Proliferation Papers

US-Russian Relations: The Arms Control Agenda

In collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA)

William Potter

Spring 2001

Security Studies Department

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Though it has long been a concern for security experts, proliferation has truly become an important political issue over the last decade, marked simultaneously by the nuclearization of South Asia, the strengthening of international regimes (TNP, CW, MTCR) and the discovery of fraud and trafficking, the number and gravity of which have surprised observers and analysts alike (Iraq in 1991, North Korea, Libyan and Iranian programs or the A. Q. Khan networks today).

To further the debate on complex issues that involve technical, regional, and strategic aspects, Ifri's Security Studies Department organizes each year, in collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (*Commissariat à l'énergie atomiqe*, CEA), a series of closed seminars dealing with WMD proliferation, disarmament, and non-proliferation. Generally held in English these seminars take the form of a presentation by an international expert. The *Proliferation Papers* is a collection, in the original version, of selected texts from these presentations.

The following text is based on a presentation given by William Potter at Ifri on the 15th of June, 2001.

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Introduction

At a time when US-Russian relations are widely regarded to be in a state of flux, it is appropriate to examine the degree of continuity and change in the sphere of nuclear arms control. More specifically, this brief essay identifies a number of propositions about nuclear weapons, arms control, and nonproliferation that increasingly reflect the conventional wisdom in Washington, although these propositions may be neither true nor wise; and assesses the prospects for arms control progress in the areas of strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons and nonproliferation in light of these prevailing views.

Propositions for Consideration

Proposition One

Nuclear deterrence remains the cornerstone of national security. This perspective is widely shared in Washington (and in Moscow). What is specific about the Bush Administration's adherence to this postulate is the lack of confidence in existing arms control agreements to ensure requisite deterrent capabilities against an expanded set of current and future perceived threats and wartime contingencies. This orientation, which is new in the sense that it now appears to reflect the thinking of most senior U.S. national security policymakers, is clearly articulated in the 2001 report of the National Institute for Public Policy entitled Rationale and Requirements for U.S. Nuclear Forces and Arms Control, whose contributors include a number of senior Bush administration appointees. Among the key points of the report are:

- "The identity of potential opponents and the requirements for deterrence…are unclear at present, and wholly opaque for the future." [1]
- "An important priority for the United States is to preserve its capability to adapt U.S. offensive and defensive forces to rapidly changing strategic conditions." [2]
- "Cold War-style arms control, a process that has focused on specific limitations designed to codify "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD), now contributes to U.S.-Russian political enmity, and is incompatible with the basic U.S. strategic requirement for adaptability in a dynamic post-Cold War environment." [3]
- "Possible current/future deterrence and wartime roles for nuclear weapons may include:
- Deterring weapons of mass destruction (WMD) use by regional powers.

[1] National Institute for Public Policy, *Rationale and Requirements for U.S. Nuclear Forces and Arms Control*, Vol. 1, Executive Report (Washington, D.C. 2001), p. iii.
[2] *Ibid*.
[3] *Ibid*, p. viii.
[3] National Institute for Public Policy, *Rationale and Requirements for U.S. Nuclear Forces and Arms Control*, Vol. 1, Executive Report (Washington, D.C. 2001), p. iii.
[3] *Ibid*.
[3] *Ibid*, p. viii.

- Deterring WMD or massive conventional aggression by an emerging global competitor.
- Preventing catastrophic losses in a conventional war.
- Providing unique targeting capabilities (deep underground/biological weapons targets).
- Enhancing U.S. influence during crises. [4]

In many ways this reassessment of the nature of deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons finds a counterpart in Russian nuclear thinking.

Proposition Two

An accelerated program of missile defense is required to guard against new threats in a dynamic international environment. I will devote little space to this proposition, which is well known. I will only add that whether rightly or wrongly there is little dispute within the U.S. Congress or between the Congress and the Executive Branch about the desirability of missile defense. The principle points of contention relate to the technical feasibility of early deployment and the international political costs of proceeding with deployment in the absence of Russian acquiescence to modification of the ABM Treaty.

Proposition Three

The preferred alternative to negotiated and codified arms control is coordinated reductions following a review of U.S. force requirements. This approach, typically characterized as unilateral in orientation, does not preclude deep reductions in nuclear forces. It emphasizes, however, that U.S. and Russian reductions "need not be linked mechanistically nor codified" in a legally irreversible manner.[5] The National Institute study specifically cautions that reductions should not be irreversible and that the United States should be capable of quickly reconstituting its arsenal. It also highlights the importance of coordination and transparency, but gives little thought to how the Russians might approach their own reductions (or the Chinese their modernization) in view of the fundamental uncertainty with respect to the size and nature of the U.S. arsenal.

Proposition Four

Nuclear proliferation is inevitable; at best it can be managed, not prevented. This perspective echoes in some respects the dire predictions about proliferation popular in the early 1960s and represents a departure from the prevailing view among experts in the 1970s, 1980s, and most of the 1990s that the spread of nuclear weapons could be curtailed and, in some instances, even reversed. According to the new thinking, we are approaching a new "tipping point" in which a number of second tier states

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[4] *Ibid*, p. viii.
[5] *Ibid*, p. 15.

may "go nuclear." If that occurs, it is argued, many others will follow suit, providing an additional impetus for missile defense.

Proposition Five

Nuclear proliferation is increasingly seen as a defense planning challenge. By this, I mean that prior to the Gulf War proliferation typically meant nuclear proliferation, and nuclear proliferation usually was conceived as an arms control, foreign policy, or export control problem rather than a defense planning challenge. As Lewis Dunn has pointed out, prior to the Gulf War "existing U.S. military capabilities were assumed sufficient to deal with any new threats to U.S. interests." [6] Associated with this assumption was the fact that throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s, the bulk of the countries of greatest proliferation concern—states such as Argentina, Brazil, Israel, Iran, South Africa, Taiwan, South Korea, and even India and Pakistan—were either friends of the United States, or at least not our adversaries. Today, although the list of problem states may be smaller, they also tend to be far more anti-American in orientation.

Proposition Six

Multilateral mechanisms to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons are ineffectual. Although this view is not shared by all the relevant bureaucratic actors in Washington, I believe it is increasingly prevalent in Congress and is the prevailing view of the Department of Defense. Regrettably, the tendency to deprecate the importance of multilateral nonproliferation institutions also has strong advocates within the Department of State.

Proposition Seven

U.S. and Russian interests regarding nuclear nonproliferation increasingly diverge. One of the most important but little recognized phenomenon of the Cold War was the parallelism and often close consultation and cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union on nuclear nonproliferation issues. This cooperation generally persisted across Republican and Democratic administrations and during some of the most troubled periods of the superpowers' relations in the 1970s and 1980s. It also served, in many respects, as the cornerstone of the NPT and the nuclear export control regimes.

Ironically, today, after the end of the Cold War, there are major strains in the U.S.-Russian nonproliferation partnership. These strains are evident in major disputes over Russian nuclear exports to Iran and India; the rift over policy toward Iraq; the lack of meaningful intelligence-sharing regarding illicit nuclear trafficking; the lack of cooperation on important regional security issues in South Asia and the Middle East; the looming crisis over NMD; differences over the nearly complete treaty for a nuclear-

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[6] Lewis A. Dunn, "On Proliferation Watch: Some Reflections on the Past Quarter Century," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Spring-Summer 1998, p. 60.

weapon-free zone in Central Asia; and domestic political pressures in both countries to emphasize short-term, economic and military considerations to the neglect of longer term, international security and nonproliferation objectives.

Although this general erosion or unraveling of U.S.-Russian cooperation in nonproliferation has been underway for a number of years, it could now potentially collapse altogether as the few remaining institutional advocates for nonproliferation in Russia are under siege. Indeed, nowadays, there are even Russian advocates for selective proliferation if that process results in more headaches in the short term for the United States than for Russia. This tendency is reinforced by the rise in Russia of the same fatalistic attitude toward nuclear weapons spread as had previously occurred in the United States. The U.S. tendency to de-emphasize the role of multilateral institutions in combating proliferation also has its counterpart in Russia.

Proposition Eight

U.S. nonproliferation policy has become increasingly political and partisan, and the prospects for a reversal of this trend are slim. During the Cold War most nonproliferation issues were neither highly partisan nor very politicized, and often made for odd Congressional bedfellows (e.g., Gordon Humphrey and John Glenn). More often than not, a few key senators of both conservative and liberal stripes from the two political parties were able to forge, within a relatively small number of committees, bipartisan support for the passage of nonproliferation legislation. Today, in contrast, the nonproliferation scene in Congress more closely resembles a fifteen ring circus in which highly charged, partisan, and political battles are waged in more standing Congressional committees and special Congressionally-mandated commissions and committees than there are “countries of concern.” This proliferation of Congressional committees with a finger in the nonproliferation pie is exceeded only by the proliferation of Executive branch agencies with a stake in the issue.

Prospects for Arms Control

What do those eight propositions mean in terms of the prospects for U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control? In particular, how do they apply with respect to strategic nuclear arms, tactical or non-strategic nuclear weapons, missile defenses, confidence-building measures, and U.S.-Russian cooperation for nonproliferation?

A. Strategic Reductions

I see virtually no prospect for headway on START III or any other formal, negotiated strategic arms reductions, including a “grand bargain” in which Russia would get a START III Treaty in exchange for an amended ABM Treaty. Loosely coordinated but not strictly parallel reductions by both the United States and Russia seem far more likely, and would reflect their very different perceived security needs. This approach is favored by the United States and would also probably be supported by the Russian military. On the Russian side, a combination of economic factors and the aging nature of the nuclear arsenal are likely to bring about reductions to a level of between 1000-1500 deployed strategic warheads, the actual figure depending on the pace of U.S. national missile defense and the viability of the ABM and START treaties, among other factors. My guess is that despite a lot of talk in Washington about deep unilateral reductions, when “push comes to shove” the Bush administration will find it very difficult to go below START II levels. I also am skeptical that much of the interesting “new thinking” going on in the U.S. Air Force and elsewhere will actually lead to any drastic change in the U.S. nuclear triad.

B. Non-Strategic Reductions

Ironically, at a time when the new Bush administration is enthusiastic about unilateral approaches, it has been silent about the informal arms control regime on non-strategic (or tactical) nuclear weapons

based on the 1991 and 1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives.[7] This regime, initiated by George Bush Sr, brought about the single largest reduction in nuclear weapons. This silence is due to several reasons. First, Washington's satisfaction with the status quo and a perception, which is probably misplaced, about the durability of the current tactical nuclear weapon (TNW) regime. Secondly, an assessment of the Russian TNW threat primarily in proliferation terms, but not as a threat to U.S. forces. Thirdly, concern that discussion of TNW will lead to a debate about withdrawal of U.S. nuclear forces in Europe—the so-called "slippery slope." Fourth, limited awareness that one of the 13 "practical steps" in the Final Declaration of the 2000 NPT Review Conference calls for further reductions in non-strategic nuclear weapons. Finally, a growing interest in developing/deploying new TNWs.

To the extent that the United States has any interest today in tactical nuclear arms control, this interest has to do with the issue of increased transparency, not reductions or legally-binding limitations. Transparency, however, is precisely the item Russia most objects to and will not yield without major U.S. concessions, including the withdrawal of U.S. TNW from Europe. As a consequence, in the foreseeable future, prospects are slim for progress in codifying the 1991/92 regime, prudent as that would be. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that international pressure could lead the United States and Russia to reaffirm their earlier commitments.

The NPT Review Process and the UN General Assembly may be useful in this regard. For example, there probably would be very substantial international support for a UN General Assembly resolution that reiterated the 2000 NPT Review Conference Final Declaration's call for further reductions in non-strategic nuclear weapons and also sought enhanced transparency for such reductions that were not limited to unilateral initiatives. The United States might also be successful in expanding the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (CTR) to include the protection and dismantlement of TNW. CTR funds currently are not designated to assist the safeguarding and dismantlement of non-strategic nuclear weapons in Russia, although that objective is not inconsistent with the goals of the original Nunn-Lugar program. Among the potential gains from the expansion of the CTR mandate would be the acceleration of the process of securing TNW and their consolidation at fewer facilities, acceleration of the pace of TNW dismantlement, greater likelihood of Russian receptivity to further arms reductions involving TNW, increased transparency (a part of the CTR process) for TNW dismantlement, and more safeguards for the fissile material byproducts of the dismantlement process. Given the growing interest on the part of a number of countries in non-strategic nuclear weapons disarmament, it would be highly desirable for other states to join the United States in this expanded CTR effort.

[7] On this regime see William C. Potter, Nikolai Sokov, Harald Müller, and Annette Schaper, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Options for Control* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2000).

C. Missile Defenses

Although the positions of the United States and Russia appear to be far apart on missile defense, and I am not optimistic that they will be bridged, one should not exclude the possibility that Washington will eventually succeed in inducing Moscow to accept modification of the ABM Treaty. In this regard, it is important to recall that Moscow, unlike Beijing, historically has been supportive of the concept of active missile defense—it simply finds itself today in a strategic position where it cannot afford a defense-oriented arms race and where limited defenses, if deployed, would confer greater advantage to the United States. There is a disparity of concerns, however. The United States is strongly interested in defense against strategic missiles while Russia is more concerned about defending against intermediate and tactical missiles—an approach more likely to be compatible with the ABM Treaty.

Recent proposals to Russia, reportedly being considered by the United States, at least partially meet the criteria set forth by Russia during the February 2001 visit to Moscow of NATO Secretary General George Lord Robertson. / It is reported that the US is currently considering proposals to Russia that would at least partially… These criteria include joint development of theater missile defense systems and consultation about the nature of the missile threat and appropriate responses to it. The communiqué of NATO foreign ministers in Budapest also includes language compatible with some of the Russian points.[8] The United States apparently is prepared to explore some of the same avenues, as the recent leaks about possible purchases of Russian-made tactical missile defense systems indicate. Although the Russian response to these informal overtures by Washington has been extremely cool, this reaction may be as much a negotiating tactic as anything else. As my Monterey colleague and former Russian START negotiator Dr. Nikolai Sokov points out, "the first response should never be positive." In addition, he believes Russia may well seek a better package and one in which Russia does not appear to be trading a principled position based on deterrence theory for only financial considerations. Russia may need to receive some assurances that NMD will be limited and will not contravene Russian deterrence precepts.[9] The recent shift to Democratic control of the U.S. Senate also may encourage Russia to pursue a waiting game, a tactic that could lead it to miss an opportunity to strike a deal with Washington.

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[8] See Nikolai Sokov, "A New Stage of the NMD Debate: A U.S. Proposal and a Russian Response," *CNS Reports*, June 1, 2001.
[9] *Ibid*, p. 2.

D. CBMs/ "Unilateral Plus"

At the moment we find ourselves in a situation where the Bush Administration has jettisoned (at the declaratory level) the Cold War deterrence concept of MAD and its emphasis on a balance of strategic offense nuclear weapons, and has hinted at the need for a new framework based on a mix of offensive deterrence and missile defenses, but has provided little flesh to the skeletal framework. The big trick, as many others have noted, is how to preserve strategic stability as we move from here to there, when the "there" is not yet well defined.

There is a real chance that a unilateral misstep such as abrogation of the ABM Treaty, disavowal of the 1991/92 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, or NATO expansion to the Baltics could trigger a chain reaction leading to the unraveling of the U.S.-Russian arms control legacy. One should not discount that possibility or the prospect that an event external to the bilateral relationship (e.g., a U.S.-Sino military confrontation over Taiwan) might have a dramatic impact on the U.S.-Russian strategic relationship. I suspect, however, that increasingly policymakers in both the United States and Russia will appreciate the current predicament and will try to find confidence building measures (CBMs) that could ease the transition to a new arms control relationship. These CBMs could include parallel, unilateral reductions in strategic forces in the form of coordinated presidential declarations, U.S. encouragement to Russian companies to bid on studies examining theater missile defense technologies, and resurrection of the old Ross-Mamedov strategic stability talks of the late 1980s and early 1990s. This approach is reflected by Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov's proposals during his visit to Washington in May 2001 to establish two new working groups that would examine potential threats to strategic stability and explore the future of arms control accords. This mode of arms control resembles what Lewis Dunn has referred to as "Unilateral Plus," a hybrid approach between negotiated arms limitations and unilateral initiatives in which the United States and Russia would utilize a variety of means short of formal negotiations to exchange data and record shared understandings about where both sides were heading and how they planned to get there.[10] It was precisely this hybrid of arms control that emerged from a 15-week U.S.-Russian START III negotiation simulation Dr. Sokov and I conducted at the Monterey Institute last semester.

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[10] Lewis Dunn, Remarks at an international seminar on "Next Steps for Nuclear Disarmament and Arms Control: Thinking Outside the Box," Palais des Nations, Geneva (May 21, 2001).

Nonproliferation

I am not optimistic that we will soon see a reversal of the trend I've noted above regarding the erosion of U.S.-Russian cooperation for nonproliferation. Indeed, if anything, tensions are apt to rise over issues of Russian export policy, U.S. threat assessments of "countries of concern," and the growing U.S. inclination to devalue international nonproliferation regimes.

That being said, there are at least several areas where U.S. and Russian nonproliferation interests still converge. They include the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program and cooperation in combating WMD terrorism.[11] One modest step to enhance nonproliferation cooperation, for example, would be to create and maintain under the auspices of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council a joint database on international terrorist incidents involving the acquisition, threat to use, or actual use of weapons of mass destruction. Another desirable step would be to revive U.S.-Russian nonproliferation bilateral meetings, which used to take place every six months. A useful focus for an early bilateral would be to arrange a deal to return to Russia the 48.2 kilograms of Soviet-origin highly-enriched uranium currently residing at the Yugoslav nuclear research facility at Vinca.

[11] On this topic see William Potter and Serguei Batsanov, "U.S.-Russian Relations: Practical Measures to Restore Russian Nuclear Cooperation," in Michael Barletta, *WMD Threats 2001: Critical Choices for the Bush Administration*, Occasional Paper No. 6, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies (May 2001), pp. 13-16.

Conclusion

It is still too early in the new Bush Administration to gauge with much confidence if what passes as conventional wisdom about nuclear arms control will in fact be reflected in official U.S. policy toward Russia. The risks of premature assumptions were highlighted in the recent encounter of the two presidents in Ljublijana and the change in fortunes for NMD that accompanied the political shift in the U.S. Senate. Nevertheless, it is clear that the new U.S. Administration has a pronounced skepticism about what can or should be accomplished in the realm of negotiated arms control. Although the door to traditional arms control with Russia has not yet completely closed, there are few indications that a line is forming on either side of the threshold./the two governments are crowding up on either side of the threshold.