

## Why Russia Undermines the Norm of Nuclear Disarmament

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 305  
December 2013

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Russia is one of the founding fathers of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and continues to play a major role in its framework today. Together with the United States, Moscow plays an important role in keeping the regime intact, both preventing the emergence of new nuclear states and complying with its own obligations as a leading nuclear state to work toward gradual nuclear disarmament. This memo analyzes Russia's position on this second issue, which has become the key element in Russian-American relations since the Barack Obama administration first proclaimed support for the idea of "nuclear zero."

Like the United States, Russia formally accepts the principle enshrined in Article VI of the NPT: that signatories undertake "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament." Russia signed and ratified the New START Treaty that put new ceilings on nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles. It also claims to support the policy of "nuclear zero."

More recently, however, Moscow seems to have lost its enthusiasm for disarmament. In particular, it met President Obama's June 2013 offer to reduce both states' nuclear arsenals by one-third below New START levels with little enthusiasm. Russian president Vladimir Putin observed that "[w]e cannot allow the balance of strategic deterrence systems to be undermined [or] for the effectiveness of our nuclear forces to be reduced."<sup>1</sup>

Other officials have repeatedly articulated Russia's main points of concern – U.S. plans to develop space weapons, conventionally-tipped strategic missiles, and plans for global ballistic missile defense – and emphasized that Russia is not going to disarm until other nuclear states are included in the process.

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<sup>1</sup>Aleksandr Kolbin, "Prazhskiy Sindrom Obamy," PIR Center, June 23, 2013, [www.pircenter.org/blog/view/id/121](http://www.pircenter.org/blog/view/id/121)

There are two main areas of concern preventing Russia from embracing further rounds of disarmament. The first is the quantitative imbalance that exists when taking into consideration the military capabilities of states other than the United States. As NATO powers, France and Great Britain have nuclear capabilities that bolster the United States' destructive potential. Until these two countries get involved in the disarmament process, Moscow will continue to factor in the risk of strategic disparity between all NATO members and Russia.

At the same time, China's growing nuclear and conventional might inevitably leads Russia to allot its targeting requirements among the United States, other NATO members, and China. The latter has considerable potential to turn into a powerful adversary if Russia imposes limits on its nuclear arms without ensuring reciprocal Chinese limitations.

Moreover, Russia's own nuclear capabilities will decline in the coming decade as outdated Soviet missiles are removed from service. Consequently, Russia anticipates entering a "missile gap" of 1:3 with the United States from 2020-2028, until Moscow is able to produce enough new ICBMs to compensate for this imbalance.<sup>2</sup> If Russia were to proceed with further negotiated reductions, this would just highlight Russia's inferiority in conventional arms. For Moscow it is easier to overcome the "missile gap" by producing more ICBMs than to try and catch up to the United States in conventional precision-guided missiles, a task for the longer term. Maintaining the strategic balance is an important consideration for Russia, as relative nuclear parity with the United States is the last attribute of its former superpower position. Continuing to harbor some superpower ambitions, Moscow regards the preservation of this status as vital for its national interest.

Russia is also concerned about NATO's qualitative military superiority and intentions. Moscow's attitude is perfectly expressed by Sergey Kortunov, who attributes the United States' support of global zero to its desire to "secure its overwhelming military superiority in the field of high precision munitions and to diminish the nuclear potential of other nuclear states by radical nuclear disarmament and the creation of a global American BMD system."<sup>3</sup> This situation, the reasoning goes, is unfolding at a time when a global struggle for domination still exists and the predictability of the Cold War has been replaced by multiple sources of instability and growing international asymmetries. This, in turn, increases the possibility of war between Russia and the West. According to Nikolai Kosolapov, "a war between the United States and Russia appears possible now, not only technically, but also politically and psychologically. The two countries are gradually approaching the line at which they risk being much closer to war than the USSR and the United States ever were."<sup>4</sup> According to Kosolapov, Moscow has come to understand that the main motivation of U.S. policy toward Russia is not to

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<sup>2</sup> Aleksei Arbatov, "Gambit or Endgame? The New State of Arms Control," *Carnegie Moscow Papers*, March 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Sergey Kortunov, "Yaderniy Gambit Baraka Obamy," *Indeks Bezopasnosti* no. 3 (2011), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolai Kosolapov, "Porogoviy uroven i veroyatnost kanflikta SSHA s Rossiey," *Mezhdunarodnie Protsessy*, November 12, 2013, <http://www.intertrends.ru/eighteenth/003.htm>

support freedom or democracy but “the liquidation of the nuclear missile potential left over from the USSR and Russia’s very capacity to restore and develop it.” Complicated by regional conflicts (Georgia) and the global financial crisis, a situation in which the United States seeks to dominate and Russia is unwilling to obey raises the possibility of military conflict.

In this situation, Russia sees no hope but to rely on strategic nuclear forces as the last attribute of its superpower status. Sergey Karaganov has called nuclear weapons “something sent to us by the Almighty to save humankind,” adding that “for the first time in the history of Russia nobody in the region threatens our country, owing to nuclear weapons and owing to an absence of major political disagreements with the major countries [of the region].”<sup>5</sup> In Karaganov’s opinion, a rejection of Russia’s powerful nuclear potential, which represents “the main guarantor of state security, the source of its political, even economic position in global competition, is equivalent to suicide.”<sup>6</sup> Karaganov regards Russia’s campaign against European missile defense as a rational attempt “to tie the hands of the Americans politically, getting a convenient and credible excuse to refuse any further treaty-based steps toward any kind of nuclear weapons reduction.”<sup>7</sup>

Russia’s position also stems in part from its strategic culture, or rather that of its leadership. Take Moscow’s reaction to Obama’s speech in Berlin, when he proposed further reductions to both states’ nuclear arsenals. In Russia, the general impression of Obama’s propositions was that they lay somewhere between “idealistic” and “hypocritical,” in the spirit of Nikita Khrushchev’s “struggle for peace,” when Moscow suggested “total general disarmament” while testing the world’s strongest hydrogen bomb and preserving a preemptive nuclear strategy. The belief that Moscow would be defenseless in the face of NATO military primacy in the event of radical nuclear reductions bolsters a perception of the proposal as hypocritical.<sup>8</sup> Speaking about Putin’s personal beliefs, Alexander Garin emphasizes Putin’s inclination to see conspiracies and selfish interests everywhere.<sup>9</sup>

None of the above makes the fate of a new round of reduction talks very promising. The Obama administration wants to launch negotiations on a follow-on treaty to New START. Russia’s main argument against a new treaty continues to be the uncertainty surrounding the future of missile defense, as well as NATO’s superiority in

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<sup>5</sup> Sergey Karaganov, “Yadernoe oruzhie – eto nechto, poslannoe nam Vsevyshnim,” *Rossia V Globalnoy Politike*, February 23, 2013, [www.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Yadernoe-oruzhie--eto-nechto-poslannoe-nam-Vsevyshnim-15855](http://www.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Yadernoe-oruzhie--eto-nechto-poslannoe-nam-Vsevyshnim-15855)

<sup>6</sup> Sergey Karaganov, “Globalniy niol I zdraviy smysl,” *Rossia V Globalnoy Politike*, July 1, 2010, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Globalnyi-nol-i-zdravyi-smysl-14881>

<sup>7</sup> Sergey Karaganov, “Strategiya bezopasnosti: Zachem Oruzhie?” September 12, 2012, <http://karaganov.ru/publications/284>

<sup>8</sup> Malor Sturua, “Berlinskaya rech Obamy napomnila vystupleniya Hrusheva,” *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, June 20, 2013, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/article/2013/06/20/872151-berlinskaya-rech-obamy-napomnila-vystupleniya-hrusheva.html>

<sup>9</sup> Andrey Shariy, Veksler Yuriy, “Vistuplenie Obamy v Berline,” *Radio Azadlyg*, June 20, 2013, <http://www.radioazadlyg.org/content/article/25022413.html>

conventional high-precision weapons. These factors may be relevant, but even if they weren't, Russia would likely find other objections.

In the end, the stability of the NPT regime is less significant to Russia than its own national interests, under which its political establishment includes a need to counterbalance the domination of the United States, Moscow's Cold War rival. This situation affects the consistency of Russia's nonproliferation policy. On the one hand, Russia is increasingly inclined to associate its greatness with the size of its nuclear potential. Continuing to see enemies through the prism of a Cold War mentality, Moscow tries to preserve the idea of strategic stability, based on mutual assured destruction. Even regarding its capabilities realistically and accepting the idea of minimal nuclear deterrence, based on the capacity to destroy an adversary's infrastructure only to a degree that is sufficient to deter an attack, Russia assumes the need for a very high number of casualties (50-100 million).<sup>10</sup> As the Russian notion of "sufficiency," therefore, is rather different from the French or Chinese one, there is little reason to expect Russia to dip below the threshold of New START as a limit for minimal deterrence, at least for the near future. Still, while this number is far from nuclear zero, it also remains far from the nuclear excess of Cold War times.

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<sup>10</sup> Sergey Rogov and Pavel Zolotarev, "SNV Posle Pragi," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, August, 28, 2010.