

Pugwash President Jayantha Dhanapala on the
US-Russian START Treaty - 29 March 2010

The long awaited and successful conclusion of the nuclear arms control treaty negotiations between the US and the Russian Federation which together have 95% off the nuclear weapons in the world must surely be welcomed. It is a return to traditional arms control (replacing the 1991 treaty signed by Presidents Bush and Gorbachev) with a seriously negotiated three-tiered treaty and not by a perfunctory “handshake” as preferred by the previous US Administration; it envisages actual reductions over a seven year period after its entry into force estimated at 30% of deployed warheads; it represents a breakthrough by counting warheads and not missile launchers; it contains confidence building measures by sharing telemetry or information technology data and it is verifiable and irreversible - provided the US Senate and the Russian Duma ratify it.

However, it is important to analyze the yet unavailable text of the Treaty to know whether it is a genuine disarmament treaty which envisages the actual destruction of nuclear warheads and not a diversion of deployed warheads to a parking lot to be held in storage. News reports indicate a limit of 1550 deployed warheads for each side. Let us put this in perspective. The Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) states that there are a total of 23,300 nuclear warheads in the world today. Of this the US currently has 2702 deployed warheads (2202 of them strategic and 500 non strategic) while the Russian Federation has 4834 warheads (2787 strategic and 2047 non strategic). The earlier Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (SORT) of 2002 envisaged limits of 1700-2200 deployed warheads by 2012. In addition, according to the new treaty, a total limit on launchers has been set at 800, with a ceiling of 700 agreed for deployed ballistic missiles and strategic bombers. Tactical or short-range nuclear warheads, which do not come within the scope of this new treaty, remain part of the unfinished nuclear disarmament business, as are US ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and its entry into force and the negotiation of a Fissile Material Treaty.

The signature of this new Treaty, scheduled for 8 April in Prague, and its hoped for ratification, lends great credibility to the vision of a nuclear weapon-free world articulated in President Obama's Prague speech one year ago and supported by many others in the US and around the world. It also strengthens both the nonproliferation and disarmament norms embodied in the NPT. It is a new and more durable "Prague Spring" - harbinger of more nuclear disarmament treaties both bilateral and multilateral.

The signature of the Treaty in April comes just before the Washington Nuclear Security Summit which focuses on the safeguarding of nuclear materials as a non-proliferation measure as well as the Eighth Review Conference on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) which is under great strain due to the failure of the 2005 Review Conference and mutual recrimination between nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapon states on compliance with their respective treaty obligations. The demonstration by the two major nuclear weapon states that they are beginning to fulfill their responsibilities and commitments will increase the prospects for the success of these two important conferences. Equally important are the US Nuclear Posture Review and the upcoming NATO Strategic Concept Review reflecting a reduced salience and role for nuclear weapons in defence strategy. It should also lead to other nuclear weapon states following the example of the US and Russia by implementing reductions in their own arsenals.