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## Assured Destruction vs. Low-Intensity Deterrence CAN RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES ADJUST THEIR NUCLEAR POSTURES?

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Mikhail Troitskiy

*Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO); MacArthur Foundation<sup>1</sup>*

Just two years after Russia and the United States began implementing the New START Treaty, the two sides are coming under increasing pressure to define their positions on future rounds of strategic arms control. The direction in which the United States and Russia head is of key importance for not only the relationship between the two states but the nuclear future of the entire globe. Holding over 90 percent of global nuclear-weapon stockpiles, Washington and Moscow are destined to be fashion-setters in the global discussion on nuclear weapons: the agreement of non-nuclear-weapon nations not to acquire nuclear arms, as stipulated in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, hinges on the progress of nuclear-weapon states toward nuclear disarmament. Yet the prospects for further disarmament will remain bleak until both the United States and Russia show a readiness to critically review their nuclear postures and adapt them to changes in the strategic environment and public perceptions of nuclear weapons.

In particular, the attainment of Russia's key policy goals vis-à-vis the United States (constraining intervention in Russia's internal affairs or use of force against Russia's allies) no longer requires hedging against the possibility of nuclear use in a crisis. Having internalized this new reality, Moscow and Washington can proceed with further nuclear cuts and exert joint pressure on other nuclear-weapon states that have so far refused to take part in arms control.

### **The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Russian and U.S. Security Policy**

When it comes to reducing the risk of accidental nuclear launch or the seizure of nuclear materials by terrorists, Moscow and Washington stand united. Beyond this, however, Russian and American arms control priorities and strategies significantly diverge. The United States is contemplating, albeit with a number of caveats, a reduced role for nuclear weapons in its national security policy. Influential representatives of the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed here are solely those of the author and not those of MGIMO or the MacArthur Foundation.

policy community, up to and including President Barack Obama and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, have suggested that even within the limits of the New START Treaty, the United States' nuclear arsenal is much larger than is needed for national security.

Although Russia committed itself to the goal of nuclear disarmament in an April 2009 joint declaration with the United States and signed up to the New START treaty in April 2010, it has since qualified its enthusiasm for arms control agreements. Russian officials and experts insist that Washington seeks further rounds of arms control not so much out of concern with global nuclear safety, but because the United States seeks to capitalize on its edge in high-precision conventional weapons and missile defenses that can be employed much more flexibly than nuclear weapons during an escalation.

Moscow has declared that it feels vulnerable—both in terms of policy and technology—in the face of U.S. pressure and views missile defense, the possible “weaponization of space,” and high-precision conventional weapons as factors complicating further nuclear cuts. Russia has also officially stated that the next round of talks on reducing strategic nuclear arsenals may need to be multilateral. The final set of factors complicating progress in arms control, from the Russian perspective, includes U.S. and allied interventionism and questioning of the legitimacy of “undemocratic regimes.” Believing that “regime change” events such as the Arab Spring are impossible without direct U.S. involvement, Russian policymakers argue that such scenario could also happen to Russia if Moscow did not have a credible deterrent.

Russian concerns are rooted in the belief that nuclear weapons help to achieve a broader range of interests than the simple guarantee of national survival. Moscow is convinced that the United States can only be deterred from infringing upon Russia's interests under a condition of mutually assured destruction (MAD), which guarantees retaliation even after a massive nuclear strike aimed at disarming one's adversary. MAD is based on the assumption that, at a certain stage in conflict escalation, the use of nuclear weapons becomes plausible. It requires that states retain a “second-strike capability” with nuclear forces anticipated to survive a first strike.

### **What Nuclear Weapons Can and Cannot Do**

In today's world, an attachment to a second-strike capability has become costly, pointless, and risky.

Under conditions short of an existential threat, a state's commitment to make an initial nuclear strike as tensions rise between it and an adversary is not very credible. As was established already during the Cold War, a nuclear attack by one nuclear superpower against the other cannot lead to victory due to the massive and irreparable environmental damage it would cause on a global scale (to say nothing of the economic and social damage). Any nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia would herald the end of the world as we (and indeed the policymakers launching a nuclear attack) know it. Smaller nuclear-weapon states are likely to suffer irreparable and potentially terminal economic and social damage as a result of even a limited nuclear

war. This would make it impossible for any side involved to reap the benefits of victory in nuclear war.

In general, no nuclear-weapon state can afford to assume that after a “successful” nuclear attack the world (and its position in it) would be the same except for its adversary’s defeat. As a result, no threat of a nuclear strike by the United States or Russia against the other is credible, even after a conflict has escalated to open hostility.

Indeed since 1991, nuclear weapons have not enabled Moscow to prevent any of the interventions that the United States and its allies have undertaken against third states like Serbia or Iraq. Despite Russian objections, the UN-mandated peace enforcement mission in Libya morphed into a regime change operation. Nuclear weapons may not even help dissuade an adversary from indirect hostile actions or a limited proxy assault against a nuclear state (Georgia’s August 2008 operation against South Ossetia), when that assault does not threaten the state’s survival. At the same time, a high-alert nuclear posture, upon which U.S.-Russian mutually assured destruction hinges, can still result in an accidental launch, either due to a technical glitch or the reckless behavior of trigger-happy politicians.

In the case of the U.S.-Russia relationship, even a direct existential threat would likely not lead to a decision to use nuclear weapons. The relationship has not been put to the test of such a threat for over 20 years. However, given the above reasoning about the irreparable global damage resulting from a nuclear confrontation between the two nuclear superpowers, it is safe to assume that the triggers in Washington and Moscow would not be pulled even in this extreme case.

Nuclear deterrence at an advanced stage in a conflict may only be credible when a nuclear superpower or smaller nuclear-weapon state faces off against a smaller nuclear-weapon state or a non-nuclear-weapon state powerful enough to pose an existential threat. In such cases, one could imagine a nuclear first strike remaining unreciprocated, leaving the defending nuclear state with a chance of survival. This scenario will have to involve issues perceived to be of vital importance to the defending state.

In all other cases, nuclear deterrence during an open conflict is unlikely to work. What can be effective, though, is deterrence at lower levels of conflict escalation, before the start of mutual hostilities. In such a context, the deterrence mechanism is simpler than MAD and yet reliable enough to prevent major powers from undertaking actions that nuclear-weapon states would view as seriously threatening. Low-intensity (or low-escalation) deterrence relies not on the fear of an imminent nuclear strike (that too many people know would be unlikely or useless), but on the influence that public opinion and the prospect of massive destruction produce on a government. If public opinion matters in the state to be deterred, its government will respond to public demands of restraint in relations with the deterring nuclear-weapon state. Even in states with governments that do not have a habit of responding to public opinion, most decision-makers should be appalled by the potential for massive destruction from nuclear retaliation. They should also be wary of the need to back off at a later stage in escalation, given the harm to their domestic standing that will ensue (several juntas fell in the aftermath of a defeat in an

international conflict). By making its “red lines” clear and reasonable in its national security doctrine or other official document, a nuclear-weapon state can credibly demonstrate its commitment to the limited use of nuclear weapons as a means of de-escalating vitally important conflicts.

Low-intensity nuclear deterrence (or “dissuasion”) could be an optimal posture for Russia. More cost-effective and technically viable than a second strike requirement, it adequately addresses all Russia’s existential security concerns, from massive conventional ground assaults to “regime change” operations. A 100-percent viable second-strike capability is an excessive—and therefore redundant—instrument for dissuading the United States, any other nation, or an alliance from infringing on core Russian interests. Moreover, as described above, any hostile action that would not be deterrable at a low level of conflict escalation would anyway not be deterrable at a higher level. Diplomacy, not MAD, is the best guarantee against an existential security issue surging onto the agenda of the nuclear superpowers’ relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, instead of keeping an overwhelming number of nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert to dissuade potential opponents from a disarming first strike, Moscow may find it useful to change its nuclear posture to something like “the possession of a sufficient number of nuclear weapons.” This would require a more fundamental review of Russia’s nuclear strategy than reducing the launch readiness of Russia’s nuclear-tipped missiles or retargeting them – measures that Moscow and Washington have already attempted with limited credibility and therefore success.

A conceptual shift in Russia’s nuclear posture could bring a number of tangible benefits. First, if Moscow starts to believe that de-escalation of a conflict between the United States (or any other country or alliance) and Russia could be achieved by invoking the Russian deterrent before the nuclear forces of both countries were placed on high alert, Russia could free itself from worrying about U.S. missile defense capabilities. Significant material, intellectual, and diplomatic resources could then be economized.

Second, should the United States follow Russia in adapting its nuclear posture to new realities, both sides could begin negotiating a new agreement on deeper nuclear cuts because a second-strike requirement would no longer justify a need for overwhelming arsenals. Apart from the main benefit of substantial budgetary savings, this could significantly raise both countries’ arms control and nonproliferation profiles and allow them to more successfully tackle the proliferation challenges they consider important.

Finally, Russia could gain international prestige by forswearing heavy reliance on nuclear weapons in its security policy. In particular, this would add weight to Moscow’s support for a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East (if, that is, Russia considers this zone an important foreign policy goal).

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, the need for extended deterrence is also not a source of concern for Russia. According to its 2010 Military Doctrine, Russia does not promise a “nuclear umbrella” to its allies if they come under conventional attack.

### **What it Takes to Switch Postures**

In light of the above, Russia could consider making the following steps rather than continuing to rely on a doctrine focused on the preservation of a second-strike credibility.

First, Moscow could assert that it firmly believes that a nuclear war, even one waged unilaterally, cannot be won. Russia could thereby express its certainty that nuclear weapons will never be used against it (or any other state) by another major nuclear-weapon power (first and foremost, the United States) because of the enormous responsibility that would befall a state that launches a nuclear offensive. If nuclear weapons are used against Russia, it would do its best to retaliate but a nuclear attack against Russia (or any other state) would in any case herald the end of the world as we know it and require a complete overhaul of the international security regime.

Second, instead of insisting on nuclear parity (roughly required for MAD), Russia could adopt a more ethical, even moral, posture, forswearing the need to be able to survive a massive first nuclear strike by the United States. Since it is also rational to assume the impossibility of survival after a massive first nuclear strike, planning for such a scenario would be nonsensical.

Third, Moscow should be clear that this does not mean Russia would give in to nuclear blackmail and that it trusts its willingness to use nuclear weapons in retaliation for aggression remains a credible deterrent for any state that might contemplate such. Specifically, Russia could emphasize the role of nuclear weapons in deterring a conventional assault or any other action that could pose a clear existential threat to Russia short of an initial nuclear strike (for example, an attempt to sabotage or destroy Russia's nuclear deterrent by conventional means).

Finally, if nuclear preponderance or parity are removed from the list of Russia's foreign policy goals, Russia could achieve major budgetary savings. For instance, it could scale down the number of its ballistic missiles and revise its force structure toward a greater reliance on submarines and mobile ballistic missiles as the means of deterrence.

### **The Importance of Reciprocity**

It would be naïve to assume that low-intensity deterrence will remain effective regardless of the policies of other nuclear actors. Making a shift in its nuclear strategy, Russia can reserve the right to expect reciprocal moves from other world powers. Washington's response would naturally be the most significant. Certain measures that the United States might choose to undertake in response would alarm Russia and possibly instigate a reversal of its shift in posture. Possible disconcerting measures would include:

- Advanced missile defense projects coupled with official statements that the United States seeks to become invincible to Russian strategic missiles. Direct or indirect signs that point to how the United States intends to use the technology, rather than technical advancement per se, would do the greatest damage;

- Breakthrough upgrades of conventional first-strike technologies and their successful testing, coupled with doctrinal shifts toward more assertive and risk-taking policies and/or commitments;
- Interventionist policy practiced despite Russian objections, even if Russia can hardly compare on most counts to any of the target states, such as Libya or Syria.

If Washington decides to welcome the shift in Russia's nuclear posture, the United States should consider a number of parallel moves of reassurance. Most importantly, the United States would be advised to:

- Continue to reduce the number of its nuclear weapons, demonstrating a commitment to reducing their role in the United States' deterrence posture;
- Welcome an opportunity to work with Russia toward a new comprehensive (if possible, multilateral) nuclear arms control agreement;
- Refrain from statements to the effect that the United States' edge in high-end military technologies can be used for offensive purposes in the absence of direct threats to U.S. interests;
- Display a clear interest in discussing with Russia developments in other countries' nuclear deterrence strategies and their impact on U.S. and Russian deterrence postures.

### **Conclusion**

If implemented, this set of measures by Russia and the United States could help test the foundations of a world in which nuclear deterrence is increasingly de-emphasized. In such a world, consensus would emerge on the inability of nuclear weapons to deter an adversary at high levels of escalation. It already does not make a strategic difference whether a nuclear-weapon state forswears, in its military doctrine, the first-strike option against other nuclear powers. From a strategic viewpoint, most, if not all, such claims are either not credible, pointless, or both. Major nuclear players only need to begin acting on this assumption.

Facing the grave consequences of a "limited" regional nuclear war, second-rate nuclear-weapon states like China, India, and Pakistan would be discouraged from increasing the launch readiness of their nuclear forces. Other smaller nuclear-weapon states as well the aspiring members of the nuclear club might realize that their security can also be guaranteed without ready-to-launch nuclear weapons. Great Britain may find it expedient to resume debates on complete voluntary nuclear disarmament. France would have to reassess the extent to which nuclear weapons enhance its national prestige.

In a way, a new nuclear world would signify the triumph of diplomacy, which would be entrusted with the task of forestalling high levels of conflict escalation. Just like a government that proves incapable of defusing social conflict before it takes the form of mass protest or violence, diplomats who fail to reach the compromises necessary to avoid nuclear saber-rattling must be given no mercy.

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