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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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Russia and America: Is Another Arms Race Afoot?

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During the Cold War years we learned that successful arms control agreements with the Soviet Union were those that codified parity, or at least a mutually acceptable status quo. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) in 1991, a much diminished Russia saw all its WTO allies and three former Soviet republics join NATO, making parity harder to achieve. But there are still compelling reasons to shape agreements that satisfy all parties.

During the 1990s, under Boris Yeltsin, Russia strove to be represented as an equal to the United States in arms control diplomacy and in negotiations concerning the future of former Yugoslavia. President Bill Clinton tried to meet Yeltsin's concerns, but there has been little constructive cooperation on arms control between George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin. Indeed, since 2000, Bush has been hostile to any kind of multilateral diplomacy. He began his presidency with a new generation of ballistic missile defenses (BMD) and withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, an agreement that had stabilized U.S.-Soviet relations for two decades.

In Russia, an increasingly belligerent Putin, flush with oil money, is now determined to be accorded great power status in his dealings with the West. He is asserting himself in many areas: trying to block independence for Kosovo; countering U.S. sanctions against Iran; and renegotiating arms control agreements concluded when Russia was weak. While Putin is viewed with increasing wariness in the West, on arms control he has some points that need to be taken seriously.

Putin's Proposals

Specifically, the Russian president wants to extend the life of the 1994 START-I agreement (due to expire in December 2009) that constrains U.S. and Russian ICBMs, offensive missiles he cannot afford to upgrade, and would prefer new negotiations to reduce.

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Putin is also determined to rewrite or abrogate agreements that he claims are unequal and discriminatory. In particular, he is focusing on the bilateral 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) treaty banning U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles (range 500-5500km), and the multilateral 1990 treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), which codified the balance between NATO and the then WTO in five categories of ground force equipment.

The INF treaty resulted in the destruction of 846 U.S. and 1,846 Soviet intermediate-range missiles, including those that caused so much anxiety in Europe, particularly in West Germany in the 1980s. In February 2006, however, at the annual Wehrkunde meeting in Munich, Sergei Ivanov (then Russian defense minister) denounced the INF treaty as “a Cold War relic,” while Putin said that Russia could no longer comply with a bilateral treaty that does not constrain non-signatory states that already have or might soon acquire INF. In October 2007, Putin threatened to abrogate the 1987 treaty unilaterally unless it is made global.

The CFE treaty is seen in NATO as the bedrock of post-Cold War stability in Europe because of the transparency and predictability of its compliance mechanism, which mandates regular exchanges of information and on-site inspections. Nevertheless, as an inter-bloc agreement, CFE was overtaken by events when the WTO disintegrated in 1991. Boris Yeltsin started to complain about the impact of NATO enlargement on CFE in 1993 and, soon afterwards, about the constraints CFE imposed on Moscow’s ability to deal with unrest in the Caucasus.

After successive amendments in Russia’s favor, including more generous ceilings for Russia in the flank zones,¹ a new Adapted CFE (ACFE) treaty was signed in Istanbul in November 1999. Yeltsin also agreed to withdraw Russian forces from Moldova and Georgia—a precondition for NATO to ratify the new treaty. Putin did not attend the November 1999 meeting, however, and has always denied the link between Yeltsin’s commitment to withdraw from Georgia and Moldova and NATO’s ratification of the new treaty. He would also exclude Russian “peacekeeping forces” from the withdrawal commitment.

As NATO further enlarged its membership, and entered into various cooperative military arrangements to train and equip new allies like Bulgaria and Romania and former Soviet states like Georgia, Putin increasingly voiced his opposition to CFE. He emphasized that the three Baltic members of NATO were not subject to treaty limits, although he knows that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have all promised to accede to NATO once the ACFE is concluded. Last May, Putin called for an Extraordinary Conference on CFE (a contingency foreseen in Article XXI-2 of the 1990 treaty). This was held June 12-15 in Moscow, but there was little meeting of minds. In mid-July, Putin (invoking Article XIX of the 1990 treaty) announced that Russia would cease compliance with CFE within 150 days, i.e., by December 12, 2007, unless NATO ratifies the treaty in the meantime. So far, only Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan have ratified the agreement.

A particular irritant to Putin, parallel to the arguments about CFE, is the U.S. proposal (a pet project of former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld) to deploy 10 ground-based interceptor missiles in Poland and a 360 degree X-band radar in the Czech Republic. These are linked to an Alaska-based ballistic missile defense system, for which Gordon Brown agreed in late July 2007 (without the public debate Tony Blair promised the previous February) to provide facilities at Fylingdales and Menwith in Yorkshire. This U.S. system was initially justified to counter a threat from North Korea, then rationalized against an Iranian threat.

Putin, however, sees U.S. missiles deployed in central Europe as primarily directed against Russia, specifically the Topol, Topol-M and RS-18 ICBMs stationed in the Russian regions of T’ver, Ivanovo, Kaluga and Saratov. Putin’s fears are well-founded as a memorandum signed by Rumsfeld in January 2002 and a national security directive signed by Bush the following December (NSPD-23) both specify that these BMD systems would be upgraded as U.S. technology advanced.

Putin’s initial response in February 2006 to the prospect of missiles in Poland was to threaten new missiles in Kaliningrad. In a slightly more conciliatory mood at the G-8 meeting in early June 2007 in Heiligendamm, Germany, Putin offered, as an alternative to

a U.S. radar in the Czech Republic, the use of Russia radars in Gabala, Azerbaijan, and at Armavir in southern Russia, an offer he repeated in early July to Bush in Kennebunkport. The American response was cool, proposing only some form of “joint architecture.”

NATO's Response

NATO does not always speak with one voice on how to deal with either George Bush or Vladimir Putin. On June 14, 2007, NATO defense ministers meeting in Brussels agreed to assess the implication of new American missiles in Europe by February 2008. European allies deeply resent the fact that Washington bypassed NATO to discuss basing BMD components bilaterally with Britain, Poland, and the Czech Republic. The U.S. Congress was none too pleased either, and the House has eliminated the \$310 million that Bush requested for the project for FY 2008, which ends next September. Some Czechs complain about the likely health hazards from the proposed radar, and in Poland a former defense minister, Radek Sikorski, thinks the risk of hosting American missiles outweighs any potential benefits.

He is right. In the unlikely event that the system actually intercepted an incoming missile, the collateral damage to surrounding European countries could be catastrophic. Fortunately, Poland seems to be moving away from the knee-jerk acquiescence to Washington as practiced by the Kaczynski twins.² New Prime Minister Donald Tusk, head of the centre-right Civic Platform party, campaigned on promises to withdraw Polish troops from Iraq and to renegotiate the BMD agreement.

On CFE, Germany has been the most sensitive to Russian concerns and the most pro-active in trying to preserve the treaty regime. One issue in dispute is whether Russia must withdraw even peacekeeping troops from Moldova and Georgia (as the U.S., U.K. and Canada insist, while Germany, Italy, and Belgium would be more flexible). Another is whether NATO can make more concessions on Russian equipment in the flank zone (vigorously opposed by Turkey and Norway).

After the lack of progress at the CFE meeting in Moscow in June, and a number of bilateral talks between Russia and various allies over the summer, Germany called a meeting of all 30 CFE state parties in Bad Saarow in early October 2007. That gathering discussed “a parallel process of NATO and Russian actions that could end the current stalemate.” NATO offered funds to assist Russia to withdraw from Georgia and Moldova and consultations in the NATO-Russia Council for the Baltic states and Slovenia to accede to the CFE regime. Russia was apparently unmoved and continues its litany of complaints about the agreement.

Breaking the Impasse

In an effort to resolve differences on a number of security issues (including CFE, BMD and the thorny issue of independence

for Kosovo) the U.S. and Russia recently launched a series of 2+2 meetings comprising foreign and defense ministers to be held every six months. At the first of these on October 12, 2007, in Moscow, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made no headway on CFE. This was reflected in the vote of October 16, in the Security Committee of the Russian Duma, endorsing Putin's proposed legislation to abrogate the treaty on December 12. On BMD, however, Gates suggested to the Russians that radars and interceptor missiles would not necessarily be deployed in the Czech Republic and Poland if the Iranian threat did not materialize, a suggestion he repeated ten days later in Prague to the Czech defense minister.

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Meanwhile, at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C., Bush reiterated the immediacy of the Iranian threat and the need to act now on BMD in Europe. Opponents of BMD took heart at this apparent rift in administration thinking, which reflects the deep apprehension throughout the U.S. about the Bush-Cheney project to demonize Iran in preparation for yet another war. In any event, Putin seemed unimpressed by the concession offered by Gates in Moscow and Prague. At an EU-Russia meeting in Portugal in late October, Putin invoked the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, noting that Soviet deployments of offensive missiles in Cuba were a direct response to U.S. missile deployments in Turkey, implicitly threatening a similar Russian response to American BMD deployments in central Europe.

The main problem facing Europe in dealing with a belligerent President Putin and a lame duck President Bush bogged down in Iraq is that neither is inclined to accommodate the other. Putin is an increasingly difficult leader for western powers to deal with on Iran, Kosovo, and many other issues. Nevertheless his goal of establishing a measure of parity with NATO should not be dismissed out of hand.

The parity principle also serves the goal of international stability and should be supported as long as western security interests are not put at risk. This requires an alliance leader strong enough for the give and take of multilateral diplomacy, one who can resist Russia's effort to block Kosovo's independence, but also open up a number of arms control possibilities. For example: freeze the needlessly provocative BMD plans for Europe; extend the START-I agreement; begin new Strategic Offensive Reduction Talks (SORT), which Bush promised Putin in Kennebunkport in July; and open up the bilateral INF treaty to new partners—including Iran. Putin might then re-think his threat to abrogate CFE, a win-win situation for everyone.

article footnotes

¹ The flank zones are the outer regions of the CFE zone of application, which stretches from the Atlantic to the Urals. For Russia the northern flank zone borders on Norway, Finland and the Baltic states, and the southern zone borders on Turkey and the Caucasus.

² Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the prime minister of Poland since July 2006, is the identical twin brother of Lech Kaczynski, the president of Poland since December 2005.



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