Negotiating the New START Treaty

Andrej Stefanović[1]

Rose Gottemoeller, *Negotiating the New START Treaty*, Cambria Press, 2021, pp. 218

The "Negotiating the New START Treaty" provides a timely and insightful account of the history behind the negotiation and adoption of the New START Treaty in 2009 and 2010. It is timely having in mind that in early 2021 the decision was reached to extend the Treaty for another five years, and insightful, for historians, international relations theorists, and arms control practitioners alike, considering that the piece was written by Rose Gottemoeller, chief negotiator of the US delegation.

The book consists of 14 chapters, a prologue, and an epilogue. Even though the author tried to make the manuscript as accessible as possible to the wider audience, a glossary is also included, meant to aid in understanding the various abbreviations, technical terms, and arms control jargon and parlance.

Gottemoeller begins the book writing about her professional beginnings. With an educational background in Russian language and linguistics, and working as a research assistant at the RAND Corporation, she explains how she acquired first-hand experience working on the START I negotiation in 1990, thanks to a Council on Foreign Relations scholarship. Here already she had the opportunity to expose issues with differing definitions in the Russian language version of the early drafts, compared to the English copies. With this in hindsight, she stresses that "good definitions… are the absolute core of an effective arms control treaty" (Gottemoeller 2021, xix).

Two decades later, the real story begins. It is 2009, the START I is about to expire, and divergent views emerge regarding its exact replacement. Unlike the

[1] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Permanent Mission to the UN Office in Geneva. E-mail: andrejstef89@gmail.com

Russians, who were supportive of retaining the START approach, with limitations on warheads, launchers, delivery vehicles, and stringent verification measures, the Bush administration at the time was inclined to having a more flexible and simple treaty framework, comparable to the 2002 SORT Treaty (aka the Moscow Treaty). Fortunately for everyone involved, there was no need to resolve this issue at the negotiating table, rather it was made obsolete with the election of Barrack Obama to the Presidency in 2008. Already in April 2009, at the London G7 Summit, Presidents Obama and Medvedev, discussing the ways in which to ameliorate the deteriorating relations between their two countries, agreed to pursue a new nuclear arms control agreement, and to negotiate it as quickly as possible. This agreement would come to be known afterward as the New START Treaty.

In the run up to the negotiation, Gottemoeller was named Assistant Secretary of State for Arms control and lead negotiator of the US delegation that would participate at the talks. Backed by an inter-agency team she was soon hands deep in preparing for the negotiations. At this point two decades had elapsed since the last round of nuclear arms control talks, and this raised suspicion whether there were any experienced arms control negotiators around. These fears turned out to be uncalled for, as the women and men on the US team proved to be natural negotiators, despite never participating at formal arms control negotiations before. This bears importance to the current situation, as there have been no formal arms control talks in more than a decade, which also prompts concern of a potential deficit in experienced negotiators. Here, Gottemoeller's message is clear: "As long as the United States continues to deploy nuclear weapons and continues to conduct inspections at Russian facilities, there will be experts in our government who can step forward into the role of negotiators" (Gottemoeller 2021, 16). These statements could be applied to the Russian side as well. Likewise, on a more sobering note, the author professes that "negotiating a nuclear treaty is not rocket science. It requires a clear-eyed sense of where US national interests lie. Then, we must negotiate so that the treaty serves that interest" (Gottemoeller 2021, xxii).

The negotiations experienced a bumpy ride right from the very start, as there was seemingly no agreement on the most basic point – the structure of the treaty. This time the Russian side favored a simple model based on the SORT Treaty. This situation was ironic, owing to the fact that the two sides held the opposite views during the preceding year. Gottemoeller argues that one should remain level-headed, as this was not the first, nor the last time such situations occur. In fact, she informs that in the State Department there is even a saying for circumstances such as these: "the two sides have the same positions, but never at the same time" (Gottemoeller 2021, 50).

Because of this, it was plain to see that the New START would not be identical to the START I, but a hybrid combining the flexibility of the SORT Treaty, and the robustness and a verification regime of the START I. The verification procedures themselves were thus to be streamlined, simplified, and made less costly and burdensome, which meant fewer inspections and halving the number of different categories of inspection.

In time however, a basic framework of the future Treaty was emerging, with a treaty text, a detailed protocol, and annexes for the individual procedures. Likewise, the experts worked out the consolidated types of verifications, and settled on the method of counting Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM), opting for a simple solution of using their serial numbers to track them. This was seen as an important innovation and a step forward in conjuring up verification procedures, giving rise to the author's assertion that the verification regime itself is of bigger value than the Treaty. In this sense, she recalls that Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister at the time and highly skeptical whether the dubious flow of the negotiation would hammer out a proper treaty, became in time a strong supporter of the New START calling it a "gold standard of nuclear treaties" (Gottemoeller 2021, 172). Others critics, however, remained staunchly opposed to the Treaty, even with the passage of time. Notably, John Bolton, President Trump's National Security Advisor, called the Treaty "a disaster" and advocated for the US not to extend it, supporting a more simplistic model of the SORT Treaty (Bolton 2020, 151). There were likewise those who saw the New START as an intermediary agreement meant to pave the way to more comprehensive arms control which would encompass a broader range of issues, such as tactical nuclear weapons, missile defense, as well as some conventional weapons. In this vein, the extension of the New START, that occurred in February 2021, could not be regarded as the end, but rather as the beginning of the efforts on reaching agreement on a more extensive set of issues (Stefanovic 2021, 61-62).

That being said, the New START Treaty is not an anomaly, as it fits nicely in the tradition of strategic nuclear arms control that brought about more clarity, predictability, understanding, and confidence between the two sides. At the same time, the Treaty was not spared from the already existing dilemmas, divergences, and conundrums, such as the interplay between offensive and defensive weapon systems.[2]

[2] The issue of US anti-missile defense even sprang up in presidential talks, as is observed in the memoirs of President Obama, who asserts that he rejected out of hand President Medvedev's requests to "fold missile defense considerations into the… START" (Obama 2020, 342)

The Treaty however was a first in terms of the brevity of time taken to negotiate it. The leading factor for the rush in negotiations was President Obama's desire to adopt a new treaty before the expiration of START I in December 2009. This task was from the beginning deemed "mission impossible", as all previous major arms control agreements took years to conclude. The flip side of the story was that the negotiators received clear instructions from the two Presidents.

The New START negotiations were also unique because for the first time one of the delegations in arms control talks between the two countries was spearheaded by a woman. Gottemoeller recounted that some expressed their reservation regarding the way in which she handled the negotiations: talking reasonably and in an expert fashion, but purportedly without any fury or agitation when needed. This led to the "tough-girl negotiator incident", when Gottemoeller, in the middle of a particularly difficult moment in the course of the negotiation, decided to do an impromptu delivery of a response in which she threw a tantrum, much to the surprise of the Russian delegation.

In conclusion, it is worth stating the obvious: this book represents an American rendition of the negotiations, set against the backdrop of US interests, and the interplay between different national security actors in the US political and military apparatus. Nevertheless, it is without a doubt that it contributes to our understanding of the New START negotiations, its flow, the different interests at stake, the compromises reached, and how and why the endgame played out as it did. The book is also valuable in comprehending what the next generation of arms control agreements might look like, particularly in the context of a faltering global arms control architecture, in which the New START Treaty stands as the only remaining arms control agreement between the US and the Russian Federation.

References

Bolton, John. 2020. *The Room Where It Happened*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

Gottemoeller, Rose. 2021. *Negotiating the New START Treaty*, New York: Cambria Press.

Stefanovic, Andrej. 2021. "Deterioration of the Global Arms Control Regime and the Role of the Vienna Document in Reviving Stability and Confidence in Europe". *Journal of Regional Security* 16 (1): 55-72.

Obama, Barack. 2020. *A Promised Land*, New York: Crown, an imprint of Random House.