



Russian Tu-95 military jets were dismantled in accordance with the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START, between the United States and the ex-Soviet Union. Both sides agreed to eliminate many bombers that had carried nuclear weapons.



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

# *De-Escalation in the* Post-Cold War

*Nonproliferation is key to peace  
as Cold War rivalries fade*

Story by *per* Concordiam Staff

**A**t a time when rogue regimes pursue atomic bombs and nations confront the threat of nuclear proliferation, the former nuclear standoff of the Cold War represents an era of relative stability for many. Even accounting for a dose of Nuclear Age-nostalgia and historical amnesia, there is some truth to the claim that the world was a more predictable place when it was strategically split between two rival superpowers.

For all of the fears it inspired, the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction managed to keep the relative peace for decades, most prominently between the United States and the Soviet Union. A world power tempted to launch nuclear weapons had to contend with an almost inevitable response from its adversaries. It was a price no nation was willing to pay. The expansion of Soviet and U.S. nuclear capability in the 1960s and 1970s — when strategic warheads multiplied by the thousands in missile silos and aboard submarines and long-range bombers — raised questions of overkill resulting in the first of several arms control agreements such as Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty I.

But after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the former bipolar world fragmented. World leaders expressed unease that nuclear stockpiles once safely tucked away inside the Soviet empire would become fodder for international smugglers. Americans and Russians took comfort that their nations had ceased pointing Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles at one another, though they soon recognized the growing threat of nuclear proliferation in the new multipolar world, epitomized by the ambitions of nations such as North Korea and Iran.

The task facing NATO, and the international community at large, is clear but difficult: Rebuild a disarmament and nonproliferation regimen in a world no longer bound by the rules of old U.S.-Soviet conflict. Progress has been steady, if incomplete. Leading by example, the U.S. and Russia have spent 20 years slashing their stockpiles of nuclear weapons. The latest arms control agreement, the New START treaty signed by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama in 2010, mandates a reduction of one category of nuclear weapon — strategic warheads attached mostly to missiles — to 1,550 in each country.

The specter of nuclear material falling into the hands of international terrorists has prompted NATO to refocus on this nontraditional threat. The Alliance's most recent dissertation on the topic appeared with the 2009 publication of the "Comprehensive, Strategic-Level Policy for Preventing the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Defending against Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Threats." Two recent nuclear-related incidents — Moldovans trying to smuggle 2 kilograms of processed uranium and an al-Qaida sympathizer suspected of spying within the European Organization for Nuclear Research — suggest the Alliance's emphasis on nonproliferation is well founded.

## Roots of U.S.-Russia Cooperation

Ever since the Soviet Union acquired atomic weapons in the late 1940s, ending the U.S.'s brief monopoly of "the bomb," no disarmament talks could neglect that mutual standoff. When the Soviet system dissolved in 1991, the U.S. and USSR could have destroyed each other many times over. Experts estimated the rivals' nuclear warhead strength at 35,000 for the ex-Soviet Union and 20,000 for the U.S. Unilateral and bilateral deals carried out by U.S. presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, on the one hand, and Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, on the other hand, brought about disarmament on a vast scale. The best known of those treaties was 1991's

Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START. Though the treaty focused on long-range strategic weapons, most of the nuclear bombs deactivated and dismantled in the 1990s were tactical weapons, including low-kiloton nuclear artillery and short- and intermediate-range missiles no longer needed as the threat of land war in Central Europe dissipated. In a largely symbolic gesture, both nations took the step of "de-targeting" each other's cities.

But the fragmentation of the once-tightly controlled Soviet nuclear arsenal provoked fears of proliferation. The splintering of the Soviet Union into independent states required the evacuation of nuclear weapons from new nations such as Kazakhstan, Belarus and the Ukraine, a mission largely completed with the help of NATO members by the late 1990s. As the nearest thing to a successor state to the old USSR, Russia retained much of the old Soviet nuclear force. The September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Virginia raised awareness of the threat of weapons of mass destruction should they fall into the hands of terrorists. World leaders were quick to recall a 1998 promise by al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden that it was his Islamic duty to acquire WMDs. Through agreements such as the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, the U.S. provided billions of dollars in assistance to secure Soviet nuclear weapons, going as far as to buy hundreds of tons of highly-enriched Russian uranium for use in U.S. nuclear power plants. The goal was to dispose of dangerous material that could otherwise arm thousands of nuclear weapons.

In 2002, the Moscow Treaty between presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, followed by NATO's Rome Summit, attempted to solidify and extend the arms control gains of the preceding decade. After signing the Moscow agreement, Bush spoke of his hopes for a world secure from the scourge of a renewed nuclear arms race: "This is a historic and hopeful day for Russia and the United States, a hopeful day also for the world as a

whole. It liquidates the legacy of the Cold War and the nuclear confrontation of our countries."

## Proliferation Risks

But as the U.S. and Russia made history by recommitting themselves to de-escalation, the threat of proliferation, including the sale of nuclear material on the black market, refused to recede. During the Cold War, the most concrete step to stem the spread of nuclear weapons was the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, ultimately signed by 189 nations, including the U.S. and then-USSR. The treaty stresses not only nonproliferation and disarmament but also the peaceful use of nuclear energy under the guidance of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Moscow invoked the peaceful use clause as it assisted Iran's nuclear program, a sticking point left unresolved by the Bush-Putin treaty. NATO continues to offer proof that Iran is a terror-sponsoring regime more interested in building nuclear warheads than nuclear power plants. Saber-rattling speeches from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have done nothing to soothe international concerns.

But even as Iran pursued its nuclear ambitions, NATO and its partners notched one success in the pursuit of nonproliferation: Libya gave up its nuclear weapons program in 2003 and threw open its uranium-enriching operation to international inspectors. An investigation of Libya's nuclear program uncovered an international network of proliferators led by A.Q. Khan, considered the father of Pakistan's nuclear program. Investigators allege Khan helped assemble a nuclear infrastructure not just in Libya but in North Korea and Iran. The elderly Khan was sentenced to a temporary — some say lenient — stint of house arrest in his home country.

Khan's removal from the world stage has not ended nuclear proliferation scares. In 2009, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, or CERN, announced the arrest of a French physicist of Algerian extraction and accused him of spying for al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, a violent

extremist group tied to bin Laden. “His work did not bring him into contact with anything that could be used for terrorism,” the Swiss-based CERN said in an October 2009 statement. “None of our research has potential for military application, and all our results are published openly in the public domain.”

Perhaps more serious, in August 2010 three Moldovans were charged with trying to sell about 2 kilograms of uranium-238 worth an estimated 9 million euros (about \$11 million) on the black market. The uranium was shipped to Germany to analyze its country of origin and enrichment grade, but the Moldovan Interior Ministry said the men were carrying too little fissionable material to build a nuclear explosive or radiation-dispersing “dirty bomb.” Two of the three suspects arrested were former policemen intent on shipping the uranium to buyers in what the media said were “unspecified countries.”

That case harkens back to two well-reported uranium seizures in the Caucasus during the past decade. In separate incidents, Armenian Garik Dadayan and Georgian Tamaz Dimitradze were caught trying to smuggle small quantities of enriched uranium sufficient to supply a bomb. Both men were accused of being couriers for undisclosed buyers or sellers, and the uranium in question, owing to its distinctive chemical signature, likely came from former Soviet stockpiles. Slovakia broke up another nuclear fuel ring in 2007 with seizure of two shells containing 481 grams of enriched uranium powder. Police said the three suspects, from Hungary and the Ukraine, hoped to sell the dirty-bomb-grade uranium for \$1 million.

## NATO Shifts Strategy

In light of the breakup of the USSR and the shock of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, NATO has shifted strategy to place a greater emphasis on nonproliferation of WMD. The need to store nuclear weapons under a responsible central authority has been a topic of discussion within the U.S.-Russia Council, a body formed during the Rome Summit of 2002 to maintain open lines of communication between the former NATO and Eastern Bloc rivals. Both nations recognize the



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev inspects a Topol-M rocket at a nuclear missile launching site in May 2008. The latest disarmament treaty between the U.S. and Russia slashes strategic nuclear weapons in each country to 10 percent of their Cold War peaks.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

danger should nuclear weapons fall into the hands of anti-NATO and anti-Russian extremists.

In 2007, NATO activated the Joint Chemical Biological Radiological and Nuclear Defense Center of Excellence in Vyškov, Czech Republic. Part of its mission is the development of doctrines and standards to combat the spread of WMD. Ten European nations, including Poland, Germany, Italy and Hungary, jointly operate the center. The Alliance also hosts yearly nonproliferation seminars to which nonmember countries are invited. The last seminar, in Prague, drew 120 senior officials from NATO members and nonmembers from five continents. Summing up the conference, Czech Foreign Minister Jan Kohout stated that it “reaffirmed that the full and effective implementation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and

Defending Against Chemical, Biological and Nuclear Threats.” The document noted that the spread of WMD and their possible procurement by terrorists were “the principal threats to the Alliance over the next 10-15 years.” NATO followed that up by activating its Emerging Security Challenges Division in August 2010. The division, based at Alliance headquarters in Brussels, is tasked with confronting “a growing range of nontraditional risks and challenges,” including the spread of nuclear weapons to terrorists and noncompliant regimes. At their Lisbon summit in November 2010, Alliance members reiterated their opposition to the proliferation of WMD, singling out Iran and North Korea. NATO gave itself until June 2011 to “assess and report” how it can better counter the proliferation of WMD and their means of delivery.

little doubt that by objective standards, our controls on weapons-usable material are far stronger—and consequently we are safer—than ten or fifteen years ago. Moreover, this work will continue, which is all to the good. But, it is not enough. No security system can be perfect, and we have empirical evidence that our control over nuclear material is not absolute.”

Analysts rate the chances of terrorists acquiring or building a Hiroshima style bomb as “remote” at this stage. Regimes with such know-how would hesitate to provide terrorists such a device for fear that the weapon could invite retaliation or be used against the supplying regimes. Perhaps a bigger immediate threat is violent extremists acquiring the material to make a dirty bomb, a radiological device that could contaminate an area using smaller amounts of lower grade uranium “In some senses, the greater danger is the use of radioactive materials that are used to create the dirty bomb,” said Carlton Stoiber, head of the Working Group on Nuclear Security of the International Nuclear Law Association in Brussels.

## Making Progress

Evidence of the former U.S.-Soviet conflict continues to dwindle with the 2010 signing of the New START treaty in Prague. The treaty stipulates that the United States and Russia reduce their strategic nuclear arsenals approximately 90 percent below Cold War peaks. In hard numbers, the treaty would cap strategic nuclear warheads at 1,550 and nuclear-armed bombers and long-range missiles at 700. To ensure compliance, both nations agreed to resume inspections that had lapsed months earlier with the expiration of an earlier START treaty. The agreement leaves each nation in possession of nuclear forces sufficient to deter the other — or any other nuclear state for that matter. But its focus on dismantling old weaponry and converting much of its nuclear fuel to peaceful uses aids the cause of nonproliferation.

The U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration has assembled anti-proliferation partnerships with



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

World leaders gather at the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington in April 2010. Nations pledged to eliminate excess nuclear fuel that terrorists seek to acquire to produce bombs.

the regime of nonproliferation in all its aspects has a vital role in promoting international peace and security.” Norway plans to hold this year’s multinational nonproliferation conference.

The Prague seminar was the second NATO nonproliferation event since NATO’s 2009 adoption of the “Comprehensive, Strategic-Level Policy for Preventing the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and

The U.S. and its NATO allies continue to support Russia financially in its efforts to catalogue and quarantine nuclear fuel. The U.S. Congress approved \$1.2 billion in such “nonproliferation assistance” in 2009 alone. Analysts contend the money has been well spent. Here’s an assessment from a July 2010 article published by Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs: “There is



U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev answer questions during a news conference at the White House in Washington in June 2010. Two months earlier, Obama and Medvedev reached agreement on New START, a nuclear arms reduction treaty.

REUTERS

countries such as Norway, Finland, the Netherlands and the UK. Norway, for example, has used NNSA funding to set up a program in Kazakhstan called Second Line of Defense. The program uses radiation detecting equipment to counter potential nuclear smuggling at Almaty International Airport. NNSA also contributed \$31 million toward closing Russia's last weapons-grade plutonium reactor.

Nuclear containment was also a key topic at the Nuclear Security Summit, a gathering of representatives of 47 nations held in Washington in April 2010. The summit obtained promises from the Ukraine,

Mexico, Chile, Kazakhstan, Vietnam and Canada to wean some of their nuclear plants off highly enriched uranium, the fuel also used in nuclear bombs. Attempting to lead on the issue, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed a pact requiring Russia and the United States each to dispose of 34 metric tons of surplus weapons-grade plutonium. Malaysia, Armenia and Egypt vowed to impose stricter export controls to interrupt nuclear trafficking. Armenia was the country through which Dadayan planned to smuggle uranium, and Malaysia was a transit point in the Khan nuclear network.

But few believe the summit's announced goal of a "nuclear-free" world is immediately achievable. The world contains an estimated 200 sites capable of producing or storing weapons-grade uranium or plutonium. The fraying of the post-Cold War security fabric will continue to present proliferation challenges. Nuclear deterrence, though effective in the context of the United States versus Soviet Union, cannot be relied upon to contain the homicidal impulses of terrorists. When one considers the destructiveness and lethality of even a single World War II-era nuclear device, the margin for error in our multipolar world remains narrow. □