

The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992

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Summary

On 27 September 1991, U.S. President George H.W. Bush announced unprecedented changes to U.S. nuclear forces and practices. Known as the Presidential Nuclear Initiative (PNI), the measures were unilateral-reciprocal—the U.S. would act on its own, but also challenge the Soviet Union to take comparable steps. Bush declared additional PNI actions on 28 January 1992. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev responded on 5 October 1991, and Russian President Yeltsin on 29 January 1992.ⁱ The U.S. nuclear stockpile fell by 50 percent between 1990 and 1994. No other period in U.S. nuclear history saw such a large numerical reduction in so short a time. The extent of Soviet and Russian implementation, however, remains uncertain. Given the current political and military environment between the U.S. and Russia, any return to the PNI approach seems unlikely.

The Context

The context for the PNIs began to emerge with the December 1987 signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the first U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms control agreement to provide for intrusive on-site verification and real reductions. Changes in the international security environment accelerated thereafter. Six months after the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, Bush announced significant changes to planned tactical nuclear forces in Europe—cancelling the Follow-On to Lance short-range, ground-launched missile, as well as modernization of nuclear artillery warheads deployed in Europe. In July 1990, the NATO Summit in London called for the elimination of short-range nuclear artillery in Europe, pursuant to a U.S.-Soviet arms control agreement. Slightly over a year later, the PNI went much further.

The Warsaw Pact effectively ceased to function after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and finally dissolved officially on 31 March 1991. Ukraine and the Baltic States pressed ever more strongly for independence. On 12 June 1991, Boris Yeltsin was elected President of the Russian Republic. Beginning in January 1991, Gorbachev oversaw the preparation of a New Union Treaty, in an effort to salvage the Soviet Union by reorganizing it into a confederation. Eight republics

were to sign the Treaty on 20 August, 1991. That was cancelled after a hardline group instituted a coup against Gorbachev on 19 August. Their efforts collapsed quickly, ending on 21 August. The stage for the PNIs was set.

U.S. Motives

Several complementary factors motivated Bush and other principal U.S. players to pursue the PNI. First, they had been seriously concerned about the reliability of Soviet nuclear command and control during the failed coup attempt against Gorbachev. That concern remained after Gorbachev's reinstatement, given the questionable future of the Soviet centre. Perhaps even more important was the spectre of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan; by September 1991, it was likely that each would become independent, inheriting the nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles on their territories. Further, President Bush saw dramatic nuclear reductions as both reflecting and accelerating the changed relationship with the Soviet Union.

Ideas for reducing U.S. theatre nuclear forces had circulated for some time among senior U.S. military officers. The Cold War had ended, but there were new conflict areas—highlighted by Operation Desert Storm in Iraq—in which conventional military force would have primary importance. Further, several U.S. military leaders believed that advanced conventional forces could now accomplish many missions that earlier required nuclear weapons.

The U.S. faced other pressures to reduce shorter-range nuclear weapons. NATO Allies were increasingly resistant to required modernization of ground-launched nuclear forces. Political and budgetary strictures also were important. Earlier in September 1991, the U.S. Senate had voted against funding the mobile versions of the Peacekeeper intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and Small ICBM as well as the advanced Short-Range Attack Missile (SRAM II). The PNI cancelled all three programs.

The 27 September PNI included a call on the Soviet Union to reciprocate. That was driven primarily by concern over the security of Soviet nuclear warheads. Short-range nuclear warheads were a particular worry, given that they were widely dispersed, smaller, and easier to transport than weapons associated with strategic systems. Still, the U.S. Government was fully prepared to implement most PNI elements unilaterally. The only ones to require reciprocity were the proposals for U.S.-Soviet dialogue and for a formal agreement that became START II.

The Soviet Union and close allies of the U.S. were apprised of the PNI only at the most senior level, and just hours before the announcement. Presidential letters outlining the initiative were delivered to selected heads of government and the NATO Secretary-General at their opening of business on 27 September. Bush followed up with telephone calls to French President Francois Mitterrand, British Prime Minister John Major, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Gorbachev and Yeltsin. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft called NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner.ⁱⁱ Although Bush asked all for their reactions to the initiative before its

announcement, the last-minute nature of the contacts prevented a detailed consultation. Yeltsin, Mitterrand, and Kohl warmly welcomed the proposals, without qualification. Major raised two issues, but does not seem to have opposed the package. Gorbachev was somewhat cautious, but positive, and approved Bush's public statement of optimism about the likely Soviet response.

The 27 September Announcement

The first PNI is remembered primarily for tactical nuclear reductions. However, it also included several important measures on strategic nuclear weapons and U.S.-Soviet cooperation.

Tactical Nuclear Forces

Under the 27 September PNI, all U.S. ground-launched tactical nuclear weapons—about 1000 artillery rounds and 700 Lance surface-to-surface missile warheads—were removed from Europe. Those, and another 400 nuclear artillery and Lance warheads in the U.S., were all destroyed. All U.S. nuclear weapons were removed from surface ships, attack submarines, and land-based naval aircraft. Those included 100 nuclear Tomahawk Land-Attack missiles (TLAM-N), naval nuclear bombs, and nuclear depth bombs. Approximately half of the total naval tactical nuclear stockpile was destroyed. The remainder, including all TLAM-N, were put in storage.

Cancellation of the planned theatre version of the SRAM II was the only element of the 27 September PNI announcement concerning air-delivered weapons. However, in mid-October, the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) announced that “the number of air-delivered weapons in NATO's European stockpile will be greatly reduced.”ⁱⁱⁱ Press reports indicated that those weapons would be cut by 50 percent, from about 1400 to 700 gravity bombs.

Strategic Nuclear Forces

The 27 September PNI included an end to strategic bomber alert, cancellation of the mobile ICBM and SRAM II programs, removal from alert of all Minuteman II ICBMs slated for elimination under the START Treaty, and commitment to accelerate Minuteman II elimination after START's entry-into-force.

Calls for Reciprocity

While all of those measures for U.S. nuclear forces were unconditional, Bush called on the Soviet Union to take reciprocal actions. He suggested that the Soviet Union:

- eliminate all of its ground-launched tactical nuclear forces, including artillery, warheads for short-range ballistic missiles and air-defence missiles, and land mines;
- remove all tactical nuclear weapons from surface ships and submarines, withdraw nuclear

weapons for land-based naval aircraft, destroy many naval tactical warheads and consolidate the rest in central storage areas;

- limit ICBM modernization to one single-warhead system;
- end all programs for future ICBMs with multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs); and
- confine mobile ICBMs to garrison.

Calls for Cooperation

Bush also proposed to the Soviet Union important new forms of cooperation. First, he suggested that the two governments explore cooperation on safe and secure nuclear warhead command and control, storage, transport, dismantlement, and destruction. The idea reflected the strong concerns of the time about Soviet nuclear command and control, the need to consolidate as many nuclear weapons as possible in Russia, and the hope for major Soviet warhead reductions. Bush also proposed U.S.-Soviet cooperation on practical steps to allow limited ballistic missile defences beyond those permitted by the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Finally, Bush described what apparently would be a very simple, perhaps informal, agreement, under which the sides would agree on a timetable to eliminate MIRVed ICBMs (through missile destruction and/or warhead downloading), and use START Treaty procedures to implement it.

The Soviet Response

At midday on 5 October 1991, a U.S. interagency team arrived in Moscow, intending to explain the 27 September PNI more fully and to urge a positive Soviet response. However, shortly after arriving, the delegation head was called to the Foreign Ministry and provided with a copy of the speech that Gorbachev would give that evening. The Soviet response was faster, wider-ranging, and more positive than even the most optimistic U.S. official would have predicted.

Tactical Nuclear Forces

Gorbachev committed to sweeping reductions of tactical nuclear weapons, most of which followed the U.S. measures and calls for reciprocity. The Soviet Union would eliminate all nuclear artillery, short-range missile nuclear warheads, and nuclear mines. It would remove all air defence nuclear warheads to central storage, and eliminate a “portion.”^{iv} The proliferation potential of the large number of ground-launched Soviet tactical nuclear weapons still deployed outside Russia probably provided a powerful motive for these commitments. Non-Russian republics might be loath to allow the transfer of tactical nuclear weapons from their territory if they thought they would simply add to the Russian arsenal. Their attitude toward those transfers would be far more positive if the weapons were to be destroyed and if the action was part of a unilateral-reciprocal arrangement with the U.S.

Gorbachev also announced that the Soviet Union, like the U.S., would remove from deployment all tactical nuclear weapons for surface ships, submarines, and land-based naval aircraft.

He stated that “some” of those naval weapons would be eliminated, and the remainder placed in central storage. The practical consequences of removing Soviet weapons to “central storage” are unclear. Many U.S. observers believed that the weapons would be stored well away from operational bases, but that does not appear to be the case. Instead, “central storage” seems to have been an organizational concept, specifying that the warheads would be under the control of the 12th Main Directorate of the Ministry of Defense, rather than the navy, army or air force.

Strategic Nuclear Forces

Gorbachev also echoed many of the U.S. measures for strategic nuclear forces. He announced that the Soviet Union would remove from alert 503 ICBMs, including 134 MIRVed ICBMs, and all strategic bombers.^v The Soviet Union would cancel development of its mobile small ICBM and short-range nuclear missile for bombers. Further, it would not increase or modernize its rail-mobile SS-24 ICBM and would confine it to garrison. No such commitments were made regarding the road-mobile SS-25 ICBM.

In some respects, Gorbachev’s 5 October response went beyond President Bush’s 27 September measures on strategic forces. He announced that the Soviet Union would remove three ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) from active duty, in addition to three that had already been removed. He also declared that the Soviet Union would reduce its total accountable strategic warheads to 5000 (1000 below the START ceiling) by the end of the treaty reduction period. Both actions reflected previously planned changes to Soviet strategic forces. The SSBNs were slated for elimination to meet START limits, and it seemed clear that the Soviet Union would not be able to sustain the 6000 accountable warheads allowed under the treaty.

Finally, Gorbachev announced a one-year unilateral moratorium on Soviet nuclear testing, “hoping to achieve the comprehensive cessation of nuclear testing.” The last acknowledged Soviet (or Russian) test was in October 1990. In their 27 September conversation, Bush said that the U.S. was “reluctant on testing,” but the sides “would need to consult on that.”

Calls for Reciprocity

Gorbachev proposed two measures on tactical nuclear weapons that the Soviet Union would take only if the U.S. reciprocated. Both were longstanding Soviet proposals that the leadership probably expected to fail. That was certainly the case with the proposal “to withdraw from combat units on frontal aviation, all nuclear weapons and place them in centralized storage sites.” That meant the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe, which was unacceptable to the U.S. and most (if not all) NATO Allies. The second reciprocity proposal was to “eliminate fully...all tactical nuclear weapons of naval forces.” The U.S. ultimately eliminated remaining TLAM-N in 2010, but that was definitely not a reciprocal action.

Gorbachev called for multilateralizing the PNI, probably targeting British and French nuclear

forces. The idea was a nonstarter for the U.S. The first point Bush made to both Major and Mitterrand on 27 September was that the PNIs were completely separate from British and French nuclear force decisions. Gorbachev also called for a “joint declaration of all nuclear powers on no first use of nuclear weapons.” The U.S. ignored the proposal.

Calls for Cooperation

Gorbachev accepted Bush’s proposals for U.S.-Soviet discussions on missile defence and nuclear warhead safety, security, and command and control. On missile defence, he added a proposal to discuss possible development of joint early-warning systems. He was less forthcoming on nuclear warhead safety and security, appearing to want to limit discussion to relevant technologies, rather than to venture into more sensitive areas of nuclear weapons practice and procedures.

Gorbachev did not respond to Bush’s call for an agreement to eliminate U.S. and Soviet MIRVed ICBMs. Instead, he proposed that the sides negotiate, immediately after START entry-into-force, a new treaty that would reduce each side’s strategic forces by about one-half. Gorbachev also proposed an agreement to end U.S. and Soviet fissile material production. The George H.W. Bush administration did not follow up on that idea, but President Bill Clinton proposed a multilateral Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT) in September 1993. The United Nations Conference on Disarmament has had the issue on its agenda ever since, without being able to agree to begin negotiations.

The Path to PNI II

Immediately after the Gorbachev speech, the U.S. interagency team that had come to Moscow to urge Soviet PNI reciprocity turned its attention to implementation. The U.S. and Soviet teams discussed how each government planned to implement its unilateral commitments, and agreed to inform each other of progress through periodic implementation reports. They also set up initial discussions on missile defence, concepts of strategic stability, and nuclear warhead safety and security, which occurred later that fall.

The few months between the Bush-Gorbachev PNI announcements in September-October 1991 and those of Bush-Yeltsin in January 1992 were dominated by the prospect and then the reality of the fall of the Soviet Union. On 25 December, Gorbachev submitted his resignation as President of the Soviet Union, and the Russian tricolor was raised over the Kremlin.

PNI II

Bush presented additional PNI measures—often referred to as “PNI II”—in his State of the Union address on 28 January 1992. While the first PNI is remembered mainly for its tactical nuclear reductions, PNI II concerned strategic forces exclusively. Bush cancelled the silo-based small ICBM program, terminated Peacekeeper production, capped B-2 strategic bomber production at 20 aircraft, and ended procurement of more advanced cruise missiles. Further,

Bush announced an end to production of new W-88 warheads for the Trident II D-5 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

Although the PNIs are noted for being unilateral-reciprocal — arms control without agreements — one of the most important elements of PNI II was a proposal for a “de-MIRVing” treaty that expanded on the suggestion in PNI I. Bush announced that if Russia eliminated all its MIRVed ICBMs, the U.S. would eliminate all Peacekeepers, download all Minutemen to one warhead, reduce deployed SLBM warheads by “about one-third,” and “convert a substantial portion of our strategic bombers to primarily conventional use.” Those words led in less than a year to the START II Treaty, which never entered into force.

The Russian Response

While Gorbachev learned of the September 1991 PNI just hours before it became public, it appears that Yeltsin was given more advance notice of PNI II. Bush noted in his State of the Union address that he had informed Yeltsin of the de-MIRVing proposal, and Yeltsin offered a detailed response the very next day. Yeltsin’s speech reaffirmed many elements announced by Gorbachev on 5 October, but also included new unilateral commitments and proposals for reciprocal or joint action with the U.S.

Yeltsin reaffirmed that nuclear warheads for ground-launched short-range missiles, nuclear artillery shells, and nuclear land mines would be eliminated. Yeltsin was more specific than Gorbachev had been on plans to eliminate other tactical nuclear weapons types. Russia would destroy one-half of all air-defence nuclear warheads, one-third of sea-based tactical nuclear warheads, and one-half of air-launched tactical nuclear weapons.

Yeltsin added substantially to the strategic force measures put forth by Gorbachev. Much of what he announced may have been motivated partly by a desire to improve relations with the U.S. and NATO. Probably the most important considerations, however, were the severe economic difficulties facing Russia, and the belief that unrestrained military spending was not possible if the country was to be modern, democratic, and fiscally stable. Yeltsin announced an end to production of the Backfire and Blackjack bombers, of current air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs), and of long-range sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs). He also committed not to produce new types of SLCMs. Further, Yeltsin declared a goal of reaching the START Treaty limit of 6000 deployed warheads by three years after entry-into-force—four years before the end of the treaty reduction period.

Yeltsin also introduced changes to expensive military practices. There would be no more military exercises with over 30 bombers, and SSBN combat patrols had “been halved and will be reduced further.” Finally, Yeltsin appeared to reaffirm many Gorbachev statements about early preparations for START reductions.

In addition, Yeltsin made several proposals for U.S.-Russian reciprocal steps. One such proposal repeated Gorbachev’s proposal to place all remaining air-launched tactical nuclear

weapons in central storage. The others were new: to eliminate all existing long-range nuclear SLCMs, forswear production of new ALCM types, end SSBN combat patrols, and eliminate existing anti-satellite weapons (ASATs). None of these was acceptable to the U.S.

Two Yeltsin proposals for negotiations were also nonstarters for the U.S.: one aimed at an ASAT ban, the other at further limits on nuclear testing. His repetition of Gorbachev's proposed bilateral agreement to end fissile material production was not objectionable, but again, there was no reported follow-up during the Bush administration. Yeltsin also proposed a new treaty to reduce accountable strategic warheads to 2000–2500 on each side. That was farther than the U.S. was willing to go at the time; the final START II limit was 3000–3500. Yeltsin added his hope that China, France, and Britain would join in nuclear reductions, but implied that would be in a later stage of the arms control process.

Finally, Yeltsin expressed willingness “to continue discussion without prejudice of the U.S. proposal for limiting non-nuclear ABM systems,” and “jointly to work out and subsequently to create and jointly operate a global system of defence in place of SDI [the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative].”

Conclusion

The PNIs were largely responsible for the most sweeping nuclear arms reductions in history. Between December 1990 (nine months before the first PNI announcement) and December 1994 (when the START Treaty entered into force), the number of U.S. active and inactive nuclear warheads fell by 50 percent, from 21,392 to 10,979. No other period in U.S. nuclear history has witnessed such a large reduction in such a short time.

The PNIs were inspired—and made possible—by an extraordinary confluence of factors. Of these, the most critical were the geopolitical changes in Central-Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Those changes did not permit long deliberation or great caution. They demanded—but also allowed—rapid, dramatic action. Bush and his team saw in them both a need and an opportunity that they were prepared and able to seize. The same appears true of Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

The PNIs were universally welcomed when they were announced, but their implementation proved disappointing to many. Serious concerns developed within just a year or two about the extent to which Russia was fulfilling its PNI commitments. The sides exchanged detailed implementation reports at the beginning, but the Russian submissions grew progressively less informative, until finally the report exchanges ceased. The PNIs are not legally binding, but in 1991-1992, both governments seemed to consider them to be firm political commitments. The U.S. continues to hold that view, but the Russian Government apparently does not. In recent years, several Russian Government officials have denied that the PNIs remain a political obligation. Many reportedly see the PNIs as an unpleasant reminder of the time when the Soviet Union and Russia were weak.

Those major doubts about Russian implementation of the PNIs have led many observers to conclude that the initiatives were failures. It is noteworthy that no one interviewed for the case study on which this paper is based shared that negative judgment. All emphasized that they saw the PNIs as a success. First, the U.S. was completely willing to implement the PNI measures unilaterally. Second, the U.S. did not expect that the Soviet Union would take up the reciprocity “challenge” as quickly and fully as it did. Under those circumstances, these officials saw even incomplete Russian implementation as far better than nothing. It is unknown whether the interviewees still hold the same view.

In December 2010, the U.S. Senate, in providing advice and consent to the New START Treaty, required the President to certify that the U.S. would seek negotiations with Russia to reduce tactical nuclear weapons in an equitable, verifiable manner.^{vi} In doing so, the Senate made clear that it would oppose a revival of the unilateral-reciprocal PNI approach. Still, there remained some U.S. interest in “arms control without agreements.” In June 2013, President Obama called for U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions. The strategic cuts would be negotiated, but Obama was vague about the process for shorter-range reductions: “we can ensure the security of America and our allies, and maintain a strong and credible strategic deterrent, while reducing our deployed strategic nuclear weapons by up to one-third. And I intend to seek negotiated cuts with Russia to move beyond Cold War nuclear postures. At the same time, we’ll work with our NATO allies to seek bold reductions in U.S. and Russian tactical weapons in Europe.”^{vii} The Berlin proposal was rejected by the Russian Government.

If the prospects for further nuclear reductions—with or without agreements—appeared low in 2013, they have fallen much further since then. Many factors are at work, including the invasion of Crimea, Russian threats towards other neighbors (including NATO members), Russian nuclear modernization, and Trump Administration skepticism about arms control. It is clear that the political and strategic environment in both the U.S. and Russia has changed too much for a return to unilateral-reciprocal measures of any sort, let alone of the scope and scale of 1991-1992. The PNIs were unique at the time, and will almost certainly remain so.

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ⁱ The texts of the four PNI announcements may be found in *ibid.*, pp. 23-39.

ⁱⁱ Memoranda of Conversation on the telephone calls are at www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research.

ⁱⁱⁱ NATO Ministerial Communique: Nuclear Planning Group, Taormina, Italy, 17-18 October 1991, *Final Communique*, at www.nato.int.

^{iv} At the time, neither Gorbachev nor any other Soviet official defined what was meant by “a portion.” However, Yeltsin did so in his January 1992 response to Bush’s PNI II announcement. See p. 7, below.

^v The last was essentially meaningless, because Soviet bombers were not routinely on alert.

^{vi} “Treaties – 111th Congress (2009-2010) 111-5,” at www.thomas.loc.gov.

^{vii} The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama at the Brandenburg Gate – Berlin, Germany,” 19 June 2013, at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov>.