

Nuclear Weapons and Russia's Economic Crisis

Nikolai Sokov

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The recent announcement by vice-premier Yuri Masliukov that Russia would produce 30-40 Topol-M (SS-27) single-warhead ICBMs annually put the finishing touches on Russia's defense policy under the conditions of economic crisis. This statement would have come as a surprise to anyone who expected that nuclear weapons production would be scaled down or even discontinued after August 1998. This seemingly paradoxical policy begs for an explanation.

The number of missiles itself is easy to rationalize. The rate of Topol (SS-25) production in the 1980s was, on average, 48 per year; the number announced by Masliukov will allow for replacement of missiles whose warranty periods are beginning to expire. Thirty-to-forty is also the most cost effective rate of production. A somewhat lower figure around 20 (the rate of production in the mid-1990s) would have yielded no significant savings: for about the same money Russia would have obtained fewer missiles. A significantly lower rate, which could theoretically achieve noticeable savings, is impossible because the bedrock rate--the minimum at which the network of about 200 suppliers can be sustained--is 12-15 missiles per year.

So, Masliukov's statement makes sense in economic terms. The question is, rather, why the government addressed production of nuclear weapons almost immediately after paying wage arrears to the military--making it number two on the list of national security priorities. The answer can be found if the international situation is viewed through Russian eyes.

It is obvious that nuclear weapons have become more prominent in Russian national security policy since 1992. On the surface, Russia's official policy on nuclear weapons is not all that different from that of the United States and NATO: they are the weapons of last resort to be used if the country faces a serious defeat which could threaten core security interests (recent statements indicate that nuclear weapons are considered usable at a regional (i.e., theater-wide) level, but not below), and they could be used in response to a conventional attack. In fact, Russia is even somewhat more explicit than the United States in its commitment to negative guarantees under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (not to threaten non-nuclear states with nuclear weapons): an unequivocal statement to this effect is contained in the military doctrine of 1993 and is certain to be preserved in the next doctrine.

Beyond the purely military aspects, however, nuclear weapons have additional significance. Two points should be noted in this regard.

- **Nuclear weapons are an important guarantee of economic and political reforms.**

Although this may sound strange, nuclear weapons serve such a role in the current Russian political context. As long as the nuclear arsenal can conceivably provide viable deterrence, proponents of reforms can claim that the security of the country is assured. Hence, the pressure in favor of greater defense spending is weakened, and military reform can be allowed to continue at a snail's pace. This paper is not intended to evaluate the validity of this claim, but rather to note that it has political relevance. It is hardly accidental, as a favorite Soviet saying goes, that nuclear weapons have received close attention from the Russian government, and that they received more attention from the reformist government of Sergei Kiriyenko than they did from the previous government of Viktor Chernomyrdin.

The emphasis on nuclear weapons also makes it more difficult for the opposition to mobilize voters by claiming that the "powers that be" undermine Russian security. The government can always point to its efforts to improve financing of nuclear modernization (even though these efforts have generally failed), at the strategic modernization program adopted on July 3, 1998, and now at Masliukov's statement.

Modernization of nuclear weapons is cheaper than that of conventional armed forces, and sustaining the relatively small (in terms of manpower and facilities) strategic triad is cheaper than sustaining a much larger, even if reduced, general purpose forces and the Navy. This means that relatively higher attention to nuclear weapons will continue under the conditions of the economic crisis because it provides for a near-optimal combination of political imperatives and economic costs.

As a consequence, no amount of external pressure can force Russia to abandon strategic modernization. If, for example, the United States were to link Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR), the Material Protection, Control and Accounting program (MPC&A), and similar programs to modernization (although, it should be recognized, no such plans apparently exist), this would only mean that less money will be spent on CTR-related activities. Reallocation of resources is highly unlikely.

- **Nuclear weapons possess an immediate deterrence value.**

Again, many might find it hard to believe, but a significant part of the Russian political-military establishment is genuinely concerned about the use of force or the threat of force by the United States and NATO. At issue is not fear of a real large-scale war, but rather a limited use of force over limited political objectives along the lines force was used in Iraq, Bosnia, or, most recently, Kosovo (a threat rather than the actual use in the last case). If these cases are taken as an example, one could imagine a variety of scenarios within Russia or in close proximity to its territory, but involving, nonetheless, its troops. These would include a deteriorating situation in the North Caucasus, the conflict in Abkhazia, separatist movements inside the country, nuclear cooperation with Iran, etc.

The use of force around these and similar issues is hardly likely today, but in the future and under a different US president, who knows? While still foreign minister, Yevgeniy Primakov never tired of repeating that intentions are transitory, but power is enduring. And, after all, this is just a mirror image of the Western and East European concerns about the revival of Russian expansionism. This mirror image on the part of Russia is not appreciated in the West because NATO is viewed as inherently "good" and, in any event, one's own intentions are always clear. In today's Russia, however, precious few view NATO as friendly in the long term.

The concern about the possible use of force is one (but not the sole, of course) reason for Russian objections to NATO enlargement, especially to the prospect of the Baltic states' membership in the alliance. The Baltic states are located in close vicinity to vital political and economic centers, and even a limited NATO military presence on the territory of these countries is and in the foreseeable future will be seen in the light of possible threat of force. Published Russian military analysis estimates that the incidence of armed conflicts in the Western part of the country is three times more likely than in the East, on the border with China. Since a large-scale war between Russia and NATO is hardly possible, it is clear that these analyses refer to possible use of force to achieve relatively limited political goals.

In the absence of credible conventional deterrence, it is little wonder that nuclear weapons are viewed as a primary means of "dissuading" NATO from threatening the use of force against Russia. Theoretically, even the remotest possibility that any armed conflict could be elevated to the nuclear level is supposed to guarantee Russia against "unpleasant surprises." Tactical nuclear weapons are particularly important in this respect, of course, their mission being approximately the same as that of NATO's tactical nuclear weapons during the Cold War. To be credible, deterrence should be more or less commensurate with the anticipated threat, and the use of strategic nuclear weapons in a limited conflict is not credible.

In view of this, it is hardly surprising that the prospect of the Baltic states' entry into NATO is countered, at least on the level of rhetoric, by the threat of additional deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, including partial withdrawal from the informal 1991 US-Russian regime reducing them. Two options are being considered: a return of tactical nuclear weapons to ships and submarines and deployment of land-based tactical missiles (a new tactical missile to replace the SS-23 Oka eliminated under the 1987 INF Treaty has reportedly been created). Although such a step would involve additional expenditures, which Russia admittedly cannot afford in the near future, the required amount of spending is still lower than what would be necessary to deploy high-precision "smart" weapons to mirror the expected NATO force that might be employed in a limited strike.

Conclusion

To the extent that a significant part of the Russian political-military elite continues to perceive the threat of force on the part of NATO as real, nuclear weapons will continue to be viewed not simply as a symbol of Russia's status as a great power, but also purely instrumentally. In fact, strategic weapons can easily satisfy whatever status needs exist.

There is widespread perception that Russia needs more than just status: its nuclear weapons should provide for a reliably stable strategic balance and deter NATO from limited use of conventional weapons. It does not really matter if threats exist in real life: it is sufficient that they exist in the imagination. The government and a large part of the elite appear determined to finance modernization and deployment on a limited scale. Without doubt, it would be preferable to avoid the enhanced role of nuclear weapons, a stalemate in arms control, and additional expenses. However, as indicated by Masliukov's announcement, nuclear weapons will continue to have tremendous significance in Russian political discourse. The prospects for cooperation on these issues can be enhanced by understanding the political nuances of Russia's nuclear weapons strategy.

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