CHAPTER 1

Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons Controls: What's the Problem?

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In 1987 the United States and the former Soviet Union signed the Intermediate- and Shorter-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. This first treaty dealing with non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) broke new ground, from its far-reaching provisions for on-site inspections to the fact that it eliminated a complete class of nuclear weapon systems. Faced in 1991 with the imminent break-up of the Soviet Union – and the danger of loss of control over non-strategic nuclear weapons – President George H. Bush proposed what has come to be called the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs). A prominent part of these initiatives was a set of parallel unilateral actions by the United States and Russia to withdraw from foreign deployments and eliminate both ground-launched and ship-borne tactical nuclear weapons. Here, too, new ground was broken in the use of non-treaty arms control as a means to respond very quickly to the changed security environment.

Throughout the 1990s, U.S. policymakers focused little additional attention on NSNW arms control. Instead, their primary concern was how to reduce strategic offensive nuclear systems under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) process, as well as to redefine the limits on missile defenses set by the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. More recently, however, whether or not to seek further arms control limits on non-strategic nuclear forces has again appeared on the radar screen. To help provide an overall framework for thinking about controls on NSNW, this chapter asks what the problem is that needs to be addressed. In so doing, it briefly sketches some alternative arguments for pursuing new NSNW arms control initiatives, but also highlights some important constraints. In conclusion, it highlights the options available to U.S. policymakers.

A broad range of different answers is possible to the question, "what's the problem?" In many instances, these answers comprise arguments for "doing NSNW controls;" in some cases, these answers suggest important cautions and constraints that need to be weighed in thinking about U.S. options. More specifically, the problem the United States needs to address may be related to any one of a number of issues:

- Dealing with uncertainties concerning Russian implementation of the 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives;
- Enhancing controls on Russian nuclear weapons and lessening the risk of nuclear theft;
- Providing a counter-balance to a growing Russian emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons in its military doctrine;
- Reducing an NSNW "overhang" that could ultimately affect the prospects for further strategic nuclear offensive arms reductions;
- Institutionalizing further the principle of cooperative U.S.-Russian management and restructuring of their Cold War nuclear legacies;
- Saving money and force structure;
- Demonstrating compliance with U.S. nuclear disarmament undertakings under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty;
- Preserving deterrence, including an NSNW component;
- Keeping the NATO Alliance intact; and
- Retaining credible options for deterring or responding to regional threats from weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

We will first consider the logic of pursuing NSNW controls, then examine the cautions or constraints on doing so. Each element is reflected in these answers to the question of the problem to be worked.

The Logic of Pursuing NSNW Controls

Turning to the first possible answer to the problem, questions persist in many U.S. government quarters about Russian implementation of the 1991 PNIs over the past decade. It seems clear that Russian efforts at dismantlement have fallen well short of their PNI commitments. This is so despite statements by Russian officials over the past decade that Moscow had withdrawn its ground-launched tactical nuclear weapons to central Russia and that it had been dismantling these systems at a rate of over 2,000 per year. What is less clear is the degree to which this lagging dismantlement is attributable to technical, logistical, or security shortfalls. Even if the Russian government was fully committed to complete and rapid compliance with the PNIs, does it have the capacity to carry out the implementation? The poor health of the Russian economy and crumbling technical infrastructure within the Russian defense establishment likely pose great constraints on even a well-intentioned compliance effort.

But is that effort really well-intentioned? There have been recent indications that some Russian officials and military leaders have become increasingly uncomfortable with the PNI restraints. A major push by the United States for NSNW arms control could conceivably shore up the 1991-92 commitments by Presidents Bush, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin. For example, the PNIs could now be codified in a legally binding agreement, whether in a treaty requiring U.S. Senate and Russian Duma ratification or in an executive agreement which would avoid this hurdle. Or a mixture could be pursued which included confidence-building measures (such as exchanges of data and visits) as well as the types of on-site presence and hands-on implementation that are the essence of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program with Russia (currently limited primarily to eliminating START-constrained nuclear systems as well as some biological and chemical weapons). Traditional verification means also might be added. Regardless of the approaches used, the purpose would be to provide enhanced confidence in the implementation of the PNIs and to avoid further Russian backsliding. Indirectly, this

would result in mutual political reassurance between Moscow and Washington.

The importance of further strengthening controls on Russian tactical nuclear weapons, thereby lessening the risk of nuclear theft, comprises another definition of the problem. In the midst of continuing social and economic instability, enhancing nuclear controls in Russia remains a central U.S. security objective. A breakdown of such controls over not only nuclear weapons materials but also nuclear weapons themselves is a credible route to "instant proliferation" – access to an initial nuclear arsenal, whether by an U.S. adversary such as Iraq or Iran, or by a terrorist group. From this perspective the logic of NSNW arms control is two-fold. On the one hand, codified and confirmed reductions – by treaty or agreement, traditional verification or less rigorous means – would eliminate potential targets for theft. This is especially important since Russia is publicly estimated to have upwards of 10,000 tactical nuclear weapons. On the other hand, an NSNW agreement could provide a legally or politically binding framework that would buttress already ongoing cooperation aimed at security improvements for Russian storage sites. It also could result in exchanges of information on NSNW and increased access that would facilitate the process of enhancing security.

Third, part of the NSNW problem today is a growing Russian emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons in its military doctrine. For Russia, that new emphasis reflects the combination of sharp economic decline, conventional military weakness, and long borders. For the United States and its allies, however, such a nuclear emphasis poses a dual problem. It could result in heightened tensions between Russia and NATO, particularly if it results in future westward redeployments of Russian nuclear weapons. It also could slow the emergence of a more politically cooperative post-Cold War relationship between Washington and Moscow. In this context, sharp reductions in NSNW numbers could provide a partial political counter-balance to those elements within the Russian military that support a nuclear emphasis. In turn, NSNW controls that included centralized storage of residual systems in non-deployed status could place *de*

facto limits on the integration and forward deployment of tactical nuclear weapons into Russia's military force posture on a day to day basis, as in exercises, training, and other activities.

From a fourth perspective, the problem to be worked is reducing the NSNW "overhang" from the Cold War. Though public estimates vary, Russia is often assumed to possess 10,000-plus non-strategic nuclear weapons – compared to public estimates of several hundred comparable U.S. weapons deployed overseas. With the end of the Cold War confrontation in Europe, this imbalance has little immediate or direct military significance. At the same time, however, there is widespread discussion of reductions of U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces to levels considerably below the agreed START II levels of 3,000 to 3,500 deployed warheads. Washington and Moscow have also discussed putting in place a more comprehensive regime for the monitored elimination of nuclear warheads from strategic reductions. However, Russia's possession of a significant uncontrolled stockpile of NSNW could emerge as a significant political and psychological obstacle to further restructuring of both sides' nuclear postures in directions more consistent with a post-Cold War political relationship.

In turn, NSNW controls would be yet another way to institutionalize further the principle of cooperative U.S. and Russian management of their overall nuclear relationship. During the Cold War both Washington and Moscow eventually came to acknowledge that they had a mutual interest in the safe, stable management of nuclear matters. This principle was reflected in arms control agreements ranging from the 1971 Accident Measures Agreement to the START treaties. More recently, the U.S. Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program has epitomized this basic principle. A commitment to cooperative management remains, moreover, an important element of stability today, since both countries have yet to put the psychology of their Cold War nuclear competition fully behind them. In turn, over the longer term both Washington and Moscow have political, budgetary, and economic incentives to cooperatively restructure their overall nuclear force postures in a manner consistent with a very different political relationship.

For this view of "the problem," NSNW controls would be part of that cooperative restructuring.

Saving money and freeing up force structure provides a somewhat different logic for working the issue of non-strategic nuclear forces. From this definition of the problem, a key consideration for NSNW controls would be whether such controls would permit significant cost savings due to lessened requirements for maintenance of nuclear security and storage sites overseas. In turn, from the perspective of the U.S. Air Force, with its continuing responsibilities in this area, the desirability of giving up the NSNW mission would need to be weighed.

Particularly for those U.S. officials responsible for nuclear non-proliferation matters, there is a quite different logic for pursuing NSNW controls. For this group, reducing or eliminating such weapons would further demonstrate U.S. compliance with Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Long regarded as the cornerstone of U.S. non-proliferation efforts, that Treaty calls on the United States and other parties to undertake good faith negotiations on nuclear disarmament. Effective progress toward that goal would help to buttress the Treaty's legitimacy and to strengthen the hand of opponents of further proliferation.

Cautions and Constraints – Other Views of "The Problem"

Taken together, the preceding perspectives provide a set of overlapping arguments for pursuing controls on non-strategic nuclear weapons. But there are other ways to define the NSNW problem that suggest a need for considerable caution in approaching this issue. These perspectives highlight the need for ensuring deterrence, maintaining Alliance cohesion, and retaining regional WMD deterrence and response options.

For most of the past four decades, U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons were an important element of the overall U.S. nuclear deterrent posture. Today, there is considerable debate about what should be the principles and dimensions of future U.S.

nuclear strategy. The robust active deterrence posture of the Cold War years has given way to a new emphasis on a "hedging" strategy. There are some calls for even more far-reaching changes to a recessed deterrent posture in which nuclear weapons would be very much in the background, on non-alert status, and in reduced numbers. Consequently, pursuit of any future controls on NSNW would need to be consistent with maintenance of that overall U.S. deterrence posture.

Still another consideration would be to ensure that the issue of non-strategic nuclear weapons does not disrupt the cohesion of the NATO Alliance. During the Cold War, the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe demonstrated the linkage of American and European security. Even today, the American security connection remains essential for European security and stability. Nuclear weapon posture, doctrine, and deployments have historically been matters of periodic controversy within the Alliance. While there now is virtually no attention being paid among allied publics to the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, that presence has also been a subject of intense public debate in the past. So viewed, the impact of any new initiatives to control NSNW on Alliance cohesion and public support for NATO also would need to be carefully assessed and weighed.

One final if perhaps more controversial view of the problem should not be overlooked. In a world of more WMD proliferation, credible U.S. deterrent and response options are essential— not only to counter regional adversaries armed with WMD, but also to reassure allies and friends. In particular, absent effective deterrence, there will be growing pressures on those allies and friends to seek their own matching WMD capabilities. U.S. conventional military responses as well as more effective defensive measures can play a part in such deterrence and response. So can "strategic" systems based in the continental United States. But consideration also needs to be given to how new controls would impact U.S. regional WMD deterrence postures.

Conclusion

In light of the preceding answers to "what is the NSNW problem?" the most fundamental choice confronting U.S. policymakers is whether to pursue new controls or to leave well enough alone. Assuming a decision to pursue such controls, a broad range of potential goals stands out: from a minimalist effort to backfill the PNIs to pursuit of the complete elimination of U.S. and Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons.

At the same time, in crafting a negotiating strategy, it will be important to think more broadly than simply in terms of taking additional unilateral actions or pursuing a full-fledged legally binding treaty that would need to be ratified by the U.S. Senate and the Russian Duma. The toolkit of approaches available to U.S. policymakers is far broader. It includes politically binding agreements as well as legally binding executive agreements; confidence building measures such as data declarations, exchanges of visits, technical experiments and cooperation; and the use of techniques from the CTR program to provide implementation support, on-site presence, and, as a result, a measure of verification in practice. In pursuit of NSNW controls, as well as more broadly in the arms control arena, the challenge ahead is to combine these multiple approaches into a mutually reinforcing strategy to enhance U.S. national security.