

START: One Small Step for Arms Control, One Giant Leap Backward for Disarmament?

A November White House Fact Sheet, entitled, 'An Enduring Commitment to the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent,' announced the Administration's plans "*to invest more than \$85 billion over the next decade to modernize the U.S. nuclear weapons complex that supports our deterrent.... This level of funding is unprecedented since the end of the Cold War.*" And this doesn't include an additional \$100 Billion by 2020 to modernize the missiles and delivery systems that carry U.S. nuclear warheads. This was the price exacted by the U.S. military-industrial complex and its representatives in the Senate for Senate ratification of the new START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) on December 22, 2010.

Other conditions attached to START ratification include a commitment to continued development of national missile defenses and pursuit of a conventional "prompt global strike" capability that would allow the U.S. to strike any target on earth within an hour. According to General Kevin Chilton, Commander of Strategic Command, in charge of U.S. nuclear war planning: "We have a prompt global strike delivery capability on alert today, but it is configured only with nuclear weapons, which limits the options available to the president and may in some cases reduce the credibility of our deterrence."

Concerns raised by Russia's military and political elites about U.S. missile defenses and planned "prompt global strike" conventional weapons systems jeopardize prospects for the long-term viability of the new START treaty and further progress in US – Russian nuclear arms reductions. According to Russian security analyst Alexei Arbatov, it would be particularly troublesome if part of the reductions called for in the new treaty were conducted by converting strategic nuclear delivery systems into conventional prompt global strike systems.

Indeed, final ratification of new START by the Russian Parliament (Duma) on January 26, was subject to its own reciprocal amendments, including grounds for Russia's withdrawal from the treaty and the Russian President's obligation to undertake a program to modernize Russia's strategic nuclear forces. Grounds for withdrawal include the unilateral deployment by the U.S. of missile defense systems and the adoption of strategic non-nuclear weapon systems (conventional prompt global strike systems) by the U.S. without Russia's approval.

Though widely hailed as a victory for nuclear arms control and disarmament, START will not fundamentally alter the nuclear balance of terror between the United States and Russia. New START lowers the ceiling to 1550 deployed strategic warheads on each side, down from the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) ceiling of 2200 warheads — not enough to qualitatively change the relationship. Moreover, a rule for counting each bomber — which can carry from six to 20 warheads — as just one warhead, will actually enable each side to deploy hundreds of warheads in excess of the limit, near the SORT ceiling. The reductions will apply only to deployed (ready to use) strategic (long range) warheads. The treaty does not require the destruction of a single warhead. According to analyst Hans Kristensen, the new limit could represent an actual decline of only 100 – 200 U.S. weapons, seven years after the treaty enters into force. And, according to Russian analyst Pavel Podvig, Russia is already in

compliance with the numbers established in the new treaty. The main virtue of the new START agreement is that it will continue the process of reduction, however modest, and ensure continued fulfillment of the verification and monitoring functions once met by the first START.

However, new studies suggest that a nuclear conflict using even a small number of weapons would have a devastating local effect and global climatic consequences, with catastrophic effects on stratospheric ozone, precipitation, agriculture, and water supplies. And, on January 6, Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced that the Air Force would begin development of a new nuclear-capable strategic bomber, which can be remotely piloted. At present, there are no nuclear capable “drones” in the U.S. arsenal.

Unfortunately, the dominant discourse embodied in the barrage of “tell your Senator to ratify START” messages did not challenge the conditions for ratification. Most groups advocating START ratification failed to even mention its high price tag, and some even welcomed new START as a “missile defense friendly” treaty. Arms control “messaging experts” warned: “It would be a very bad mistake to frame this in any press statements as a step toward the elimination of nuclear weapons,” and “this should not be about going to zero nuclear weapons.”

In a December weekly radio address, President Obama unintentionally connected some of the dots linking the issues of greatest concern to the peace/anti-war movement, warning: “Without a new treaty, we’ll risk turning back the progress we’ve made in our relationship with Russia, which is essential to enforce strong sanctions against Iran... and resupply our troops in Afghanistan.” And in a letter to senators, Obama repeated his commitment to a 10-year, \$85 billion program to modernize the U.S. nuclear weapons complex: *“I recognize that nuclear modernization requires investment for the long-term, in addition to this one-year budget increase. That is my commitment to the Congress – that my administration will pursue these programs and capabilities for as long as I am president.”*

While many people of good will supported START ratification as a step towards a world without nuclear weapons, the massive commitment of resources to modernization of the nuclear weapons complex, effectively renders it an *anti-disarmament* measure. The fact that so many START advocates went along with this deal – even disassociating START from the goal of disarmament – will make it all the more difficult for us to challenge modernization of the complex over the next decade and beyond. History has shown us that investing in the nuclear weapons establishment has also strengthened its political clout.

It’s easy to get bogged down in the technical minutiae of arms control. Our challenge is to look at the big picture – to put nuclear weapons in the context of militarism and empire, to recognize the dangers of wars among nuclear-armed states in a dangerous and conflict-ridden world, and to demand the abolition of nuclear weapons – in our lifetimes!

-- Jacqueline Cabasso, Executive Director

For an in-depth analysis of the issues raised here, see ***The START Treaty and Disarmament: a Dilemma in Search of a Debate***, a Western States Legal Foundation Commentary by Andrew Lichterman
www.wslfweb.org/docs/The%20START%20Treaty%20and%20Disarmament%20Lichterman.pdf