

Improving Russian-American Strategic Dialogue

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Despite the recent complicated developments in international affairs and in domestic politics in Russia and the United States, the relations between the two powers remain a key factor in the global situation. In any case, this holds true as long as the issue of international security remains high on the international policy agenda.

In this sphere, the effectiveness of combating the proliferation of nuclear weapons (and other types of weapons of mass destruction) and international terrorism, as well as the resolution of crises in a number of most important regions (the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and the South Caucasus) depend primarily on Russia and the United States. The recent agreements on Syria and the resumed talks on Iran's nuclear program are noteworthy examples of the utmost importance of such cooperation.

The current foreign and domestic policies of Russia and the United States are such that there is little hope that in the key element of their relationship—nuclear arms control—a qualitative breakthrough is possible. The dialogue on nuclear arms control is currently at an impasse, where it was brought to in 2011 due to the disagreements over the U.S./NATO ballistic missile defense (BMD) system, consequently exacerbated by broader strategic, geopolitical, and ideological differences.

However, if chemical disarmament in Syria is successful and war in the Persian Gulf is prevented, it may be possible to open a new window of opportunity for the renewal of a serious dialogue on strategic armaments. Even the USSR and the United States, with all their contradictions, conducted such bilateral negotiations for more than 20 years and achieved considerable success in the form of the SALT/START-1/INF treaties.

The expert community, along with relevant state agencies, should prepare in advance for such a window of opportunity, in order not to waste time when the right moment comes and not to miss a favorable chance, as has happened more than once before. At the same time, one should not hope that it will be possible to simply pick up where things were left in 2011. The situation has changed, and this must be taken into consideration so as not to repeat the past mistakes.

First, unlike in the recent past, there is no longer just one major missile defense program, that of the United States, but two: the American and the Russian programs. The latter is being developed as part of the Aero-Space Defense program, which is the top priority of Russia's State Armament program until 2020 (comprising 20% of weapons development and procurement allocations, or \$110 billion). For this reason, the issue of Russia's participation in the NATO missile defense program is no longer valid. One can only speak about finding elements of compatibility between the two systems and programs. But here lies the problem: the American missile defense system is being created to defend against rogue states' missiles (although many

Russians are convinced that it is aimed against them), whereas the Russian Aero-Space Defense forces are being openly built first and foremost against the United States. It is clear that such systems cannot be combined or made compatible.

Second, throughout the development of its Aero-Space Defense program, Moscow seems to have lost interest both toward the idea of a joint missile defense system in accordance with the notorious past “sectoral missile defense” model (even if former President Medvedev seriously believed in this project), and also toward reaching legally binding guarantees that the U.S. strategic defenses would not be targeting the Russian nuclear deterrence forces. Although Russia continues to repeat its previous arguments at an official level, they sound more like lip service statements than proposals for reaching a real agreement. It goes without saying that Russia would not mind limiting the U.S. missile defense system, but it would hardly agree to limit its own Aero-Space Defense according to the same principle of “nontargeting” the other party, insofar as the Russian Aero-Space Defense system is being created precisely against the United States. A clear demonstration of this “new look” was provided by President Putin’s decision of November 2013 to disband the special interagency group that was organized in 2011 to conduct the dialogue with the United States on this issue.

Third, in reality, rather than missile defense, by all appearances it is actually the perceived threat of U.S. precision-guided conventional strategic offensive systems that have been coming to the forefront of Moscow’s strategic concerns. They include the existing sea-based and air-based subsonic cruise missiles, the development programs for supersonic cruise missiles, and hypersonic boost-glide delivery vehicles within the framework of the Global Prompt Strike (GPS) program. In this sphere, Russia's lag is most pronounced, and it is obviously concerned about the survivability of its nuclear deterrence capability under a hypothetical U.S. conventional disarming strike.

In light of such a threat (however questionable it may seem to many experts), Russia views negatively the U.S. proposals to continue reductions of strategic nuclear weapons as a follow-on to the New START treaty and to limit nonstrategic (tactical) nuclear weapons. Moreover, it is primarily against this threat that Russian Aero-Space Defense is designed and deployed.

Based on this, as soon as a political window of opportunity opens, the limitation of strategic offensive nonnuclear weapons should become top priority. There is a precedent for this in the New START treaty which sets the limit on strategic ballistic missiles regardless of their warhead type: nuclear or conventional.

It is true that agreeing on new limitations of this type of cruise missiles and hypersonic boost-glide delivery vehicles would be much more complicated. This is all the more so, since Washington justifies these new systems in terms of their potential usefulness for striking rogue states and terrorists.

However, if there is political will and if serious strategic analysis is applied, it should be possible to draw a demarcation line between the stability of central strategic balance and the regional military tasks, and to combine treaty limitations with confidence-building and transparency measures. For more than 40 years of arms control history, in the presence of political will and with the support of the expert community, the two parties have been able to solve more complicated problems—even during the years of the Cold War.

Removal or tangible alleviation of the perceived threat of U.S. strategic conventional weapons would make it possible for Russia to proceed with the follow-on agreements on strategic and nonstrategic nuclear arms reductions. Moreover, it would be conducive to the redirection of its Aero-Space Defense from opposing the U.S. systems to defending Russian territory from strikes by missiles and aircraft of rogue states and terrorists. Such restructuring may basically use the same BMD/air defense technology but would imply a different deployment geography and warning-command-control systems. This would create a strategic environment for making U.S. and Russian defensive systems compatible and interfacing them in some elements to enhance their combat effectiveness.

This is the new key to further nuclear arms reductions and to eventually engaging third nuclear weapon states in the arms control process, and in a longer perspective, to the cooperation of some great powers in the development of their strategic defense systems, which, in turn, would imply building essentially allied relations among them.

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