

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

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Overwrought on START

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|
December 1, 2010

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Washington is up in arms about arms control. With the White House pushing the Senate to ratify the New START Treaty during the lame-duck session, arms control skeptics and boosters are back in the limelight. Skeptics say the treaty will damage U.S. missile defense efforts. Boosters say it will reduce the size of nuclear arsenals and prevent proliferation.

Both sides exaggerate. The treaty, which limits U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals and continues mutual inspections of them, would not affect missile defense. It would provide minor increases in intelligence and Russian goodwill. But passing it means handing taxpayers a substantial new tab on top of what we already pay for our bloated nuclear weapons complex. And rather than reducing the arsenal's size and cost, the treaty props it

up.

Administration officials like noting that New START's eventual limit of 1550 deployed strategic warheads is 30 percent less than what the 2002 Moscow Treaty allowed. But that is an accounting trick. Under New START's counting rules, all warheads assigned to each bomber count as one warhead. When the word warhead means warhead, the treaty allows each state to deploy more warheads in 2017 than they could have in 2012 under the Moscow Treaty.

The treaty restricts each side to seven hundred deployed delivery systems: intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and bombers equipped to carry nukes. That requires little pain. The Russian arsenal is now below the launcher limit and shrinking, treaty or not. The United States plans to get under the cap by trimming the number of missiles on each of our fourteen ballistic missile submarines from 24 to 20, removing 30 of 450 ICBMs from silos, and converting a small number of bombers to a purely non-nuclear role. The treaty does not limit stored weapons, and we are not retiring any ICBM squadrons or nuclear submarines.

Actually, the number and mix of U.S. nuclear forces remains remarkably similar to what the 1994 Nuclear Posture Review proposed. That undercuts the claim that ratification will demonstrate dedication to the pledge we made under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to someday eliminate nuclear weapons and thereby discourage other countries from seeking them.

Meanwhile the administration brags about the large payoff on offer for the votes of Republican Senators, led by Jon Kyl. Their gripe that the treaty threatens missile defense plays to their base but is a smokescreen. The treaty language that they object to is obviously a sop to the Russians that does not bind us. What the Senators really want are new nuclear research and production facilities to produce new nuclear weapons. The administration met them halfway by offering to boost planned spending on weapons modernization over the next decade by roughly 15 percent, to \$85 billion. That comes on top of the \$100 billion it will take to operate the arsenal.

The real point of ratification is to help Russia continue to masquerade as a great power. That ego stroke probably increases their enthusiasm about the U.S. nonproliferation agenda, which starts with stopping Iran's nuclear program. The Russians have been more helpful on that front lately-backing UN sanctions and declining to sell Iran upgraded air defenses. But the importance of those actions is easily overstated. Sanctions rarely halt weapons programs. Keeping Iran's program vulnerable to preemption is helpful if we want it bombed, but bombing would only delay it. In any case, arms-control treaties are not the only way to buy Russian cooperation.

New START's inspection regime also has slight value. Inspections once aimed to reassure us that the Russians weren't readying a first strike. Today, that fear is virtually gone, and inspections mostly provide intelligence about weapons security. That provides some assurance that all is well at Russian missile bases, but it does little to prevent nuclear terrorism, since the nuclear materials most at risk of sale or theft are mostly stored elsewhere. Ratification might also increase the odds of a follow-on accord dealing with

tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons, a more serious, though still remote, proliferation risk.

Some pundits say that the administration has staked so much on ratifying the treaty during the lame-duck that it will lose effectiveness should the Senate fail to do its bidding. Nonsense. No other bill or election depends on ratification. And the price to get fourteen Republican votes next year won't be much higher than what the administration is willing to pay for nine now. The problem is that the price is already too high.

The real impact of New START is distraction. By faking a drawdown, the treaty keeps Americans from noticing that deterring our enemies requires nothing like the force structure we plan to retain. We can do without ICBMs and nuclear bombers, letting the U.S. Air Force exit the nuclear business. A submarine only force would provide all the deterrence we need at far less cost. We don't need Russia's permission to give taxpayers that break.

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