After the US-Russian New START: What’s Next?

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Abstract

On February 5, 2011, the US-Russian New START treaty entered into legal force. There are numerous problems to be resolved. The most important among these problems are “further reductions of strategic nuclear weapons,” “the problem of tactical nuclear weapons of the two states,” “nuclear arsenals of the third states,” “ballistic missile defense,” and “other related problems.” We should stress that the United States and Russia have different priorities in this list of problems. For Russia the number one problem is ballistic missile defense while the United States is obviously interested in non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons. This contradiction can negatively influence the progress of the future steps on the way to nuclear disarmament. The positive thing is that the two states are ready to make all possible efforts to continue arms control negotiations and officially express the final goal—a nuclear free world. All this leads to the conclusion that the above-mentioned problems cannot be solved separately. Only a combined approach can offer the parties a chance for compromise as well as a space for maneuvering and the flexibility necessary for success in achieving progress in arms control and nuclear disarmament.

Key words: US-Russian New START treaty, nuclear arms control and security, nuclear weapons, SDI, NATO, ABM, BMD

I. Introduction

On February 5, 2011, the US-Russian New START treaty entered into legal force. It took more than eight months to discuss this document in the legislative bodies of the two states and finally to approve its ratification. During these debates practically all
the spectrum of nuclear arms control and security issues were under consideration as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the treat itself.

The supporters of New START stressed that this document was a necessary element of US-Russian strategic relations which “filled the gap” previously occupied by START-I Treaty, which was out of force since December 2, 2009. Now arms control relations between Russia and the United States are re-established in full volume. It was also frequently said that the Treaty committed the two nations to cut the number of their deployed strategic warheads to 1,550 each – “a reduction of 30 per cent in the number of these weapons of mass destruction.” 1) In this connection they took into consideration the limits of 1,700-2,200 strategic warheads established by the previous US-Russian Moscow Treaty of 2002.

The skeptics quite reasonably, to my view, object that the “most of the reductions would be made possible by a change in the counting rules.” 2) These rules concern heavy bombers equipped for carrying gravity bombs and long-range nuclear cruise missiles. But according to the Treaty each of these heavy bombers is counted as a single operationally deployed warhead in spite of the fact that in reality it can carry up to 16-20 strategic warheads. 3) Having in mind that both Russia and the United States have in their inventory several dozens of these bombers, the real number of the deployed nuclear strategic warheads could exceed 2,000 for each of the sides of the Treaty, i.e. the number may remain nearly the same as it was fixed in the Moscow Treaty of 2002. 4)

Moreover, “30% reductions” of strategic offensive forces is only an abstract statement since, for example, for Russia there is no need to reduce its weapons at all.


3) In START-1 Treaty of 1991 the counting rules provided that only the heavy bombers with gravity bombs were counted as one warhead and one delivery vehicle. The bombers equipped for long range nuclear cruise missiles were counted according to their real payload.