



— PLOUGHSHARES FUND —

Meeting of the SuPR (Sustainable Partnership with Russia) Group

*February 1-3, 2011
Arc-en-Ciel, Gstaad, Switzerland*

NEXT STEPS IN U.S.-RUSSIAN NUCLEAR ARMS REDUCTIONS

A Policy Memo

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Paradigm for Next Steps

New START's limits—1550 deployed strategic warheads on 700 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers—will mean relatively modest reductions in the U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals. Looking to next steps, Washington has already indicated that it wants to include non-strategic and non-deployed strategic weapons.

The two sides could devise a stable balance at 500-1000 total nuclear warheads each. Neither side, however, appears ready for such dramatic reductions now. By all appearances, Moscow is not interested in deep cuts, and the U.S. Senate, where ratification of New START proved more difficult than expected, could balk at reducing too much. Deep reductions would force the U.S. military to confront the sustainability of the strategic triad, an issue it might prefer to avoid for now. Finally, dramatic reductions would invariably bring in third-country nuclear forces, complicating the negotiations.

Absent a paradigm shift in the two capitals, an effort to negotiate deep cuts would bog down. Washington and Moscow thus should seek a more modest agreement: limit each to 2500 nuclear weapons (strategic and non-strategic, deployed and non-deployed), with a sublimit of 1000 deployed strategic warheads. If completed by 2015, the sides could use the NPT review conference to broaden the reductions process to other countries.

Issues to be Addressed

In the next round, the sides should discuss limits on deployed strategic systems (warheads and delivery vehicles), deployed and non-deployed launchers, non-strategic nuclear weapons and non-deployed strategic warheads. They should consider a single limit on all nuclear warheads (treating weapons awaiting dismantlement separately). Third-country

nuclear forces hopefully can be set aside; missile defense and the implications of long-range conventional strike systems will likely arise in the negotiations.

Limits on Deployed Strategic Warheads

The United States and Russia should seek to limit each side to no more than 1000 deployed strategic warheads (down from New START's level of 1550). The next agreement should retain New START's counting rule for warheads on ICBMs and SLBMs: the actual number should be counted (and, during inspections, declared to the inspecting side with the inspecting side able to choose and inspect a missile to confirm the count). Moreover, should either side decide to arm ICBMs or SLBMs with conventional warheads, the warheads should count under the 1000 limit.

The sides should alter New START's bomber weapon counting rule, which attributes one warhead to each deployed bomber. Such "discounting" is justified, given the difference in flight times between ballistic missiles and bombers, but the discount should not be so great. Each bomber should be attributed as three-four warheads under the 1000 limit.

Limits on Strategic Delivery Vehicles

The United States will implement its New START reductions by downloading warheads from ICBMs and SLBMs and will maintain 700 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs and bombers. Russia, by contrast, will likely reduce its deployed strategic delivery vehicles to 500 or fewer. Moscow will probably seek some reduction in the 700 deployed strategic delivery vehicle limit. Washington may not be enthusiastic but should consider accepting a limit of 500-600 in the context of a limit of 1000 deployed strategic warheads. If the sides can agree on a limit on deployed ICBMs, SLBMs and bombers, finding a limit on deployed and non-deployed ICBM and SLBM launchers plus bombers should not be hard.

Non-Strategic Nuclear Warheads

Negotiating limits on non-strategic nuclear warheads will be difficult due to the disparity in numbers (most assessments show Russia with a significant advantage). While Russia may have a greater need for non-strategic weapons, its current number is hard to justify.

When addressing non-strategic systems, Washington and Moscow should limit warheads, not delivery systems, most of which have primary conventional roles. This will mean new verification challenges—perhaps requiring on-site inspection of warheads in storage bunkers. Given the transportability of non-strategic warheads, limits should be global (a Europe-only limit could be circumvented and would cause political problems with China, Japan and other Asian countries). The sides also should consider consolidating non-strategic warheads at central storage areas, located away from delivery systems.

Moscow presumably will seek to require that all nuclear weapons be based on national territory. This cannot be a precondition for negotiations. However, in the context of the

right overall agreement, and in consultation with NATO, Washington should consider outcomes that require withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe.

Non-Deployed Strategic Warheads

Limiting non-deployed strategic warheads will reduce upload potential, a particular concern for the Russian side (while the United States will download most, if not all, of its ICBMs and SLBMs and thus will have a significant upload potential, the Russian plan appears to be to keep full warhead sets on strategic missiles). The United States is prepared to limit non-deployed strategic warheads. Doing so will entail verification challenges similar to those posed by limits on non-strategic nuclear warheads.

A Single Limit on Nuclear Weapons

It is time for the United States and Russia to apply a single limit to all nuclear warheads (treating separately those awaiting dismantlement). The next negotiation should aim for an overall limit of 2500 nuclear weapons each, with a sublimit of 1000 deployed strategic warheads. Each could choose how to allocate its additional 1500 warheads between non-strategic and non-deployed strategic weapons. Russia would likely choose to keep more non-strategic warheads; the United States would prefer non-deployed strategic warheads.

Monitoring Confidence

This approach would result in a two-tiered verification system. Using procedures built on New START, each side should have high confidence in its ability to monitor limits on deployed strategic warheads and strategic delivery vehicles. Assuming the sides are not prepared for “anytime, anywhere” challenge inspections, they would have less confidence in their ability to monitor limits on non-strategic and non-deployed strategic warheads.

Other Issues

Third-country nuclear forces. A major reason for an incremental approach is to limit the next round to U.S. and Russian nuclear forces. Washington and Moscow may, however, wish to pursue dialogues with Britain, France and China regarding their nuclear force structures and doctrines, with a view to informing the U.S.-Russian negotiations.

Missile defense. Given that the next treaty could extend to 2025 or 2030, and there will be less clarity regarding U.S. missile defense plans in that period, Moscow will likely raise missile defense limits. Washington would strongly resist, if for no other reason than that the U.S. Senate would reject any arrangement limiting missile defense. NATO-Russia missile defense cooperation may offer a way out of this potential conundrum.

Long-range conventional strike. The Russians have raised concern about the potential of U.S. long-range conventional systems to carry out missions that previously required strategic nuclear weapons. The sides should discuss the implications of such

conventional weapons for the strategic balance, with a view to increasing transparency and providing reassurance that such systems will not undercut a nuclear arms agreement.

Conclusion

Negotiating another U.S.-Russian nuclear arms agreement, even if it takes an incremental approach, will be a complex task. But the challenges are soluble. Washington and Moscow should begin consulting soon to lay the basis for formal negotiations.