



# BULLETIN

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## COMMENTARY

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### The Treaty on the Reduction of US and Russian Strategic Nuclear Arsenals

Łukasz Kulesa

*The agreement signed in Prague is very important symbolically and politically but it does not constitute a breakthrough in the reduction of American and Russian strategic nuclear forces.*

The agreement limiting the nuclear forces of the US and Russia signed by both powers' presidents in Prague on 8 April is symbolically important. It is a confirmation of the unique position both countries occupy in the international security system (the USA and Russia have nearly 95% of the world's stockpiles of nuclear warheads). For Moscow it is also evidence that Russia retains the status of a nuclear superpower and the US's equal partner.

The agreement should also be viewed as a political victory for the Obama administration. In 2009, the US president presented a sweeping program of action to reduce the importance of nuclear weapons and to eliminate them ultimately. This plan included coming to a new agreement with Russia. The discussions leading to the agreement were also a fundamental element of the "reset" of relations with Russia. The signing of this agreement signals the completion of one of the tasks Obama undertook to accomplish.

It is difficult, however, to treat the new agreement as a breakthrough in the reduction of US and Russian nuclear arsenals. While the threshold of 1550 deployed strategic nuclear warheads represents progress in relation to the target of 1700–2200 warheads adopted in the agreement Russia and the US signed in 2002, the two countries have seven years following the treaty's entry into force in which to reach this target. In addition, both parties planned to reduce their strategic nuclear arsenals during the upcoming decade. In the case of Russia, this process will be accelerated by the aging of parts of its strategic forces.

More important, especially for the US, will be the limitation to 800 of the number of nuclear weapons delivery systems (intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine launched ballistic missiles and strategic bombers). This will entail the necessity to withdraw some missile and aircraft from service in America's strategic forces before the end of their expected life span.

The principal military advantage arising from the agreement will be the maintenance of the strategic balance between the US and Russia and the guarantee of considerable transparency of the two countries' arsenals. The system of inspections and verifications was simplified in comparison with the previous START agreement, but it will still allow for mutual monitoring of the parties' fulfilment of the treaty provisions (exchange of information, inspections) and of their nuclear forces' modernization process (the prohibition against the encryption of telemetric data from part of ballistic missile tests).

The question of Russia's reservations about the missile defence (MD) system being developed by the US dominated the last stage of work on the treaty. The United States did not accept Russia's arguments that the reduction of the number of strategic offensive weapons should be accompanied by an agreement about limitations on the building of MD systems. Instead of this, a compromise solution was agreed upon—the connection between the offensive and defensive potentials was mentioned in the preamble, while a unilateral statement made by Russia was attached to the agreement, pronouncing that Russia may withdraw should it feel that MD development constitutes a threat to potential of its strategic nuclear forces. At this stage, the primary importance of this declaration lies in its propagandistic effects. It is not legally binding. It limits the USA's freedom of action to a certain degree, but only in an entirely hypothetical situation in which the USA unilaterally builds a system allowing it to intercept Russian missiles.

At present, the most difficult challenge for the American and Russian presidential administrations is to bring about the agreement's ratification in the US Senate (something that some Republican senators will assuredly be against) and in the State Duma and Federation Council.