

Nuclear De-emphasizing in Russia's Military Thinking: Phantom or Reality?

Alexander Pikayev
October 2000
PONARS Policy Memo 179
Carnegie Moscow Center

Shortly after coming into power, Russian President Vladimir Putin's administration significantly changed Moscow's foreign and security priorities. These changes were based upon the realization that the real and present danger to the country's security comes from the low-intensity conflicts emerging along Russia's vulnerable underbelly, which stretches from the Black Sea to the Pamir Mountains. While Russia's relations with more powerful neighbors in the East and West are not free from controversy, challenges coming from there are less acute and immediate.

Russia, unlike the Soviet Union, possesses very limited resources. While in Soviet times Moscow could spend (under some estimates) up to \$100 billion, in 2001 the overall size of the Russian federal budget is estimated at no more than \$40 billion under the market's ruble-to-dollar exchange rate. Though next year national defense spending will increase by more than 50 billion rubles (\$1.7 billion), it will still be at a level of merely \$6.9 billion (207 billion rubles under the official average exchange rate expected for 2001), or about 2.3% of the US defense budget.

A Changing Focus

With those resources the Kremlin simply cannot permit itself to continue a policy of confrontation on all horizons, which it conducted twenty years ago. Instead, the Putin administration wants to concentrate on recent threats, such as conflicts in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Meanwhile, it expects to solve less urgent and more hypothetical problems with Eastern and especially Western neighbors by diplomatic means, with minimal defense allocations.

Much to the surprise of outside observers, Moscow has begun to discuss de-emphasizing the importance of nuclear weapons in its general security policy. Part of the military establishment points to the disproportionately high percentage of expenditures for nuclear-related forces in Russia's defense procurement budget. According to data provided by official military sources, in 1999 the "nuclear share" reached 90% of the defense ministry's total procurement. Reportedly, the task of reaching a more balanced structure of spending for nuclear and conventional forces in 2000 has thus far failed. The minuscule conventional procurement prevents the military from buying arms and

equipment urgently needed for the Chechen war and for dealing with the deteriorating security situation in Central Asia.

Plans to radically reduce the number of deployed nuclear warheads and to downsize nuclear modernization programs are frequently and openly discussed. The Strategic Rocket Forces, which still control the bulk of Russia's strategic triad, might be entirely abolished as a separate armed service. It is not clear whether these plans would actually be implemented in the absence of arms control agreements. If so, recent trends mean that the Kremlin will lose an opportunity to undertake credible scenarios of extended deterrence against the conventionally predominant and strong nuclear powers in the West and the East.

Geopolitical changes in the 1990s made extended deterrence less relevant for Russia's security interests: both in Central Asia and in the larger Euro-Atlantic zone, which includes the European newly independent states (NIS). The majority of the European NIS seeks not Moscow's guarantees, but protection *from* Russia. Among them, only Armenia and Belarus remain interested in Moscow's security umbrella. Yerevan needs protection from its non-nuclear neighbors, and in this case, Russia's conventional and nuclear guarantees will continue working irrespective of the size of Moscow's nuclear might.

Belarus is a more difficult case. On the one hand, it is located on the strategic Moscow-Berlin axis, and its security environment could approximate the Cold War in the event of resumed confrontation between Russia and NATO--which could occur after the next wave of Alliance expansion. On the other hand, relations between Moscow and Minsk are so intimate that it is not clear whether Russia's security guarantees for Belarus should be considered as *extended* deterrence, or rather a simple *extension* of deterrence covering the Russian homeland, as if Belarus were an integral part of Russia.

Central Asia

In the early 1990s a number of Central Asian states expressed their concerns over possible Chinese encroachment in the region. Those concerns were alleviated by the 1996 five-party border agreement signed in Shanghai, and by the 1997 agreement on military confidence-building measures along the Chinese border with four post-Soviet states. In the late 1990s, Russia, China, and Central Asia came to the conclusion that the major and common threat to their security is coming from radical fundamentalist and separatist groups operating in the region, including in western China.

This shift in security priorities led to a further rapprochement between the five capitals. Summits between leaders of the Shanghai Five have been held annually since 1996. In 2000 the summits were accompanied by a series of meetings between the defense and interior ministers of the five countries, and the process was formalized as the Shanghai Forum. Uzbekistan participated at all Forum gatherings in 2000 as an observer. Thus, the evolution of security perceptions in the region transformed China's image from potential adversary to valuable partner in resisting a common enemy. Consequently, the urgency of

Russia's nuclear guarantees against Beijing was considerably, albeit not completely, muted.

The Future of Russia's Conventional and Nuclear Forces

Although the expected narrowing of the role of nuclear weapons for extended deterrence seems quite realistic and justifiable, reduced nuclear arsenals will probably be even more important as a weapon of last resort in defending Russia's national territory, and what was its national territory less than ten years ago. Financial restraints have forced the Putin administration to further downsize the manpower of the Russian armed forces. By 2004 it will be reduced by one third and will be decreased to 850,000 men (from the recent figure of 1.2 million). This represents the third radical reduction of the armed forces since the Soviet collapse; between 1992-97 they were reduced from 2.8 to 1.8 million men, and in 1997-99 they fell to 1.2 million.

Among those 850,000 personnel, only 170,000 will serve as ground troops--the forces used to resist traditional conventional aggression. Clearly, this number would be sufficient only for dealing with small-scale warfare, including low intensity conflicts, peacekeeping, and counter-guerrilla operations. It would most likely be too small to counteract stronger conventional opponents.

Under these circumstances, the nuclear forces will have to become a multiplier and compensate for conventional inferiority. Smaller deterrent forces will probably play a higher "vertical" role in military thinking; they would also become more important "horizontally." In the foreseeable future, nuclear weapons might be relevant not only in dealing with NATO and China, but perhaps with other countries like Turkey (should it take offensive action in the Caucasus), Iran, or Pakistan. These countries might build stronger conventional militaries, which would be difficult to deter using Russia's non-nuclear forces available in the regions.

Conclusion

In sum, de-emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons in Russian military thinking represents a realistic trend motivated by limited resources and changing geopolitical conditions. However, implementation of these ideas in practice is complicated by the unsettled US-Russian strategic arms control limbo. The recent deadlock makes the Kremlin vulnerable to arguments that its support of unilateral reductions will undermine Russia's negotiating position on Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START) and Anti-Ballistic Missile consultations. It is unlikely that President Putin, who came into power with a strong nationalist mandate, can afford to ignore this argument. As one Russian lawmaker stated recently: "During the first few months of his presidency, Vladimir Putin opened many doors for Russia's foreign policy--to the West, to the East, and to the South. Now it depends on the West, which doors will be of primary, and which of secondary importance."

© PONARS 2000