

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Richard G. Lugar
Opening Statement for Hearing on Prospects for Engagement with Russia
March 19, 2009

I join the Chairman in welcoming our distinguished witnesses.

Russia represents significant challenges as well as opportunities for the Obama Administration. Moscow is at the intersection of many of the most important foreign policy issues facing the United States. We have common interests on a number of economic and security issues, including arms control, non-proliferation, anti-terrorism, and global economic recovery. Russia is experiencing severe pain from the global economic downturn that would seem to increase incentives to cooperate on a range of issues. The ruble has plunged 50 percent against the dollar, and the Moscow stock market has dropped 80 percent, amidst a collapse in oil prices.

Although these economic conditions and common interests may create openings, we should be realistic in assessing the prospects for cooperation. Negotiating with Russia will be a far more complex proposition than appealing for a new relationship. Russian actions related to Iran, Afghanistan, and North Korea, for example, have exhibited a reflexive resistance to U.S. positions even when we have substantial commonality of interest. Russia's repeated use of energy exports as a political weapon and its treatment of Ukraine and Georgia demonstrate an aggressiveness that has made comprehensive negotiations on regional problems impractical. In this context, we should avoid ratcheting between excessive expectations and severe disappointment. Rather, we should recognize that U.S. – Russian relations are likely to be strained for some time. We should consider carefully what initiatives can be advanced in such an environment.

Our most time-sensitive agenda item with Russia is the preservation of the START Treaty. On December 5, the verification regime that undergirds the START Treaty will expire. The Moscow Treaty, which reduces deployed warheads to 1,700, would also be a casualty because it utilizes the START process. In other words, the foundation of the U.S.-Russian strategic relationship is at risk of collapsing in less than nine months. The Bush Administration made little progress on this issue prior to its departure. I know that President Obama and Vice President Biden understand the urgency of the problem. However, everyone involved should recognize that we are dealing with a timeline that leaves little room for error or delay.

I support efforts to negotiate lower U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons levels; reduce Russia's tactical nuclear weapons stockpile; cooperate on missile defense; and solve the conventional weapons stalemate. But with the December 5th deadline looming, we should carefully set priorities. Solidifying the START verification regime must be the primary focus. Both sides would benefit from a legally binding solution in which a common commitment to the START and Moscow Treaties is retained.

Reaching common ground on START would provide a foundation for continuing U.S.-Russian cooperation on reducing the nuclear, chemical and biological dangers facing the world. Next year, nearly every nation will participate in a Review Conference on the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The NPT is under stress from the actions of Iran and North Korea and the concerns of neighboring countries. The Treaty is also contending with the complications that arise out of an expansion of global interest in nuclear power. The national security of both Russia and the United States will suffer if the world experiences a breakdown of the non-proliferation regime. Before the Review Conference, Moscow and Washington should strive to achieve bilateral arms control progress, as well as strengthened cooperation on non-proliferation issues.

One important element of such cooperation is the establishment of an international nuclear fuel bank. A nuclear fuel bank would help keep nuclear power safe, prevent proliferation, and solve energy problems by providing nuclear fuel and fuel services at reasonable prices to those countries that forego enrichment and reprocessing. Unless the U.S. and Russia provide strong leadership in this area, the coming surge in demand for nuclear power will lead more and more nations to seek their own enrichment facilities. That would pose an unacceptable risk to the security of both countries. If non-nuclear weapons states opt for major nuclear power programs and their own fuel-making capabilities, they would produce enough nuclear material for tens of thousands of nuclear bombs every year. This could generate a raft of new nuclear weapons states, exponentially increase the threat of nuclear terrorism, and provoke highly destabilizing arms races.

The Obama Administration must plan and carry out a realistic strategy that promotes U.S. interests while engaging with Russia in areas where we have common objectives. I look forward to the insights of our witnesses on the prospects for engagement with Russia and the priorities that we should be pursuing.

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