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Mahnoush Sadat Moossavi*

**Obama and the Bomb:
New START, Russia, and
the Politics of Post-Cold War
Arms Control**

by Frank Leith Jones,
Palgrave Macmillan 2025

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“One Cold War was quite enough.”¹ His statement captures the spirit of President Barack Obama’s early approach to Russia and the belief that history should not repeat itself. As Vice President Joe Biden emphasized at the time, US relations with Russia required a “new tone” and a strategic “reset,” since renewed confrontation between Washington and Moscow was neither desirable nor inevitable. When Obama entered office in 2009, he advanced a vision of reducing the role of nuclear weapons in international politics while maintaining strategic stability. His administration therefore sought to ease escalating tensions with Russia and prioritize structured negotiations, an effort that led to the New START Treaty, signed in April 2010.

In *Obama and the Bomb: New START, Russia, and the Politics of Post-Cold War Arms Control*, Frank Leith Jones guides readers through a detailed political and diplomatic account of how the treaty developed. Drawing on his experience as both a scholar and a former senior defense official with decades of experience in national security affairs, he provides an insider perspective on the negotia-

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1. F.L. Jones, *Obama and the Bomb: New START, Russia and the Politics of Post-Cold War Arms Control*, Palgrave Macmillan 2025, p. 66.

tion and decision-making processes that occurred behind closed doors. Rather than evaluating the technical dimensions of nuclear force reductions, Jones examines how presidential vision was translated into teamwork, concrete policy, alliance management, and political compromise. As he clarifies in the preface, “It is not a study of arms control per se” nor “a study of whether the New START treaty is a success or failure”; it concentrates instead on the negotiation and ratification process itself.² This is a deliberate and honest framing, and Jones largely delivers on it.

The Prague speech of April 2009 serves as the foundation of Obama’s nuclear policy throughout the book. Obama connected Prague’s history of democratic resistance to the broader challenges of international security, arguing that because the United States was the only nuclear power to have used such a weapon, it had a “moral responsibility” to lead in seeking “the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”³ Jones describes this as a “bold and overarching vision”⁴ that set the direction for the administration’s nuclear strategy. His analysis of the speech is useful, though the discussion occasionally leans toward historical description rather than critical evaluation. Jones is more persuasive when he moves from the rhetoric of the speech to the practical policy decisions it generated.

One of the genuine strengths of the book is its historical consistency. Jones traces the reset back to earlier debates about US nuclear posture and to Obama’s long-standing interest in arms control, reaching back to his early political career. He also revisits US-Russia tensions during the George W. Bush administration, particularly disputes over missile defense, NATO expansion, and the 2002 US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Importantly, Jones shows that the follow-on START treaty and cooperation on Iran were “integrally linked,” writing that the treaty was “not merely a continuation of Cold War era arms control efforts” but was tied to preventing nuclear proliferation, particularly Iran’s nuclear ambitions.⁵ This broader framing strengthens the book’s argument considerably, showing that New START served strategic goals well beyond the bilateral US-Russia relationship.

A central theme is the importance of leadership and personal diplomacy. The relationship between Obama and Medvedev is depicted as a key driving force behind the negotiations. However, Jones is careful not to oversimplify this dynamic. He describes the relationship as “in reality a triangular relationship, albeit with one side of the triangle often out of view,”⁶ referring to Vladimir Putin. Medvedev may have been the formal head of state, but Putin’s continued authority shaped strategic deci-

2. Ibidem, p. VII.

3. Ibidem, p. 12.

4. Ibidem, p. 13.

5. Ibidem, p. 38.

6. Ibidem, p. 32.

sion-making throughout. This is one of the book's more insightful observations, and Jones handles it with appropriate caution given the complexity of Russian domestic politics at the time. The ratification battle in the US Senate is also covered in meaningful detail. Republican lawmakers expressed skepticism about missile defense limitations and the future modernization of the US nuclear arsenal, creating significant partisan division. Jones is convincing here in demonstrating that diplomatic success abroad depends heavily on domestic political approval, and that the Obama administration had to balance foreign policy goals against sharp internal political resistance. This section gives the book practical weight and prevents it from reading as a straightforward diplomatic success story.

What distinguishes *Obama and the Bomb* is its sustained attention to process. Cooperation did not emerge from a sudden disappearance of mistrust; it came from sustained effort within clearly defined limits. Jones's focus on bureaucratic coordination, negotiation constraints, verification mechanics, and legislative maneuvering gives the book genuine analytical depth. Readers looking for grand theoretical arguments about US-Russia relations will find the scope narrower than expected, and larger structural questions about the long-term durability of great power cooperation are largely set aside. That is a fair limitation to acknowledge, but it does not significantly undermine the book's core contribution.

In conclusion, *Obama and the Bomb* succeeded by carefully reconstructing the pathway to the New START Treaty rather than exaggerating its significance. Jones captures the interplay of domestic politics, institutional discipline, and leadership by tracing the negotiation and ratification process with precision. Given that US-Russia arms control has since collapsed, with Russia suspending its participation in New START in 2023, the book also serves as a timely reminder of how difficult such agreements are to build and how fragile they can be. Its lasting value lies in showing that arms control is often less about transforming relationships and more about preventing them from deteriorating further. In that sense, *Obama and the Bomb* is both a historical account and a sober lesson in the perseverance required to sustain nuclear diplomacy.

Bibliography

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