

THE START ARMS ACCORD: DOES IT MATTER?

After nearly a decade of negotiations, George Bush will go to Moscow at month's end to sign a Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) at a summit with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Yet in contrast to the fanfare over the 1972 Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) or the controversy surrounding SALT II in 1979, START worries few and stirs few passions. For one thing, the fate of the collapsing Soviet Union has displaced arms control as the top item on the superpower agenda. START, therefore, in contrast to prior arms accords, is not a touchstone for United States-Soviet relations. For another thing, START if anything demonstrates the limits of arms control. It neither fundamentally improves U.S. security nor signals any major shifts in Soviet military policy. START or no START, Moscow's massive nuclear arsenal will remain a threat — perhaps the only serious direct threat — to American security for years.

To be sure, the Senate will have to scour START for loopholes and flaws before it ratifies it. But American security against a thoroughly modernized Soviet nuclear threat has less to do with arms control than with America's determination in coming months and years to modernize its own strategic arsenal; to deploy defenses against missile attacks from the U.S.S.R. and Third World countries; and to conduct a foreign policy that prompts free market and democratic reforms and demilitarization in the Soviet Union. Next to these critically important issues, START matters little.

Arms control, by default, became the centerpiece of superpower relations in the 1970s. Moscow refused to address the core issues of the Cold War, including Soviet support for anti-Western movements around the globe, and what then was a growing and overwhelming Soviet military threat to Europe. In the absence of progress in these and other areas, negotiating arms agreements with Moscow gradually became an obsession among liberals apparently desperate for some dialogue with Moscow. Conservatives also were obsessed by arms control, correctly aware that, given the dangers of those years, any less-than-perfect agreement could tilt an already precarious balance of power even further in Moscow's favor.

Shift in Superpower Relations. Today, this all has changed. Without any arms control treaty, or any arms control at all, superpower relations have shifted. The risk of war drops steadily, not because of treaty constraints on superpower nuclear arsenals, but because the Soviet political and economic crisis makes it impossible for Moscow to compete effectively with the West. The result: arms control has been pushed to the periphery of the public debate and replaced by such elemental issues as whether the Soviet Union can survive another season and whether the West should do anything about it.

Yet START is not irrelevant. This is because Moscow still possesses strategic nuclear weapons that mortally endanger America. In fact, Gorbachev has been upgrading the Kremlin's arsenal. Moscow recently modernized its force of SS-18 *Satans*, the most powerful in its arsenal, and Mos-

cow continues to deploy new, mobile ten-warhead SS-24 *Scalpel* and single-warhead SS-25 *Sickle* missiles. Five or six ballistic missile submarines are under construction, and an entirely new generation missile boat is under development. These new submarines will carry a new more accurate missile, which may be deployed by the end of this year.

“Balance of Terror.” Even after START, the U.S. and Soviet Union together will be able to deploy roughly 18,000 offensive weapons. But because of the limitations imposed by the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, each still will be able to deploy only 100 missile interceptors to defend against nuclear attack. American negotiators hoped that a START Treaty would be reached in tandem with a Defense and Space Treaty (DST) that would permit the deployment of more extensive defenses than allowed by the ABM Treaty. But this has not happened. START is about ready to be signed while DST remains deadlocked. As a result, American and Soviet citizens will continue to live under the Cold War’s precarious “balance of terror,” instead of moving toward a stable deterrent force of offensive and defensive weapons.

START also does nothing to protect America’s land-based missiles, vulnerable even in their hardened underground silos to a surprise Soviet attack. American START negotiators hoped to redress this problem by cutting in half the number of Moscow’s main “silo-busting” missile, the SS-18 *Satan*. Moscow agreed to the cuts, but then doubled the destructive power of its SS-18s so that it could halve its force — from 308 SS-18s to 154 — without sacrificing any capability to destroy U.S. military targets, including missiles.

Meanwhile, Soviet violations of arms control agreements mount. In the past two years Moscow clearly has violated the 1972 ABM Treaty, the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement, and the 1988 Ballistic Missile Launch Notification Agreement. Moscow also is pushing at and beyond the edges of the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, moving equipment thousands of miles so it would not be counted under Treaty limits, making claims for exemptions accepted by none of the other signatories, and providing questionable data on the numbers and location of their own forces.

START nevertheless is not without merit. It reduces the 11,000 Soviet warheads aimed at America to about 8,000 — roughly the number it had when negotiations began in 1982. START also will permit Washington to monitor Soviet missile production, deployment and testing, and will reduce the total throwweight, or lifting power, of Soviet missiles.

Strategic Imperatives. Yet START will not appreciably reduce the Soviet military threat to America. Ensuring security in the face of this threat will require more than START or any other arms control treaty. It will require continued modernization of America’s strategic forces, deployment of strategic defenses, and a foreign policy geared toward permanently and fundamentally reducing the Soviet military threat to the U.S. If America heeds these strategic imperatives, it will remain secure with or without START. If not, arms control will be of little help.

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