

The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Worldview: Policy Implications

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Nuclear weapons occupy a special place in the policy of Russia. Today it is even possible to say that they have become a part of Russian strategic culture, initially built around the idea of a strong military state.

It is difficult not to agree with Fritz Ermarth, who said that during the whole history of the Russian Empire military power became the “chief institutional foundation of Russian statehood”.¹ Even the abdication of Tsar Nicolas II from the throne in 1917 was accepted by the General Staff, instead of by the State Duma, as it should have been.² The same culture was continued by the USSR. Having become a superpower following the victory over Germany in 1945, 5 million Soviet troops were deployed across the territories of Eastern Europe, ready to grasp the whole continent upon the General Secretary's command.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, which saw a weakening in the field of conventional weapons, Russia still continued to occupy the position of the second world's nuclear superpower. This criteria of the great state – the only remaining since the time of the Cold War – has become one of the greatest incentives to revive Russian state nationalism, which together with revanchist ideas form the political portrait of Moscow today.

The aim of the article is to analyze the connections between the Russian nuclear worldview and Russian state policy during the twenty-five years since the end of the Cold War.

The Decline Times

In the first years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, when Russia was trying to build a truly democratic society, its inherited nuclear forces entered an era of decline. The economic situation severely influenced the state's nuclear potential, which despite its reduction in accordance with the START Treaty, suffered from significant hardships.

During the two decades following the end of the Cold War, Russia managed to modernize only 10% of its SNF. The remaining 90%, produced in the Soviet-era, have already gone beyond their initial terms of expiration by 2 to 3 times.³

At the end of the 1990s Bruce Blair expressed the idea that, considering the decline of Russia's nuclear forces, a surprise attack by the United States would destroy all Russian nuclear forces save for a few dozen mobile ICBMs and SLBMs. These, however, would be unable to inflict damage on the United States due to the destruction of the whole Russian nuclear infrastructure and subsequent loss of control of over these units by the central authorities.⁴

Almost ten years later Keir Lieber and Deryl Press pointed out the highly vulnerable state of Russian strategic nuclear forces (SNF). According to their estimates, an attack by the US will result in the complete destruction of all Russian nuclear forces. To support their thesis the experts noted the levels by which Russian SNF had degraded since the Soviet period, including the degradation of 39% of heavy bombers, 58% of

When briefly describing the condition of Russian SNF after the collapse of the USSR, it is worth enumerating several dangerous tendencies which critically undermined the capabilities of Russian nuclear deterrence. Among these tendencies are the following:

- 1) Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian military industry lost its main source of ICBMs production. Ukraine's missile industrial facilities (Dnipropetrovsk, Pavlograd and Kharkiv) had served as the core pillar of Soviet ICBM construction and development. Thus Russia had to restore its missile industry around the Votkinsky machine building plant, spending a lot of time and money on this process.
- 2) The critical condition of the naval branch of SNF. The creation of the new generation of SSBMs (955 or the "Borey" type) was started in 1996, but due to the number of financial and technological difficulties the first SSBM "Yuriy Dolgorukiy" was introduced only in 2007. Moreover, the SLBM project for the fourth generation atomic submarines ("Bulava") was far from perfect – only 7 out of 17 tests proved to be successful, while the missile itself was introduced only in 2013.⁶ The quantity indicators have become the matter of anxiety as well: in the new century the number of Russian SSBMs was reduced by 16 times in comparison with Soviet-era levels.
- 3) Low dynamics of the ICBMs development. In particular, at its peak the Russian nuclear industry produced 10 missiles a year (only 1/10 of Soviet production levels) and in 2005 there were only 4 new ICBMs.

To a significant extent these issues were also connected with financial difficulties which served to deepen the economic aspect of military disparity with the United States. The issue of strategic parity was always a matter of special concern for Russian authorities, who often emphasized the need to maintain a strategic stability based on equal nuclear capabilities between the U.S. and Russia. They therefore furiously rejected certain actions by Washington, such as the abandonment of the ABM Treaty. Still, during the Soviet times Moscow spent on defense about 70-80% of American spending (which was almost enough to provide parity), while in the post-Cold War period this amount has never exceeded 6-17%.⁷

Meanwhile other events, such as NATO enlargement, the 1999 allied military operation against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, as well as the US abandonment of the ABM Treaty of 1972, made Russia feel that its strategic interests were being gradually marginalized whenever its deterrence capabilities were endangered.

Nuclear weapons in Russian Policy and Academic Discourse

To some extent this explains the domination of the main schools of thought in Russian strategic policy. Adapting the classification of Kuchins and Zhevelev for strategic nuclear policy,⁸ it is possible to say that the period of 1992-1995 was marked by the prevalence of Pro-Western Liberals, who were often associated with the personality of Andrey Kozyrev as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. During this period Russia accepted the first enlargement of NATO, ratified START I and also easily signed START II,

which is considered to be one of the hardest strategic treaties for Moscow. The only unarguable benefit of this treaty was its coordination with the reduction of American strategic nuclear weapons, which coincided with the inevitable degradation of Russian nuclear forces. Nevertheless, the treaty overburdened Russia with a number of costly obligations at a time when its strategic forces suffered from the lack of financing. Also, the Russian Military Doctrine of 1993 abandoned the Soviet principle of the non-use of nuclear weapons, instead giving negative security assurances regarding the use of nuclear weapons. This step looked quite natural for the young state in the new, indefinite strategic environment. At the same time, NATO enlargement was regarded in Moscow as the extrusion of Russia from the traditional Soviet spheres of influence, which had a great impact on national interests.

In 1996 the replacement of Kozyrev by Evgeniy Primakov marked the rise of the Great Power Balancers, who remain in power today. This group, understanding Russia's declining capabilities in the military field, tried to not assimilate Russian national interests to the interests of the West, but instead to defend them "by all azimuths," as Primakov said.

Since 1996 Russia has in fact abandoned its negative security assurances, according to a Message of the President to the Federal Assembly, demonstrating for the first time the state's readiness to use nuclear weapons in response to nuclear or large-scale conventional aggression. Russia's Military Doctrine of 2000 looked even more radical – the use of nuclear weapons was assigned to regional conflicts, for the purpose of de-escalation.

Since the mid-1990s Moscow resisted any amendments to the ABM Treaty initiated by Washington. Also, in 2002, in response to the United States' withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, Russia abandoned START II, substituting it with the much less obligatory SORT. The latter resembled much more a declared intention to reduce nuclear weapons than the previous treaty, but was more convenient for Moscow, as it didn't impose any special restrictions on the structure on Russian nuclear arsenal, thereby permitting MIRved ICBMs. This measure was necessary for Russia, which was suffering from the degradation of the older Soviet heavy missiles and unable to produce an equal amount of new missiles.

The New START of 2010 was drafted as part of the so-called "reset" in Russia-US relations (which, unlike the Treaty itself, is considered quite unsuccessful) and has become the product of the Great Power Balancers in power. By remaining in power up to the present, the Great Power Balancers have provided a general political line for the country. Their continual power is also connected with the evolution of the role of nuclear deterrence, not only in Russian policy and research circles, but even in the general Russian worldview.

Thus the importance of nuclear deterrence is regarded quite differently by the two political mainstreams mentioned above. The Pro-Western Liberals, often headed by the experts from Moscow Carnegie and ISKRAN, regard mutual nuclear deterrence between Russia and the United States, Great Britain and France as a "latent but real barrier" for integration with the West and cooperation in providing security in Eurasia. In particular, Alexey Arbatov and Vladimir Dvorkin support the idea that the changing relationship between the United States and Russia, from enemies during the Cold War to partners today, demands transformation from deterrence based on mutual assured destruction into a quantitatively new type of relationship. This new relationship could be called a "nuclear partnership" or "joint management of nuclear forces", and could

be considered to be any form of cooperation which could remove nuclear deterrence as: 1) the foundation of the operational strategic relationship between the United States and Russia; 2) the embodiment of the two states military relations; 3) a huge drain of both countries' financial resources and scientific-technological innovations.⁹

Pro-Western Liberals welcome arms control treaties, mentioning that they “gave Russia a sense of security in the post-Cold War era, when the former superpower was struggling to define itself in the shadow of a militarily superior United States. The agreements allowed Russian leaders to claim strategic equality with the United States, holding on to a small measure of great-power status.”¹⁰ They also insist on the rejection of the “launch-on-warning concept” at the official state level, along with verifiable de-alerting of strategic forces as a tool to curtail the strategic and tactical nuclear weapons programs of both states.¹¹ Unlike other Russian schools of thought, the Pro-Western Liberals do not regard European Missile Defense (MD) as a threat to Russia's nuclear deterrence. In particular, General Vladimir Dvorkin points out that the Iranian missiles against which European MD is deployed promise to be effective only in a ratio of 5 interceptors to 1 missile. Russian ICBMs, meanwhile, are equipped with sophisticated systems for MD penetration. Therefore, according to Dvorkin, “the new planned missile defense architecture practically won't affect Russian potential of nuclear deterrence.”¹² Pro-Western Liberals have called on Moscow to cooperate with the United States in the field of missile defense, saying that such cooperation would enrich Russia with new information and technologies. In particular, they propose cooperation in the field of information. This includes calls to restore the project to establish an Exchange Data Center, to practice common military trainings in the field of theater MD as well as deployment of common low orbital space information systems for global MD.

Nuclear deterrence is regarded quite differently by the Great Power Balancers. Composed mostly of experts from MGIMO and the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, they believe that the probability of a nuclear conflict between Russia and the United States can't be excluded. The character of nuclear deterrence has changed after the Cold War – from the defensive stance (pure deterrence) to an offensive one (compliance) by which the nuclear threshold tends to be lowered. Russia, therefore, is absolutely not prepared to transform its nuclear deterrence into something else or, moreover, to radically reduce its nuclear potential.¹³ Nikolai Kosolapov claims: “The probability of war between the United States and Russia today is high enough, not only technically, but also politically and psychologically. Two states are approaching the margins, which make them closer to such conflict, then the USSR and the United States has ever been.”¹⁴ Kosolapov also mentions that today Moscow gradually understands the main motivation of American policy. This is not the support of freedom or democracy in Russia, but the “liquidation of nuclear and missile potential left after the Soviet Union, as well as the capability of Russia to restore it.” Therefore, in conditions when the United States wants to dominate and Russia is not ready to obey, which are then further complicated by regional conflicts (such as Georgia in 2008) and the world financial crisis, the possibility of mutual military conflict becomes very real.

Proving that the ideas of Kuchins and Zevelev have much in common with political realism, Sergey Karaganov, the Head of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, calls nuclear weapons “something, sent by God to save humankind,”¹⁵ adding that “For the first time in history nothing threatens Russia in the region – due to nuclear weapons and lack of contradictions with other states. We should be grateful for this to Sa-

harov, Korolev, Kurchatov and their associates.” Arms reduction treaties are supported by the Great Power Balancers to the extent they preserve the balance with the United States, thereby helping Russia to avoid significant nuclear disparity and to support mutual transparency. This school of thought in its own way supports the official line, implemented in Russia’s Military Doctrine 2010, which proclaims NATO enlargement as well as European missile defense deployment to be the greatest threats for Russia’s security. In particular, Karaganov notes that the main aim of the Russian campaign against European MD should be not the hysterical approach in the spirit of the Reagan-era, but a rational attempt “to tie hands of Americans politically, getting convenient and credible excuses to avoid any further steps for any nuclear weapons reductions.”¹⁶

Significant support to the Great Power Balancers is coming from the Russian Orthodox Church, whose attitude towards nuclear deterrence is very different from the Catholic or Protestant branches, highlighting some of the peculiarities of Russian strategic culture. For example, in Catholicism, deterrence itself can’t be considered as a final goal, but only as a means supporting ultimate nuclear disarmament. In contrast, the Russian Orthodox Church accepts deterrence in a spirit of the so-called “Russian Doctrine”, or nationalist worldview, which is based on the idea of Russian consolidation and confrontation with the West. In particular, Patriarch Cyrill, who has become the honorable professor of the Russian Academy of Strategic Nuclear Forces in 2010,¹⁷ publically called the opening of the Federal Nuclear center in the city of the Holy Seraphim Sarovsky as “God’s commandment” (*bozhiy promysel*). He also stated many times that nuclear weapons “provide sovereignty to Russia.”¹⁸

One can also refer to the words of Egor Kholmogorov, a journalist, philosopher, former editor of the “Edinaya Rossiya” official website, and author of the “Atomic Orthodoxy” concept: “In order to fulfill this mission successfully [to approach God], Russia cannot be an Orthodox state only; it should be a powerful state so that nobody and no weapon could silence our testimony of Christ.”¹⁹ The main principle of the “Atomic Orthodoxy” idea, according to Holmogorov, is that “to stay Orthodox Russia should be a strong nuclear power and to stay a nuclear power it should be Orthodox.” This notion Holmogorov takes from the issue of nuclear parity (“atomic clinch”), which not only prevents states from waging war, but brings their rivalry into the mental and spiritual arena. That is why, together with a traditional military defense, the Russian State has to protect the nation by conceptual means, to protect it from mental threats.²⁰

Translating this notion to practical life, nuclear weapons are destined to deter any kind of Western military interference into the Russian fight against the evil forces domestically (which is the subject of the New Military Doctrine-2014, which is concerned with the result of the informational warfare and the activities of foreign special services in Russia aimed at undermining the regime) as well as in the near abroad. This notion perfectly fits with Georgia as well as Ukraine, both of which have been regarded as proxy battlegrounds for Russia’s ideological fight with the United States.

Certain experts consider the new Russian military doctrine as being not so radical in the sense of nuclear use, but at the same time this is not the case. On one hand, the idea of prescribing nuclear use in situations “critical for the national security”, as mentioned in MD 2000, has disappeared in the text since the 2010 edition. On the other hand, it actually hasn’t been changed. The current Doctrine continues to assign the application of nuclear weapons to two types of conflicts, large-scale and regional. This posture was introduced by the Doctrine-2000 and developed a certain definition of the role of nuclear weapons as a deterrent factor for

any aggression against the Russian Federation, including in the conventional role. The fact that the main task assigned by the Doctrine to Russian military forces is not only to defeat an enemy, but to compel him to stop military actions on Russia's terms, brings to memory a concept of "tailored damage", which was developed by Doctrine-2000 and is still quite applicable today.

"Tailored damage" was defined as "damage subjectively unacceptable to the enemy as being higher than the advantages the aggressor is waiting to gain from the application of the military force."²¹

The advantage of this term is in its higher flexibility in comparison with the classical notion of "unacceptable damage", as it links the damage necessary for the effective deterrence with the enemy's stakes in a conflict. The "tailored damage" concept is addressed to the two types of conflict - traditional classic deterrence and deterrence of a limited attack utilizing conventional weapons.

In particular, any possible interference of NATO in the Georgian War as well as the Ukrainian conflict was and is deterred by Russian capability to "compel the enemy to stop military actions" and to move away from Russia's sphere of vital interest. NATO would not consider military support to Georgia or Ukraine unless it was eager to provoke the use of nuclear forces, even at the regional level.

An additional warning on that issue is contained also in the Military Doctrine 2014, which regards any demonstration of military exercises in Russia's neighborhood as a military threat.

The Implications of the Ukrainian Crisis

In this context Russian nonstrategic nuclear weapons (where Russia still has the largest stock of more than 2,000 warheads)²² will continue to compensate for its conventional inferiority to NATO. Indeed, the latest news anticipates that deployments are going to take place in Kaliningrad oblast as well as in Crimea.

Here the role of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine cannot be underestimated. Vladimir Putin's revelations about his readiness to use nuclear weapons for the "defense" of Crimea shows that, for the Kremlin, the existence of the state means the existence of the current political regime and its aggressive nationalistic ideology. Also, the famous claim of Putin – "if I wanted, Russian troops could not only be in Kyiv in two days, but in Riga, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw or Bucharest, too."²³ – has added heavily to the European feeling of insecurity.

Since the beginning of the conflict the number of nuclear threats issued by Moscow has doubled, along with military training exercises in Kaliningrad oblast and in Crimea. In June 2015, while making a speech at the military technical forum "Army-2015", President Putin announced that this year Russia will add 40 new ballistic missiles to its strategic nuclear forces (24 ICBMs "Yars" and 16 SLBMs "Bulava").²⁴ This announcement was accepted by NATO with great anxiety, and viewed as evidence of Moscow's determination to start a new arms race.

Today the Russian nuclear arsenal consists of 4,500 warheads,²⁵ including the 2,000 nonstrategic nuclear weapons mentioned above, as well as 1,643 weapons deployed on strategic vehicles.²⁶ Still, considering the realities facing Russia, where its ICBM deficit is combined with the influence of sanctions over the economy, there are strong reasons to believe that by 2018 Russia will comply with the demands of START III, which defines the limits of deployed warheads at a level of 1,550. At the same time, START III represents a

threshold which Russia will not be able to cross in the near future. First, due to the previously mentioned economic and technical reasons, Moscow will be prevented from substituting the old SS-18s with the new ICBMs before 2022. A couple of years ago it was planned that the SS-18s would be decommissioned in 2017. Their service was prolonged till 2020, and has now been prolonged again until 2022, when the new liquid-fuel missile “Sarmat” should be deployed instead. Still, today there are still many reasons to believe that the nuclear weapons field, being “sacred” for Russia, will suffer from sanctions less than the others, as most nuclear technologies are inherited from the Soviet Union and the investments in research and development have already been made.

Today, despite certain hardships, Russian nuclear forces are continuing their modernization cycle. It is possible to say that the strategic nuclear forces of Russia are gradually overcoming the crisis they suffered for almost 15 years after the breakup of the USSR. On one hand, the situation could be regarded as favorable from the point of view of maintaining strategic stability. In this connection the current bellicose rhetoric of Moscow is reminiscent of statements by Nikita Khrushchev, back when the aggressive nuclear rhetoric and great geopolitical ambitions were hiding significant military inferiority on the part of Moscow. On the other hand, it is worth remembering that the most dangerous nuclear crises in history are connected with the name of Khrushchev. Moreover, one element is missing – in the time of Khrushchev, the USSR was still much more powerful than today’s Russia, which now tries to substitute all other elements of power with nuclear might. In this sense the role of nuclear weapons are becoming more and more essential for Russia, boosting its geopolitical ambitions by hard-power arguments. It is presented by the Kremlin as a factor providing Russia’s “unity” by coercing the international community from interfering in the Ukrainian conflict. Starting from the annexation of Crimea and finishing with the war in Eastern Ukraine, Russia has utilized its nuclear threats as the active coercive/deterrent element, successfully keeping the West out of the conflict. Russian “sovereignty” and might also looks much more credible to the Russian public when Russia started threatening the Eastern borders of NATO.

This situation has already created a strange paradox in Russian public opinion. During the Soviet times, the mass non-nuclear propaganda taught people that any outbreak of nuclear war will result in total world annihilation. Today, according to Russian public opinion polls, 39% of respondents are not afraid of the prospective of using Russian nuclear weapons against the West.²⁷ The actual weakening of Russia has therefore created the current situation, where most of the elements of state power have been substituted with nuclear might, and where nuclear weapons move beyond the basic deterrence function and gain the role of an active policy tool which guarantees basic elements of the state power. This fact, in turn, might be the most damaging for strategic stability. The increased number of nuclear threats as well as the increasingly unpredictable reactions potentially serves to further destabilize crises, thereby turning nuclear weapons into a regular and even basic policy tool.

NOTES

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