

New arms treaty paves way for US military buildup

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During his upcoming visit to Moscow, US President George Bush will join Russian President Vladimir Putin in signing a new arms-control treaty. The agreement, reached May 13, is a treaty for arms control in name only. It allows for the continued escalation of American militarism with the acquiescence of the Russian government.

The main component of the treaty is a pledge by both sides to cut nuclear warheads to about a third of their current levels over the course of the next decade. Currently the two nuclear powers have about 6,000 to 7,000 warheads each, and these would be cut to between 1,500 and 2,200. However, there is no timetable for the deactivation of the weapons—that is, the United States (as well as Russia) would be free even to increase its stockpile during the intervening period, so long as the number did not exceed the limit in 2012. This is the year that the treaty expires, if it is not renewed.

And the loopholes don't end there. The treaty does not require the actual destruction of the deactivated warheads. Russia has indicated its opposition to assertions by the United States that it could reduce its stockpile by simply placing the weapons in storage, available for quick and easy reactivation—essentially an accounting trick. The agreement does not prohibit this method, and US officials have indicated that they plan to use it for at least a portion of the current stockpile.

Either country will be allowed to withdraw with only 90 days' notice. The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, from which the US announced plans to withdraw last December, and most other arms-control agreements have twice as long a waiting period. And, in contrast to such agreements as START I, no restrictions are placed on the type of nuclear weapon that can be deployed.

The accord took only six months to negotiate, and is only three pages long (in comparison to START-2, which was over 700 pages long and took over a decade to put together). It has the appearance of an agreement thrown together as a face-saving gesture to Putin—a scrap of paper with no substance, but which will allow Putin to declare that he forced the Americans to sign a treaty.

Since coming to office, the Bush administration has stridently opposed any international agreement limiting the prerogatives of the American military and the arms industry. This has been in line with a generally unilateralist posture on the part of the American government, which has refused to recognize any constraints on its foreign policy. Over the past year, Bush has insisted that any arms control agreement should be in the form of an informal agreement between the two governments, and not a formal treaty.

The administration accepted Russia's demands for a formal agreement only because it will have no effect on American military

policy. Bush had announced already that he planned to cut the American nuclear force to the levels stipulated in the treaty regardless of whether an agreement was reached. However, officials in the Pentagon and Bush himself wanted to ensure that if the American military so desired, it could increase this number at any time. The Nuclear Posture Review issued by the Pentagon earlier this year, for example, called for reducing the nuclear arsenal but stated, "In the event that US relations with Russia significantly worsen in the future, the US may need to revise its nuclear force level and posture."

The treaty will also give the same flexibility to Russia, including the ability to stock up on land-based multiple warhead missiles, which Washington had previously opposed. However, the Russian economy is incapable of sustaining a nuclear force on par with that of the United States, and the treaty is an acknowledgment of American superiority. "Crudely put," noted Russian defense analyst Alexander Goltz, "the US unilateral nuclear reductions policy has taken on the form of a bilateral document." A senior American official was quoted as saying basically the same thing: "What we have now agreed to do under the treaty is what we wanted to do anyway. That's our kind of treaty."

Agreement on nuclear arms control is part of a whole series of negotiations between the United States and Russia. Under Putin, the Russian government has sought over the past several months to overhaul its relationship with the US, dropping or toning down much of its opposition to American military operations in hopes that Washington will reciprocate.

As part of its attempt to gain US approval for its own actions, Russia largely dropped its opposition to American plans to construct a national missile defense (NMD). Before the fall of last year, Russia adamantly opposed any move by Washington to abandon the ABM treaty. When the Bush administration announced the planned withdrawal last winter, however, Russia's response was largely uncritical. Bush assured Russia at that time that any system constructed would not deter Russia's arsenal. However, the treaty does not codify this promise and does not mention missile defenses at all.

The treaty thus opens the way for the construction of an NMD, which is set to begin in Alaska within a couple of weeks, as soon as the six-month period required for withdrawal expires. There has even been some discussion between the two countries about possible Russian participation in the construction of any future missile defense system. Bush and Putin have agreed to a joint NMD committee to pursue this possibility, and one senior administration official said that at the meeting in Moscow the two will discuss "enhanced cooperation in ... missile defense." The US hopes that Russian support will also

undermine opposition from Europe.

The Putin government has also muted any criticism of increased US military presence in Central Asia, including several former Soviet states. At the same time, NATO is planning on expanding to include the former Soviet states in the Baltics, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.

Moreover, there are signs that Russia is preparing to accept the American military intervention of Iraq that is likely to occur later in the year. Shortly after working out the missile agreement, Russia voted along with the other members of the UN Security Council to approve the American-backed proposal on overhauling Iraqi sanctions. By supporting the measure, Washington is seeking to deflect European criticisms concerning the sanctions policy and thereby provide a clearer case for military intervention. Russia, on the other hand, hopes that in a post-Hussein Iraq the US would allow it control over a section of the country's oilfields.

In addition to getting the Bush administration to accept the principle of an international treaty, Russia hopes that closer relations with the US will improve its economic prospects and allow it to pursue regional interests without American opposition. Vladimir Frolov, an advisor to the chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the State Duma, noted in an editorial in the *St. Petersburg Times*, "Putin appears to genuinely believe that realigning Russia with the West ... is inherently in Russia's interests as the only environment providing the necessary external conditions for Russia's economic and social resuscitation and eventual rebirth as a great power.... He is not standing alone and has a viable political base in the growing Russian entrepreneurial class, hungry for acceptance in the West."

A day after the agreement on arms control was reached, NATO agreed to accept a new Russian-NATO partnership. Russia will have a say in NATO decisions on several issues, though the United States together with the major powers of Western Europe will retain control over most questions, including troop deployments. Putin also hopes to gain US support for Russia's admission to the World Trade Organization later this year.

Putin has redirected Russian foreign and military policy to focus on regional issues, particularly on the continued suppression of the nationalist revolt in Chechnya as well as conflicts with Georgia, both of which threaten Russian access to the oil-rich Caspian Sea. Ever since Russia began its reorientation, the US has dropped its previously harsh criticism of the brutalities carried out in Chechnya.

On May 13—that is, the day the arms control agreement was reached—Russia signed a deal with the Central Asian state of Kazakhstan for division of the oil and gas basins under parts of the Caspian. Russia's largest oil company LUKoil has a major stake in the production of oil from the northern Caspian, and Russia hopes that increased exploitation of the region will allow it to challenge the Middle East as a source of oil exports to Europe and America. Over the past several months, the US has taken a much more favorable view toward Russian oil interests than it had previously.

Over the past year, the Russian government has noticeably changed its language regarding relations with Washington. It has largely given up for the time being the possibility of challenging the US in a "multipolar world." Referring to the agreement on NATO participation, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov enthused, "We must now together build the new world order."

This reorientation could rapidly change, especially if the escalating tensions between the US and Europe lead to an open fracture in the transatlantic relationship. Russia has close ties to Europe, especially Germany. Indeed part of Putin's strategy is to use Washington to

improve relations with Western Europe. If this strategy fails, the pro-American stance could disintegrate.

Moreover, there is a great deal of opposition within the Russian ruling elite to what is perceived as a wholesale capitulation to the United States. Leonid Ivashov, former head of the Russian military's foreign relations department, called Putin's policy "an attempt at geo-strategic suicide."

Alexei Mitrofanov, a member of the Russian Duma, called the nuclear arms agreement "an erroneous decision.... We are doing a favor to the United States. They form a shield and we break our sword. We must reserve the right to have as many missiles as possible so that we could deploy them under every tree." There is considerable opposition, especially within the military establishment, to national missile defense and American presence in Central Asia.

In the US, a section of the ruling elite is incensed that Bush agreed to any treaty, even one that will allow the American government complete freedom. In an editorial entitled "A Gift to Mr. Putin," the *Wall Street Journal* wrote that Bush "has now agreed to breathe life back into the dinosaur bones of arms-control.... The new treaty will reinforce the outdated and dangerous notion that US security is synonymous with treaties."

However, the treaty will likely be ratified in both countries. In the US Senate, most Democratic and Republican leaders have indicated their support. Indeed, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Democrat Joseph R. Biden, together with Republican Jesse Helms, had earlier insisted that any agreement take the form of a treaty. The Senate leaders wanted to ensure that there was some Congressional say in the matter. Senator Joseph Lieberman called the treaty "a bold significant step" that will "make the world a safer place."

The laxity of the agreement makes it largely acceptable to the US ruling class. It is unclear, however, how long support will last in Russia. Dmitri Trenin, a foreign policy expert at the Moscow Center of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, noted, "The prize [for Russia] is Russia's integration into the world community which is dominated by the United States." The precarious stability of this "community" calls into question the value of the prize.



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