

The Scouting Report: Next Steps in U.S. Russian Nuclear Arms Reductions

In April, President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced they would work on a new agreement to limit offensive arms before the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty expires in December. This week, U.S. and Russian officials met in Moscow to discuss a new strategic arms reduction treaty.

To assess the considerations of both countries and offer suggestions for building a new framework to reduce strategic arsenals, Brookings expert Steven Pifer and Senior *Politico* Editor Fred Barbash took questions in the May 20, 2009 edition of the Scouting Report. The transcript of this chat follows.

12:30 Fred Barbash-Moderator: Welcome all.

Our guest today is Steven Pifer.

A former ambassador to Ukraine, Steve's career as a Foreign Service officer centered on Europe, the former Soviet Union and arms control. In addition to Kyiv, he had postings in London, Moscow, Geneva and Warsaw as well as on the National Security Council. He is focusing on Ukraine and Russia issues at Brookings.

In April, President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced they would work on a new agreement to limit offensive arms before the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty expires in December. This week, U.S. and Russian officials met in Moscow to discuss a new strategic arms reduction treaty.

Steve will discuss that with us today. Welcome to our participants and welcome Steve.

12:30 [Comment From Jason] With the current START treaty expiring in December, what are the main goals of negotiations between the US and Russia? What can we hope to achieve with a new treaty?

12:30 Steven Pifer: The main goals for the negotiation which began yesterday in Moscow are to get an agreement that reduces U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear weapons and preserves the verification and transparency measures in the START treaty. We do not want to lose the strategic arms control framework when the START treaty expires in December.

12:30 [Comment From Laurie] How difficult will it be to sign a new treaty before December?

12:32 Steven Pifer: It's not going to be easy. We have to sign and ratify a treaty by December 5. The sides have to agree on limits for warheads and strategic delivery vehicles (intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and heavy bombers), and then work out counting rules, verification measures and how to deal with conventional-role systems. It's a big task.

12:32 [Comment From Juliet] What happens if we reach December 5 and the START treaty expires without a follow-on treaty in place?

12:33 Steven Pifer: We lose all of START's limits and the verification measures. The 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) will remain in effect until 2012. SORT limits each side to 2200 strategic warheads, but it has no counting rules, definitions or verification measures. All of that is in START.

12:34 [Comment From Shawn] The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) signed by Bush and Putin remains in force until 2012. So why are people so focused on START's expiration?

12:35 Steven Pifer: As noted, without START, we have no verification measures. So we will know a lot less about Russian strategic forces. For example, START allows us to conduct ten inspections each year of Russian missiles to verify the number of warheads on those missiles. Without START, we can't do that.

12:35 [Comment From Erin] What are some of the key decisions that need to be made for a new treaty to be signed?

12:37 Steven Pifer: The sides will need to agree on a limit on warheads and strategic delivery vehicles. I have suggested 1500 deployed warheads and 700 strategic delivery vehicles on each side. Agreeing the numbers may not be that hard -- the big questions will be what to count, how to count them and how to verify the count.

12:37 [Comment From Eric] What will be the tough issues in the negotiation of the follow-on treaty to START?

12:39 Steven Pifer: One question will be what to count -- how do you treat systems like the B-1 bomber which START limited as a nuclear-capable bomber but which now has been converted to a conventional-only role. Another question is how to count the number of warheads on a missile that could carry eight warheads but is "downloaded" to carry only five or six warheads.

12:39 [Comment From Carmen] Do you think President Dmitry Medvedev is sincere in wanting a new start to U.S. Russia relations? But does it even matter with Putin still running the show?

12:41 Steven Pifer: I would say that Putin and Medvedev would like to see an improvement in some areas of U.S.-Russian relations. They would like to get a strategic arms reduction agreement, explore if Washington is more flexible on missile defense and boost commercial ties. But there will remain some difficult issues between Washington and Moscow.

12:41 [Comment From Dave] What is actually driving the Obama administration to mend ties with Moscow?

12:43 Steven Pifer: What is driving the Obama administration is a view that U.S.-Russian relations had deteriorated so badly that it was affecting Washington's ability to deal with big problems such as nuclear proliferation, Iran and Afghanistan. The hope is that a more positive relationship will let the U.S. secure Russian help on these questions.

12:43 [Comment From Sally] Why do you think arms reductions have been so difficult to negotiate? The goal seems so simple to me.

12:44 Steven Pifer: Arms reduction agreements have typically been hard to do because the sides have competing interests that involve fundamental security questions. Also, since neither is prepared to trust the other, you need verification measures that let you know the other side is complying with the agreement.

12:44 [Comment From Jen] How do these talks relate to Obama's stated goal of a "nuclear free" world, which he said probably would not happen in his lifetime?

12:46 Steven Pifer: This negotiation would be a first step. The U.S. and Russia together have more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons, so if they are not reducing, how can they expect other countries to reduce ... or not to try to get nuclear weapons? That said, the President was clear that a nuclear-free world is a distant goal.

12:46 [Comment From Carl] Do you think securing Russian nukes will be part of a new treaty? I think I've heard they're a little lax in protecting the ones they have.

12:47 Steven Pifer: This won't be a subject for the strategic reductions treaty now being negotiated. But there is a history going back to the mid-1990s of U.S.-Russian cooperation to improve the security and protection of Russian nuclear weapons.

12:48 [Comment From Rolinda] In a recent opinion piece on Brookings.edu, you stated that the US and Russia should agree to reduce their strategic nuclear arsenals to "no more than 1500 deployed warheads on each side." Why 1500? What is the significance of this number?

12:50 Steven Pifer: START limits each side to 6000 warheads on 1600 strategic delivery vehicles. SORT limits each side to 2200 warheads (it does not limit delivery vehicles). 1500 seems to me a significant reduction below 2200, as the presidents agreed in London. But it is high enough that it should allow the negotiators to leave a lot of hard issues -- missile defense, third-country nuclear forces, non-deployed strategic warheads and tactical weapons -- for a later negotiation.

12:51 [Comment From Ron] How do the talks between Obama and Medvedev fit into the larger NPT regime?

12:52 Steven Pifer: The U.S. and Russia committed under the NPT (nuclear non-proliferation treaty) to disarm. If the U.S. and Russia reach a new reductions agreement, that increases their credibility to push for a stronger non-proliferation regime. That's important, since the NPT review conference will be held in May 2010.

12:52 [Comment From Nell] Are there any domestic political risks for Obama in pursuing these reductions? How about for Putin and Medvedev?

12:54 Steven Pifer: If the post-START agreement reduces forces to 1500 warheads on each side, that should not be a problem domestically for Obama or for Putin and Medvedev. But the lower we go beyond that -- assuming the negotiating process continues -- there will be harder questions on both sides about the security implications.

12:54 [Comment From Andrew] Who is doing the negotiating for the United States?

12:55 Steven Pifer: Rose Gottemoeller, an Assistant Secretary of State, heads the U.S. negotiating team. She understands strategic arms issues very well -- we used to work together on these questions in the 1980s at the State Department. She also understands Russia well. She headed the Moscow branch of a U.S. think tank from 2005-2008.

12:56 [Comment From Mike] How costly may be the weapons reduction and who will be responsible for Russian nukes reduction?

12:58 Steven Pifer: Destroying weapons costs money, but I believe that both sides would realize cost-savings by not having to maintain, operate and overhaul them. If past practice is a guide, the Russians will be responsible for eliminating their reduced systems and the U.S. for its systems. There will likely be verification measures that allow the other to monitor the elimination and be sure it has happened. We have lots of experience on this.

12:58 [Comment From Bruce] How does this relate to the ballistic missile defense issue that's so upsetting to the Russians? Will Obama ultimately rethink that?

1:00 Steven Pifer: The Obama administration is conducting a review of its missile defense policy, so we don't yet know where it will go on that question. While there is linkage between strategic offensive forces and missile defense, I would argue that the sides can reduce to 1500 warheads without addressing missile defense. But, if reductions go further, at some point they will have to address missile defense.

1:00 [Comment From Frank] Is there anything useful a long-time "no nukes" activist can do at this point?

1:03 Steven Pifer: Getting to a nuclear-free world will be hard. It will require verification measures far beyond anything imagined to date. It will also likely require agreements on conventional forces and big changes in political relations between states. It will take a long time to realize, if ever. But that's no reason not to press for the U.S. and Russia to begin the process, starting with the START follow-on treaty.

1:03 [Comment From Tom] Is the U.S. Congress helping or hurting the efforts to negotiate with Russia?

1:04 Steven Pifer: The main role for Congress will be the question of Senate ratification once a treaty has been signed. At that point, the administration will have to explain how the treaty serves U.S. security interests. I wouldn't be surprised if, as the negotiations proceed, the administration informally briefs relevant Senators so that they understand how the talks are developing.

1:04 [Comment From Daniel] This is follow up Q to missile defense, Secretary Lavrov stressed it again today. Are the Russians really dead serious about it? And if so, would US stand its ground?

1:06 Steven Pifer: We will see. This could be just initial public bargaining. If the Russians want to resolve missile defense in these negotiations on a START follow-on treaty, there is no way there will be a new treaty by December.

1:07 Steven Pifer: Just to add, at some point, you have to bring missile defense into the equation. But you do not have to do it if you are negotiating a limit of 1500 warheads and 700 delivery vehicles on each side. Those would easily overwhelm existing or planned missile defenses.

1:07 [Comment From Jen] Based on your knowledge of nuclear weaponry, is the fear of extremists "getting a hold" of nukes in Pakistan well grounded? Would they even know what to do with them?

1:09 Steven Pifer: My sense is that the Pakistan military maintains tight security on the nuclear weapons (and the U.S. has provided them some help on this). But you don't like to see instability in a country that has nuclear arms, and you would not want to take a chance that the bad guys, if they had a nuke, could figure out how to use it.

1:09 [Comment From Lindsey] Not to drag missile defense out, but how likely is it that the US would take up the Russian offer of the Baku location, as opposed to Poland and the Czech Republic? Can we see any effects should this happen?

1:11 Steven Pifer: We will see. The Bush administration was prepared to take up the Russian offer of use of the Baku radar ... but in addition to going ahead with its missile defense deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic. The Obama administration is reviewing its policy on missile defense. I believe, though, that it has already signaled that it could take a more flexible approach.

1:11 [Comment From Bradley] Are Britain and France involved in these talks? Or are they not really relevant?

1:12 Steven Pifer: British and French strategic nuclear warheads number in the low hundreds, so they are not really comparable to U.S. and Russian strategic forces. That said, if the U.S. and Russia continue to reduce their nuclear forces, at some point you have to bring third-country forces into the equation.

1:13 Steven Pifer: UK Prime Minister Brown has said that Britain would be prepared to join the nuclear reductions process at some point. I don't think the French have expressed a view.

1:13 [Comment From Andie] Don't you think that the American public's fear of nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists--and all the publicity about North Korea and Iran--could change the political climate on the totally unrelated matter of arms limitation with Russia. People are fairly ignorant on this subject.

1:15 Steven Pifer: I don't think concern about North Korea, Iran or terrorists should affect how the public sees this round of U.S.-Russian strategic arms cuts. To the extent that Washington and Moscow are moving in the direction of reducing their nuclear weapons, it should bolster general efforts to curb nuclear proliferation.

1:15 [Comment From Eswar] Obama will travel to Moscow in July for a very crucial meeting with Medvedev, do you think we can convince Russia to be helpful in dealing with the nuclear threat from Iran?

1:17 Steven Pifer: One of Washington's hopes is that better U.S.-Russian relations will translate into a more helpful Russian approach on Iran. I agree, but we need to be realistic. The Russians have other interests with Iran that they don't want to endanger and do not see the nuclear problem with the same urgency as Washington does. So the Russians might be more helpful, but likely not as helpful as the U.S. would like.

1:17 [Comment From Tom] If you don't mind talking about Ukraine...That country seems to be out of the news here in the U.S. but they seem to be in a perpetual political crisis and I'm wondering where that might lead?

1:17 Fred Barbash - Moderator: We have time for just a few more questions, everyone....

1:18 Steven Pifer: Ukraine remains in an extended political crisis. The good news is that all major figures appear to agree that they must play by democratic rules. Ukraine faces a presidential election at the end of this year or next January that hopefully will lead to a more coherent government.

1:19 [Comment From Eduardo] Any thoughts on Jackson-Vanik?

1:20 Steven Pifer: Russia long ago opened up emigration for religious minorities, especially Russian Jews, and met the requirements of Jackson-Vanik. Despite other shortcomings on democracy, Russia deserves to be "graduated" or removed from Jackson-Vanik's purview. Congress should act to make this happen.

1:20 [Comment From Jim V.] Is there really any realistic possibility anymore of a confrontation between the U.S. and Russia that could produce either a conventional arms confrontation or even the threat of a nuclear confrontation? It all seems so "yesterday."

1:21 Fred Barbash-Moderator: Last question folks.

1:22 Steven Pifer: The political relationship between the U.S. and Russia has changed a lot since the Cold War. Even though we have difficult relations, it is hard to see a nuclear or conventional confrontation of the kind that we worried about for 40 years after World War II.

1:22 Fred Barbash-Moderator: Our great thanks to Brookings and Steven Pifer for taking time to answer all these important questions.

And thanks to all of you who participated. We'll be back with Brookings next week.

1:22 Steven Pifer: Thanks a lot!