incorporated into a new treaty, and even improved upon.³⁰ Overall, START’s verification protocol grants an unprecedented level of access for each nation to the other’s nuclear facilities. A follow-on treaty is expected to apply a new verification protocol offering similar levels of confidence, but with less costly and cumbersome provisions. Anything more intrusive is likely to be met with fierce [resistance](#) from the military and counter intelligence agencies in both Russia and the United States, who perceive the existing protocol to be too intrusive.³¹

If they were not to be counted under the new treaty, the existence of conventionally-armed strategic missiles would create a verification challenge, as they would be difficult to distinguish from those allocated to nuclear missions, a task requiring procedures more intrusive than those currently in play.³²

Conclusion

U.S. military leaders continue to actively promote the PGS vision. General Kevin P. Chilton, head of STRATCOM, argued at a [hearing](#) in March 2009 before the House Strategic Forces Subcommittee that conventional PGS is essential because certain targets in denied territories can only be “rapidly struck today with nuclear weapons platforms.”³³ In early June, General Cartwright again [called](#) for the assigning of conventional warheads to strategic missiles or AHWs, saying, “The reality today is conventional bombers for global strike -- probably not credible. They're too slow.”³⁴ The Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review, due by the end of 2009, is likely to become the definitive statement of the Obama Administration’s position on the issue of strategic delivery vehicles. Such internal consideration by Administration officials will take place concurrently with the negotiations with the Russians over the START follow-on, and it seems likely that the Russian perspective will play a significant role in the calculations.

¹ “Russia and U.S. diplomats preparing Medvedev-Obama meeting in Moscow,” *The Voice of Russia*, April 28, 2009 <http://www.ruvr.ru/main.php?lng=eng&q=44394&cid=56&p=28.04.2009&pn=1>

² Robert Evans, “U.S., Russia focus on details of potential arms pact,” Reuters via *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2009 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/03/AR2009060301572.html>

³ “U.S., Russia end first round of high-stakes nuclear talks,” AFP via Yahoo! News, May 20, 2009 http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20090520/wl_afp/russiausweaponsnucleardisarmament_20090520162336

⁴ Dmitry Medvedev, “Speech at Helsinki University and Answers from Questions to Audience,” President of Russia website, April 20, 2009 http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2009/04/20/1919_type82912type82914type84779_215323.shtml

⁵ The original START signatories in 1991 included the Soviet Union and the United States. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine inherited the Soviet nuclear arsenal and subsequently signed the Lisbon Protocol in 1992 to bind all countries to the START agreement.

⁶ START did not address nuclear warheads in storage.

⁷ *Treaty Between The United States Of America And The Union Of Soviet Socialist Republics On The Reduction And Limitation Of Strategic Offensive Arms*, Article II, July 31, 1991 <http://www.state.gov/www/global/arms/starhtml/start/start1.html#artil>

⁸ Defense Treaty Inspection Readiness Program (DTIRP), Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), last accessed June 19, 2009 <http://dtirp.dtra.mil/TIC/synopses/start.cfm>

⁹ Hans Kristensen, *Nuclear Posture Review Report [Reconstructed]: Submitted to Congress on December 31, 2001*, January 8, 2002, p. 7, p. 29 http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/united_states/NPR2001re.pdf (the text of the 2001 NPR remains classified as of June, 2009); also see Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 6, 2006 <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/QDR20060203.pdf>

¹⁰ Wade Boese, "Russia Wants Limits on Prompt Global Strike," *Arms Control Today*, June 2008 http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_06/GlobalStrike

¹¹ "Military Transformation: DOD Needs to Strengthen Implementation of its Global Strike Concept and Provide a Comprehensive Investment Approach for Acquiring New Capabilities," United States Government Accountability Office, April 2008, p. 14 <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08325.pdf>; General Cartwright has said that missile defense should be considered part of PGS as well. (Missile defense is also another issue that Russians have said should be addressed in an agreement with the United States.)

¹² John T. Bennett, "Cartwright: U.S. Force-Sizing, Basing Strategy Need Overhaul," *Defense News*, June 4, 2009 <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4123641>

¹³ "Conventional TRIDENT Modification," GlobalSecurity.org (date of publication not provided—obtained May 14, 2009) <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/systems/ctm.htm>; See also Committee on Conventional Prompt Global Strike Capability, et. al., *U.S. Conventional Prompt Global Strike: Issues for 2008 and Beyond*, The National Academies Press, 2008 <http://www.cdi.org/pdfs/natresearchcouncil.pdf>

¹⁴ Michael Bruno, "Conventional Missile Pushed by Air Force," *Aerospace Daily and Defense Report*, April 26, 2007 http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/generic/story_generic.jsp?channel=aerospacedaily&id=news/CSM042607.xml&headline=Conventional+Strike+Missile+Pushed+by+Air+Force

¹⁵ Elaine Grossman, "Price Tag for Fast Missile Might Top \$600 million," *Global Security Newswire*, December 21, 2007 http://www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/GSN_20071221_6A172F65.php

¹⁶ The AHW could rely on a two-stage rocket booster, the same booster that would be used for the proposed missile defense interceptors that would be based in Poland. (Elaine Grossman, "New Army Missile Faces Treaty Compliance Hurdles," *Global Security Newswire*, January 7, 2008 http://www.nti.org/d_newswire/issues/2008/1/7/fbe00b7b-308f-48b7-ab1a-e90be9752c20.html)

¹⁷ United States Department of State, "ARTICLE-BY-ARTICLE ANALYSIS OF THE ANNEX ON TERMS AND THEIR DEFINITIONS STRUCTURE AND OVERVIEW OF THE ANNEX," *START I—Article by Article Legal Analysis (part 1)* <http://www.state.gov/t/vci/trty/104056.htm#3>; and "START I at a Glance," *Arms Control Association Fact Sheet*, January 2009 <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/start1>

¹⁸ Walter Pincus, "U.S., Russia Split Over Scope of Arms Treaty Follow-Up but Concur on Goal, Negotiator Says," *Washington Post*, December 22, 2008 http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/21/AR2008122102111.html?wprss=rss_politics/fedpage

¹⁹ "U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller outlines the U.S. position on a new strategic arms reduction treaty with Russia," *Interfax News Agency*, May 4, 2009 <http://www.interfax.com/17/491670/Interview.aspx>

²⁰ Daryl G. Kimball and Miles A. Pomper, "A Fresh Start? An Interview with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak," *Arms Control Today*, December 2008 http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_12/KislyakInterview

²¹ *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until the year 2020*, Article 30 (in Russian-translation by author); Official website of the Russian Federation <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html>; for evaluation of this document in English, see: Roland Oliphant, "Ploughing the Sand of National Security," *Russia Profile*, May 14, 2009 <http://www.russiaprofile.org/page.php?pageid=Politics&articleid=a1242326869>

²² *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until the year 2020*, Article 30; Official website of the Russian Federation <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/99.html>

²³ Pavel Podvig, "Formulating the next U.S.-Russian arms control agreement," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 18, 2008 <http://www.thebulletin.org/web-edition/columnists/pavel-podvig/formulating-the-next-us-russian-arms-control-agreement>

²⁴ "Strategic arms reduction a two-way road: Sergei Lavrov," *Voice of Russia*, February 21, 2009 <http://www.ruvr.ru/main.php?lng=eng&q=40938&cid=56&p=21.02.2009>

²⁵ "Sergei Lavrov's speech before the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva," Reaching Critical Will, March 7, 2009 http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/political/cd/speeches09/1session/7March_Russia.pdf

²⁶ Medvedev, "Speech at Helsinki University and Answers to Questions from Audience," April 20, 2009.

²⁷ Pavel Podvig, "Russia and the Prompt Global Strike Plan," *PONARS Policy Memo* No. 417, December 2006, available via the website of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/pm_0417.pdf

²⁸ Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, "Text of US-Russia statement on nuclear arms," White House Office of the Press Secretary, April 1, 2009 http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-Statement-by-Dmitriy-A-Medvedev-and-Barack-Obama/

²⁹ Walter Pincus, "Clinton's Goals Detailed," *The Washington Post*, January 19, 2009 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/18/AR2009011802268.html>

³⁰ "U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller outlines the U.S. position on a new strategic arms reduction treaty with Russia," Interfax News Agency, May 4, 2009 <http://www.interfax.com/17/491670/Interview.aspx>

³¹ "Next Steps in U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Reduction: The START Follow-On Negotiations And Beyond," Transcript of Event hosted by the Arms Control Association, April 27, 2009 <http://www.armscontrol.org/node/3632>

³² Steven Pifer, "Beyond START: Negotiating the Next Step in U.S. and Russian Strategic Nuclear Arms Reductions," Brookings Policy Paper No. 15, May 2009 http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2009/05_arms_reduction_pifer/05_arms_reduction_pifer.pdf
See also "Next Steps in U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Reduction: The START Follow-On Negotiations and Beyond," April 27, 2009.

³³ General Kevin P. Chilton, "Commander, United States Strategic Command, Before the Strategic Forces Subcommittee, House Committee on Armed Services on the United States Strategic Command," House Armed Services Committee, March 17, 2009 <http://www.stratcom.mil/posture/>

³⁴ Transcript of presentation by Gen. James Cartwright, "Military Strategy Forum: Whither the Forward-Basing of U.S. Forces?" Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, D.C., June 4, 2009 http://www.csis.org/media/csis/events/090605_cartwright_transcript.pdf

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