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The Dangerous Myths of START II

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Even though the Cold War is over, Russia will continue to defend itself with nuclear weapons." Speaking through a translator at Stanford University, Victor Nefedov, who designed Soviet missile warheads, continued: "Abolition of nuclear weapons will not make the world a safer place." [1] Nefedov, a 1970 graduate of Leningrad University, gave two reasons for Russia's continued reliance on weapons of mass destruction: "In terms of cost per pound of explosive yield, nuclear weapons are much less expensive than conventional weapons. Additionally, their possession has tremendous deterrent value. Since the end of World War II, no nuclear power has been attacked by an aggressor nation."

On potential possession of nuclear weapons by terrorist states, the Russian physicist used the same arguments the National Rifle Association has raised against gun control. In Nefedov's opinion, trade sanctions, non-proliferation treaties, and diplomacy cannot check the inevitable spread of nuclear weapons any more than gun control laws can stop the spread of firearms already in great supply in most American communities. "Someday a terrorist group will have the bomb. That's the best argument yet for responsible nations like Russia and the United States to retain nuclear weapons for their own defense," he observed.

Nefedov's candor runs against the grain of many Americans who believe the crumbling Berlin Wall signaled an end to nuclear confrontation. Judging from the comments of a Russian military-industrial-complex insider, the vanquished Soviet Union may have placed more reliance on nuclear weapons than most Westerners thought. Certainly, his unabashed acknowledgment that the Confederation of Independent States (CIS) will continue to build its military structure around a nuclear core splashes cold water in the face of new world order optimism.

Even as the United States moves toward ratification of START II (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), the most comprehensive arms control agreement yet between the nuclear superpowers, the nuclear genie has not been put back into the bottle. Negotiated during the hair-trigger era of Mutual Assured Destruction, this 15th attempt to reset the doomsday clock through paper accords [2] may have little relevance to future realities. After implementation, START II will roll back the US nuclear arsenal to early 1960s levels. As new threats to national security begin to take form, the United States should carefully review the tenets of START II before enacting its provisions. At least three "what ifs" dictate a go-slow approach before irrevocably downsizing US strategic nuclear forces:

- What if nuclear weapons proliferate among third-world powers such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea?
- What if China emerges as a major nuclear power hostile to the United States?
- What if a new strongman rises from the troubled remnants of the Soviet empire to resurrect its dormant nuclear capability?

The third "what if" unmask the most dangerous potential consequence of START II. Breakout, a sudden deployment of significant numbers of weapons above treaty ceilings, could leave the United States a distant runner-up in a resurgent East-West arms race. Technical details, carefully hidden in the text and footnotes to START II, leave the door open to one-sided nuclear rearmament by the CIS. Since most Americans no longer view the former Soviet Union as a threat, there has been little public debate on the provisions of START II. Consequently, at least six myths proclaimed by treaty supporters have not been exposed by the Clinton Administration, by senators charged with its ratification, or by the mainstream press. They will be addressed here.

Myth 1: START II eliminates land-based MIRVs (multiple warhead missiles).

This was the initial US position until the Russians balked. To get the stalled talks moving again, Secretary of State James Baker wrote to Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrey Kozyrev on 17 June 1992, conceding, "There is no requirement to replace the reentry platform . . . no matter how many warheads are removed." [3]

The reentry platform is functionally similar to the cylinder on a gunfighter's Colt '45, except it dispenses nuclear warheads instead of bullets. It is the one piece of equipment differentiating a multiple-warhead missile from the single-shot kind. In effect, Baker's concession allows either side to retain the cylinder if they agree to load only one chamber.

The United States, on its only affected missile, will replace the three-warhead cylinder, making Minuteman III a true single-shot weapon. Russia will not replace the six-warhead cylinder on its SS-19, one of the modern ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) expected to be retained by Moscow's Rocket Forces after START II is implemented. Limited on-site inspections will verify the SS-19 six-shooter has been downloaded to a single round. But Baker's loophole, retained by the current Administration, offers a dangerous breakout opportunity. Almost overnight, the Russians could add 525 warheads to their fleet of 105 SS-19s, easily restoring the MIRV capability. The United States could not reload Minuteman III without a major retrofit that would take several years to complete.

Myth 2: Both nations' strategic nuclear weapons will be reduced from the current level of 10,000 each to between 3000 and 3500 in ten years (by 2003).

Neither START accord did away with a single nuclear bomb. (Nor, for that matter, did either of the earlier Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties, SALT I and II.) START limits are based on "warheads attributed to deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs [submarine-launched ballistic missiles], and deployed bombers." [4] The key words are "attributed" and "deployed."

Here's how START math works. Let's assume US spy satellites have detected 100 silos capable of housing the SS-17 ICBM. If Russia chooses to retain all of its SS-17s, then the "deployed" count equals 100. But US intelligence data indicates the SS-17 can carry four warheads. Since START II allegedly eliminates multiple-warhead land-based missiles, each SS-17 is "attributed" one warhead. The START count for SS-17 warheads thus becomes 100: the 100 "deployed" missiles times the "attributed" loading of one bomb each. Spare SS-17 missiles and the downloaded warheads (300 in this example) are not counted. Ambassador Winton Brooks, assistant director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), says: "There is no requirement to dismantle warheads downloaded to reach START II limits." [5]

These warheads could be sold to China or to any third-world nation without violating START II. They could also be redeployed on tactical weapons, defensive weapons, or any aircraft or missile not included in the START dictionary, such as the SS-11 co-orbital anti-satellite system or the Galosh anti-ballistic missile interceptor.

After START II, the Russian Federation will have exactly as much fissionable material as it had before the treaty was negotiated--over 900 tons of highly enriched uranium and weapon-grade plutonium. [6] It takes about 15 pounds of plutonium or twice that amount of uranium to make a small atomic bomb.

Myth 3: START II will eliminate Russia's most destabilizing strategic weapon, the "heavy" SS-18 ICBM.

Dubbed "Satan" by Western intelligence, the giant ten-warhead SS-18 is the world's most destructive weapon. Its ability to drop each of its megaton-rated warheads within 600 feet of their intended targets gives the SS-18 a true first-strike capability. SALT I granted the old Soviet Union an exclusive franchise to build heavy ICBMs while limiting the largest US missile, the MX [7] to half the Satan's throw-weight. START II, until you read the fine print and note the omissions, corrects the inequity of previous arms control agreements by eliminating Russia's monster missile.

The treaty requires Russia to cut up each deployed SS-18 under the watchful eyes of US inspectors. [8] But it does not call for destruction of warehoused spare and test SS-18 boosters, which could number well over 100. [9]

In 1988, Les Aspin, then Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, chided the Reagan Administration for

not addressing the uncounted-missiles loophole in its START negotiating strategy. "Verification is an enormously difficult problem," he noted, "but verification doesn't even touch the chief element of Soviet breakout potential, the legal spare and test missiles." [10] Aspin was referring to stockpiles of missiles, not counted in arms-control agreements, used for frequent flight tests or as replacements for boosters damaged during operational deployment. [11] With the addition of nuclear warheads, they can be quickly converted from spare assets to operational weapons. During his tenure as Secretary of Defense with the Clinton Administration, Aspin did not repeat his concerns about the spare missiles loophole when endorsing START II.

The final step in truly eliminating an ICBM such as the SS-18 is to destroy its launchers or silos. Backpedaling from what had been a firm position, US negotiators allowed the Russian Federation to retain 90 of the massive, super-hard SS-18 silos. After complying with the START II silo conversion protocol, the Russian Rocket Forces will be permitted to replace 90 of the SS-18s with a smaller, single-warhead missile. The protocol requires Russia to place a 2.9-meter restrictive ring near the top of the retained SS-18 silos and to fill the bottom five meters of the silos with concrete. These measures make the silos too small to hold an SS-18. [12]

But the restrictive ring is almost as easy to remove as one of the little washers placed inside a shower head to reduce water consumption, and chipping out five meters of concrete from a silo hard enough to resist a nuclear explosion is not an engineering challenge.

Concessions and ambiguous text offer another opportunity for Russia to break out from START II should relations with the West grow cold again. A thought-to-be-extinct killer missile could suddenly reappear, assembled from forgotten spares and placed on alert in silos that should have been dismantled.

Myth 4: Both sides will "build down" to reach START II warhead limits.

With its economy verging on chaos, the Russian Federation will continue a multibillion-dollar program to deploy the modern, fifth-generation road-mobile SS-25 ICBM. As they "build up" to insure the current inventory of 300 truck-borne SS-25s reaches the treaty's limit of 1100 mobile ICBM warheads, the Russian government will destroy older, paid-for missiles equally capable of vaporizing US cities. One explanation: mobile missiles are next to impossible to destroy while the older, silo-based missiles, which can be pinpointed by satellites, are easy to target. No doubt Russian military strategists noted that during the Gulf War US forces could not find mobile Scud missiles even after establishing overwhelming air superiority over the battlefield.

Meanwhile, the United States will continue production of the 20 authorized B-2 stealth bombers and *Ohio*-class Trident submarines to reach its quotas for SLBM and bomber warheads while retiring some older B-52 bombers and *Poseidon* submarines.

START II sets warhead limits, but the competition continues to field more-capable, higher-technology weapons.

Myth 5: On-site inspections guarantee compliance.

Up to a point, this is a correct claim by arms control proponents. START I allows ten missile site inspections annually, each requiring 16 hours advance notification. START II added four additional on-site visits so US inspectors could look in on SS-18 silo conversions. Also, submarines may be inspected in port to verify warhead loading on sea-launched missiles. A one-time inspection of bombers is stipulated to assess bomb bay capacities. Still, 14 annual on-site inspections in a country whose strategic nuclear forces are distributed throughout 11 time zones can hardly be called comprehensive.

The operative word is "limited," meaning only sites identified during negotiations, primarily from spy satellites, are subject to inspection. For example, if five minutes after ratification, satellite imagery spots a previously undetected bomber or missile factory, the United States can declare it a "suspect site" but cannot inspect it. The Russians could explain it away as a "baby milk factory," and that would be that.

ACDA's Ambassador Brooks claims we did not press for unlimited on-site inspections because granting reciprocal rights to the Russians could undermine US constitutional guarantees against unwarranted searches. [13] ACDA

contends limited on-site inspections would detect a breakout from the treaty, but admits we might not catch violations such as the illegal Krasnoyarsk radar in Siberia that breached the 1972 ABM Treaty or the SS-23 rockets found in Eastern Europe after the 1987 INF Treaty allegedly eliminated all intermediate-range missiles in Europe.

Myth 6: START II makes the world a safer place.

Before signing the treaty in Moscow on 3 January 1993, Russian President Boris Yeltsin called it "our joint gift to the peoples of the earth." [14] Brushing aside the rhetoric, real-world considerations cast serious doubts on the efficacy of START II.

First of all, the intent of Russian arms control negotiators is suspect. By hard-line resistance to true elimination of multiple-warhead land-based ICBMs, by insisting on retaining the right to deploy mobile missiles even high-tech US reconnaissance systems can't detect or verify, and by keeping the door open for a second coming of the dreaded SS-18 Satan, Russian diplomats have set the stage for a dramatic breakout from the 3500-warhead limit. And no one can guarantee that future Russian governments will remain friendly to the West or supportive of START II. Meanwhile, the United States, which steadfastly observes arms control agreements, will irrevocably reduce its strategic nuclear arsenal to early 1960s levels with no hope of matching a sudden resurgence of Russian capability. It currently takes the United States 12 to 15 years to develop and deploy a new strategic weapon system.

Second, START II addresses only strategic offensive systems; it ignores their military corollary, strategic defense. Uncounted are 2800 Russian nuclear warheads providing air defense against ballistic missiles, bombers, and cruise missiles. [15] The US total for strategic defense warheads is zero. If the United States reduces its offensive weapons by two-thirds, as required by START II, Russian strategic defenses become more effective because they have fewer targets to contend with. A treaty that attempts to balance offensive systems while leaving one side with a clear advantage in defensive capabilities doesn't lessen the likelihood of war.

Also, despite the drumbeat of the arms control lobby about warhead reduction, START II leaves former KGB bureaucrats and Russian military brass home alone with the world's largest stockpile of fissionable nuclear materials. In fact, the Russian nuclear weapons stockpile may have exceeded Cold War intelligence estimates. Victor N. Makhailov, head of Russia's Ministry of Atomic Energy, recently stated the Soviet Union had built 45,000 nuclear warheads, or 12,000 more than worst-case estimates by Western intelligence agencies. [16] Russian warheads may be downloaded, but they are not eliminated at a time when terrorist states are willing to pay hard currencies for nuclear materials. With few such products available on the world market, how long can the keepers of the hard-pressed Russian economy resist the suitcases filled with dollars that they could receive in exchange for a few pounds of processed uranium or plutonium?

This leads to a final question. Should START II be considered only in the context of Russian Federation capabilities or should it also address rest-of-the-world threats? China, which at best maintains lukewarm relations with the West, is currently developing three new ICBMs capable of striking US cities. Saddam Hussein is having difficulty in letting go of his nuclear aspirations. Iran and North Korea may soon join the exclusive nuclear club. Another 33 countries today own short- and intermediate-range missiles that can reach from 40 to 3000 miles beyond their borders. Most are capable of delivering nuclear payloads.

Clearly, the nuclear threat to the United States is changing. Less clear is the proper response to an emerging new world order that could see a resurgent Russian military, a new menace from China, or a nuclear-capable terrorist state that wouldn't think twice about using weapons of mass destruction in a reprisal against Europe or the United States. Strategic nuclear systems require high investment, and take a long time to build, but they are inexpensive, compared to conventional armaments, to operate and support. All of this raises a caution flag about deep reductions in US strategic capabilities. Figuratively speaking, we shouldn't take the nuclear cops off the beat before the world neighborhood is safe.

Time to Act in Our Own Interests

The first principle of military strategy taught in service academies and reinforced at the war colleges is this: military forces should be structured to respond to a potential enemy's capabilities, not necessarily his intent. Such is the essence

of deterrence.

This principle proved its effectiveness during the Cold War. The US strategic triad of bombers, ICBMs, and sea-launched ballistic missiles was an effective counterforce against a Soviet first strike. World War III didn't happen, perhaps because the Pentagon retained the flexibility to reshuffle its strategic forces to take advantage of new technologies and to counter Soviet advances in both defensive and offensive nuclear forces. For example, noise cancellation technologies permitted *Poseidon*- and *Trident*-class submarines to evade detection while on patrol, B-2 Stealth bombers negated the massive Russian investment in air defense radar, and an advanced inertial guidance system made the MX missile accurate enough to attack superhard SS-18 silos. START II, because its binding language and precepts reflect capabilities of current systems or those already under development, could place severe limits on force modernization in the early 21st century after the treaty is fully implemented.

Arms control can work against, rather than for, national security. When the United States and the Soviet Union negotiated the ABM Treaty in 1972, their objective was to reduce the likelihood of war by preventing either side from destroying the other's retaliatory nuclear forces with a sneak attack. If a counterattack was guaranteed, they reasoned, only a madman would push the button. Each side was limited to a single ABM launch site to prevent the defenses from overwhelming the offensive forces. Protection of strategic nuclear forces was envisioned as a better deterrent than protection of people.

Nineteen years later, Saddam Hussein changed the rules. During the Gulf War, the Iraqi strongman sought military advantage by terrorizing population centers with Scud missiles. Killing people became a more important objective than destroying military hardware. As outlaw states with a similar mentality acquire more-capable ballistic missile systems, US population centers could become targets.

Missile defenses of the future will have to do more than deter an attack on strategic nuclear forces. They should also shield population centers from limited nuclear attack by terrorist states. Grand Forks, North Dakota, the only US interceptor launch site permitted by the ABM Treaty, is ideal for defending strategic bomber and missile bases located in the Great Plains, but it's too far inland to protect population centers along our east and west coasts. Mobile launchers, explicitly forbidden by the ABM Treaty, coupled with space-based detection and cueing satellites, implicitly forbidden by the "strict interpretation" favored by the Clinton Administration, offer the best means of shooting down warheads aimed at cities by terrorist states. These and other technologies developed as part of the Strategic Defense Initiative long after the ABM accord was ratified will remain on the shelf because they were not specifically authorized by the treaty. Under the rules of 1972, the United States cannot have both a treaty-compliant missile defense and one that protects citizens from emerging threats in the new world order.

START II could put future US strategic forces in a similar arms control straitjacket. According to the Pentagon's recently released bottom-up review of US defense needs, "Two principal guidelines shape our future requirements for strategic nuclear forces: to provide an effective deterrent while remaining within START II limits, and to allow for additional forces to be reconstituted in the event of a threatening reversal of events." [17]

The two guidelines are contradictory. Once our forces reach START II levels, it will take years to reconstitute them no matter how threatening "a reversal of events" may be. For example, by 2003 or earlier, all 50 MX missiles (500 warheads) will be cut up. The MX alone among US strategic systems has the accuracy to effectively attack superhard Russian silos. If, in a worst-case scenario, the SS-18 reappears after the MX is gone, the United States will need more than a decade to develop a counterforce. Actual MX acquisition time lines prove the point. Development of the MX started in 1971. It was first flight-tested in 1983. Three years later, in 1986, the first squadron was operational in Wyoming. Strategic systems, like Rome, are not built in a day.

If a "strict interpretation" policy is applied in the future to START II, language could handcuff the United States in altering its strategic forces to counter currently unknown threats. Like the ABM Treaty, whose terminology currently hinders the United States in adapting its missile defenses to the emerging terrorist threat, technical terms contained in START II are frozen in the vernacular of the times in which it was negotiated. New technologies could not be foreseen, nor were strategic systems other than today's bombers and missiles envisioned. As nuclear weapons spread to less-developed nations, delivery vehicles will undergo a complete transformation. For example, an auto-pilot system

coupled with a Global Positioning System receiver for navigation could convert a business jet into a poor man's cruise missile. Innovations such as this would blur the distinction between tactical and strategic weapons. If that happens, is there any guarantee that START II will permit the United States to use its technological advantage to develop an effective counterforce against such unforeseen weapons? Current experience with the ABM Treaty suggests otherwise.

Ukraine's initial refusal to ratify START I interrupted the Clinton Administration's timetable for presenting START II to the Senate.[18] In October the Ukrainian parliament did approve START I, but added 13 conditions, some of which are unacceptable to the United States.[19] The most serious roadblock is Ukraine's refusal to accept the affirmation of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty contained in Article 5 of the START I accord. An Administration spokesman indicates negotiations are under way with Ukraine to mitigate the added conditions so that the Ukrainian parliament's ratification will be acceptable to the United States.[20] With the rush-to-ratify momentum broken, there is still time to carefully weigh START II in light of long-term US defense needs.

While START II provides a reasonable framework for downsizing superpower arsenals, it contains serious flaws that could affect US national security. With this in mind, the Senate should amend the treaty to include Russian defensive nuclear weapons and to close loopholes permitting a rapid breakout from the pact's warhead limits. Also, a memorandum of understanding should be added updating the ABM Treaty to allow either side to deploy missile defenses capable of protecting population centers from a limited nuclear strike. Additionally, provisions of the final version of START II should be consistent with the ongoing Defense Department review of US nuclear weapons policy which was initiated on 29 October 1993.

If the treaty is not amended, by 2003 when START II is fully implemented, the United States will be more dependent on the good will and stability of a longtime Cold War foe than on its own military prowess for the preservation of world peace.

NOTES

This article was adapted from a previous article by the author, "START Again," which appeared in the August-September 1993 issue of *Reason* magazine.

1. "Nuclear Weapons and the Stability of International Relations," technical seminar conducted 18 June 1993 by Victor Nefedov, Leading Researcher, All-Russian Scientific Research Institute of Experimental Physics, at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Arms Control. This and subsequent quotes are from author's notes.
2. Other nuclear arms control treaties and the year in which negotiated include: Antarctic Treaty, 1959; Limited Test Ban Treaty, 1963; Outer Space Treaty, 1967; Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, 1968; Seabed Arms Control Agreement, 1971; Agreement on Measures to Reduce Risk of Nuclear War, 1971; Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, 1972; Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I), 1972; Agreement on Prevention of Nuclear War, 1973; Threshold Test-Ban Treaty, 1974; Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty, 1976; Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II), 1979; Treaty on Intermediate- and Shorter-Range Nuclear Forces, 1987; and Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), 1990. Source: William Gay and Michael Pearson, *The Nuclear Arms Race* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1987), p. 122.
3. Letter dated 17 June 1992 from James A. Baker III, US Secretary of State, to Andrey Kozyrev, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation in Moscow.
4. *Official Text, Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Arms* (popularly known as START II), 3 January 1993, Article I, paragraph 1.
5. Telephone interview with Ambassador Winton Brooks, assistant director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, on 20 January 1993.
6. David Hughes, "Arms Experts Fear Nuclear Blackmail," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 4 January 1993, p. 61.

7. The ten-warhead MX, which is the United States' largest and most accurate ICBM, will be eliminated by START II. The treaty does allow retention of three MIRVed ICBMs--the US three-warhead Minuteman III, the four-warhead Russian SS-17, and the six-warhead SS-19--if they are downloaded to a single warhead. From an ACDA Fact Sheet, "Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Further Reduction of Strategic Offensive Arms," 1 January 1993, p. 3.
8. *Protocol on Procedures Governing Elimination of Heavy ICBMs and on Procedures Governing Conversion of Silo Launchers of Heavy ICBMs Relating to the Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Further Reduction and Elimination of Strategic Offensive Arms*, 3 January 1993, Section I, paragraph 3.
9. *Official Text*, START II, Article I, paragraph 1.
10. "House Study Cites Potential for Soviet START Violations," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 30 May 1988, p. 18.
11. A high ratio of reserve to deployed missiles is common for ICBM developers. The United States deployed 50 modern MX ICBMs in 1986-87 but produced another 128 that are held in reserve for test firings or to replace any damaged during deployment.
12. *Official Text*, START II, ICBM *Protocol*, Section II, paragraph 4(c).
13. Brooks telephone interview, 20 January 1993.
14. John-Thor Dahlburg, "Arms Pact called 'Gift' to the World," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 January 1993, p. A1.
15. "The Nuclear Arsenals," *The New York Times*, 30 July 1991, p. A7.
16. "Soviet Arsenal Was Larger Than U.S. Thought," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 September 1993, p. A20.
17. Les Aspin, "The Bottom-Up Review: Forces For a New Era," Department of Defense Report, 1 September 1993, p. 16.
18. Three Senate committees will review START II before its release to the full membership for a floor vote. The Foreign Relations Committee has primary responsibility for treaty review, but the Intelligence Committee will report on verification issues and the Armed Services Committee will assess the treaty's impact on national security. START I was ratified in 1991 by a 93-6 vote.
19. Art Pine, "Ukraine Says It's Deactivating Some A-Arms," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 December 1993, p. A1.
20. Telephone interview with an ACDA spokesman, 29 December 1993.

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