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Strategic Insight

With New Nuclear Arms Pact, Attention Shifts to What Post-Cold War Arms Agenda Should Be

by [Jeffrey W. Knopf](#)

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On May 24, 2002, at a summit meeting in Moscow, U.S. President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a treaty to reduce both sides' deployed strategic nuclear warheads. The two presidents also signed a joint declaration outlining a new strategic relationship involving increased cooperation between the two countries. The U.S. government refers to the new arms treaty as the Treaty of Moscow, while some commentators have adopted the acronym SORT, for strategic offensive reductions treaty.

The treaty requires cutting deployed strategic warheads from approximately 6000 on each side today to between 1700 and 2200 by the end of 2012. It does not set any specific targets along the way; each side can reduce as fast or as slow as it wishes (or even temporarily increase its forces) as long it meets the deadline ten years from now. In contrast to earlier treaties, the agreement allows both sides complete freedom to choose the types and mix of delivery vehicles on which their permitted warheads will be deployed. The treaty expires at the end of 2012 unless the two sides agree to extend it. Either party can withdraw from the treaty before then by giving three months notice, half the withdrawal period specified in previous arms control pacts.

President Bush had initially expressed reluctance to negotiate a formal treaty, preferring an informal, handshake agreement instead. However, he acceded to requests by the Russian government and a bipartisan group of U.S. Senators to put the agreement in treaty form. Russia wanted a formal accord so as to bind President Bush's successors to uphold any agreement. And Democratic and Republican Senators wrote the president to express their belief that nuclear arms control agreements are too important to bypass the Constitutional requirement to seek Senate ratification.

In terms of what it does to reduce nuclear threats to national security, the treaty's accomplishments are fairly limited. In some ways the treaty represents only modest incremental change from earlier U.S.-Russian agreements, and in some areas it even undoes measures that had previously been accepted. Its most important benefit may be indirect: it is part of a continuing process of improving the relationship between the former Cold War adversaries. As the two sides transition to a possible post-Cold War agenda for arms control, two items that are not dealt with by the Moscow Treaty are likely to become more important: tactical nuclear weapons and the security of nuclear materials.

U.S. and Russian arsenals currently conform to limits set by the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction (START) Treaty; a second START treaty signed in 1993 was never ratified in the same form by both sides. Compared to the existing START-I limits, the Moscow Treaty will reduce deployed warheads by about two-thirds after ten years elapse. However, this does not go much beyond what has long been agreed to in principle. In 1997, then Presidents Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin agreed that the next U.S.-Russia treaty should reduce strategic warheads to between 2,000 and 2,500 by 2007. Compared to this earlier agenda, the Moscow Treaty takes five more years to cut arsenals by only 300 additional warheads. However, Clinton and Yeltsin never finalized the treaty they envisioned; disagreements over Kosovo and Chechnya

and domestic opposition to the proposed deal in each country's legislature made negotiations infeasible. What is significant about the Moscow Treaty, therefore, is not so much the numbers as the fact that Bush and Putin successfully closed the deal.

For the United States, one major goal was to preserve maximum flexibility with respect to how nuclear weapons might figure in future U.S. defense plans. The Moscow Treaty thus conforms quite closely to recommendations outlined in the recent [Nuclear Posture Review](#). While flexibility is desirable in the abstract, it can be a double-edged sword in practice. A country can leave options open for itself only by allowing other countries to have available the same openings. Sometimes, greater security can be obtained by giving something up in order to get others to give it up as well. From this perspective, four areas where the Moscow Treaty does not impose restrictions could become problematic in the future.

First, the treaty undoes an earlier agreement to eliminate multiple-warhead missiles. START II specified that each side had to de-MIRV its missiles. The Moscow Treaty recognizes only START I as legally in force, however, effectively declaring START II null and void (subsequent to the Moscow summit, Russia also announced that, in response to U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, it would no longer consider itself bound by START II). This means Russia can keep its existing multiple-warhead SS-18s and build new MIRVed missiles in the future if it chooses. If the United States or Russia maintains MIRVs, this will also make it harder to pressure China not to MIRV its missiles. During the Cold War, multiple-warhead missiles led to concerns about a possible "window of vulnerability," because they made it hypothetically conceivable that one side could use a portion of its force to take out all the land-based missiles on the other side (submarine-based forces remained invulnerable, however, which made it unlikely either side would really take the risk of launching a first strike against the other's land-based missiles). Should Russia or China utilize the option to build substantial MIRVed forces, this could again create fears about the potential vulnerability of the U.S. nuclear deterrent. This hypothetical concern is not realistic in the immediate future, however, because Russia is too financially strapped to initiate a major buildup and China still lags too far behind the United States. Any new dangers in this area would not emerge for many years, which leaves time to revisit this issue if necessary, provided that future leaders are willing to do so.

Second, unlike all previous nuclear arms control pacts, the Moscow Treaty does not limit delivery vehicles, only warheads. Neither side is obligated to dismantle any of the missiles, bombers or submarines that could deliver strategic warheads. When the treaty expires, they could thus reload the warheads if they so choose and immediately reconstitute their forces to START-I levels. This is unlikely to threaten the United States directly, but it could complicate non-proliferation efforts. If other countries perceive this as a loophole that means the United States and Russia are not serious about reducing their nuclear arsenals, they will be less likely to be sympathetic to U.S. efforts to pressure other countries not to acquire nuclear weapons. On the other hand, saving these strategic systems from destruction could enable them to be used with conventional weapons, which could be valuable for limiting defense costs.

Two other features of the Moscow Treaty are consistent with past nuclear arms treaties, but potentially more problematic in the post-9/11 world. A third potential problem is that the treaty covers only strategic warheads and not so-called tactical weapons, which are designed for delivery at much shorter ranges. The United States retains about 1000 operational tactical weapons plus more in reserve (although these are currently being dismantled), while Russia has an estimated 3500 operational tactical warheads and more than 10,000 in storage.

Fourth, the treaty imposes no requirement to dismantle strategic warheads. It limits only deployed warheads. In removing warheads from deployment, each side is free to choose how many to destroy, how many to place in deep storage, and how many to leave easily available as operational spares. In practice, because of the difficulty and expense of dismantlement, Russia is unlikely to destroy very many of its warheads, while the United States has indicated that it intends to keep a large number of operational spares in case any problems develop with the reliability of deployed warheads. This has mixed implications: retaining spares may reduce pressures to resume production or testing of nuclear warheads, but also increases proliferation risks.

Most important, the lack of restrictions on tactical warheads and absence of any commitment to dismantle strategic warheads may increase the risk of terrorists acquiring a nuclear weapon. Non-governmental experts believe Russia's ability to track and protect tactical weapons and non-deployed strategic warheads is not as great as its ability to guard the warheads that remain in missiles, bombers or submarines. Adding to the number of strategic and tactical warheads sitting in storage may thus create a greater chance of a nuclear device being smuggled out or stolen and ending up in the hands of terrorists. When it comes to keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists, an ounce of prevention is worth at least a pound of cure. If the desire to retain flexibility prevented including provisions that could reduce the risk of nuclear terrorism, this is not a prudent trade-off.

The U.S. government certainly recognizes the danger here, and has sought to address it in other ways. The joint declaration signed at the Moscow summit calls for setting up joint working groups of experts to find additional ways to improve the security of all weapons of mass destruction. And a Group-of-Eight summit in Canada in late June pledged \$20 billion over the next decade to assist Russia in destroying and safeguarding its nuclear, biological, and chemical stockpiles.

Presidents Bush and Putin seem to have wanted a nuclear arms agreement primarily as a stepping-stone to other objectives with respect to U.S.-Russian relations. President Bush sought to reduce friction over nuclear arms issues so as to gain greater Russian cooperation in dealing with terrorism, Saddam Hussein, and the conflicts in the Middle East and South Asia. Improved relations could also ease the way for Russia and other former Soviet republics to become a more significant alternative source of oil for the West. For President Putin, acceding to U.S. wishes on the details of the nuclear arms treaty served a strategy of gaining greater integration with the West, including a more substantial role in NATO and perhaps eventual WTO membership.

If the Moscow summit and its agreements have set the United States and Russia on a course of improved relations, then there may be opportunities in the future for follow-up talks on nuclear arms control. The risks associated with tactical weapons and with spare strategic warheads and their nuclear materials create an obvious agenda. If nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism become more clearly identified as leading threats, then the two sides may become more willing to irreversibly destroy more of their nuclear devices and to further improve the physical protection of the nuclear warheads and materials that remain in their possession. This will require a willingness to continue talking about nuclear arms control, however, rather than a view that the Moscow Treaty represents the final word.

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