PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Russia's New Conventional Capability

IMPLICATIONS FOR EURASIA AND BEYOND

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In late 2015 and early 2016, Russia demonstrated in Syria that it had acquired long-range, precision-guided, conventional-strike capability, the use of which has implications far beyond military utility. Moscow's willingness to use this newly acquired class of military power in support of its foreign policy is a challenge both to the West's monopoly on global power projection, which it has held since the end of the Cold War, and to its state of denial about Russia's rearmament progress. Washington has difficult choices to make. Will it embark on a policy of confrontation or cooperation? Will it pursue arms control with Russia or an arms race? At this point, Russia's capabilities are not on par with the West's, but the closer Russia comes to acquiring full capability, the less inclined it will be to accommodate Western concerns.

Russia is Catching Up

The wars in Vietnam (United States) and Afghanistan (Soviet Union) demonstrated the limitations of the use of traditional World War II-style conventional forces. Both conflicts produced unacceptably high levels of casualties and collateral damage, the durations were longer than expected, and both lacked decisive outcomes. Since then, for the first time in centuries, international affairs effectively lost a major part of its power component, or as Carl von Clausewitz would say: policy could no longer be continued by means of war. The "peaceful period" was short. The 1991 Gulf War demonstrated that high-precision, conventional weapons can get the job done with limited casualties and collateral damage. The West's advanced weapons were subsequently used on a number of occasions: Balkans in the mid-1990s, Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Gulf War II in 2003, and Libya in 2011. However, as seen by Russia's long-range strikes into Syria, the near-monopoly on the "modern" use of force by the United States and its allies, which has endured for a quarter of century, is now ending.

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The traditional condescension with which Russian efforts to create modern, long-range weapons have been traditionally treated in the West is understandable. Moscow has been talking about producing precision-guided, conventional-strike weapons since at least 2000 but kept missing deadlines. By 2013-14, Moscow finally showed its first tangible successes. One should have paid closer attention to a series of high-level meetings chaired by President Vladimir Putin at the end of 2013 when he talked about conventional deterrence—such policies are only made public when success is assured. By and large, the weapons that Moscow produced are similar to what the United States has had for more than twenty years. Although it is significant that Russia has mastered the relevant technologies, it is more significant that Russia has employed them in warfare.

At the present technological level of Russia's new weapons, geography favors Russia more than it does the United States, particularly when it comes to today's "hot spots," most of which are located in Eurasia and are thus closer to Russia than to the United States. In particular, Moscow can bring the weapons to bear faster and cheaper than Washington for several reasons:

- The United States usually needs several weeks to move platforms with modern strike assets to an area; therefore, its capability is not truly stand-off. Russia, in contrast, is closer to potential target zones, as its missile strikes in Syria demonstrated. It can launch modern missiles from inside its own territory or from within its own territorial waters. Therefore, its weapons have the edge in stand-off capability. Moscow continues to build up the Caspian flotilla of small surface ships and diesel-powered submarines in the Black Sea, both equipped with long-range submarine-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs); it is also launching a large series of SLCM-carrying frigates, which will expand its reach to waters around most of Eurasia.
- To acquire a truly stand-off global capability, the United States has to pursue costly and time-consuming programs, which feature, among other elements, a hypersonic cruise missile with global reach. While Russia has been working on a similar program, in most contingencies it could limit itself to shorter-range assets, which could be developed quickly and at a lower cost (recent reports indicate that it has successfully tested the 400-km range Tsiklon hypersonic cruise missile).
- The United States had to abandon plans to equip strategic missiles with conventional warheads because almost any launch against targets in Eurasia would have these missiles flying toward or over Russia and China. The risk of misidentifying a target was rightly judged as unacceptable. In contrast, Russian strategic weapons armed with conventional warheads could be directed away from the United States. Such considerations led Moscow to undertake, for example, a program to create a dual-capable, liquid fuel, intercontinental ballistic

missile (ICBM) using existing technologies and leveraging decades of experience with designing and building similar assets.

Additionally, there are several important differences between Russia's emergent conventional arsenal and the capabilities and strategies of the United States, as follows:

- Following a long tradition, Russia continues to favor ground-launched missiles. In this category, they have the Iskandr with its declared 500-km range, which some estimate at 700 km or even more for the cruise missile version. They have plans to create a conventionally-capable ICBM (mentioned above). There are also reports about Russian tests of an intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile, which led the United States to accuse Russia of violating the 1987 INF Treaty.
- Russia employs a greater variety of platforms. These include, for example, small surface ships and diesel-powered submarines. Russia even hints at launchers hidden inside standard shipping containers, which can conceal intermediate-range SLCMs, the tracking of which would be almost impossible.
- Russia is enhancing the accuracy of its old, Soviet-era weapons, which demonstrates its propensity for quick and low-cost solutions. In Syria, for example, Russia was able to significantly increase the accuracy of "dumb" bombs dropped from Su-24s fighter jets by more accurately positioning them and better calculating the moment the bomb is dropped.
- Perhaps the most tangible difference involves the relationship between nuclear and conventional capability. Since the early 1990s, the United States has shifted emphasis from the former to the latter because nuclear weapons seemed less relevant. In short, conventional capability partially replaced nuclear capability. While Moscow initially declared a desire to do the same, its approach seems to have changed and conventional capability appears to be an addition to nuclear capability. All of its new weapon delivery systems are dual-capable and can be used to carry either nuclear or conventional warheads depending on the mission.

Conventional Missions

Russia's long-range, conventional weapons have two roles. The first is conventional deterrence. This mission was introduced by the latest Russian Military Doctrine as a means to deter the use of force by the United States and NATO. In the past, in 2000, this mission was assigned to nuclear weapons, but deterrence through limited nuclear use is not particularly credible and, already then, it was officially announced that reliance on nuclear weapons was a "temporary fix" until Russia modernized its conventional capability. Moscow announced this capability in 2013 and demonstrated it in 2015.

A closer look at the new Russian capability suggests deficiencies in NATO planning (at least when it comes to publicly available information). NATO planning—for example, regarding the defence of the Baltic states (as with deployment of a few additional battalions and predeployment of heavy equipment)—seems to be predicated on the assumption that Russia will employ the same tactics that it used in Ukraine. NATO's other scenario is an invasion by Russian troops across Poland's Suwalki gap—in effect, a copy of the Cold War scenario of an invasion through Germany's Fulda gap. These scenarios appear to overlook Russia's capability to reach targets not only in the Baltic states or Poland, but literally across Europe, without Russian troops crossing borders, giving it a capability to disrupt NATO reinforcements, communications, and strike assets. These strikes can be launched from airborne platforms, from nuclear powered attack submarines, and even from SLCM-carrying diesel submarines in the Black Sea, whose range reaches to London.

Still, Moscow is clearly aware of the risks of engaging in direct conflict with NATO. Its posture appears to emphasize deterrence rather than offense. Assets deployed in Kaliningrad Oblast, the Russian exclave between Poland and Lithuania, appear to have predominantly regional (if not local) missions, including access denial and air defense. Surprisingly, the Baltic Sea Fleet is not receiving the modification of the diesel-powered submarines equipped for SLCMs.

It should be mentioned that there is a domestic component to Russia's posture toward NATO. Russia's enhanced but controlled level of tension with NATO—achieved "on the cheap" using air force flights close to NATO borders and harassment of NATO ships and aircraft—is also a deliberate way for the Kremlin to foster a "rally-around-the-flag" phenomenon inside its own country.

Russia's second mission, one that has far-reaching consequences, is limited use of force in contingencies other than vis-a-vis the United States and NATO. Modern, long-range, precision-guided, conventional weapons can be assigned to scenarios similar to the use of force employed by the United States in the Middle East and in the Balkans. Russia's new capability would have an impact on many countries, especially those in the vicinity of Russia. These states will now need to factor in the ability of Russia to employ a wider variety of forces than in previous years.

The region of greatest interest to Russia appears to be the Middle East. This region represents a major threat (militant Islamic extremism and growing instability) but also a great opportunity. The region is in semi-chaos, allowing Moscow freedom to act utilizing a set of shifting alliances and local support. It has used military bases in Syria and in Iran. Russia's deployment of its new strike assets (cruise missiles, bombers, and SLCMs in the Caspian and the Black Seas) clearly indicates that these are primarily intended for use in the Middle East rather than in Europe. If Russia succeeds in

stabilizing the situation in Syria, it could use that success as a springboard for enhancing Russia's status and influence across Eurasia.

The Window of Opportunity (or Necessity)

Paradoxically, the greatest challenge to the interests of the United States and its allies is not the new Russian capability itself but rather Washington's state of denial regarding its strategic implications. Few in Washington seem prepared, psychologically and politically, to accept that Russia's demonstration of its newly acquired conventional capability amounts to: 1) the eventual loss of the West's monopoly on the proactive use of force in support of foreign policy; 2) changes in the nature of the global "game"; and 3) the need to adjust global and regional strategies. Moscow's disruption of Washington's Syria strategy should be a tangible warning about the future.

With its missile launches into Syria, Russia conducted an important demonstration. But full operational capability and scale are still years away. A look at statements by Russian military leaders suggests that they expect maturity of their new weapons systems around 2022. At a minimum, Russia needs to produce many more platforms and weapons. Even Russia's fairly short (although intense) employment of conventional SLCMs in Syria in 2015-2016 depleted the stockpile of these weapons.

Having conventional strike weapons is but one part of achieving full capability. Fully integrated command, control, intelligence, target acquisition, and other such systems are required. The space component of the reconnaissance-strike complex seems to present the greatest challenge for Russia, and this realm is probably the main reason for Russia's relatively long development timeline. This component might be about seven years away, and should be treated as the window of opportunity for the West. Washington and NATO should adjust policies with the understanding that returning to the *status quo ante* is not possible. Russia is increasingly capable of supporting its foreign policy endeavors with military power and will not be shy about it.

Conclusion

There is reason to believe that Russia's current confrontation with NATO fits a certain pattern of Russian leadership—it focuses the attention and resources of the West on a region where further Russian moves are actually unlikely. Although it will continue to develop conventional deterrence options vis-à-vis NATO and Europe, the "game" will most likely be played in the greater Middle East and South Asia, where Russia has a significantly better chance of procuring results.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the West is the fact that Russia's emerging capability is not subject to any arms control regimes. Effectively, Moscow is free to develop almost any type of asset and deploy it in any mode, anywhere, and in any quantity. As the

number of weapons and supporting capabilities (in particular targeting) continues to increase, Russia's conventional weapons will have progressively greater bearing on its adjacent regions, in particular Europe and the Middle East.

For more than two decades, the United States has successfully resisted Russia's demands to include conventional long-range weapons in arms control talks. That policy served the West well as long as it possessed a monopoly on these weapons (even though this situation also led Russia to rely more on nuclear weapons). But if that monopoly is coming to an end, the gap in arms control regimes will soon become counterproductive for the West itself. Changing a decades-old position will be difficult and politically controversial, but it appears to be the only reliable way to control Russia's emerging conventional capabilities, even at the price of extending the same rules and limitations to similar Western (especially U.S.) weapons. The new regime should include not only existing, but also, more importantly, future systems, the ones that are at the research and development stage today, first and foremost hypersonic systems.

Although aspects of the 1970s U.S.-Soviet "Third World" competitive era are back, the scale of the challenge is not the same—Russia is not trying to promote Communism—thus making the chances for East-West accommodation greater, but also making the contours of the "game" less well defined and strategically more challenging. Nonetheless, Russia's new weapon developments are fraught with adverse consequences; hard, new, and intelligent choices are needed in Washington. The non-nuclear weapons superiority that the West has held for twenty-five years is disappearing and decisions need to be made soon. The closer Russia comes to acquiring full capability, the less inclined it will be to make concessions.

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