



Better Wait than Never: Transitioning from Bilateral to Multilateral Strategic Arms Reductions

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Introduction

Transitioning from bilateral to multilateral strategic arms reductions will be a slow, difficult process. Conditions are far from conducive for success. Indeed, conditions are not even conducive for the next step in bilateral strategic arms reductions between the United States and the Russian Federation, even though both countries have good reasons to save money on excess force structure. Continued bilateral reductions by the two states possessing four-digit-sized nuclear arsenals is a necessary predicate to engagement with states with three-digit-sized stockpiles. If the bilateral process of strategic arms reductions breaks down, transitioning to a multilateral process becomes even harder. Trying to transition to a multilateral process of strategic arms reductions when the bilateral process is troubled and when states possessing three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals refuse to engage invites failure. There is wisdom in the aphorism “better late than never.” Rather than rushing to failure, the best way to proceed is to work to repair US-Russian relations sufficiently to secure another round of bilateral strategic arms reductions, as envisioned under the 2010 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START).

Engaging the Second Tier

Any transition from bilateral US-Russian strategic arms reductions to the engagement of states with three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals will be long and arduous. States that possess three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals – China, France, Great Britain, Pakistan and perhaps India – oppose joining such negotiations. Chinese officials, in particular, have long insisted that the United States and Russia must reduce down to their level before engaging in a strategic arms reduction process. For example, in a White Paper released in 2010, Beijing announced:

China has always stood for the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. China maintains that countries possessing the largest nuclear arsenals bear special and primary responsibility for nuclear disarmament. They should further drastically reduce their nuclear arsenals in a verifiable, irreversible and legally-binding manner, so as to create the necessary conditions for the complete elimination of nuclear

weapons. When conditions are appropriate, other nuclear-weapon states should also join in multilateral negotiations on nuclear disarmament. To attain the ultimate goal of complete and thorough nuclear disarmament, the international community should develop, at an appropriate time, a viable, long-term plan with different phases, including the conclusion of a convention on the complete prohibition of nuclear weapons.¹

The likelihood of bringing China into a process of strategic arms reductions would be even further reduced if India and Pakistan remain free to increase their nuclear capabilities. China seems intent to have greater nuclear capabilities than India, and Pakistan seems intent to have approximately the same, if not better nuclear capabilities as India. India is concerned with Chinese and Pakistani collusion on nuclear and missile programs.

The introduction of multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) by China is likely to produce cascading effects in India and Pakistan. The scale of MIRVing is likely to be modest in all three countries, but it would add impetus to a competition marked by the flight-testing of several new ballistic and cruise missile programs. The combined total increase in warheads by China, India and Pakistan over the next ten years – without accounting for MIRVs – is likely to grow by around 250, given current trends. Fifteen years from now, if current trends continue, the combined stockpiles of China, Pakistan and India could grow by about 375 warheads – again, assuming the continuation of current trends. Modest induction of MIRVed long-range missiles by China could increase these totals by perhaps 100 warheads over the next decade and a half.²

China and India are in the process of carrying out sea trials of a new class of ballistic missile-carrying submarines; all three countries can place warheads at sea on other platforms. All three states are flight-testing longer-range, land-based ballistic missiles. China and India are flight-testing missile defense interceptors, as well. These projected increases in nuclear capabilities would still place China, India and Pakistan far below US and Russian strategic forces since the two rising powers in Asia are moving at a relaxed pace relative to their economic means. This pace is, however, likely to increase in the years ahead. Pakistan, on the other hand, is competing hard and, in some respects, is out-competing India, such as in new warhead production.³

Circumstances are not conducive for China, India and Pakistan to stop in place and accept a moratorium on strategic modernization, just as circumstances in the United States and the Soviet Union were not amenable to “stopping where we are”

when both were contemplating MIRVed missiles and national ballistic missile defense systems.

The triangular, interactive nuclear competition among China, India and Pakistan is far less amenable to formal arms control arrangements than was the case, after extremely hard effort, between the nuclear superpowers. There is no meaningful strategic dialogue on nuclear issues, let alone negotiations, between China and India. A “composite dialogue” format exists within which India and Pakistan could discuss nuclear issues, but every time New Delhi seeks to improve prospects for dialogue, its efforts have been met by attacks on sensitive targets within India by cadres from groups that have found safe havens within Pakistan. The composite dialogue process remains on hold.

Prospects for dialogue in the near term, in which confidence-building and nuclear risk-reduction measures might be considered and agreed upon, are not good. And even if prospects improve in the near term, they are most unlikely to lead to moratoria on new missile induction or deployment. This interactive, triangular competition – in which the strongest and weakest countries maintain a strategic partnership against the middle power – is not amenable to formalized constraints. China barely deigns to discuss nuclear issues with India, India will not accept ratios that place it subservient to China or equal to Pakistan, and Pakistan will not accept ratios that place it subservient to India.

If Russia demands that China be included in subsequent strategic arms reduction talks and negotiations, then Russia will add all of these seemingly intractable issues to those already bedeviling US-Russian relations. India and Pakistan will adopt the same approach as China, waiting for the states with larger arsenals to drop down to their levels and linking negotiations to the complete abolition of nuclear weapons.

If states with three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals in Asia are deemed necessary for inclusion in future strategic arms reductions, states with three-digit-sized arsenals in Europe would presumably be included, as well. France appears to be opposed to its inclusion, at least until US and Russian force levels are significantly reduced. France would likely be opposed to any effort that is linked to nuclear abolition – the condition that India and Pakistan would insist upon. Great Britain faces the greatest uncertainty among these seven states regarding the future of its nuclear deterrent and will likely act in close concert with the United States, in any event.

Another complication is Israel’s nuclear arsenal, which might now be sized

similarly to India's. Israel is usually excluded from conceptualizations of multilateral strategic arms reductions because of the presumption that the more attention its nuclear capabilities receive, the more difficulties that will arise for the Non-Proliferation Treaty. But if states with four-digit-sized nuclear arsenals demand that states with three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals become part of a strategic arms reduction process, then it would be hard to ignore Israel.

Success in expanding upon an existing bilateral strategic arms reduction process to begin seven power talks – adding France, Great Britain, China, Pakistan and India (or eight power talks, if Israel is included) – would face extremely severe obstacles. Would the smaller nuclear powers be required initially to accept proportional reductions or accept moratoria on stockpile growth? Would reductions be in stockpile size or deployed forces? If moratoria were to be a starting point, how would they be monitored? If proportionate reductions are deemed necessary, what ratios might the parties agree upon from which drawdowns would occur? Would, for example, China, India and Pakistan agree to a hierarchy of nuclear weapon-related capabilities? Would India accept a lesser status than China? Would Pakistan accept a lesser status than India? Would India demand compensation for the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan? Would all three states agree to forego deployments of multiple-warhead missiles? Would a declaration of the size of Israel's nuclear stockpile help or hinder efforts to establish a nuclear weapons-free and weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East? What impact might this have on the Non-Proliferation Treaty?

This list of difficult questions could be expanded. For example, would intrusive inspections be equally acceptable? Would states agree that short-range systems and their warheads be included in ceilings and subsequent drawdowns? Some states possess short-range systems; others do not. Some consider short-range systems to be strategic arms; others do not. Listing these questions – as well as others that could be easily brought forward – underlines how formidable the task of multilateral negotiations on reducing strategic offensive arms would be.

A Cautionary History

The only example of multilateral “strategic” arms control we have to draw upon is the intra-war naval arms limitation treaties on capital ships involving the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France and Italy. The 1922 Washington Naval Treaty and the 1930 London Naval Treaty placed tonnage and numerical constraints on battleships, cruisers and aircraft carriers. These naval surface combatants constituted the strategic forces of that era – war-fighting capabilities that could

transit long distances (albeit slowly) and appear offshore with big guns to influence outcomes.

It took heroic and creative diplomatic efforts by US Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes to persuade Great Britain, Japan, France and Italy to accept hierarchical ratios in the Washington Naval Treaty of 5-5-3-1.75-1.75 for tonnage on capital ships. These ratios were acceptable primarily because of severe budget constraints and public exhaustion with the enterprise of fighting and preparing to fight wars. US Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson took up the challenge of revising and extending these limitations in the London Naval Treaty. The Treaty's most notable additions related to surface combatants of lesser tonnage, which were to be constructed along new 10-10-7 ratios among the United States, Great Britain and Japan. The London Naval Treaty also attempted to place constraints on submarine warfare while maintaining the status quo in the Pacific.

The process of multilateral treaty constraints on surface combatants lasted for fourteen years, until 1936 – the expiration date of the extended Washington Naval Treaty and the London Naval Treaty. The Government of Japan publicly announced at the end of 1934 that it did not intend to abide by treaty limitations past the 1936 deadline.

What does this thumbnail sketch of multinational naval arms control treaties have to tell us? First, multilateral accords cannot survive the national ambitions of signatories intent on changing the status quo that treaties seek to codify. Japan's militaristic leaders were intent on changing the status quo in the Pacific. Nor were naval limitations on submarine warfare consistent with the ambitions of a non-signatory, Germany, which was intent on upending a status quo in Europe based on the humiliating settlement imposed on Germany after its defeat in World War I. Even before Japanese and German ambitions became incontrovertible, they were evident in circumventions and outright violations of treaty provisions.

Wrenching consequences followed, resulting in a second world war within the European and Pacific theaters. The United States and the Soviet Union joined in common cause to fight this war against Nazi Germany. After victory, they faced off in a Cold War across a divided Europe. For a brief period, conditions were conducive for significant strategic arms reductions and the retrieval of Soviet nuclear arms and delivery vehicles left behind in newly independent states after the break-up of the USSR. This phase of US-Russian relations was transitory and is now viewed as disastrous by the leadership of the Russian Federation. Bilateral relations are once again at a low point, with numerous subjects of contention.

The dramatic changes in relations between Washington and Moscow from one decade to the next suggest that bold plans for bilateral – let alone multilateral – strategic arms reductions be approached with caution. A long-term process of strategic arms reduction requires not just the absence of friction, but also sustained partnership among major powers. These conditions are not now in place with respect to relations between the United States and Russia, the United States and China, China and Russia, China and India, India and Pakistan, and Pakistan and the United States.

Indeed, in the near term, it will be difficult enough for the United States and Russia to improve relations sufficiently to proceed with the next step of strategic arms reduction under provisions allowed by the 2010 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty – even when these armaments appear to be in excess of military requirements and an unnecessary burden on defense budgets. Many roadblocks have been placed in front of taking this next step. And even if conditions change to facilitate further bilateral reductions, bringing other states with three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals into this process – whether to accept a moratorium on further increases or to accept proportional reductions in their strategic forces – seems most unlikely, as noted above.

Necessary Conditions for Success

A successful process of multilateral, strategic constraints and reductions requires a longer timeline than the fourteen-year regime of naval limitations between 1922 and 1936. The absence of war between major powers is a necessary but insufficient condition for success. Another is the absence of intent to change the status quo in ways that adversely affect participating states. A long-term process governing nuclear arms control and reductions requires substantive and positive working relations among all the participants, the absence of issues that could lead to friction and crises, confidence among all states that reductions serve national security interests, and confidence that obligations will be properly implemented.

In other words, at the outset and throughout the duration of a long-term process of multilateral strategic arms reductions all participating states would need to be content with their obligations, whether they be moratoria or reducing their holdings of nuclear weapons. Any actions that corrode confidence among the parties that national security interests would be served would diminish prospects for success. The more unhappiness there is with the process, the more likely it is that the process will unravel.

Even more challenging, a long-term process of strategic arms reductions would eventually require changes in the status quo, as those in the first tier draw down toward second-tier arsenals, and as second-tier arsenals draw down toward much lower numbers. To succeed, all participating states would need to feel increasingly secure as they reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons and adapt to a new status quo.

Another complicating factor is that nuclear employment strategies vary among states possessing four- and three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals. The four-digit-sized nuclear powers have adopted “counterforce” targeting strategies that place at risk strategic and conventional military capabilities, along with targets within or nearby cities, such as with command and control nodes and war-supporting industry. China and India have, to date, been largely content with “countervalue” targeting strategies that seek to deter through the ability to inflict assured destruction of cities. As Chinese and Indian nuclear-related capabilities and stockpiles grow, the growth of target lists is likely to follow – to include more counterforce targeting. The stewards of Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal have already articulated counterforce rationales for their shortest- and longest-range missiles.

If a long-term process of reductions is to be sustained over time, states with four-digit-sized nuclear arsenals would be obliged to scale back counterforce targeting, while states with three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals would be obliged either to forego or minimize counterforce targeting. For the top-tier, the challenge would be to accept constraints on warheads and launchers that are insufficient to cover targets previously deemed to be necessary – a change that would be reinforced as reductions proceed. Second-tier states with three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals would be obliged to maintain limitations and then reductions in stockpile sizes that are insufficient to adopt counterforce targeting.

National and theater missile defenses pose another complication for a long-term process of both bilateral and multilateral strategic arms reductions. For states with a large landmass, like the United States, Russia, China and India, it is possible to distinguish between national and theater missile defenses as long as one is able to accurately assess the numbers and locations of missile defense interceptors, their effective ranges, and ancillary capabilities. These capabilities are also inherently limited by both their cost and their opportunity cost of deploying them in significant number. Missile defense systems have long been plagued by technical challenges, as it remains far easier for states with advanced technical capabilities to penetrate missile defenses than it is for defenders to block penetration. The advent

of cruise missiles poses even more challenges and requires even greater expenditures for states seeking national or theater missile defenses.

Nonetheless, the long history of efforts by some to field and improve missile defenses has been accompanied by the concerns of others that technical challenges could be overcome. States with concerns over the effectiveness of their nuclear deterrents assert that deep cuts could only occur if missile defenses were strictly constrained. The offense-defense dynamic has so far been, in a way, self-regulating. Hence, if Russia strongly believes that further reductions cannot be undertaken because of present and prospective national and theater missile defenses, then the bilateral process of reductions will stall out.

After withdrawing from the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, it is unlikely that a future US administration will agree to formally constrain numbers and types of missile defenses. In the absence of the ABM Treaty, the United States has not pursued unlimited theater and national missile defenses. Instead, US decisions have reflected perceived missile threats to the United States and its friends and allies, as well as domestic political, budgetary and technical circumstances. The demarcation agreement between theater and national ballistic missile defenses that was considered between the Kremlin and the Clinton Administration could have been useful in alleviating Moscow's current concerns, but reviving this agreement, like the ABM Treaty, is likely to be met with strong opposition on Capitol Hill. Nonetheless, it might well be worth resuming meaningful discussions about the capabilities inherent in US theater missile defenses and the extent to which they affect the viability of Russia's nuclear deterrent.

Sustaining a long-term process of strategic arms reductions would also require alleviating concerns whether precision conventional strike capabilities might nullify national nuclear deterrents. The advent of increased precision conventional strike capabilities is a given because these capabilities, unlike nuclear weapons, have demonstrated military utility. For this reason, among others, conventional arms control – especially relating to new technologies – is even harder to achieve than strategic arms control.

As with missile defenses, the advent of improved precision strike conventional capabilities is likely to be self-regulating – both with respect to the capabilities deemed necessary for national security and with respect to the effect these capabilities have on the willingness of any party to proceed with deeper cuts in strategic offensive arms. As with missile defenses, trying to formally link and

constrain conventional capabilities with treaty-based strategic arms reductions is likely to result in the end of treaty-based reductions.

In addition to these formidable obstacles, all participating states would need to agree on the desired end-state, or goal of a long-term process of reducing strategic offensive arms. Is the desired end state abolition, or is it proportional reductions at low levels, leaving a hierarchy in place? Agreement on this central point might be very difficult to reach. States in the top tier would resist coming down to the second tier. States with three-digit-sized arsenals would continue to insist on an evening-out process over time. A long process of proportionate reductions would bring all participating states closer together – if political and security conditions permit the process to proceed. As numbers become lower and as differentials are reduced, all state parties would become even more sensitive to potentially disruptive conditions.

Put another way, “linkage” – the sensitivity of an arms control and reductions process to events outside the scope of constraints – will be as unavoidable in multilateral strategic arms reductions as it was (and is) in bilateral negotiations between Washington and Moscow. Relations between the United States and the Russian Federation must improve for deeper cuts to happen – and for multilateral negotiations to proceed.

All relevant states in multilateral compacts must be willing to take actions that, at a minimum, do not defeat the objectives and purposes of the compacts reached. One possible path forward at the outset would be for states with the largest arsenals to reduce while states with smaller arsenals observe moratoria or accept limits to increased capabilities. Over time, obligations to reduce would be extended to those states observing moratoria or growing slowly. Questions of timing and the extent of reductions, the nature of moratoria or the extent of additional capabilities would be the subject of difficult negotiations. As noted above, success would depend on the maintenance of cooperative relations between the parties, a high degree of trust in the negotiating process, acceptance of a mutually accepted end state, and progressively increased confidence in shared obligations as the process moves forward.

The Way Forward

The complications discussed above are extremely demanding and prospects for success appear remote. If so, why invite these complications – or at least try to address them – before doing so is absolutely necessary? Maintaining a bilateral

strategic arms reduction process between the United States and the Russian Federation will be hard enough. If this bilateral process unravels, a multilateral process to include three-digit-sized arsenals is inconceivable.

As long as the differential between the strategic offensive nuclear forces of the United States and the Russian Federation on the one hand, and the second tier of states possessing nuclear weapons on the other remains quite substantial, and as long as there is no evidence that second-tier states intend to catch up to the United States and the Russian Federation, the least onerous path forward – at least over the next decade – would be to continue the process of bilateral strategic arms reductions, a process that could be accommodated by extending the 2010 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty until at least 2026.

Bilateral relations between the United States and the Russian Federation are very troubled at present, for reasons that do not require detailed enumeration. Moscow has expressed concerns about NATO expansion, US national and theater missile defenses as well as precision strike conventional capabilities, among other issues. Washington has expressed concerns about Russian actions around its periphery and compliance with treaty obligations, among other issues. Domestic constituencies in both countries are likely to take issue with extending START and agreeing to deeper cuts without addressing issues that lie outside the scope of this treaty. But if either side demands satisfaction on issues that have not been amenable to resolution for many years – and in some cases many decades – START might not be extended and further treaty-based bilateral reductions would go by the wayside.

It is preferable, at least in my view, to implement another round of bilateral reductions and to sustain START for another decade as conversations begin with states possessing three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals as to how they can facilitate a long-term process of multilateral strategic arms reductions. We will not be in a position to explore these possibilities if the process of treaty-based reductions in strategic offensive arms between the United States and Russia falls apart.

To insist on moving from bilateral to multilateral negotiations before circumstances permit is to invite failure at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. A long-term process of strategic arms reductions in the top tier alongside constraints followed by gradual reductions among all states with three-digit-sized nuclear arsenals would be necessary for success. Conversely, a long-term process of strategic arms reductions in the top tier alongside substantial increases in strategic arms in the second tier is not sustainable. The top tier would have no interest in incentivizing the second tier to catch up with them.

Conclusion

Conditions are not conducive to a formal process of multilateral strategic arms reductions. Given the difficulties and complications involved in multilateral strategic arms reductions, and given the wide disparity between the first and second tier states, it makes little sense to demand outcomes that are not achievable. If a long-term process of bilateral strategic arms reductions proceeds, engaging the second tier would be essential. But we are far from this stage. Nonetheless, success in bilateral strategic arms reductions is unlikely if second-tier states remain mere onlookers as states with four-digit-sized nuclear arsenals reduce. They, too, would have responsibilities to avoid actions that defeat the objectives and purposes of a long-term process of strategic arms reductions.

To demand a shift from bilateral to multilateral strategic arms reductions at this stage, when relations between the United States and the Russian Federation are poor, and when there is a great distance between the nuclear capabilities of states with four- and three-digit-sized arsenals – is to invite failure in bilateral, treaty-based reductions and in transitioning to multilateral reductions.

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¹ *China's National Defense in 2010* (Beijing: The People's Republic of China, March 2011), 39-40, http://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/1_1a.pdf?_id=1316627912.

² See Michael Krepon, Travis Wheeler and Shane Mason, eds., *The Lure and Pitfalls of MIRVs: From the First to the Second Nuclear Age* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, May 2016), <https://www.stimson.org/content/lure-and-pitfalls-mirvs-first-second-nuclear-age>. Also see Travis Wheeler, "China's MIRVs: Separating Fact From Fiction," *The Diplomat*, May 18, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/chinas-mirvs-separating-factfrom-fiction/>.

³ See Toby Dalton and Michael Krepon, *A Normal Nuclear Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, August 2015), 3, 19, and 22-23, <http://www.stimson.org/content/normal-nuclear-pakistan-0>.