

The New Arms Reduction Treaty & Russia's Retention of MIRV SMFs

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The Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (SORT), signed by presidents Bush and Putin on 24 May 2002, appears to signify a new era of mutual trust and cooperation between the USA and Russia. Indeed, the new arms reduction treaty was reported by many in the media as signifying the end of the Cold War. But what is contained in SORT, and what impact will it have on arms control? SORT limits deployed strategic warheads to 1,700-2,200 each over ten years, although there is no timetable for carrying out the reductions other than the implementation deadline of 1 January 2013. SORT does not call for the elimination of warheads or delivery vehicles; it only requires that warheads be de-alerted, allowing the warheads to be stored. While Russia wanted an irreversible "legally binding" treaty rather than a "handshake" agreement, it settled for the US counting system, which allows downloaded weapons to count as reductions. Stored weapons can therefore act as a hedge force that could be redeployed in the future.

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty II (START II), signed 3 January 1993, would have limited deployed strategic warheads to 3,000-3,500 over seven years. Under START II, the number of delivery vehicles was not limited, but all heavy Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and their launchers were taken off alert. Had START II entered into force, it would have banned the practice of arming land-based missiles with Multiple Independently targeted Re-entry Vehicles (MIRVs). The reductions were set to take place in two phases over a seven year period, but Russia withdrew from its START II commitment following the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty on 13 June 2002.

In mid-August the commander in chief of Russia's Strategic Missile Forces (SMFs), Colonel-General Nikolai Solovtsov, announced that Russia will extend the life of its heavy land-based ICBMs to 2016. Russia has decided to extend the service lives of 154 silo-based R-36M (SS-18 Satan); two out of the four SS-18 divisions will remain in service, with the possibility of retaining a third division. In addition, 36 combat rail-mobile RT-23 (SS-24 M1 Scalpel) ICBMs will be retained, with the Kostroma division remaining in service. Each of the SS-18 and SS-24 ICBMs can be equipped to carry 50 warheads-10 MIRV warheads and 40 decoys that behave just like the warheads.

The SS-18 was created to act as Russia's first-strike weapon against US land-based strategic nuclear forces. The SS-18 was designed in 1966-1972 and integrated into the Soviet weapons arsenal in December 1975, when it created a "window of vulnerability" for attacking US Minuteman ICBM silos. By 1980, some analysts even argued that few Minuteman ICBMs could be expected to survive a Soviet strategic first strike. SS-18s were designed to overcome US missile defence systems and confuse US nuclear attack planning systems, and had the predicted capability to destroy 65-80% of US ICBM silos using two warheads against each silo. Six variants of the SS-18 were deployed to act as Russia's "hard-kill" SMFs.

The issue of US vulnerability to SS-18s dominated US strategic debate in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the Reagan and Bush administrations made the missile the main focus of their arms control initiatives. In fact, Bush Senior, commenting on the signing of the START II Treaty in his diary entry for 3 January 1993, writes: "I think one of the crowning achievements of my presidency will be the elimination of all these SS-18 missiles-getting rid of them entirely". Under START II, Russia was permitted to retain 90 of the SS-18 silos, with the 166 remaining MIRV SS-18s to be phased out by 1 January 2003 and destroyed by 31 December 2007. As Russia withdrew from START II following the demise of the ABM Treaty, the obligation to destroy MIRV SS-18s was lifted. Besides, START II called for Russia to replace its MIRV SS-18s with single warhead missiles like the solid-

fuelled Topol-M (SS-27).

Interestingly, the Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said that US officials had been informed that MIRV ICBMs would remain on alert even before the US withdrew from the ABM Treaty. And after coming to office, President Vladimir Putin stated that Russia would not implement the START II Treaty if the US went ahead with plans to deploy Missile Defense. It seems, then, that Russia is now reacting to US plans to deploy Missile Defense. The Bush Administration has on numerous occasions reiterated that Russia is no longer a strategic threat to the US, which was the reason behind the US abrogation of the ABM Treaty. But apart from China's limited nuclear forces, Russia is the only country that deploys ICBMs that can target continental USA. SORT might give each side greater freedom to determine their SMFs, but it does not limit deployed heavy ICBMs in the way that START II would have done.

Given Russia's concerns about US Missile Defense, retaining MIRV SS-18s is for the time being the most economical way for Russia to maintain its SMFs. While the SS-27 was due to be commissioned in the Russian SMF grouping regardless of whether heavy ICBMs were to be stood down from combat duty or not, its program is behind schedule due to lack of funding and facilities. And at the current rate of progress, 50-60 SS-27s will be operational by the end of 2005 compared to the 160-220 missiles previously planned. While the SS-27 can be equipped with 3 to 4 MIRV warheads per missile, it is less potent than a MIRV SS-18. By overhauling simultaneously-launched MIRV SS-18 missiles, Russia's SMFs have more chance of evading and surviving Missile Defense systems planned by the US. Russia's decision to retain MIRV SS-18s contradicts the prediction of some arms control analysts who had stated that regardless of US plans, the SS-18s could not be extended because they were in a poor condition. Nonetheless, Russia will continue to deploy heavy ICBMs such as the MIRV SS-18 that have significantly exceeded their planned service lives, which in turn raises questions about the safety and reliability of Russia's SMFs.

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1 For background information, see the Arms Control Association website: <http://www.armscontrol.org/subject/spec/bushputin.asp>.

2All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings, Scribner, NY, 1999, p.582.

3All information cited on Russia's ICBMs is from the Federation of American Scientists (<http://www.fas.org/nuke/russia>); and 'Russia's Nuclear Forces, 2002', NRDC Nuclear Notebook, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, July-August 2002: see <http://www.bullatOMICsci.org>.

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