

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 14, 2011 at 11:31am

After START, further arms reductions under Obama unlikely

by Charlie Davis



President Obama signs the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in the Oval Office in Washington Feb. 2. Looking on are Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Sens. John Kerry and Richard Lugar. (CNS/Reuters/Jason Reed)

VIEWPOINT

The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between Russia and the United States that the Senate approved at the end of 2010 is only a modest reduction in offensive nuclear-armed forces. It does not get President Obama much closer to his dream of eventually eliminating nuclear weapons altogether.

Nuclear weapons generally make up the offensive component of strategic forces; conventional armed weapons are mainly used in defensive forces; antiballistic missiles, air-defense fighters, and attack submarines, albeit nuclear-powered, are capable of sinking an opponent's submarine carrying nuclear-armed, long-range ballistic missiles. Both offensive and defensive weapons must be considered together in arms reductions.

Since the early 1960s, the United States has had three major confrontations or disagreements with the Soviet Union or Russia on strategic weapons.

The October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis dealt only with offensive weapons. Years after the crisis, I read the unclassified testimony Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara gave to Congress in the winter and spring of 1962.

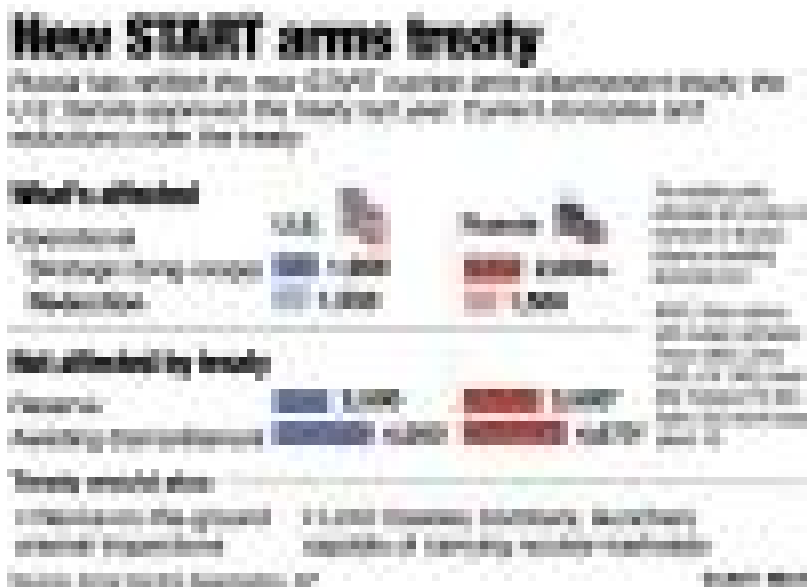
The secretary stated that the United States had reduced its perception of the Soviet threat "by over 95 percent." In effect that meant Washington believed Moscow had only around 25 ballistic missiles capable of retaliating against a U.S. nuclear attack. At the same time, he reviewed the inventory of U.S. land- and sea-based strategic missiles, strategic bombers, and tactical aircraft capable of striking the Soviet Union from airfields and aircraft carriers around the Soviet periphery.

U.S. superiority in missiles was around 15-1 and, in total missiles and aircraft, around 25-1. He then described the planned U.S. increase in deployments of Minuteman and Polaris missiles as well as B-52 aircraft.

In hindsight, the Soviets probably believed that the United States was aiming for a first-strike capability to which they would be unable to respond and this drove them to attempt to redress this strategic imbalance by stationing shorter-ranged ballistic missiles in Cuba.

After 1962, the arms race continued in the Cold War. Treaties were reached with limits on launchers and aircraft and limited deployments of antiballistic missiles, but there were still potentially destabilizing "improvements" such as "multiple independent reentry vehicles," called MIRVs, that allowed one missile to carry many warheads.

Nonetheless, the strategic balance remained relatively stable until President Reagan proposed the development of extensive missile defenses in the 1980s. The Soviets virulently opposed Reagan's "Star Wars" plan.



Although a potential U.S. attack with

offensive nuclear weapons would be unable to completely destroy the Soviet capability to launch a retaliatory attack -- the basis for the Mutual Assured Destruction stasis, the Soviets probably believed that a U.S. surprise attack with nuclear weapons, along with U.S. land-based defenses against missiles and aircraft and U.S. attack submarines capable of sinking Soviet ballistic missile submarines on patrol, would

cripple the ability of the Soviets to mount a retaliatory response. This led to their opposition to the Reagan proposal.

When President George W. Bush proposed deployment of missile defenses armed with conventional weapons in Europe in the first decade of the 21st century, Moscow again objected, probably because they believed it could evolve into a U.S. offensive/defensive capability similar to what they perceived would have evolved under President Reagan.

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The reduction in strategic forces allowed by the New START treaty, as well as the proposed reconfiguration of U.S. missile defenses away from Eastern Europe, preserves the nuclear deterrent of both sides because although the number of offensive nuclear weapons is reduced, the limited missile defense proposed by the United States is clearly designed to thwart the potential launch of a small number of missiles from rogue states such as Iran and North Korea.

In other words, while there will be an improvement in the U.S. ability to intercept missiles from rogue states, there is stability in that the nuclear retaliatory capability of both the United States and Russia is preserved. Some would call this a Faustian bargain.

This limited reduction in offensive weapons without a significant increase in missile defenses, however, caused great unhappiness among many in Congress. Merely preserving the nuclear deterrent of both sides is the fear of those who continue to seek a return to U.S. dominance in offensive and defensive weapons.

As Peter Baker wrote in *The New York Times*:

The debate over the treaty, however, ranged far beyond the numbers, revealing starkly different visions for national security in the 21st century. Mr. Obama and his supporters argued that ratification was essential to rebuilding a relationship with Russia and maintaining the international coalition against Iran's nuclear program. His critics said it represented a first step toward a dangerous and wrong-headed vision of eventually eliminating the world's nuclear weapons.

David Sanger also reported in *The Times* that other opponents "seemed unable to let go of the dreams left over from the Reagan administration." Republican Sens. James Inhofe of Oklahoma and Jim DeMint of South Carolina "said at hearings on the treaty that they were seeking a comprehensive missile shield over the United States that would protect the country from incoming Russian or Chinese missiles."

From the experience that I gained as a representative of the Defense Intelligence Agency to the National Intelligence Council and subsequently as a member of the National Intelligence Council staff during the Cold War, I believe that these proposals lead to instability, further arms races, and possible escalation to nuclear war.

After the implementation of the New START, it should be the obligation of those who propose different combinations of offensive and defensive weapons to assure that no side be perceived as striving to negate the nuclear deterrent of the United States, China or Russia. Only then can this country proceed with the other nuclear powers to reduce the dangers of nuclear war.

Unfortunately, with the current mood of some in Congress, President Obama will have to work hard just to maintain the current balance in strategic weapons. Further significant reductions in the next four years

seem out of the question.

[Charlie Davis was an analyst in the U.S. intelligence community from 1962 to 1992.]

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