

From Moscow, disappointing results on disarmament

David Krieger | Jul. 7, 2009



President Obama raised expectations for achieving a world without nuclear weapons when he said in Prague on April 5, 2009, "I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." But he only succeeded in moving the world a very small fraction of the way toward this goal when he met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in Moscow on July 6, 2009 to announce the outcome thus far of US-Russian negotiations on nuclear disarmament. A Joint Understanding signed in Moscow by the two presidents gave little cause for celebration for those who share President Obama's vision of a world without nuclear weapons.

Until now, the two presidents had not revealed the numbers they had in mind for nuclear arms reductions. The Joint Understanding, however, provided these numbers for the first time. "Within seven years after this treaty comes into force, and in future, the limits for strategic delivery systems should be within the range of 500-1,100 units and for warheads linked to them within the range of 1,500 to 1,675 units," the statement said. These numbers cut the size of the strategic delivery systems by about a third and the deployed strategic warheads to just slightly below levels set by Presidents Bush and Putin in 2002.

The agreement deals only with strategic offensive weapons, making no provisions for non-strategic or tactical weapons, which are left outside the count. These may prove to be the most worrisome and uncontrollable of the weapons. The agreement also makes no provisions for warheads held in storage. The two presidents dealt separately with missile defense forces in Europe, which the Russians have vehemently opposed, agreeing to carry out a joint threat assessment and make recommendations.

It is expected that the new arms agreement will be finalized before the end of 2009 and will replace the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), which expires December 5, 2009. This means that the new numbers set forth in the Joint Understanding will not need to be achieved before 2016, which would coincide with the end of a potential second Obama administration.

In addition to the slow progress in reductions of warheads, the Joint Understanding also fails to deal with other important issues, such as the dangers of the weapons remaining on high alert status, pledges of No First Use of the weapons, or a commitment to achieving a Nuclear Weapons Convention for the phased, verifiable, irreversible and transparent elimination of the weapons.

The Joint Understanding is a step in the right direction, but it is a step far smaller than might have been hoped. It is a step that is unlikely to indicate to the non-nuclear weapons states parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty that the nuclear weapons states are fulfilling their obligations for good faith negotiations for a world free of nuclear

weapons. Now that the numbers are revealed, it appears that the US and Russia are not making major strides, but rather creeping very slowly, even reluctantly, toward President Obama's vision of a world without nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons remain the only weapons that could destroy US or Russian cities and threaten the future existence of the two countries. Since neither US nor Russian nuclear weapons can deter non-state extremists, there is zero tolerance for these weapons getting into the hands of such extremist groups. It is highly unlikely that the level of reductions that they now envision can assure that these weapons will not end up in the hands of extremists committed to doing harm to either country or to other countries.

While surely this is only a first step in nuclear disarmament efforts by the two leaders, President Obama needs to press harder for more serious reductions in nuclear arms, reductions that will be sufficient to bring the other nuclear weapons states to the table to collectively seek a world without nuclear weapons. On the positive side, the two presidents are discussing having a global nuclear summit in 2010. Such a summit would allow for additional perspectives, those from nuclear as well as non-nuclear weapons states, to be placed on the table for a larger discussion of nuclear threats and security.

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