

Russia and President Obama's disarmament initiative

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US President Barack Obama used his speech in Berlin on 19 June to present a new nuclear disarmament plan. He called upon Russia to start talks on a further reduction in the US and Russian arsenals of strategic nuclear warheads – by up to a third – and announced talks with NATO members and Russia about a reduction in tactical nuclear arms in Europe. Reactions to this initiative in Russia were rather cool. Moscow clearly stated that the start of talks on this issue depends on whether they will include other nuclear powers and if the issues of construction of the US/NATO missile defence system and the development of precision weapons will be discussed.

Russia is not interested in further reducing its nuclear arsenal and is approaching President Obama's plan above all in political terms. Russia is ready to use Obama's intention of a gradual universal and complete elimination of nuclear weapons (the Global Zero concept, which has been one of the Obama administration's priorities since 2009) in order to push through Russian demands in the area of security. Moscow will therefore try to use the talks on a further reduction in strategic nuclear weapons in order to freeze the implementation of at least the third phase of the missile defence programme in Europe (the deployment of interceptors in Romania and Poland) and will also threaten to withdraw from the Soviet-US Treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF).

Russia is critical...

Representatives of the Russian government have responded coolly to Barack Obama's disarmament plan. President Vladimir Putin has not commented on it directly but in the speech he made in Saint Petersburg on 19 June he said that "upsetting the balance of the strategic (nuclear) deterrence system and the lowering of the effectiveness of Russian strategic forces" could not be allowed. Deputy Prime Minister for the military-industrial complex Dmitry Rogozin said the same day that the US initiative was unacceptable for Russia as it demanded the disarmament of Russian offensive systems in parallel with the development of the US defensive system (missile defence). The head of the Duma's (Russian parliament) international affairs committee, Alexei Pushkov made a similar statement. Obama's initiative was however not commented by the Russian Ministry of Defence and military circles (including retired generals who usually actively express their opinions on issues linked with nuclear disarmament). Russia's official representatives did not address the question of tactical nuclear weapons in their statements.

... Russia is setting conditions...

On 19 June Yuri Ushakov, a foreign affairs aide to the Russian president, said that nuclear disarmament must extend to other states (besides the USA and Russia) which possess nuclear weapons. The following day Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed this position in his statement for the Russian television channel Rossiya 24 and added that Russia was ready to continue dialogue about further reductions in strategic nuclear arms but in a comprehensive way which would also cover the issues of missile defence and precision weapons (mainly missiles with conventional warheads which make it possible to hit Russian strategic nuclear forces facilities). The Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov presented a more complete list of Russia's conditions in his statement for the daily *Kommersant* published on 20 June. He stated that Russia would carefully analyse the US proposals, which would require time and interagency consultations. The following issues would be taken into account in this analysis: the role of nuclear weapons and the levels of reduction, the "situation with missile defence", the establishment of conventional precision weapons within the framework of the "prompt global strike", the prospect of the militarisation of space, the non-participation of a host of states in key agreements on arms controls.

...and Russia is making threats

In his speech made on 19 June President Putin also pointed to the fact that a number of states have been developing their offensive capabilities with programmes for the construction of intermediate-range missiles and the development of precision weapons. In this context he assessed the USSR's decision to sign an agreement on the elimination of land-based intermediate-range and shorter-range nuclear missiles (INF) with the US in 1987 as incomprehensible and disputable. The head of the presidential administration Sergei Ivanov repeated this opinion on 21 June, adding that Russia cannot "endlessly" implement the provisions of this treaty.

Conclusions

Russia is not aiming to further reduce strategic nuclear weapons. For Moscow it is important to preserve parity with the US in the area of strategic nuclear arsenals. Russia also has an interest in ensuring that further reductions in these arsenals do not decrease its potential to the level comparable with other nuclear powers (the UK, France and in particular China). In Moscow's opinion more serious reductions would also require the involvement of other nuclear powers: China, the UK and France.

Russia has not ruled out the idea of talks on further reductions (the mere fact that talks of this kind would be held increases its prestige as the only state in the world comparable to the US) but clearly suggests that this issue should be linked with other questions which are important to Moscow, in particular: the implementation of the NATO/US project of the missile defence system; precision weapons; the use of strategic weapons to carry conventional ones (e.g. the possibility of using nuclear-powered ships as carriers of ballistic missiles in asymmetrical conflicts, demanded by the US); the participation of the third states in the US nuclear deterrence system (in Russia's opinion the nuclear potential of the UK - nuclear-powered submarines with Trident-2 missiles on board which are logistically and

operationally connected with the US strategic nuclear forces - should also be taken into account while agreeing on limits for both countries).

In fact Russia aims to use the talks on the further reduction in strategic arms as a bargaining chip above all serving the purpose to limit the US/NATO missile defence project. This particularly concerns the aim to persuade the US to abandon the implementation of the third phase of the project in which the SM-3 missiles based in Romania (planned for 2015) and Poland (planned for 2018) will be installed. With regard to precision weapons and the use of strategic weapons as carriers of conventional loads, Russia is probably seeking to formally and legally curtail the extension of systems of this kind.

Moscow is consolidating its position by threatening to pull out of the INF Treaty. In reality however Russia is interested in eliminating the INF regime irrespective of the missile defence issue since a number of Asian states are developing missile projects.

Russia views Obama's initiative mostly in political, not military terms. Moscow has spied a chance of a change in bilateral relations between the US and Russia due to the fact that the Obama administration is treating nuclear disarmament as its priority. In Moscow's opinion, Washington's intention to implement the Global Zero initiative makes the US more inclined to make more serious concessions in issues which are important for the Kremlin.

Appendix

The present state of the Russian and the US strategic nuclear arsenals

The US and Russia are currently implementing the provisions of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (in the US – New START, in Russia – START 3). This document was signed in Prague on 8 April 2010 and entered into force on 5 February 2011. Its parties have committed themselves to a reduction in the number of their nuclear warheads to a level not exceeding 1,550 and their delivery vehicles (intercontinental land-based and submarine-launched ballistic missiles and strategic bombers) to 800, including 700 deployed (the remaining ones are to be stored/preserved).

US Department of State data which were revealed after the latest exchange of information about the number of strategic offensive weapons (under the above mentioned agreement; the information is exchanged twice a year) state that as of 1 March this year the two parties possess:

- 1,654 (US) and 1,480 (Russia) nuclear warheads;
- 1,028 (US) and 900 (Russia) delivery vehicles, including 792 (US) and 492 (Russia) deployed.

In comparison, on 1 September 2012 Russia had 1,499 and the US – 1,722 nuclear warheads.

As Russia is seeking to neutralise results of the construction of the US missile defence system, it is carrying out extensive modernisation work on delivery vehicles of nuclear weapons, mainly on *multiple* independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV). Since 2009 two land-based missiles have been introduced to the arsenal: RS-24 „Yars” (minimum 18)

and RSM-56 “Bulava” (minimum 16 aboard the new generation project 955 Borei-class nuclear-powered submarine “Yury Dolgorukiy”, ; this year one to two submarines of this type will be added to the arsenal). These carry, according to varying data, from three to four (“Yars”) to six to ten (“Bulava”) warheads (recently larger figures have been given). Russia has also been working on the models which will succeed them and on a new generation strategic bomber. Modernised versions of older delivery vehicles (including RSM-54 Sineva submarine-launched ballistic missiles for the modernised submarines of the BDRM 667 project) have also been introduced.

As the US has been focusing on the development of the missile defence system, the country has only recently started modernising carriers. The basic equipment of its strategic nuclear forces dates back to the Cold War times (mainly LGM-30G Minuteman land-based missiles and submarine-launched UGM-133A Trident-2 ballistic missiles).