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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

OPINION | DECEMBER 13, 2010

Groundhog Day on U.S.-Russia Arms Control

The Bush administration faced demands to limit missile defenses. We told Moscow no.

By DOUGLAS J. FEITH

President Obama's pleas for quick Senate approval of New Start, his nuclear arms treaty with Russia, remind me of long days nine years ago in the Russian Defense Ministry—where I helped negotiate the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT). My Russian counterpart was Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky, who had the physique of a Soviet tank and a head full of Soviet-era arms control notions.

Gen. Baluyevsky pressed various demands. Some were for provisions designed to impede U.S. missile defense or U.S. military modernization. I said "no." When the Obama administration negotiated New Start, Russia resurfaced essentially the same provisions. This time, U.S. officials said yes.

Russian officials oppose American plans for missile defense. In the SORT negotiations, they demanded that the treaty recognize an "interrelationship" between offensive arms reductions and missile defense. They wanted language that would, down the road, legitimate Russian arguments that U.S. missile defense programs violate America's obligations to preserve a strategic balance with Russia.

The Russians also demanded elaborate but ineffectual verification measures. They focused, for example, on inspection of "declared facilities"—those that a party declared open to inspection. This was silly. We knew that any Russian violations would not likely occur in a declared facility subject to inspection.



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Associated Press

Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky

The foundation for SORT was the Pentagon's 2001-02 review of the U.S. nuclear posture. We had concluded that America was deploying far more warheads than necessary, as the Cold War was long over and there was hope of friendlier relations with Russia. We reckoned we could cut our arsenal by approximately two-thirds, and that it was not necessary to condition our reductions on any reciprocal Russian promises. So President Bush announced that the U.S. would make the two-thirds cut on our own. Russia was not our enemy, and given other threats such as North Korea and Iran, there was no sense anymore in making Russia our touchstone for all strategic weapons.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin was less interested in transcending Cold War superpower rivalry than in salvaging some of Russia's prestige as America's nuclear counterweight. He announced his own plan for unilateral Russian weapons cuts and, at the same time, pushed for a new U.S.-Russian arms treaty.

When Gen. Baluyevsky presented his unacceptable demands and I rejected them, he said they were required, absolutely. This made a new treaty impossible, I said, but that was all right, for no new treaty was necessary. It

was Russia that desired one, I observed. Mr. Bush was willing to accommodate this desire as a gesture of friendship, but not at any price.

Gen. Baluyevsky said it was unimaginable to have no arms treaty providing "structure" to the U.S.-Russian relationship. I observed that America had relationships with nearly 200 other countries, including some with nuclear weapons, and we did not structure our ties to any of them with arms-control accords. During the Cold War, things were different. Russia soon dropped its demands for terms that would constrain U.S. missile defense, discourage long-range conventional strike capabilities, and create bogus verification. The treaty was signed in May 2002.

Seven years later, the incoming Obama administration was eager to repudiate its predecessor's policies. Russian officials saw their opportunity. They asked again for the concessions they had before unsuccessfully demanded from Mr. Bush.

Mr. Obama agreed to treaty language linking offensive reductions with missile defense, limiting launch vehicles, and restricting conversion of ICBMs for missile defense purposes. He accepted counting rules that would impede us in converting nuclear ICBMs, say, to conventional missiles. They would still count as nuclear weapons and could force us to give up other nuclear weapons. Mr. Obama also accepted ineffectual verification measures that establish a bad precedent.

The American arms-control priesthood was quick to praise New Start. But the U.S. Senate has the responsibility to evaluate Mr. Obama's concessions. At a minimum, that requires reviewing the negotiating record—which has yet to be provided to the Senate.

Mr. Obama's poor negotiating is a cautionary tale: If you want it bad you get it bad.

Mr. Feith, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, served as under secretary of defense from 2001 to 2005.

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