



BULLETIN

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Editors: Sławomir Dębski (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Bartosz Cichocki,
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U.S.-Russian Negotiations on START I Replacement

by Robert Śmigielski

Over the next few months Russian-American relations will be dominated by talks on a new treaty limiting strategic offensive forces. While both parties agree on the need to reduce the numbers of nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles, wide differences of opinion remain on the so-called breakout potential and questions not directly related to nuclear arms reduction, such as the missile defense (MD) system. It seems that a compromise can only be achieved if the treaty's content is narrowed. As far as Poland is concerned, the Russian-U.S. disarmament talks are unlikely to bring any negative consequences for its strategic interests.

Determinants of the Negotiating Process. The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), which bound Russia and the U.S. to cut down on their respective strategic nuclear forces (SNF) to 6,000 warheads and 1,600 delivery systems—intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), strategic bombers—is set to expire on 5 December 2009. The above targets were met by both states: as of 1 January 2009, the U.S. declared having 5,576 warheads and 1,198 delivery vehicles, and Russia, 3,909 and 814, respectively. Back in May 2002, Russia and the U.S. signed a Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), which provides for scaling down the number of SNF operational warheads to 1,700–2,200 by 31 December 2012. But with the expiry of START I, a mechanism to verify SNF limitation will cease to exist.

At a meeting in London on 1 April 2009, Presidents Dmitri Medvedev and Barack Obama directed their diplomatic representatives to embark immediately on talks to revise START I. Two rounds of bilateral negotiations were already held, headed by Anatoly Antonov, Director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's Security and Disarmament Department, and Rose Gottemoeller, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Verification and Compliance—in Moscow on 18–20 May, and in Geneva on 1–3 June. The negotiators are expected to outline a new agreement by the time both presidents meet in Moscow on 6–8 July.

Russia is forced to reduce its aging nuclear arsenals, and therefore the adoption of a new Treaty reducing SNF numbers is the only way it can keep pace with the U.S. For President Obama, the agreement comes as part of a broader plan to strengthen a non-proliferation regime based on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), whose Article VI places nuclear powers under an obligation to act towards nuclear disarmament. Speaking in Prague on 5 April, Obama also announced measures towards ratification by the U.S. Senate of the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and towards imparting a new impulse to talks on a fissile material cutoff treaty. These measures are expected to strengthen the U.S. position in the context of the NPT review conference scheduled for May 2010 and efforts to increase pressure on nuclear-aspiring and non-NPT countries.

Positions. Unlike his predecessor, President Obama accepts the need for keeping a binding START I framework for offensive potential reduction and strong mechanisms (even if scaled down compared to START I) to verify how commitments are fulfilled. The goal is, in particular, to limit costly inspections (of 16 different kinds, under the present treaty) and reduce 150 types of notifications about fulfillment of treaty provisions. Both parties also agree on the need to cut down the number of operational nuclear warheads (below the SORT limits, to 1,000–1,500 units) and delivery vehicles.

But on many important issues the parties' positions are divergent, most notably on how to count the warheads. For the U.S., the notion of "strategic warheads" means those that remain operationally deployed on delivery systems, and—consequently—does not include warheads stored in nuclear depots. This raises suspicions in Russia that the "breakout potential" so created will make it possible for the U.S. to quickly restore to a state of readiness several thousand nuclear warheads, by means of re-arming Minuteman III and Trident II missiles. Russia has no such potential, because—due to expiring serviceable lifetimes, it must recycle the withdrawn warheads and missiles. The Russian government is also nervous because of the U.S. concept of Prompt Global Strike, which provides for re-arming ICBM and SLMB with conventional warheads, including those capable of destroying intercontinental missile silos. Russia demands, therefore, that the new treaty should provide for the limitation of both the warheads and their delivery systems (which is supposed to prevent an emergence of "breakout potential"), and also prohibit deploying SNF outside national territory, placing arms in the outer space, or re-arming SNF delivery vehicles with conventional warheads. Russia also links the negotiations on offensive force reduction with a demand for the U.S. to put an end to the deployment of the global MD system.

Room for Compromise. With START I expiry date nearing fast, the ratification of a new treaty before 5 December is unlikely. Even if a presidential-level agreement on general issues is reached, it will be hard to complete drafting the treaty itself in a situation where Russia demands it to be linked to missile defense issues—a proposal that the U.S. rejects. Compromise, however, is offered a chance by the ongoing financial crisis, which forces the U.S. to curtail MD. Still, the United States will not abandon developing the Prompt Global Strike programme. It should also be noted that U.S. conventional forces are so much ahead of any other potential enemy that the United States might well consent to global nuclear disarmament without damaging its military domination. Russia's situation is diametrically different: given the condition of its conventional forces, it is the strategic forces that offer security guarantees for the country.

Chances for reaching agreement would increase if the negotiating field were narrowed to strategic offensive arms. Russia is unlikely to consent to a drop in warheads number to below 1,500 unless the U.S. accepts a linkage between offensive arms and missile defense. A possible compromise would then include: (1) Russian acceptance of the U.S. way of nuclear-warhead counting, which excludes from treaty limits the warheads stored in reserve (with neither the U.S. nor Russia having ever agreed to inspection of their respective nuclear depots, any verification of stockpiled warheads would be impossible in practice); (2) U.S. consent to the reduction of strategic delivery systems and to treating conventional warhead ICBM and SLBM as strategic, which would help ease Russian reservations about the U.S. breakout potential. Major elements of START I verification should be retained: the Joint Commission on Inspection and Compliance, exchange of information, ban on telemetric data encryption, mutual inspections. Once compromise is reached on strategic nuclear forces, room would probably emerge for starting talks on reducing tactical nuclear weapons, which so far have remained outside the scope of international disarmament agreements.

Possible Consequences for Poland. The U.S. is not going to give up on missile defense as a result of START I replacement negotiations, and it will not agree to directly link both issues. What one can expect, though, is a postponement of the deployment of MD elements in Central Europe—officially, to check the effectiveness of interceptor missiles and, in practice, to avoid spoiling relations with Russia. At the same time, it looks like an improvement in relations with Russia is not a goal in itself for President Obama, but only a means for achieving strategic objectives in Afghanistan and Iran, and also in the field of nuclear non-proliferation. One should not fear that the United States, in exchange for a positive result of the negotiations, would be ready to make concessions to Russia in areas of strategic importance for Poland. Specifically, the United States' will remain opposed to Russia's claims for the CIS area to be regarded as a zone of its exclusive interests.