

SHOULD IT **START** OR MUST IT STOP?

Stephen L. Bakke – November 21, 2010

One of the important issues in the news this week is our President's promotion, or attempted "cram-down," of the START treaty between the U.S. and Russia which is intended to build upon the expired prior nuclear arms limitation treaties between the two countries. Unfortunately it had a shaky "START" when, while meeting with the Russian leaders earlier this year, Obama agreed to certain new arms limitations as part of the treaty. At the time I believe I characterized the Obama/Russo "agreement" as "our President giving away the farm." And, as the draft treaty appeared at that point, I believe he could have naively done that. But some things changed, and deeper analysis was necessary.

All Those Opposed Say Nay

Much of the treaty's criticism had to do with perceived limitations to be imposed on our nuclear defense weaponry. In particular, I paid close attention to critics like Mitt Romney who took serious issue with the proposed treaty on the following grounds:

- It would put severe limitations on our European based U.S. missile defense systems.
- Its verification measures are wholly inadequate.
- Russia would end up with a tactical nuclear advantage.
- The President's recent promise of weapons modernization is undeliverable.
- Russia gets to increase certain equipment since they have fewer than we do.
- "Loopholes and lapses" favor Russia.

Good points all!

All Those In Favor Say Aye

I have also paid attention to Senator Lugar and others (whom I usually don't consider complete buffoons – some may disagree however). These individuals point out that:

- The opponents dismiss strong support by the defense department and the Joint Chiefs.
- Opponents often cite "preambular language" which is unenforceable in any case.
- Some of the items "given away" were actually already "scrapped" from our future plans.
- The treaty, as practically applied, will allow the U.S. to build a good nuclear defense, and the Russians still won't do it because they can't afford it – as has always been the case.
- In general, practical realities of where we are and where the Russians are, are ignored.
- The opponents present too much hyperbole and ignore arms control history and context.
- Rejection of the treaty would be an end to human verification of Russia's capabilities.

I encourage a thorough reading of (in particular) Senator Lugar's excellent analyses of MIRV limits, silo conversions, rail-based systems, bomber warheads, composition of Russia's current weaponry, tactical measurements, and NATO implications, before reaching your own

conclusions. Once again, good points all! **One would be foolish to discount this “moderate Republican’s” grasp of the issue!**

What Do Others Say?

I have noted the surprising (for me) agreements during the last few days of a European “shield” of nuclear defense systems which Obama is promoting as a reaction to any future Iranian nuclear capabilities. That doesn’t please Russia, I’m sure. Remember that these are NATO nations, and NATO was established as a group of countries gathering together to protect themselves from Soviet aggression. But surprisingly, I understand that Russia has been asked, in a limited way, to actually join the effort.

I also have taken note of “generally conservative” pundits, who seem to believe that much of this treaty is worth supporting – given certain limitations, requirements, and parameters. Joining with many prominent and respected statesmen is the Senate Foreign Relations Committee which gave bipartisan approval to the general concepts of the draft treaty. Military leaders seem to be supporting most aspects of the treaty and, for what it’s worth, European leaders generally support it in its current form. Remember that some in Europe seemed to be “cool” to the original draft treaty because some saw it as a U.S. betrayal of traditionally providing protection. That concern seems to be subsiding.

You Can’t Escape the Politics

I have noted, with considerable appreciation, the reluctance of conservative Senator Kyl to address this measure too quickly. I believe he is leaning toward agreeing with the treaty if he can obtain assurances, which are enforceable and deliverable by the administration, of a commitment to fund future nuclear arms modernization. He has other concerns as well – like making sure he and all the Senate understand what is proposed, what the consequences are, and what could be the “unintended consequences” which this administration is so “wont” to create.

Why is there so much squabbling about the timing of the final vote on the treaty? Recall that it is the U.S. Senate which is given the constitutional responsibility of approving all treaties. And the ratification of treaties requires 67 (or 2/3) Senate votes. If the final vote is delayed until the new session of legislative session starting in January, the Democrats will hold a smaller majority, therefore more chance of changes or rejection. The democrats would have held the vote before the November elections if they felt they had the 67 votes necessary. And from a purely political perspective, wouldn’t it be best for the conservatives to be able to boast of passing a nuclear treaty which was intensely debated, and in which they had something to say.

Yet, I Am Haunted by Obama’s Embarrassment About U.S. Military Superiority

While I don’t predict that ultimately the treaty should or will be rejected, I do think it is good for the conservatives to use their leverage in the Senate and hold out for the **best deal possible**. Yet, **I am haunted** by Obama’s reflexive leadership by “low expectations.” **I am haunted** that Obama seems to sincerely lament that the U.S. has superior military capabilities. And **I am**

haunted by the possibility that Obama's desire for total U.S. disarmament (to lead by example) is the governing emotion in the final decision – **it must not be!**

Nevertheless, I believe it is important that we renew an agreement which would keep Reagan's concept of "trust but verify" alive. There have been no mutual U.S./Russian nuclear arms inspections for many months. I believe nuclear agreements are desirable, and such an agreement would "tend" to keep the U.S. and Russia "somewhat" on the same side of the Iranian nuclear arms issue, and the two are at least tacitly cooperating on efforts in Afghanistan. I admit my hopes may be a bit too idealistic – but we are all entitled to some of that.

I Believe and I Predict

If all this comes to pass, and **if Senator Kyl and others obtain what they are after, I believe the Senate should, and will, ratify this treaty with at least the required 67 bipartisan votes in the affirmative. In fact, I predict an overwhelming vote to affirm, if the loyal opposition receives the very reasonable changes, limitations, and deliverable assurances it is seeking.**

So there it is. I expect many will disagree with my stance on this one. I may change my mind, but it is what it is. I believe, within the context of the requirements and limitations I expressed above, my instincts will prove correct. This was a tough one for me to decide because there is so much uncertainty as to the results of any position or policy. My feelings on this tend to be somewhat visceral and intuitive – but I assure you I have given this considerable attention.

I invite comments – unless you disagree (just kidding). Just be gentle, polite, and please show a sincere concern for my feelings.