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Russia's Growing Strategic Nuclear Forces and New START Treaty Compliance

Dr. Mark Schneider

Mark B. Schneider is a senior analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy and a former senior official in the Defense Department.

Russia's 2016 New START data, released by the Department of State, indicate that since New START's entry into force (EIF) in 2011, Russia has increased its deployed warheads. Russia has reached 1,735 deployed warheads, an increase of 198 warheads since New START's EIF when Russia had 1,537 deployed warheads.¹ Russia is now 185 warheads above the New START Treaty limit. U.S. data for the same period indicate the U.S. cut its warheads from 1,800 to 1,481, 69 below the New START limit of 1,550.² The Russian increase is even more impressive when it is compared with their level of 1,400 warheads in October 2013.³ From this baseline, the increase is 325 warheads or about 24%.

According to Bill Gertz, an Obama administration official told him, "The Russians are doubling their [nuclear] warhead output," and, "They will be exceeding the New START [arms treaty] levels because of MIRVing these new systems."⁴ Gertz also reported Russia had added over 150 more warheads during the past year.⁵ This appears consistent with what Russian leaders say they are doing with regard to nuclear force modernization. We are now five years into the New START Treaty's seven-year reduction period (2011-2018) and all we have seen is increases in Russian nuclear warheads. The only reductions being made are unilaterally by the U.S. It is likely the U.S. will be down to all the New START limits in the near future.

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Russian Compliance Issues

The Department of State is required by the New START Treaty's Resolution of Ratification to submit an annual report on New START implementation including a section on Russian reductions. Significantly, it has never mentioned the inconvenient fact that Russia has increased, not decreased, its strategic nuclear warheads.⁶ These annual reports say the U.S. has "raised implementation-related questions with the Russian Federation" but the reports have not revealed what these issues are or their significance.⁷ In 2014, Brian McKeon (then a senior NSC official and now Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy) stated that in September 2010 the Senate had been informed of a compliance issue that "implicated possibly New START, possibly INF."⁸ Also, in December 2014, Russian ICBM force Commander Colonel-General Sergey Karakayev said, "There are currently around 400 missiles [ICBMs] with warheads on combat duty."⁹ Yet, Russia's declared strategic force numbers make it impossible for Russia to have more than about 300 ICBMs legally "with warheads on combat duty."¹⁰

Another possible compliance issue could concern heavy-bomber counting rules. In 2012, the Commander of the Russian Air Force stated that the Su-34 long-range strike fighter would be given "long-range missiles...Such work is under way and I think that it is the platform that can solve the problem of increasing nuclear deterrence forces within the Air Force strategic aviation."¹¹ This cannot be done legally without declaring the Su-34 to be a heavy bomber which has not been done.

It is clear that Russia desires to increase its strategic nuclear forces quantitatively and qualitatively. Russia has modernization programs underway that would circumvent the New START Treaty including two bomber types, a rail-mobile ICBM, a nuclear-powered nuclear-armed drone submarine and reportedly an air-launched ICBM which either do not count under New START or count at a severely discounted level.¹² These circumvention programs are more expensive than ignoring the limits and producing more existing systems indicating Russia's strong interest in the programs. Thus, Russia may withdraw from New START by mid-2017 or it may illegally suspend its obligations under New START as it has done with the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. This would allow Moscow to pocket the U.S. reductions while making little to none of their own. Indeed, a senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs official has suggested that Russia could withdraw from the Treaty.¹³ If it does so, no penalty will likely be imposed on Russia – just as there has seemingly been none for its INF Treaty or CFE Treaty violations.

The Odds of Compliance

It is still possible that Russia will comply with New START in 2018. However, the probability is declining because reductions take time. Compliance with New START is being made more difficult by the Russian strategic nuclear modernization program which will probably increase the number of warheads Russia must remove from accountability in 2016 and 2017 by 147-177.¹⁴ Added to the 185 warheads they already have above the Treaty mandated 1,550 limit, they would have to remove from accountability 332-362 warheads, presumably by warhead removal (down-loading). The just announced improved version of the SS-27 ICBM (to be tested in 2016) and the improved Bulava-30 SLBM (to be tested in two to three years)¹⁵ could result in an increased number of warheads accountable under New START when they are deployed. There are many Russian press reports that suggest that the number of warheads on the SS-27 ICBM and the Bulava-30 SLBM will be increased to 10 from the currently reported 4-6 warheads.¹⁶ This is exactly the opposite of what Russia should be doing if it intends to live under New START. The new Russian Sarmat heavy ICBM, which reportedly will carry up to 15 warheads,¹⁷ is another program that



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is exactly the opposite of what the Russians should be doing to comply with New START in terms of possible warhead numbers.

In addition to the increased number of warheads, the deployment of new mobile ICBMs in 2016-2017 will increase on a one-for-one basis the number of existing launchers the Russians will have to eliminate in what is now less than two years, the remainder of the New START reduction period.

The only evidence of a Russian intent to comply with New START is a March 2016 story in state-run *RT* which reports that Russia is disarming a Typhoon missile submarine. According to the shipyard undertaking the procedures, "We will remove the covers of the submarine's missile launchers and seal them, thus making it impossible to use the vessel's missile weapons....We are not talking yet about dismantling the submarine itself. The tender for this procedure has not yet been announced."¹⁸ This would reduce the number of Russian launchers by 20 but not the number of warheads because the Typhoon submarines reportedly have not been operational for a long time.¹⁹ Moreover, if this is all they are doing there is a potential compliance problem with the New START Treaty provision which requires, "The elimination of SLBM launchers shall be carried out by removing all missile launch tube hatches, their associated superstructure fairings, and, if applicable, gas generators."²⁰ To comply with New START Russia will probably have to remove the launchers from three submarines, eliminate several dozen mobile ICBM launchers and download several hundred warheads.

Even if Russia were to comply with New START, the actual number of deployed Russian warheads will far exceed the stated New START ceiling of 1,550 in part because of the bomber counting rule. State-run *Sputnik News* says Russia will have 2,100 actual deployed strategic nuclear warheads under New START.²¹ Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, of the Federation of American Scientists, write that Russia has approximately 2,500 strategic nuclear weapons currently.²² That claim was made before Russia announced a program to build at least 50 new Tu-160 bombers,²³ which could push this number to over 3,000 deployed warheads when the bombers are completed. It could go even higher.

Future Arms Control

Since the signing of the New START Treaty in 2010, Russia has refused to negotiate deeper cuts in strategic nuclear weapons or limitations on tactical nuclear weapons. In 2013, then-Deputy Prime Minister (now Kremlin Chief of Staff) Sergei Ivanov explained why: "When I hear our American partners say: 'let's reduce something else', I would like to say to them: 'excuse me, but what we have is relatively new'. They [the U.S.] have not conducted any upgrades for a long time. They still use Trident [missiles]."²⁴ Indeed, the notional replacement date for the already decades-old Trident missile is 2042.

Implications

Why should we be concerned about this? Russian cheating on a treaty should always be a serious concern. Perhaps more importantly, however, Russian behavior illustrates an aggressive nuclear buildup. Additionally, Russia seemingly has the lowest nuclear first use threshold in the world. In 2016, U.K. General Sir Richard Shirreff, Deputy NATO military commander in Europe between 2011 and 2014, observed, "...Russian use of nuclear weapons is hardwired into Moscow's military strategy."²⁵ Its military doctrine calls for using nuclear weapons first in local and regional wars, according to Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev.²⁶ It reportedly practices nuclear first use in its military exercises and makes repeated nuclear attack threats against members of NATO.



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Simulated Russian first use of nuclear weapons reportedly began in the Zapad-1999 theater war exercise. Then-Defense Minister Marshall Igor Sergeyev announced, “Our Army was forced to launch nuclear strikes first which enabled it to achieve a breakthrough in the theater situation.”²⁷ Simon Saradzhyan of the Harvard Belfer Center has observed, “...the Russian military has repeatedly gamed out use of strategic bombers to carry out such a demonstration nuclear strike during a number of wargames, including the Zapad (West) exercise, which is held annually to simulate a war with NATO.”²⁸ In January 2016, NATO released its annual report which noted, “Russia has conducted at least 18 large-scale snap exercises, some of which have involved more than 100,000 troops. These exercises include simulated nuclear attacks on NATO Allies (eg, ZAPAD) and on partners (eg, March 7 2013 simulated attacks on Sweden)...”²⁹

Senior Russian officials also make nuclear threats beyond the implied threats of simulated nuclear strikes during military exercises. In 2008, Yuri Baluyevsky, then-Chief of the General Staff, stated that “for the protection of Russia and its allies, if necessary, the Armed Forces will be used, including preventively and with the use of nuclear weapons.”³⁰ President Putin has personally made several threats to target Russia’s missiles at U.S. friends and allies.³¹ For example, in 2008, Putin stated that in response to U.S. missile defense deployment, Russia would “probably be forced to retarget some of our missile systems at these systems, which threaten us.”³² In 2009, Nikolai Patrushev said that Russian nuclear doctrine “does not rule out a nuclear strike targeting a potential aggressor, including a preemptive strike, in situations critical to national security.”³³ In December 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin said if Russia is subject to a conventional attack, “we will certainly resort to using nuclear weapons in certain situations to defend our territory and state interests.”³⁴ In September 2014, General Baluyevskiy stated “...conditions for pre-emptive nuclear strikes...is contained in classified policy documents.”³⁵

In March 2015, Russia’s Ambassador to Denmark Mikhail Vanin made, perhaps, the most explicit of the nuclear targeting threats: “I don’t think that Danes fully understand the consequence if Denmark joins the American-led missile defence shield. If they do, then Danish warships will be targets for Russian nuclear missiles.”³⁶ In 2016, Dr. Keith Payne observed, “Russian leaders, for example, have said that Romania could be turned into “smoking ruins,” and that Poland will be in its “cross hairs.”³⁷

Russian nuclear strategy appears to call for nuclear first use for “de-escalation” of a conflict. In June 2015, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work and then-Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral James Winnefeld observed, “Russian military doctrine includes what some have called an ‘escalate to de-escalate’ strategy – a strategy that purportedly seeks to deescalate a conventional conflict through coercive threats, including limited nuclear use,” a policy they categorized as “playing with fire.”³⁸ In March 2016, Robert Scher, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans and Capabilities, testified before the Congress that Russia has “adopted a pattern of reckless nuclear posturing and coercive threats. Russia remains in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and remains unreceptive to the President’s offer to negotiate further reductions in strategic nuclear weapons below the limits of the New START Treaty.” He continued, “Russia’s purported doctrine of nuclear escalation to deescalate a conventional conflict amounts to a reckless gamble for which the odds are incalculable and the outcome could prove catastrophic.”³⁹

Summing up the NATO security environment, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said recently, “Russia’s rhetoric, posture and exercises of its nuclear forces are aimed at intimidating its neighbours,” adding that this was, “Undermining trust and stability in Europe.”⁴⁰

While the U.S. Department of Defense now recognizes the threat posed by Russia, seemingly little has been done to bring Russia back into compliance with the INF Treaty and there is no apparent concern



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about prospective Russian noncompliance with New START. U.S. nuclear modernization programs are the same as they were in 2010-2011 when the Obama administration was in apparent denial that Russia represented a nuclear threat to the U.S. Indeed, in the FY 2017 budget request, two important nuclear modernization programs have been slowed.⁴¹ Perhaps, this is also playing with fire.

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