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## Obama and Medvedev step closer to nuclear weapons-free world

A phone call today between Barack Obama and Dmitri Medvedev sealed the deal for the US and Russia to reduce strategic nuclear weapons by almost one-third and to halve the number of delivery vehicles, such as missiles and bombers.



President Barack Obama comments on the new START nuclear arms reduction treaty at the White House with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen (l.), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates (r.) in Washington, Friday. (Kevin Lamarque/Reuters)

By Fred Weir, Correspondent

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Moscow —

It's official. The first big post cold war strategic arms control treaty will be signed on April 8, in Prague, Czech Republic, where a year ago President Barack Obama opened his campaign for a nuclear weapons-free world, amid surging hopes that the US-Russian example will lead to fresh progress in limiting the spread of atomic weapons and encouraging other nuclear-armed states to reduce their arsenals.

"Since taking office, one of my highest national security priorities has been addressing the threat posed to the American people by nuclear weapons," Mr. Obama told a White House briefing today after sealing the deal in a telephone conversation this morning with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev.

"That is why — last April in Prague — I stated America's intention to pursue the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons, a goal that has been embraced by Presidents like John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan," he said. "With this agreement, the United States and Russia — the two largest nuclear powers in the world — also send a clear signal that we intend to lead. By upholding our own commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty, we strengthen our global efforts to stop the spread of these weapons, and to ensure that other nations meet their own responsibilities."

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Experts say the new agreement, designed to replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, will reduce strategic nuclear warheads by almost a third, to about 1,550 on each side, and halve the number of delivery vehicles – missiles, bombers and submarines – to 700 for each country.

The US and Russia still deploy more than 90 per cent of the world's nuclear weapons; the US currently around around 2,150 strategic warheads while Russia reportedly maintains about 2,600. Both sides have thousands more in storage, or awaiting dismantlement under previous arms control deals.

The treaty will still need to be ratified by a two-thirds vote the US Senate, as well as by Russia's upper and lower houses of parliament. Concerns have been raised on both sides about the treaty, which will slash strategic arsenals to their lowest levels since the superpower arms race began in earnest in the 1960s.

## Political victory for Obama, Medvedev

Obama noted that the new treaty will continue the warming trend in relations with Russia that his administration began, a sentiment widely echoed in Russia. Russian arms control experts say it's been a long time coming, after nearly a decade in which serious dialogue about strategic stability lapsed, while tensions and mistrust between Washington and Moscow spiked to post-cold war highs.

"It's true that this is a modest treaty, and that it mainly covers reductions the two sides would probably make anyway, but its real impact is that it gets the arms control process back on track," says Yevgeny Myasnikov, an expert with the Center for Arms Control, Energy and Environmental Studies a semi-official Moscow think tank.

"Now we have a new beginning, and it's something to build on. That is extremely significant," he says.

The treaty is a crucial victory for the Nobel Prize-winning Obama, who can use some dramatic results to brandish as he heads into a 40-nation nuclear security summit due to open in Washington on April 12. It may also be seen in Russia as a political win for Mr. Medvedev, who needs some solid achievements to step out of the shadow the powerful prime minister, Vladimir Putin, in the runup to 2012 presidential elections.

## Russia remains skeptical of US intentions

But Russia's foreign policy community appears far more divided over the usefulness of the new START accord for Russia's long-term security, and some wonder what compromises the Kremlin might have made on Russia's insistence that a strong mechanism be embedded in the text to link the need for controls on defensive anti-missile weapons with the treaty's cuts to offensive arsenals.

"We're living in a world in which the US has undisputed military supremacy, and Russia has only its nuclear weapons to defend itself," says Mikhail Delyagin, director of the independent Institute of Globalization Problems in Moscow.

"So, nuclear arms talks with the US is all we've got, the only thing we can talk to the Americans about while maintaining our self-esteem," he says.

Moscow is deeply suspicious and fearful of a potential US technological breakthrough on defensive antimissile systems, which could undermine or even negate Russia's aging Soviet-era strategic nuclear deterrent.

Russian security experts fondly recall that cold war-era arms control began with the 1972 framing of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which curtailed further work on defensive weapons. The logic of follow-on SALT and START agreements was based on the certainty that neither side could defend itself from a nuclear attack, and therefore had no option but to negotiate controls on offensive weapons. But President George W. Bush radically altered the strategic landscape, and deeply antagonized the Kremlin, by unilaterally pulling out of the ABM treaty in 2001.

"We face a very different strategic landscape from that in which previous arms control accords were negotiated," says Alexander Kononov, president of the independent Institute for Strategic Assessments in Moscow. "America needs nuclear weapons less and less, because it is shifting its focus toward high-precision conventional weapons of both defensive and offensive types. Russia, on the other hand, depends increasingly upon its nuclear deterrent as the bedrock of our national security."

## Final resolution needed, but roadblocks remain

Some US experts agree that the problem of defensive weapons is likely to resurface, perhaps in dangerous ways, if not dealt with soon.

"The agreement seems to be a compromise on the linkage between offensive and defensive weapons," says Stanley Kober, Research Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. "The Russians, according to the reports, have accepted the linkage implicitly by confining the language to the preamble. They are thus sending a political signal of their intentions... Just as we withdrew from the ABM Treaty, which we were entitled to do, they are indicating they might withdraw from this treaty, assuming it is ratified, if they conclude we are doing things that jeopardize their security."

Experts say future relations between Moscow and Washington will depend heavily on the – as yet unknown – extent to which the US has compromised with Russian demands that the new START accord explicitly link the need to control defensive weapons with the deal to eliminate large numbers of offensive ones.

"Any treaty is a series of compromises, and it seems very likely that the US has accepted some sort of language connecting the two issues," says Mr. Konovalov. "But it seems very unlikely that the Americans would have agreed to anything binding, or which obligates them to curb their plans down the road."

Russia's State Duma last month passed a resolution warning it might refuse to ratify the START deal if it doesn't contain a strong mechanism leading to onward talks to limit antimissile systems, and many conservatives have echoed that sentiment.

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