

# **Who is in Charge? Russia Handles Arms Control Negotiations**

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Russia has always considered arms control negotiations with the United States to be one of the most important elements of its foreign policy. Debates about strategic arms reductions and the future of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty have played a significant role in the U.S.-Russian relationship during the past decade. The importance of arms control is further underscored by the fact that Russian society and leadership traditionally pay serious attention to the role of the military in national security. Arms control negotiations, therefore, provide an opportunity to look at the relationships between various Russian political institutions in the process of decisionmaking involving two questions considered extremely important for Russia's national security: relationships with the United States and the military aspects of national security.

This paper considers the interaction between Russian institutions over the course of negotiations leading to the conclusion of the Moscow Treaty on offensive reductions in May 2002, and attempts to draw conclusions about the role these institutions play in the decisionmaking process.

Arms control was among the first items on the foreign policy agenda of the Putin administration in 2000. Among the problems Putin inherited from the previous leadership were ratification of the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks Treaty (START II) by the Duma and the ongoing debate about the future of the ABM Treaty. Ratification of START II was considered long overdue and allowed Putin to demonstrate his control over the newly elected Duma. The treaty was swiftly ratified in April 2000, while Putin was still acting president.

The decision to proceed with ratification did not (and could not) initiate any debate within or outside of the government. By the beginning of 2000, ratification had almost universal support. The Ministry of Defense was dominated by the Strategic Rocket Forces, which portrayed the treaty as an important element of the strategic forces modernization program that gave priority to development of the missile forces. Most of the formal objections of the treaty opponents were dealt with by linking START II and the future of the ABM treaty, and by a promise to press for the beginning of START III negotiations. And, last but not least, the strongest opponents of the treaty lost their positions in the Duma after the December 1999 elections and were not able to muster any opposition.

The prevailing opinion at that time was that Russia should accept the START II treaty because Russia would have to reduce its forces anyway. The drawbacks of the treaty should be

dealt with by moving on to START III, which was supposed to be more favorable to Russia. Meanwhile, ratification of START II was seen as giving Russia additional leverage in the ABM treaty debate. The official position, publicly formulated by the president, was that should the United States withdraw from the ABM treaty, Russia would pull out of START I and START II, as well as other arms-control agreements.

This position remained the centerpiece of Russian policy for more than a year and had not been challenged by any of the policymaking institutions (partly because the early endorsement of START II ratification represented a serious commitment that could not be easily reversed). Rather, various players used it to reinforce their positions in the debates held in Russia in 2000. The Ministry of Defense and the Strategic Rocket Forces appealed to the decisions about development of the strategic forces associated with the START III-track policy in its dispute with the General Staff about the future of the Russian strategic nuclear forces. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was almost completely excluded from that discussion and increasingly distanced from important foreign policy security decisions tried to use the issue of opposition to U.S. missile defense plans to regain some influence in internal Russian politics.

It should be noted that the discussion was very compartmentalized. Neither side made an effort to consider the effect the policies they were advocating would have on arms-control policy (and, to some extent, on the U.S.-Russian relationship in general). As a result, the internal military discussion and the decisions that emerged from it did significant damage to the Russian position in arms-control negotiations. The new strategic modernization plan left Russia with no leverage in any possible ABM-START tradeoff. Similarly, the ideologically rigid position of the Foreign Ministry, which tried to champion the case of the ABM treaty and resisted any flexibility in this question, raised the stakes of the confrontation with the United States over the issue of missile defense high enough to make any compromise virtually impossible. (The military was somewhat more ready to accept the inevitable and reach a compromise on missile defense.)

In general, any possible discussion of arms control and disarmament measures was strictly limited by the boundaries set earlier. The United States should follow Russia's lead and ratify the START II treaty, which would be followed by START III (a draft of which was officially presented to the United States in June 2000 by Putin himself). The ABM Treaty should remain the cornerstone of strategic stability; any possibility of modifying the ABM treaty was rejected.

The only significant change was a new lower level of 1500 warheads in the START III agreement (instead of 2500), mentioned in President Putin's address in November 2000, which was presented as an important arms-control initiative. The address instead demonstrated serious problems in handling the Russian leadership's foreign policy issues at that time because it was seriously ill-timed. When it was delivered, the final outcome of the U.S. presidential elections was still uncertain, and there was nobody there to listen or respond.

A much more serious problem, however, was that the Russian arms-control position was not only very weak, it was almost completely inadequate to the conditions that emerged with the new U.S. administration's coming to office. Continuation of the START process was almost out of question and the administration openly advocated withdrawal from the ABM treaty. The only argument that Russia could exploit—the link between missile defenses and reduction of offensive forces—was not working. The U.S. administration showed it was not interested in any negotiated reductions, but even if it was, the Russian position was very weak.

The position of the new U.S. administration forced Moscow to reconsider its approach to the modernization of strategic forces. The adjustments, however, were fairly minimal. The main idea that appeared at that time was deploying multiple warheads on single-warhead missiles as the primary means of countering U.S. missile-defense deployment. This option allowed the already adopted strategic forces development plans to be kept intact, while leaving some room for a response should it be necessary.

On the political level, Russia intensified its efforts in Europe and aimed them at winning European support for its position on missile defense and disarmament. These efforts largely failed, primarily because the goal was not realistic, but also because of unprofessional implementation. The Foreign Ministry was essentially excluded from this activity and it was left to the military, which seriously mishandled it by issuing a series of direct threats to Europeans and presenting a poorly thought-out plan of European missile defense, which seriously undermined the Russian position on the ABM treaty.

The change of the leadership in the Ministry of Defense in March 2001 seemed to have serious (although not necessarily intended) effects on the Russian policymaking process. It left the uniformed military without the capability to suggest policies directly to the president and take part in the implementation of policies set by the president. As we will see later, the minister of defense, Sergei Ivanov, remained involved in decisionmaking, but he could hardly be considered a representative of the uniformed military. As a result, the Foreign Ministry began to assume a more active role in Russia's arms-control efforts. It should be noted, though, that the mission of the Foreign Ministry was mainly limited to implementation of policies formulated by the president. The ministry has had virtually no role in actual decisionmaking, which had become concentrated at the presidential level.

These changes in the internal Russian decisionmaking mechanism coincided with (and may have played part in) a turn toward softening confrontation in the U.S.-Russian relationships. In May 2001, President Bush announced a major initiative on handling the missile defense issue and suggested opening a series of consultations with various countries—Russia included. This presented Russia with an opportunity to open a dialogue, which it immediately embraced. This dialogue, which was handled by the Foreign Ministry, eventually opened the way to summit meetings in Ljubljana, Genoa, Crawford, and eventually in Moscow.

Initially, Russia insisted that any dialogue would have to consider questions of missile defense as well as reductions in strategic weapons. However, it was clear at the time that it would settle for much less. Russia stopped mentioning START II or START III treaties altogether and demonstrated that it would be satisfied with an agreement that would somehow link offensive and defensive weapons (if only symbolically). In contrast to the previous year, however, President Putin himself announced all major initiatives, which were very strictly adhered to by all government officials—both military and diplomats.

In the beginning of the new consultations and negotiations, the Russian strategic forces modernization program remained unchanged, and the possibility of MIRVing (multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles) single-warhead missiles (e.g. Topol-Ms) in June 2001 was still considered the primary response to a possible U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty. The plan was most likely reexamined when it became clear that the ABM treaty could not be saved, which must have been by September–October 2001 (however, it is possible that it was not until later, after the summit in Crawford in November 2001).

Among the most important changes was the decision to keep the currently deployed heavy SS-18 missiles in service until about 2015–2016 by extending their service life. The previous plan called for decommissioning those missiles by 2008. These measures, which had important symbolic and practical value as well as the prospect of a new agreement that would cap U.S. strategic forces, persuaded the military to accept U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty, which was announced in December 2001. By the end of that month, the Russian minister of defense commented that as far as strategic programs are concerned, Russia will have “untied hands” and will be able to carry them out as it sees fit. In any event, by that time, the uniformed military were not in a position to complain about presidential policies.

In the pattern of decisionmaking that emerged from the negotiations the key role was assigned to the president. The Foreign Ministry was responsible for work on the language of the treaty and for general public-relations support (which, it should be noted, it did extremely well, given the circumstances). At the same time, the Foreign Ministry was not allowed to make its own decisions about the substance of the treaty. Moreover, it was not allowed to act as a messenger in delivering concessions. The two important concessions that were made over the course of the negotiations were delivered personally by the minister of defense, Sergei Ivanov. (The first, which came in February, most likely dropped the offensive/defensive link; the second, in April, removed the irreversibility requirement).

The formal military channel established for the negotiations seemed to have very little impact on their outcome. Furthermore, the uniformed military seemed to be isolated from the actual decisionmaking process and were presented with a fait accompli. For example, less than two weeks from the summit, when the text of the treaty existed in its almost-final form, a senior member of the Russian military delegation was still under the impression that the text would include some measures that would limit U.S. upload potential.

The analysis of the way that Russian leadership handled arms-control policy during its first two years leads to several conclusions about the decisionmaking process and the role of various institutions.

- First, not surprisingly, the decisionmaking process has become highly centralized and the president makes virtually all foreign policy decisions.
- Second, Russia lacks a formal mechanism for handling arms control (or other foreign policy and national security) issues. The Security Council, which is usually considered a candidate for this role, is unlikely to emerge as a center that would coordinate or direct this activity. The Council was not able to play it even in its prime, in 2000, when it was a much more powerful institute than it is now.
- Third, the Foreign Ministry has been given the responsibility of handling negotiations, but has not been given the authority to make any serious decisions. This situation is unlikely to change even with a change of the minister, for this would not affect isolation of the ministry as an institution.
- Fourth, the role of the uniformed military in the decisionmaking process has been weakened, and they currently appear unable to influence foreign policy decisions directly or to take a lead in implementing them as it had been in the past.
- Fifth, the Duma has been reduced to the role of an observer and is increasingly unable to provide a venue for a discussion of foreign policy questions.

All this leaves Russia without a transparent decisionmaking mechanism that would allow discussion and influence over decisions before they are made. As the outcome of the Moscow Treaty negotiations shows, this mechanism can be effective in the short run, allowing Russia to reach a clearly defined and very modest goal (which the Moscow Treaty was). Given the fact that even that modest effort was far from perfect, it is clear that in the long run, the current mechanism will have to be replaced by a more transparent and effective one.

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