

## The Significance of the US-Russia “New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty” and Future Outlook

**Cheon Seong-Whun**

(Senior Research Fellow, Center for North Korean Studies)

### Introduction

2010 looks to be a very important year for South Korea, which has set the denuclearization of North Korea as a key objective. The Global Nuclear Security Summit is scheduled to be held in Washington D.C. April 12-13, and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference will be held in New York in May. 43 countries, including South Korea, as well as host country the United States, will participate in the Global Nuclear Security Summit, which will discuss, at the summit level, the seriousness of the threat of nuclear terrorism and various proposals for defeating it. The NPT Review Conference will examine the implementation of the NPT over the past 5 years and discuss measures for dealing with major challenges faced by the global non-proliferation regime, such as nuclear development in North Korea and Iran.

Meanwhile, on April 8<sup>th</sup> the leaders of Russia and the US meet in Prague to sign the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (or “New START”), opening a new chapter in nuclear arms reduction. In the midst of the international debate about creating a so-called “world without nuclear weapons” which has progressed since the inception of the Obama administration, the agreement on “New START” carries at least some significant political and diplomatic meaning.

Prague is the site where, just one year ago, President Obama warned about the threat of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terror, and revealed his policy objective to free humanity from the threat of nuclear arms. Since Prague was designated the site for the historic signing of “New START,” the city has now become a symbol of global nuclear non-proliferation. Just as Hiroshima and Nagasaki have become symbolic of nuclear destruction, Prague looks to become established as the emblem of nuclear arms reduction.

## The Negotiation of “New START” and Its Contents

The “New START” negotiations began with an agreement between US President Obama and Russian President Medvedev in London in April 2009 to create a replacement for the “Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty I” (START I) signed in 1991. The US negotiation goal, in place of drastic arms reduction, was to create a follow-up to START I, which expired in December 2009, while still maintaining its system for monitoring Russia’s strategic nuclear position and achieving limited arms reduction. Yet one year’s negotiations required an exhausting itinerary of 10 general sessions and 14 bilateral summit meetings.

The START I treaty limited both sides’ Strategic Nuclear Delivery Vehicles (SNDVs) to 1600 devices and limited operationally deployed nuclear warheads to 6000. SNDVs consist of what is known as the triple axis nuclear strategy: ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles), SLBMs (submarine-launched ballistic missiles), and long-distance bombers. There were some setbacks when the Soviet Union collapsed, but Russia, which inherited the status of possessor of the world’s largest nuclear stockpile, fulfilled its disarmament obligations in December 2001, and on December 5, 2009, the treaty expired as planned.

“New START” can be considered an expanded successor to the spirit and terms of START I, but the stepping-stone between the two is the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT). In May 2002, Presidents Bush and Putin agreed to limit the number of operationally deployed nuclear warheads to 1700-2200 each. SORT came into effect in 2003, and will expire automatically once “New START” takes effect.

“New START” restricts the number of strategic nuclear warheads each side can deploy to 1,550, with a limit of 800 total SNDVs, of which 700 can be actively deployed, excluding delivery systems undergoing repair. The reduction on strategic nuclear warheads is 30% of SORT levels, and the SNDV reduction is 50% of START I. Also it includes a strict verification system based on START I. Like START I, it provides a 7-year period for reductions after coming into effect, and expires after 10 years, which can be extended up to 5 additional years at the consent of both parties. The treaty must be ratified by the legislatures of both countries to take effect; in the US, it needs two thirds of the Senate, or 67 votes, to pass.



## Assessment and Implications

New START's greatest significance is as a symbolic achievement to demonstrate the success of the Obama administration's policy to "reset" US-Russia ties, from confrontation to cooperation. Through this new treaty, the US and Russia have shown the international community that they have forged a new partnership. In a reflection of this, at the public announcement of New START, President Obama declared that when the US and Russia cooperate, they not only benefit their own countries but also contribute to global peace and prosperity, and he emphasized that US-Russia cooperation is essential to strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation system.

The second achievement of New START is that the world's two largest nuclear powers, by signing a new treaty to reduce their nuclear stockpiles and thus showing compliance with the nuclear disarmament obligation under Article 6 of the NPT, have established an ethical, political, and legal basis for demanding that non-nuclear powers renounce nuclear weapons and participate in the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. At the Global Nuclear Security Summit in April and the NPT Review Conference in May, this will help to buttress the positions of the US and Russia, who seek stronger control of nuclear materials and more forceful sticks to apply towards Iran and North Korea.

This method of problem-solving using the international system, which was avoided and underestimated by the preceding Bush administration, and of acknowledging the importance of arms control and restoring the process, is another significant aspect of New START. The Bush administration devalued arms control as a Cold War relic and unilaterally withdrew from the ABM treaty, which was considered emblematic of the easing of military tensions during the Cold War. Now, with the signing of New START, the arms control processes which were marginalized during that period have been put back on the right track.

## Implications for the North Korean Nuclear Issue

It does not appear that New START will have a direct influence on the North Korean nuclear issue. Clearly this treaty will present a new basis from which to call for North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs at international disarmament conferences such as the 6-party talks and the NPT Review Conference. As nuclear powers work to fulfill their obligations under the NPT, they build up justification for demanding that North Korea rejoin the NPT and renounce nuclear weapons. However as long as North Korea does not conduct additional nuclear tests or spread nuclear weapons, it will be



difficult for the UN to further strengthen existing sanctions against North Korea on the basis of New START.

The country in a somewhat awkward position now is China. It supported nuclear disarmament as a matter of policy, so it will not be able to criticize New START. Regarding the nuclear issue, up to this point it has tried to maintain a position favoring neither North Korea nor the US, but the signing of this disarmament treaty by the US and Russia, two major participants in the 6-party talks, has created circumstances in which it will be difficult to support North Korea. It is also possible that China will show more direct involvement in North Korean nuclear disarmament to escape international criticism of its efforts to modernize its own nuclear forces.

In North Korea's case, while we can expect a more vigorous nuclear disarmament offensive following the New START agreement, it will still be able to take a critical position on this treaty. Focusing on the remaining nuclear stockpile rather than on the reduction, North Korea will emphasize that the US nuclear threat still exists. In conclusion, the New START agreement has created some positive conditions for North Korean nuclear disarmament, but it is unlikely that it will make any concrete contribution.

