

Print

Wednesday, June 16, 2010 3:32 PM EDT

A new START for an old danger

By Joseph Picard

The United States and Russia agreed earlier this year to again mutually lower their nuclear arsenals in a new version of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty or START. The treaty will not take effect, however, until approved by the U.S. Senate and the Russian Duma. The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations is currently holding a second series of hearings on the new START.

The new treaty "will provide ongoing transparency and predictability regarding the world's two largest deployed nuclear arsenals, while preserving our ability to maintain the strong nuclear deterrent that remains an essential element of U.S. national security and the security of our allies and friends," Rose Gottemoeller, Assistant Secretary of State for Verification and Compliance and chief U.S. START negotiator, told the Senate panel on Tuesday.

The U.S. and Russia currently have more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons, according to Sen. John Kerry, D-MA, chairman of the Foreign Relations committee.

According to the new treaty, each side would be allowed 1,550 deployed warheads, 700 deployed delivery vehicles, and 800 deployed and non-deployed launchers. A deployed weapon is one that is ready for use, and a non-deployed launcher is one that is part of a test or training facility.

If the new START is approved and goes into effect, it will lower the nuclear arsenals in each nation by roughly 30 percent.

The first two START treaties, which ran their course in 2001, comprised the largest arms reduction in history, as both the former rivals of the Cold War markedly cut back their arsenals.

"At the height of the Cold War, the U.S. and Russia each had approximately 20,000 nuclear warheads," said Christopher Preble, director of Foreign Policy Studies at the Cato Institute. "We have reduced those arsenals by 90 percent and could reduce them further."

During the Cold War, the term "mutually assured destruction," with its acronym "MAD," were in wide use in conversations regarding nuclear policy.

Preble said that, although the arsenals have been greatly reduced, MAD still applies.

"There is still mutually assured destruction because the accuracy of our delivery systems has greatly improved," he said.

Preble agreed with Gottemoeller and the Administration that the new START will make the world a safer place.

"But not because of the treaty itself," he said. "The world becomes a safer place because of the realization by both the U.S. and Russia that they do not need as many weapons in their arsenals for deterrence."

Michael O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute, agreed that the benefits of the new START are not so much in the treaty but in the atmosphere the treaty creates.

"START is beneficial, more for improving US-Russian relations, restoring momentum to arms control and pushing forward verification methods that may be of use on other treaties, than for reducing overkill," O'Hanlon said.

O'Hanlon estimated that the destructive power of the two arsenals is "still probably a factor of 10 greater than any realistic military demands could ever dictate."

Even during the Cold War, deterrence was recognized as the principle, and possibly the only, reason for having a nuclear arsenal. In 2009, when the Obama Administration was hammering out the details of the new treaty with the Russians, the U.S. Air Force Air War College published a report urging the president to seize the opportunity of further reducing arms.

The Air War College report recommends unilaterally reducing nuclear warheads to 1,000 and going lower if there is bilateral agreement, while leaving the door open for re-arming if that proves necessary.

"With their unparalleled survivability and the capacity to accommodate an operational force of up to 1,000 warheads, the extant US fleet ballistic missile submarines could be fielded as the sole arm of US nuclear deterrence," the report said.

A 2008 report by the Union of Concerned Scientists goes further.

"There is no plausible threat that justifies maintaining more than a few hundred survivable nuclear weapons," states the report *Toward True Security*.

The new START is more conservative in its aspirations than those recommendations, but it does offer more transparency in the verification process than its predecessors, which government officials and experts say displays an improved U.S.-Russian relationship. That, in turn, lowers tensions among non-nuclear nations and decreases the possibility of more nations wanting to acquire nuclear arms.

"We were also determined to move beyond Cold War mentalities and chart a fresh start in our relations with Russia," Gottemoeller said.

Under the Constitution, the Senate must provide its advice and consent to U.S. ratification of the new START. This summer, the Foreign Relations committee plans to draw up and vote on a resolution of ratification that it would recommend to the Senate. Two-thirds of the full Senate - at least 67 senators - must approve such a resolution. Russia's Duma, or parliament, must also approve the treaty.