

Leave the hard bits till last

But a new treaty is worth having.

Their countries once used to glare at each other, nuclear triggers cocked. They still find plenty to disagree about. But when President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, prepared to meet this week to discuss the planet's nuclear future, their purpose was rather more visionary: to recommit themselves, along with other UN Security Council colleagues, to the dream of a world eventually free of the bomb.

Meanwhile, an ocean away in Geneva, American and Russian negotiators are aiming at something more modest but arguably more urgent: new verification rules, along with a token cut in existing weapons stockpiles, that will get them safely beyond December 5th, when old counting rules, in place for the past 15 years, are due to expire. This gritty work on a new, legally binding arms-control treaty is vital if deeper weapons cuts are to follow.

New counting rules will help ensure predictability in any future build-down. That is particularly important to Russia just now. It has long had technical and financial problems modernising its long-range missiles; its submarine-launched Bulava missile, for example, has proved a dud in recent tests. It wants to be sure America's numbers come down along with its own.

Both agree that the old rules were needlessly cumbersome and expensive. Many of their provisions, devised in an era of cold-war suspicion, have never even been used. Yet on this and other issues, negotiations have proved tough.

Actual weapons numbers, though always tricky, are the least of it. At a meeting in Moscow in July Mr Obama and Mr Medvedev agreed that the new treaty would limit their arsenals to between 500 and 1,100 long-range delivery vehicles (missiles, aircraft and submarines) and 1,500 to 1,675 deployed warheads apiece. These broad figures spanned the two sides' competing proposals as they went into talks; the final treaty totals will be in-between. Within the agreed limit, each side will then be free to configure its forces as it sees fit.

To nuclear critics, that will still leave an awful lot of warheads. Yet Russian and American weapons totals have tumbled dramatically since the cold war ended. The 2002 Moscow treaty now in force limits deployed strategic warheads to 1,700-2,200 apiece by 2012. That was a sharp cut from the 6,000 each allowed under the Start-1 treaty, for which the counting rules are being renegotiated. That, in turn, was well down on the excesses of the cold war.

Even when the new treaty is finished, Russia will still be grumbling. It has kept its most modern multi-warhead missiles tipped with as many warheads as it can fit, whereas America has configured its missile forces differently, leaving space, Russia frets, for a quick upload. America has also been musing about putting conventional warheads on some of its fastest-flying strategic missiles to achieve what is known as "prompt global strike" against otherwise fleeting terrorist targets. Russia hates the idea. So, if America goes ahead, it will insist that any such missiles be counted against its overall nuclear tally.

Missile defences are another irritant. Yet even before Mr Obama's decision to abandon planned sites in Poland and the Czech Republic (see article on previous page), he and Mr Medvedev had agreed to take their differences over this elsewhere, rather than burden the new arms treaty they both want.

In pursuit of timely new counting rules, some hard issues had to be set aside. Dismantling extra warheads not counted as "deployed" would help disarmament but require more intrusive inspections than the Russians like. America would like shorter-range tactical weapons, of which Russia has plenty, cut too. This issue will become urgent as NATO thinks through its future

strategy; members such as Germany will soon have to decide whether to replace ageing aircraft with newer dual-capable ones, or settle for cheaper versions that carry only conventional arms. Arms control: a profession with a future.

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