

Nuclear Deterrent Congressional Breakfast Seminar Series
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Connecting Arms Control to Strategic Deterrent Requirements

I will discuss this morning the approaches to nuclear arms control in the Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush Administrations. My colleague Frank Rose will have the much more difficult task of addressing the present and future.

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) and Strategic Arms Reduction (START) Treaties, respectively, were designed to strengthen deterrence and strategic stability. They did so at lower weapons levels, but they were not just – or even primarily – about numbers. Instead, they sought greater stability through measures to improve survivability, predictability, transparency and verifiability.

I would like to focus today on the elements of specific arms control agreements during the Reagan and both Bush Administrations. First though, I will discuss briefly U.S. positions on linking future agreements to arms control compliance, as well as changing Russian views of the offense-defense relationship.

The U.S. position has not been consistent over time on the linkage between compliance and future agreements. In March 1987, President Reagan stated that “compliance with past arms control commitments is an essential prerequisite for future arms control agreements.” Yet he signed the INF Treaty eight months later, even though the Soviet Union was still violating the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty with the Krasnoyarsk radar. We continued thereafter to link START completion to ABM Treaty compliance, but the issue became moot when the Soviet Government admitted the violation and began the process toward its ultimate dismantlement in October 1989.

Until very recently, subsequent Administrations were quiet about the linkage between arms control compliance and future agreements. That changed with the March 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). The new NPR stressed U.S. openness to new arms control agreements which serve U.S. and Allied security interests, but added that those were difficult to envision while the other side violated existing agreements. The NPR noted that the most significant Russian violation of a nuclear agreement was its development and deployment of a cruise missile prohibited by the INF Treaty.

Regarding the offense-defense relationship -- after the ABM Treaty was signed in 1972, the Soviet Union and Russia steadfastly maintained that continued limits on strategic defenses were essential for nuclear reductions. That is, they did so unless it was convenient to change their position. Thus, when the United States withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, President Putin turned the traditional Russian position on offense-defense arms control on its head. His price for quietly accepting the end of the ABM Treaty was a new treaty on strategic offensive reductions.

While the Russians – and some Americans -- still argue that strict defensive limits are critical to nuclear arms control, it is hard to support that claim – given the changing strategic environment facing the United States and the rather flexible Russian interpretation of its national interests. Therefore, I will leave the offense-defense issue where I believe it belongs – outside the realm of nuclear arms control – and return instead to the more enduring concepts of survivability, predictability, transparency and verifiability.

The INF Treaty, along with the NATO dual-track decision and the global zero option leading up to it, were clear on the link between arms control and deterrence. The U.S. and NATO position was quite simple: if the Soviets deployed INF missiles, we would do the same; if they didn't, we wouldn't. Moreover, for the first time, we insisted on – and won – all the elements of effective, intrusive verification that formed the basis for the verification provisions in subsequent treaties. In addition, it is worth noting that the Treaty protected missile defense interceptors of INF range, and – at Congressional insistence – made clear that all offensive INF missiles would be eliminated no matter their armament.

The United States' only major mistake in the INF Treaty regarded the duration of verification provisions. The Treaty is of indefinite duration, in keeping with its elimination of two classes of ground-launched missiles. However, we assumed that it would be safe to end most of the verification provisions ten years after all treaty-limited items were eliminated. Continued verification might not have prevented the Russians from developing and deploying the new cruise missile that now violates the INF Treaty, but its absence certainly made it easier.

The START I Treaty built on the INF verification measures, and included the same protections for missile defense interceptors. Moreover, and very importantly, the provisions of START I were designed not just to maintain strategic deterrence at lower levels but to do so with a more stabilizing force structure. Key elements of START I to that end included:

- Heavy bomber counting rules, with air-launched cruise missile (ALCM) carriers discounted and non-ALCM carriers counting as one warhead. Slow-flying systems were seen as more stabilizing than ballistic missiles.
- Reduction by one-half in heavy intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), a ban on future heavy ICBMs, and a limit of 10 warheads on future ICBMs or submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). MIRVed ICBMs, and heavy ICBMs in particular, were seen – and continue to be seen -- as most threatening to strategic stability.

The START II Treaty of 1993 went much further. Its hallmark was the elimination of all MIRVed ICBMs, including of course all heavies. In exchange, the U.S. abandoned bomber discounting, which had been such an important U.S. goal just a year before. One may question whether the Russians were sincere at the time about the destabilizing nature of MIRVed ICBMs. I certainly believed that they were. In retrospect, however, the Russian government's support for START II may have had more to do with the fact that their MIRVed SS-18, SS-19 and SS-24 ICBMs were all produced in Ukraine. In any case, the Russian Duma was not convinced of the virtues of START II, and refused to approve it without conditions on missile defense that were unacceptable to the United States. Further, the Russian Government turned enthusiastically to development and deployment of new MIRVed ICBMs, once it could afford to modernize and to build the necessary production infrastructure.

President Putin declared that Russia would no longer pursue START II on June 14, 2002, the day after U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty took effect. A few weeks earlier, on May 24, 2002, Putin and President George W. Bush signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, (SORT), also known as the Moscow Treaty.

SORT definitely was just about numbers, and nothing else. "Strategic nuclear warheads" (not defined) would be limited by December 31, 2012 to 1700-2200. There were no other provisions governing types and numbers of strategic forces: "Each Party shall determine for itself the composition and structure of its strategic offensive arms." The sides agreed that START I would remain in force, so its stabilizing provisions continued to apply. However, while SORT would expire at the end of 2012 unless superseded, START could (and did) expire three years earlier. That left us with no strategic arms control constraints except the SORT limits until New START came into force in February 2011.

Numerical limits and deep reductions were also an important part of START I and II. START I required reductions to 6000 accountable strategic warheads on each side, of which 4900 could be on ballistic missiles. START II dramatically cut the total warhead limit, to 3000-3500. (The actual reduction was even greater than the numbers indicate, because of the lack of bomber discounting in START II.) However, the most important features of those agreements were not their numbers, but the provisions that favored stabilizing force structures, and enhanced verifiability, predictability and transparency.

Finally, a few words about the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) of 1991 and 1992. The first PNI was a unilateral U.S. declaration, with a call for the Soviet Union to reciprocate. The Soviet Government said that it would do so, but its Russian successor ultimately did not.

Under the PNIs, the U.S. eliminated all ground-launched shorter-range weapons and one-half of sea-launched (the other half were put in storage). One month later, NATO announced a substantial reduction in air-launched weapons – the press reported that “substantial” meant one-half. The PNIs involved no legal obligations, verification or other stabilizing provisions. It is useful to note that the Russians used the PNI commitments to help persuade Ukraine and Belarus to return all of the shorter-range nuclear forces on their territories by June 1992. It was not long after that Russia essentially abandoned the PNIs.

In some ways, the PNIs were a precursor of SORT. In 2001, the United States was ready to announce unilateral reductions below START levels. When Russia wanted to codify those, we agreed. But we were quite content to have arms control without agreements. Strategic deterrence and stability did not appear threatened in the global security environment as we perceived it. We learned a decade later that we were very wrong.