

"Kosovo Syndrome" and the Great Nuclear Debate of 2000

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In the summer of 2000, a long-simmering conflict within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) burst into the open in a series of leaks to the media that culminated in a stormy meeting of the Collegium of the Ministry of Defense (an assembly of the top brass) on July 12. The center of contention was a proposal by the General Staff, under the leadership of its chief, Anatoly Kvashnin, for a dramatic shift of emphasis away from nuclear weapons toward conventional forces. Reports about this conflict generated anticipation of a fundamental "denuclearization" of Russian defense policy. The debate was transferred to a higher level, to the Security Council, and at the moment of this writing is not over. One meeting of that body after another was postponed: the July 27 meeting was conducted August 11 and the September 27 one was rescheduled for November. In the meantime, the emphasis has gradually shifted from the future of the nuclear arsenal toward broader issues of military reform.

Evidence available to date points to the following:

- There will be no "U-turn" in Russia's nuclear policy. Rather, the country is returning to the pre-1998 policy, which stressed gradual reduction of the nuclear arsenal as the warranty periods of weapons systems expire.
- The needs of conventional forces will be primarily covered from additional spending instead of reallocation of previously available funds.
- Even as the nuclear arsenal contracts, theater-wide missions might expand, leading to a greater role for nuclear weapons that can be used in substrategic roles.
- The Russian military is likely to emphasize flexibility (in ways similar to US military preferences), including greater ability to reassign the same delivery vehicles from nuclear to conventional roles and vice versa.
- A combination of economic pressures and the uncertainty of future missions may not only work to keep the Russian arsenal relatively large (or determine a slow pace of reductions), but can also increase Russia's propensity to withdraw from arms control treaties. While it is unlikely that such a withdrawal would be unilateral, US abandonment of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty could start a veritable avalanche of such withdrawals.

The End of the "Kosovo Syndrome"

The partial "denuclearization" proposed by the General Staff proceeds from the premise that the main threats to Russia come not from the West (North Atlantic Treaty Organization--NATO) or the East (China), but from the South (militant Islamic radicals). Funds allocated for nuclear forces appeared the most logical source of funding for enhancement of the conventional component of the armed forces. Under the new plan, the central mission should be the ability to fight limited conflicts similar to the war currently underway in Chechnya. The reassessment of threats and missions that underlies the General Staff plan may indicate that the Russian military is overcoming "Kosovo syndrome"--the expectation of use of force by NATO against Russia over political disagreements. This expectation resulted from the 1999 Kosovo campaign and led to a sharp increase in the reliance on nuclear weapons as the only means to deter NATO.

This reassessment is unequivocally positive, but one should not expect radical shifts. Policy is apparently returning to the optimization guidelines of 1998, meaning that the arsenal will be gradually reduced, but nuclear deterrence will remain an important element of defense policy. The impact of conceptual discussions in the fall of 1999--conducted partially on the pages of the military's own journal *Voyennaya Mysl* and partially in closed meetings--will not disappear either, especially such innovations as the mission of "de-escalation" and the concept of "expanded deterrence." Both refer to the use of nuclear weapons in regional (theater-wide) conflicts, and this idea was subsequently enshrined in the new military doctrine that President Vladimir Putin approved in the spring of 2000.

Under the 1998-type guidance, Russia will also be able to retain flexibility in terms of the sheer size of its nuclear arsenal through manipulation of the warranty periods of existing weapons. This flexibility will be specifically tied to US national missile defense (NMD) plans: if necessary, older types of delivery vehicles can be kept in service for a longer time than currently anticipated. In this way, one of the most intriguing elements of Kvashnin's original plan--reduction of the nuclear arsenal irrespective of developments in the NMD area--has been removed.

A Funding Dilemma Solved by Logrolling

Even in the absence of final decisions with regard to military reform, it seems reasonably clear that funding for nuclear forces will not be diverted to conventional forces. Instead, the overall defense budget will be increased. Whereas in fiscal year 2000 defense spending is 154.4 billion rubles (an increase from the original budget allocation of 140.8 billion rubles), the government proposal for FY 2001 was 206.3 billion; the Duma increased this amount to 218.9 billion, and the government promised to find an additional 10 billion rubles next year. Thus, the overall figure in FY 2001 may approach 230 billion. Of course, the actual increase is significantly less: about 20% of it came from simple manipulation of figures: several items were simply transferred from other articles into the

defense budget. Even with this caveat, however, the MOD will have more money next year.

There are many reasons for this logrolling, but one of the most persuasive is the sheer cost of reducing nuclear weapons. Russia is simply too poor to quickly reduce its nuclear arsenal. In 2000, the Strategic Rocket Forces (SRF) consumed about 10% of the total defense budget (compared to 18% before a merger of several services in 1998) and about 40-60% of all MOD research and development and acquisition spending (a decline from about 80% in 1999). Since a portion of the SRF as well as almost the entire command and control and early warning systems would have been preserved even under Kvashnin's plan, savings were bound to be limited. According to some calculations, the effect could only amount to 19 billion rubles in 15 years or 0.7% of the anticipated defense budget.

Worse still, short-term expenses generated by weapons elimination and retirement of personnel (about half of the SRF are commissioned and noncommissioned officers who are entitled to severance packages) would have skyrocketed and actually reduced the funds available for conventional forces. Russia would have needed new storage for missiles and fuel as well as additional storage for nuclear warheads removed from missiles--an asset which is in particularly short supply today. Cutting down production of Topol-M (Kvashnin proposed to limit production to only two per year) could have led to the unraveling of the network of about 200 primary contractors. The current rate of about 12-15 missiles per year is considered the minimum necessary to support this network (the rate of 30-35 is cost-effective when calculated per unit). Thus, the implementation of Kvashnin's plan could have resulted in the complete loss of the capability to produce intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in the future.

For these reasons alone, fast-track reductions of the Russian nuclear arsenal--if at all possible--are difficult. It makes much more sense to go slow, eliminating missiles only as their warranty periods expire. The costs of reduction also hint at the limitations Russia faces in the implementation of the second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II) and possibly the START III Treaty (although extension of the implementation deadline of START II relieved many of these problems).

Conceptual Uncertainties

Thus, in only a year and a half, Russian nuclear doctrine has come full circle, by and large returning to the ideas of the summer of 1998. The extent to which the new policy is likely to be stable depends to a large extent on economic and financial rather than political-military factors.

For Russia throughout the 1990s, reliance on nuclear weapons was rational in a purely economic sense. Russia could retain a large arsenal "on the cheap" by simply extending the service life of ICBMs and submarines (the warranty periods of heavy bombers will only expire in the second decade of the 21st century). The presence of the ultimate security guarantee made political reforms and reductions in both the armed forces and the

defense budget possible, alleviating pressure on the government from conservative, nationalist, and simply alarmist groups.

Today, Russia finally faces a choice between a large investment in nuclear weapons and a significant reduction of its arsenal. In this context, the intensity of the debate about priorities is hardly surprising, but there is more than one answer to the questions pending. Two variables appear most important in this respect: mission uncertainty and economic and financial pressures.

The first is mission uncertainty. The range of future threats cannot be reliably determined, and their assessment fluctuates as domestic and external inputs change. Today, the war in Chechnya seems to epitomize the wars of the future, and so Kvashnin wanted to redesign the armed forces to fit this particular type of conflict. If Russia fights a more traditional and larger-scale war in, for example, Central Asia against the feared incursion of Taliban forces from Afghanistan, a Chechnya-type force might prove inadequate. The relationship with China is friendly at the moment, but who can predict what will happen ten or twenty years ahead?

Even though the "Kosovo syndrome" is clearly receding, one is hard-pressed to find a politician who would claim that there is and, even more important, will be no threat of NATO use of force against Russia. Voters and even the political elite will unlikely accept such a definitive statement as a solid foundation for defense policy. A new round of NATO enlargement could stimulate a renewed sense of threat from the West. Another war in the Balkans (for example, over Montenegro) could have the same effect, as might the presence of NATO troops on the territory of the former Soviet Union in any capacity (such as peacekeepers in Georgia).

The second variable is economic and financial pressures. In the view of mission uncertainty, Vladimir Putin appears to prioritize available money ahead of missions: this might be the right choice since Russia simply does not have the money to prepare against all theoretically feasible eventualities. Cost-effectiveness can have a downside as well. Many provisions of formal and informal arms control regimes work against this principle. For example, the START I verification system is regarded as excessively expensive. START I's prohibition on deployment of air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) on medium bombers reduces the options for cheap expansion of a theatre-range nuclear force. The 1991 decision by former President Mikhail Gorbachev (confirmed by Boris Yeltsin in 1992) to retain only air-based tactical nuclear weapons prevents their deployment on ships and submarines as well as, in the future, on the new tactical "Iskander" missile. In other words, without treaties one can have more weapons for the same amount of money.

Given these constraints, many within the Russian military have developed a preference for withdrawal from arms control regimes. Currently this segment is not sufficiently strong to sway policy, but if the United States decides to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, this may be regarded as a signal for Russia to do the same with respect to other treaties and regimes. Paradoxically, the less threat Russia anticipates from NATO, the greater the

propensity to withdraw from arms control treaties and the greater the emphasis placed on substrategic nuclear weapons (including the use of heavy bombers for theatre missions as well as ALCM deployment on medium bombers). If the threat from NATO is low, then existing treaties lose their primary value: restrictions on US and NATO forces. Instead, in the absence of threat from the West, Russia would be able to disregard a possible buildup of US nuclear forces and perceive much greater value in increasing its own nuclear arsenal vis-à-vis other threats (from the south, for example).

Conclusion

The "great nuclear debate of 2000" has demonstrated that the Kosovo syndrome--the expectation that NATO might use force against Russia--may be receding. A closer look demonstrates, however, that the perceived threat from the United States and NATO is not the only variable that affects the size and the composition of Russia's nuclear arsenal or, for that matter, Russia's propensity to adhere to arms control treaties. Other variables, most importantly among them economic constraints, may actually cause greater reliance on nuclear weapons. Some Russian decisions dictated by cost-effectiveness and the desire to address security challenges from other directions may indirectly affect US security--for example, by their impact on the stability of the network of international arms control regimes, including, in the worst (but fortunately least likely) scenario--the non-proliferation regime. A clear understanding of the complicated and confusing ways in which Russian nuclear policy develops should figure into US policymaking.

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