

Russia's Conventional Deterrence

AN ENHANCED TOOL FOR BOTH WARFIGHTING AND POLITICAL STRATEGY

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 466

March 2017

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Over the last two decades, conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence in Russia's military strategy has changed from being a sub-tactical, sub-strategic warfighting tool to being a separate military-political factor—a self-contained component in Russia's strategic deterrence concept. Soon after Russia revised its military doctrine in 2014, it applied this conventional deterrence concept in its Syria campaign—against the backdrop of being under international pressure vis-à-vis the Ukraine conflict and Russia-NATO tensions. In Syria, Russia fired new types of long-range, precision-guided missiles, showcasing these weapons both as battlefield tools and as geopolitical instruments of deterrence.

The “Second Conventional Age”

After the era of World Wars and nuclear arms races, a conventional deterrence renaissance took place. This so-called “[second conventional age](#)” was marked by the development of modern conventional weapons: long-range, precise ballistic and cruise missiles that use advanced intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance systems. These modern technologies include not only classic strike platforms—ballistic and cruise missiles, artillery systems, other precision-guided munitions (PGMs)—but also weapons based on new physical principles, for example, hypersonic weapons, self-maneuvering reentry vehicles (MaRVs), anti-satellite and space weapons, and new types of non-kinetic, non-nuclear weapons (cyber, radio-electronic, electromagnetic).

[According](#) to Russian military experts, the technological development of conventional weapons by many countries “has made such progress that the destruction of a single element of infrastructure, communication, and control systems can lead to a catastrophe, able to throw a country back many years in its development.” Conventional weapons have reached such a combination of range, accuracy, and lethality that even leading

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nuclear powers effectively rely on them for strategic deterrence. The important advantage of non-nuclear deterrence application is also that even the most powerful conventional munitions, such as Russia's thermobaric warheads, do not have the serious radioactive side effects accompanied by every type of nuclear weapon, even so-called mini-nukes. The conventionalization of strategic deterrence by the key nuclear powers – the United States, Russia, and China – has led to the partial substitution of at least regional-level nuclear deterrence by conventional deterrence, based on long-range PGMs.

Dynamics in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Conceptual Approaches

Given the closed nature of military-strategic studies in the Soviet Union, the issue of conventional deterrence never received public attention in Soviet military and political theory, in contrast to Western countries. This was mainly due to the fact that the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies enjoyed significant quantitative and even qualitative offensive superiority in conventional forces in Europe.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the neglected status of Russia's conventional deterrence began to change, although only gradually. The main reason was the growing role of nuclear deterrence against the decline of Russian conventional forces vis-à-vis the opposite processes taking place in the United States and leading NATO countries. Meanwhile, the interest of Russian academia in conventional deterrence was mainly focused on conventional arms control (for instance, on issues related to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe), with only very limited study of the impact of conventional PGMs on strategic stability and nuclear deterrence. For example, there was not much consideration given to counterforce threats from U.S. precision conventional sea and air launch cruise missiles (SLCMs and ALCMs) against Russian strategic nuclear silo-based and mobile intercontinental ballistic missile forces.

Only from the beginning of the 2000s did the role of conventional forces in Russia's strategic deterrence outlook begin to take shape and be considered an initial element in the early de-escalation of military conflicts (prior to the possible use of nuclear weapons). According to Russian military experts, one of the key advantages of conventional deterrence was that it increased the nuclear threshold. As Christine Leah [wrote](#) in December 2015, "conventional weapons are used to deter aggression beginning with the threat to inflict sufficient damage to the adversary's forces and military and economic potential, and ending with the threat of nuclear escalation of the conflict to the extent of a massive nuclear exchange."

From the beginning, the post-Soviet Russian conceptual approaches to conventional deterrence considered it not so much a military-political tool as a practical warfighting instrument, one that was relevant especially in low-scale, local conflicts in which nuclear weapons were useless to apply. Russian military theorists used to consider non-nuclear

deterrence as a convenient military-political addition to tactical nuclear weapons. It is not accidental that since the 1990s, the Russian professional discourse (for example, studies by Andrei Kokoshin) have been [applying](#) the terms “non-nuclear deterrence” or “pre-nuclear deterrence” and not just “conventional deterrence.”

The improved accuracy and lethality of conventional weapons progressively upgraded their role in Russia’s deterrence strategy. The significance of conventional deterrence as a practical operational-tactical warfighting instrument also increased. Even though the theoretical foundations of conventional deterrence started to develop in Russia in the late 1990s, the practical testing and demonstration of its advanced technical capacity took place recently, in Syria. This applies especially to strategic level PGMs, for example the 3M54 Kalibr cruise missile, but also covers advanced weapon projects such as the Yu-71 glide vehicle or 3K22 Zircon hypersonic cruise missile.

A Self-Contained Component of Russian Strategic Deterrence

Russia’s approach to conventional deterrence differs from the U.S. Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS) program. [According](#) to one prominent U.S. expert, the U.S. concept is one of “a missile in a search of a mission,” meaning that the existence of detailed technical research and development products and programs comes before mission goals or being mentioned in the U.S. strategic doctrine.

According to Russian officials, the technical and conceptual development of Russian non-nuclear deterrence is mainly [aimed in response](#) to the CPGS. The assessment of the U.S. long-range conventional PGM counterforce capacity (for example, the Block IV Tomahawks) indicates that at the current stage there is no guarantee that such strikes against Russian nuclear silo-based and mobile ground missile launchers will succeed. However, the U.S. non-nuclear PGMs can already complement tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons and undermine the general balance between the two nuclear superpowers. Russian experts argue that any further technological development of the CPGS (together with the enhancement of the U.S. ballistic missile defense system and a new generation of PGMs) will [create existential threats](#) to Russia’s strategic deterrence capacity. According to estimates by the US Strategic Command (STRATCOM), conventional PGMs can already [destroy](#) 10 to 30 percent of the nuclear weapons counterforce targets in Russia.

Non-nuclear weapons used to hold a low place in the framework of Russia’s global strategic deterrence. This changed due to Russian technological developments, and it now seeks to use the capability in the context of “central nuclear deterrence” between Russia and the United States, and also, potentially, as a tool against “second echelon” nuclear powers. The development of high-precision long-range strategic non-nuclear weapons (SNNW) might soon become a matter of arms control negotiations between Moscow and Washington, with discussion on the development of ground- and sea-

launch ballistic and cruise missiles, long-range attack unmanned aerial vehicles, compliance with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), and other arms control agreements.

Since the late Cold War period, the United States has had a near-monopoly on Tomahawk-type missiles. This is why Washington was not interested in discussing this issue during negotiations on the New START Treaty. But now the situation has changed: the first salvos of Russian Kalibr missiles and the [combat debuts](#) of the Kh-101 ALCM in Syria have significantly shifted the overall context of strategic arms control negotiations. The possible deployment of the new Russian 9M729 missile (SSC-8), which resembles a ground version of the Kalibr SLCM or Kh-101 ALCM but uses a mobile launcher (the same used for the Iskander-M missiles), is more complicated in the strategic arms control context; the issue is that these Russian measures very likely directly [violate](#) the provisions of the [INF Treaty](#).

Despite the active debate on concepts and prospects for technological development, many Russian experts argue that conventional deterrence is not able to fully replace nuclear deterrence at both the global and regional level. However, the development of SNNWs can make considerable changes in the overall concept of Russian strategic deterrence. The SNNWs may be able to deal with a conventional de-escalation scenario in case there is a conflict situation between nuclear superpowers (in the framework of the famous Russian concept of “de-escalation through escalation”) as well as to deliver preventive strikes against nuclear and non-nuclear targets without relying on nuclear capacity.

Russia’s SNNW will not replace tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons but will serve as an important component of regional, strategic-level deterrence. The Ukraine conflict fostered this process and the Russian Syrian campaign brought it to light. According to Sergey Shoigu’s statement in January 2017, Russia’s Ministry of Defense is planning to increase the capacity of their SNNW by a factor of four by 2021, which will allow Russia to [further shift](#) its deterrence capacities from nuclear to non-nuclear measures.

Practical Warfighting Capacity

Russia’s long-range PGMs are in linked development across its land, air, and sea forces. Alongside their role as strategic deterrence, these weapons are meant to be anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) in scope—aimed to [deny](#) possible adversaries access to strategic regions such as in the Black and Baltic Seas and near the Northern and Pacific Fleet nuclear submarine bases. Russia has equipped its bastions in the Baltic Sea

(Kaliningrad) and Black Sea (Crimea) with the long-range A2/AD systems.² Russia also created an A2/AD “bubble” over Syria.

The counteraction against the Russian and Chinese A2/AD systems serves as one of the arguments among U.S. military planners for the further development of the CGPS program. Therefore, it is natural that in order to counter the U.S. conventional prompt strikes, as well as for the effective implementation of its own A2/AD, Russian non-nuclear deterrence acquires a new meaning on operative-tactical and sub-strategic levels. For example, the development of an effective Russian A2/AD system can directly influence regional security issues in Europe. In this context, the building of long-range conventional A2/AD capacity in Kaliningrad creates a new strategic reality in relations between Russia and NATO, especially when it comes to the [Baltic countries](#).

After the Ukraine conflict, some Western experts are keen to describe Russian conventional deterrence as part of a wider strategic approach (for instance, cross-domain coercion) and try to link it with “hybrid warfare” and other newfangled [conceptions](#) aimed at describing Russian policy in the post-Soviet region. In addition, it is widely discussed in expert circles whether NATO should return to the implementation of its own conventional deterrence policy in order to react to the growing potential of Russian conventional forces and systems of non-nuclear deterrence. Experts are taking into consideration the combination of Russian hybrid warfare and its A2/AD systems – systems that reinforce each other – in the context of potential Russian designs on East European countries. The [notion](#) is that Russia could “create a sort of double deterrence to NATO intervention in a military crisis.”

Finally, another area where Russian conventional deterrence could be applied, especially traditional long-range PGMs, is against terrorism, which according to the Russian Military Doctrine is a major threat, and specifically the targeted [killing](#) of terrorist leaders. Of note, the fight against terrorism is also presented as one of the official priorities in the U.S. CPGS program.

Conclusion

Conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence has evolved significantly in Russian military and strategic thinking. It is a sub-strategic warfighting tool, as well as a separate military-political strategic deterrence element. The main area where this reverberates is in the post-Soviet region but it has impact on Europe and the Middle East. It is a self-contained element of the Russian global level strategic deterrence system and can be in accompaniment to Russia’s strategic nuclear weapons and non-kinetic cyber and radio-

² Russia’s concept of so-called “sea bastions” was developed during the Cold War and aimed to defend Soviet nuclear submarines deployment bases in the context of U.S. and NATO naval superiority. See: James J. Wirtz, “Strategic Conventional Deterrence: Lessons from the Maritime Strategy,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 3, Autumn 1993, p.132-137.

electronic warfare weapons. On the regional level, Russia's conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence systems can be applied in combination with tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons to provide flexibility in strategic deterrence, especially in crisis situations in which Moscow's political goals are limited. The missiles and munitions are also practical warfighting military instruments that contribute to strengthening the A2/AD capacity of Russia's conventional forces. This includes the application of PGMs in regional, low-intensity, and asymmetric conflicts and in fighting terrorism.

In short, Russia's new conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence capability and doctrinal language provides political underpinnings and geopolitical influence when deterrence is aimed at maintaining regional balance and promoting Russian geopolitical interests in the post-Soviet region, Eastern Europe, Middle East, and probably beyond.

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