

The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, 1991-1992:

An Assessment of Past Performance and Future Relevance

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The fabric of US-Russian nuclear arms reductions is unravelling. Among the indications of the tenuous nature of the current bilateral arms control regime are:

- Diminished prospects for extension of New START, which is set to expire in 2021.
- Increased probability that the 1987 INF Treaty will collapse under the weight of mutual accusations of noncompliance.
- Pursuit by both the United States and Russia of nuclear force modernization.
- Uncertain prospects for continuation of bilateral consultations on strategic stability.
- Unusually vitriolic exchanges between the two former nonproliferation partners at the 2018 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting.

At the same time, there have been occasional signs that arms control progress is not impossible. According to unofficial reports, during his meeting with US President Donald Trump, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed that the two countries recommit themselves to four regimes – New START, INF, the 2011 Vienna Document, and the Open Skies.ⁱ Other sources reported that Putin handed his counterpart an informal document, which, in addition to the proposals about recommitting to existing treaties, contained proposals for new negotiations, including resumption of a strategic stability dialogue, a treaty banning placement of weapons in space, and new confidence building measures in Europe.ⁱⁱ Unfortunately, these overtures have yet to yield any concrete results. Although extension of the New START was discussed at the meeting between US National Security Advisor John Bolton and Russian Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev in Geneva in late August, and was also raised in Congressional testimony by senior U.S. officials, the commentary was not encouraging and there is little reason for optimism on the arms control front.

At a time when re-starting formal arms control negotiations is likely to meet major resistance, especially in the United States, it is worthwhile to recall less formal options for pursuing nuclear arms reductions. These include measures that can be undertaken by the Executive without Congressional/Parliamentary approval. The most relevant example of that approach is the 1991/1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs), which resulted in deep reduction of tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons.

Presidential Statements

On September 27, 1991, President George H. W. Bush unexpectedly announced unilateral measures to radically reduce the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) arsenal. The initiative involved a pledge to: eliminate all ground-launched TNWs, remove all nuclear weapons from surface ships and attack submarines (some warheads for these weapons would be dismantled while others would be placed in “central storage”), and reduce by approximately two-thirds the stockpile of nuclear gravity bombs. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev responded promptly and positively to the Bush initiative and, on 5 October 1991, largely reciprocated in kind. Several months later, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, reiterated Mr. Gorbachev’s pledge, with only slight modifications, including a somewhat deeper reduction of air-launched TNW. Together, these parallel US and Soviet/Russian statements constituted what is known as the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives or PNIs.ⁱⁱⁱ

The most detailed examination of the U.S. PNI decision suggests that President Bush and his team were motivated by a variety of considerations.^{iv} They included tectonic changes caused by the end of the Cold War, concerns about the reliability of control over Soviet nuclear weapons as the country was falling apart in the wake of the attempted August 1991 coup, expectation of the “peace dividend” from the end of the arms race, large-scale restructuring of US armed force, including in particular the reduced need for deployments of nuclear weapons overseas, and the growth of anti-nuclear sentiment among some allies (most notably Germany and South Korea). The parallel unilateral approach also had the virtue of avoiding protracted negotiations at a time when the United States was especially concerned that rapid steps were required to secure Soviet TNW in a time of acute turmoil and centripetal tendencies.

Although President Bush announced unprecedentedly deep reductions, the package of measures initially prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff was even bolder and foresaw the complete elimination of all non-strategic sea-based nuclear weapons —first and foremost sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs). It was the civilians at the Office of Secretary of Defense (some of whom later contributed to Nuclear Posture Reviews under the George W. Bush and Donald Trump administrations) who insisted that a significant portion of SLCM warheads should be retained in storage. It was not until the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review that a decision was taken to designate these weapons as “redundant” and to retire them.^v

The Soviet reaction in fall 1991 was immediate and positive. As was the case in the United States, the Soviet position was developed by a small team. It consisted of Defense and Foreign Ministry officials (According to Susan Koch, the State Department was excluded from the US decision-making process until the last moment).^{vi} The reasons for Moscow’s positive response corresponded closely to those in Washington. A paramount concern was control over tactical nuclear weapons in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This danger was highlighted by an attempt by the Popular Front of Azerbaijan (a loose coalition of opposition groups with a tightly knit and semi-independent militarized component) to seize nuclear weapons in the early 1990s. Although that attempt was foiled and the Soviet military initiated the removal of TNW from most Union republics, the process had not been completed at the time of the announcement of the U.S. initiative.^{vii} An additional incentive for President Gorbachev was the desire to increase his standing with the US president at a time of increasing political peril domestically. The “peace dividend” consideration, in other words, was even more important for Moscow than for Washington.

An important and often overlooked element of the Soviet counter-initiative, which set it apart from the statement made by George H.W. Bush, was a proposal to begin negotiations on a legally binding and

verifiable treaty on TNWs. Unfortunately, the United States was not prepared to engage in these negotiations and shortly after the idea was broached, the Soviet Union fell apart.

Implementation Record

A major trade-off between arms by means of parallel unilateral statements and negotiated accords is speed versus durability. While the PNIs could be put in place quickly, they lacked not only legally binding provisions but also data exchange and verification procedures. Soon after the initiation of the PNIs, it became clear that the parties had different interpretations of one key element—“central storage.” The United States understood the phrase to mean locations far from bases at which delivery vehicles were deployed. In contrast, Russia interpreted the phrase in an administrative rather than geographical sense. In other words, it considered “central storage” to mean storage facilities subordinated to the 12th GUMO, the department of the Ministry of Defense in charge of safekeeping of nuclear weapons. These facilities in many cases could be located at military bases, including naval bases hosting surface ships and submarines capable of carrying TNWs. In 2007, Chief of the 12th GUMO, General Vladimir Verkhovtsev, declared that, although Russia no longer deployed TNW on surface ships and submarines, it could “if necessary... deploy them [and] no one should doubt that.”^{viii}

Another point of controversy stemmed from the fact that the PNIs were imprecise with respect to numbers—both regarding baseline figures and the number of affected warheads. The statements only referred to the *share* of tactical nuclear weapons that the parties planned to eliminate or retire. In 1997, after the creation of the NATO-Russia Council, the parties began to use that body to exchange data on the *percentages* of reduction, but after the war in Kosovo in 1999 even that very limited form of data exchange ceased.

Initially, the United States planned to complete its implementation of the PNIs by 1998, but the deadline was extended twice and the process was completed only in 2003. The extensions were apparently due primarily to financial and technical considerations, including the limited U.S. capacity for dismantlement of warheads. The status of Russian implementation of its PNIs is even more ambiguous. Russia initially set the deadline for 2000, but, like the United States, chose to extend it. At the 2004 NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, the Russian delegation declared that Russia had reduced 75 percent of Soviet tactical nuclear weapons, that the implementation of PNIs was “almost complete” and that the pace of elimination was constrained by the technological capacity and available funding.^{ix} Six months later, however, Moscow declared it no longer considered itself bound by the PNIs; an official representative of the Foreign Ministry characterized them as a “goodwill” gesture rather than an obligation.^x This left open the question of whether or not the implementation of the PNIs had been completed.^{xi} Speaking in 2007, Chief of the 12th GUMO, General Vladimir Verkhovtsev, declared that the 75 percent reduction went beyond what had been promised under the PNIs (he said that the Gorbachev and Yeltsin statements foresaw a 64 percent reduction).^{xii} He also disclosed that Russia had completed the elimination of nuclear warheads for ground-launched delivery vehicles—the only category, whose reduction the statement at the 2004 NPT PrepCom listed as incomplete.^{xiii} Most likely Russia completed the implementation of PNIs only two or three years after declaring it was no longer bound by the Gorbachev and Yeltsin statements and about four years after the completion of reductions by the United States. Thus, the October 2004 declaration apparently reflected a change in policy tone and preferences, but did not reverse the trend toward reduction of nuclear weapons. The extent of these reductions remains uncertain. Obviously, without baseline data, the figure of 75 percent, which since 2004 has become a permanent feature of all official Russian statements, has little meaning. An authoritative, but unofficial estimate puts the number of Soviet

tactical nuclear weapons in 1991 at almost 22,000,^{xiii} which would mean that by the early 2000s the stockpile was about 5,000. This figure most likely reflects the total stockpile, i.e., including the retired weapons awaiting dismantlement. Several independent estimates put the number of operational tactical nuclear weapons during that period at about 2,000. There is also every reason to believe that reductions have continued, albeit at a slower pace. In 2012, Igor Sutyagin estimated the active stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons at 1,000.^{xiv}

The most unexpected development, however, was the reaffirmation of adherence to PNIs, which was made by Russia in 2018 without an apparent reason for such a statement. In February 2018, responding to the new US Nuclear Posture Review, the Foreign Ministry declared that, “although the Initiatives do not have the status of legally binding international agreements, they remain fully relevant for us today.”^{xv} This statement has not been repeated since, but apparently demonstrates that PNIs have not been forgotten and that their status can fluctuate depending on the political needs of parties without necessarily affecting their substance.

The situation is further complicated by Russian efforts to acquire conventional strike capability. Weapons, such as land-based *Iskander* missiles, precision-guided gravity bombs, short- and long-range sea-launched cruise missiles and other dual-capability delivery systems, can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads. Currently, there is no reason to believe that these systems are deployed with non-conventional warheads, but such an option cannot be excluded, especially given the availability of nuclear weapons storage facilities at some of the relevant bases.

Lessons of PNIs

Overall, the experience of the PNIs must be assessed as positive. In spite of many political and legal limitations, they have resulted in very deep reductions in the number of nuclear weapons in general and the tactical variety in particular – deeper than any treaty has so far been able to achieve – and these reductions have not been subject to changes in the political climate. They also have accomplished the reduction of at least 25,000 tactical nuclear weapons, most of which have also been dismantled. Obviously, it would have been desirable had the statements of the three presidents been codified in a legally-binding document with verification provisions, as Mikhail Gorbachev had proposed, but even in the absence of that development, the PNIs should be judged a success.

On at least two occasions the United States seriously put forward arms control initiatives modeled, in part, on the PNIs. The first occurred during the November 2001 meeting between President George W. Bush and President Vladimir Putin, held at the Bush ranch in Texas. At the summit, Bush indicated that the United States was prepared to cut its nuclear arsenal by two-thirds and proposed that reductions be implemented without a formal agreement, invoking the example of the PNIs. Putin agreed to match the reduction, but expressed strong preference for a legally binding treaty. The result was a compromise; although the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), also known as the Moscow Treaty, signed in May 2002, had the status of a formal treaty, it was extremely short and closely resembled a joint statement.

The second relevant episode took place in January 2013 when President Barack Obama proposed that the United States and Russia reduce the aggregate warhead limit in New START by about one-third to 1,000 warheads. The format suggested by Obama was a joint declaration by the two presidents, which would not entail a formal amendment to the treaty itself. The intent was to circumvent the anticipated

resistance of the Senate, whose advice and consent would have been mandatory in case of an amendment. Moscow, however, was not interested in that approach and refused to consider lower warhead limits without also addressing other issues, such as missile defense and long-range conventional weapons.

These aforementioned cases reveal two of the key attractions of non-binding informal arms control arrangements. The first is the desire to avoid lengthy negotiations as well as the cumbersome and often expensive treaty implementation process. The second consideration involves an attempt to avoid challenging political obstacles associated with the treaty ratification process. This is an unavoidable challenge if an accord is sent to Congress for ratification by the Senate in the case of a treaty and to both houses of Congress in the case of an executive agreement. The latter consideration clearly is relevant today given the current political situation in the United States.

Prospects of PNI-Style Arms Control Measures Today

Traditional arms control measures involving legally binding, verifiable agreements are very unlikely today and in the near future for a number of reasons, including:

- The political climate in the United States makes ratification of any treaty, much less one with Russia, extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible. It is worth recalling that ratification of the last arms control treaty, New START, was a protracted and very challenging process at a time when Democrats controlled both the White House and the Senate. At the time, the main opposition came from Republicans, who remain unsympathetic to any form of nuclear arms control. In the near term, at least, they might well be joined in opposition by many Democrats, who, for domestic political and other reasons, are disinclined to support any collaboration with Russia.
- Russia continues to insist that agreements limited solely to nuclear weapons are unacceptable. Instead, it wants to include at a minimum missile defense and long-range, precision conventional weapons, items that Congress finds highly objectionable. In this context, it should be noted that the New START ratification resolution adopted by US Senate in 2011 explicitly bans negotiations on these two issues.
- New bilateral arms control negotiations are unlikely to be possible until the controversy over INF Treaty implementation is resolved. The United States formally charged Russia with violation of that treaty in 2014; Russia has since raised its own allegations of US violations. Resolving mutual accusations requires a level of cooperation and trust, which does not exist today. Compounding these difficulties for negotiated arms control are a number of international political, military, and technological developments. These include increasingly asymmetrical force postures, divergent military doctrines, and the lack of a clear divide between nuclear forces and those referred to by Russia as “non-nuclear strategic weapons.” Moreover, the loss by the US and NATO of a monopoly in long-range conventional weapons could prompt NATO to renew its reliance on nuclear weapons. In addition, Russia is developing and deploying new classes of nuclear and dual-capable weapons, such as air-launched ballistic missiles, and possibly a nuclear torpedo, which are not covered by existing treaties.

The risk of accidental conflict between the US and Russia has also significantly increased in recent years, as evidenced by a growing number of confrontations and “close calls” in the airspace over the Baltic and Black Seas, as well as in other regions. Currently, the only US-Russian mechanism in place to prevent such confrontations from escalating pertains to Syria. There is little prospect of joint NATO-Russia action to

establish a similar mechanism for the European region despite the fact that introduction of long-range hypersonic missiles, perhaps as soon as within five to seven years, will radically reduce reaction time and essentially preclude the possibility of verifying the accuracy of initial reports by early warning systems or contacting the other side.

Given the impediments to traditional, formal arms control, a contemporary version of the example of PNIs may merit renewed consideration. The areas where parallel unilateral declarations might prove most productive and feasible involve confidence-building measures, including those related to:

- Reaffirmation of PNIs—given the unexpected declaration by Russia that it continues to adhere to that informal regime, such a step no longer seems impossible.
- Pledges that military aircraft flying over the Baltic and the Black Seas would keep transponders switched on to prevent collisions and other mishaps.
- Promises not to increase troop strength and military hardware adjacent to the NATO-Russia border, as well as perhaps even pulling them back from the border. Although this is mainly a symbolic measure, it could have a calming effect on the increasingly tense stand-off.
- A pledge by NATO not to move tactical nuclear weapons in Europe further eastward and a corresponding statement by Russia that it will refrain from deploying additional tactical nuclear weapons in the vicinity of NATO. Such parallel declarations could help forestall a crisis related to possible future deployments of B-61 bombs in Eastern Europe, most notably Poland, while also guarding against equipping *Iskander* missiles with nuclear warheads. Russia also might declare that it would refrain from storing nuclear warheads for *Kalibr* SLCMs at naval bases in the Baltic and Black Seas.
- Restoring the effectiveness of the Open Skies Treaty, by confirming the appropriateness of overflights of the territory of the Kaliningrad Oblast and the border with Georgia, among other sensitive areas as well as a US decision to upgrade equipment on its observation aircraft comparable to that used by Russia.

The aforementioned informal, parallel declarations would not necessarily be easy to accomplish and also might fall victim to domestic political opposition. However, they are apt to face significantly less political resistance than more formal accords, including even the extension of an existing treaty.

It is hard to predict where the greatest support for and resistance to new PNIs will emanate. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, an advocate for this approach could be National Security Advisor John Bolton, who traditionally has preferred informal, nonbinding measures to treaties. At the same time, his support for PNIs may not bode well for further arms reductions. For example, speaking after a meeting with Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev in Geneva in August 2018, Bolton said that there were three options for New START – extension, renegotiation, or a new treaty along the lines of the Moscow Treaty (SORT), the latter arguably being the least consequential and unverifiable nuclear arms control treaty in history.^{xvi} Selection of either the second or third options would likely mean the end of the nuclear arms control as we have known it in the past.

While the U.S. Congress is likely to oppose an approach that circumvents their power to ratify, the greatest impediment to PNI-style measures is most likely to come from Moscow. Russia is more comfortable with negotiated legally binding agreements and mistrusts informal arrangements. Even its

acceptance of the minimalist Moscow Treaty (SORT) in 2002 is widely regarded among Russian experts as an unnecessary concession and a mistake.

In light of Russia's stance, it is difficult to imagine many realistic options for advancing informal arms control arrangements in the near term. Perhaps most likely to succeed, although hard to envision being initiated, are:

- A unilateral statement by the United States with an invitation to adopt a similar declaration by the Russian Federation, along the lines initiated by George H.W. Bush in 1991; and
- Informal consultations to agree on the scope of measures that could be introduced at a later date through unilateral coordinated statements, conceivably also discussed in the P-5 process.

The potential for the first option resulting in reciprocal action assumes that the initial declaration is designed to meet specific Russian concerns or at least is not seen as undermining them. In that case, a positive response is not impossible depending on other international and domestic political considerations. Informal consultations, however, are probably the most attractive approach in the current international environment, and also could help to restore at least some modicum of mutual understanding and trust.

Conclusion

In many ways, the 1991/92 PNIs were unique and period-specific. They reflected a convergence of interests at that time: the United States was anxious to address the issue of tactical nuclear weapons, after decades of opposition to the topic, while the Soviet Union and then Russia were still receptive to reductions of these weapons. That convergence of views existed only for several years, and by the mid-1990s the Russian position more closely resembled the stance which the United States and NATO had held during the Cold War. In other words, success of PNIs was time bound and would have been impossible had they been broached a few years earlier or later.

Although it is very unlikely that the success of the PNIs can be repeated today or in the near future, a similar approach of parallel unilateral declarations could gain traction, especially as a confidence building measure, under certain circumstances. At the moment there are few alternative options available for nuclear arms control and risk reduction, and there is little to be lost in trying.

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ⁱ Elena Chernenko, “Mery po Kontroluy nad Soglasheniyami,” *Kommersant-Daily*, July 26, 2018 (https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3696084?from=four_mir).

ⁱⁱ Bryan Bender, “Leaked Document: Putin Lobbied Trump on Arms Control,” *Politico.com*, August 7, 2018 (<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/07/putin-trump-arms-control-russia-724718>).

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Susan Koch, *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992*, *Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, September 2012); William

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^{iv} Susan Koch, The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992. (http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/casestudies/CSWMD_CaseStudy-5.pdf).

^v Nuclear Posture Review Report, April 2010 (https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf).

^{vi} Susan Koch, op. cit., p. 7

^{vii} See Nikolai Sokov, "Controlling Soviet/Russian Nuclear Weapons in Time of Instability," in Henry D. Sokolski and Bruno Tertrais, eds., *Nuclear Weapons Security Crises: What Does History Teach?* (US Army War College, 2013) available at: http://nuclearpolicy101.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Chapter-4_Sokov_Security-Crises_History.pdf.

^{viii} Nikolai Poroskov, "Takticheskii Yadernyi Kozyr" [A Tactical Nuclear Ace], *Vremya Novostei*, September 7, 2007.

^{ix} Vystuplenie Glavy Rossiiskoi Delegatsii A.I. Antonova na 3 Sessii Podgotovitel'nogo Komiteta Konferentsii po Rassmotreniyu Deistviya DNYaO [A Statement of the Head of the Russian Delegation A.I. Antonov to the 3rd Session of the Preparatory Committee of the NPT Review Conference], April 28, 2004, Document 927-28-04-2004 (<http://www.mid.ru/Ns-dvbr.nsf/10aa6ac6e80702fc432569ea003612f0/432569d800226387c3256e840046adc4?OpenDocument>); "Rossiya Perevpolnila Plany po Sokrashcheniyu Yadernogo Oruzhiya" [Russia Has Overfulfilled the Plan for Reduction of Nuclear Weapons], RIA-Novosti, June 22, 2005, <http://www.rian.ru/politics/20050622/40566772.html>.

^x Otvet Ofitsial'nogo Predstavatelya MID Rossii A.V. Yakovenko na Vopros Rossiiskikh SM Ina Press-Konferentsii f RIA-Novosti Otnositelno Initsiativ Rossii po Sokrashcheniyu Takticheskogo Yadernogo Oruzhiya, October 7, 2004 (http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/voenno-strategiceskie-problemy/-/asset_publisher/hpkjeev1aY0p/content/id/458482).

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^{xii} Nikolai Poroskov, "Takticheskii Yadernyi Kozyr" [A Tactical Nuclear Ace], *Vremya Novostei*, September 7, 2007.

^{xiii} Alexei Arbatov, "Deep Cuts and de-Alerting: A Russian Perspective," in Harald Feiveson, ed., *The Nuclear Turning Point* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1999), p. 320.

^{xiv} Igor Sutyagin, Atomic Accounting: A New Estimate of Russia's Non-Strategic Nuclear Forces, RUSI Occasional Paper, 2012 (https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201211_op_atomic_accounting.pdf).

^{xv} Commentary of the Department of Information and Press of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation in Connection with the Publication of a New US Nuclear Doctrine, February 3, 2018 (http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3054726).

^{xvi} Karen DeYoung, "Bolton and His Russian Counterpart Discuss Arms Control, Syria, and Iran," *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2018 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/bolton-and-his-russian-counterpart-discuss-arms-control-syria-and-iran/2018/08/23/626eb772-a6f6-11e8-a656-943eefab5daf_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.10e4e17f14cd).