

Geopolitics and Neo-containment, as well as Common Security

Russian Views on Proliferation

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A premise of U.S.-Russian security cooperation is that the two countries define security threats and the means to combat them in complementary, if perhaps not identical, ways. Cooperation requires some scope for common interests on which to base collaborative action. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union rarely had common views on security threats: nuclear nonproliferation was one of the very few areas of substantially common definitions of the problem which led to serious security cooperation.

After the Cold War, and especially after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States, there was hope that the space for common understandings of threat had grown to encompass terrorism as well as nonproliferation, creating the opportunity for meaningful cooperation in key security issues facing the United States and Russia in the 21st century. Instead, security cooperation has been very weak. There have been important areas of success, most notably Russian assistance for the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001. But the United States and Russia have not been able to cooperate meaningfully on terrorism, nonproliferation, and the intersection of the two threats, despite

numerous statements by officials in both countries that cooperation in this vital security arena is a bilateral priority.

In order to assess why cooperation has not been fruitful, Robert Einhorn of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and I conducted some twenty interviews with current and former Russian defense officials as well as analysts on Russian understandings of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The interviews were conducted on background: neither the individuals nor specific quotes are included in this analysis. We found a striking consensus among the officials and experts on seven key points.

1) For Russia, nonproliferation is a priority, but not a top priority, and it is secondary to increasing Russia's political influence with important regional powers and to commercial relations.

Although proliferation is a potential security threat, the Russian leadership and foreign policy elite do not see Russia as a likely target of the countries or non-state actors most likely to obtain WMD capability. The Putin government's immediate priority is further economic growth in order to reestablish the country as a great power. Commercial and political relationships are key to that objective. Military technology is one of the few economic sectors in which Russia is competitive globally and from which it can derive financial resources. Russia's political standing as the United States' equal on the world stage as a nuclear power gives the Russian government an incentive to engage on nonproliferation issues, but this does not mean that nonproliferation is the top priority in its foreign policy.

2) The costs and benefits of proliferation are viewed by Russian leaders in geopolitical terms.

This is most often cast in terms of a geopolitical framework for Russian nonproliferation policy. That is, Russia cares about balancing the United States' global power and countering U.S. unilateralism by fostering military and political multipolarity. This does not mean that Russia will sell WMD in order to create new nuclear power states to balance the United States. But it does mean that Russia views the potential spread of nuclear weapons capability with less alarm than the United States and more ambivalently. It also means that Russia is disinclined to risk political relationships with important regional powers in pursuit of a nonproliferation objective that it does not consider to be a priority.

3) Russian officials question U.S. nonproliferation motivations and assess they are as likely to be based on containing and weakening Russia as on genuine security vulnerabilities.

This is part of a general trend in Russian foreign policy thinking, and one that has roots in the 1990s. Mainstream Russia foreign policy thinking sees U.S. policy since the breakup of the USSR as primarily driven by the desire to weaken and encircle Russia: a neocontainment policy. U.S. policy toward the Yeltsin government, in this view, was not motivated genuinely by any desire to reform the country and make it secure and prosperous, but to urge upon Russia shock therapy and related policies in order to break apart the Soviet/Russian economy so that it could not serve as a basis for Russian power. The enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in this view was driven primarily by the desire to create a favorable western military balance vis-à-vis Russia. And NATO intervention in Kosovo outside of legal United Nations rules, while not directed militarily against Russia, was directed politically to weaken Russia's position in Europe and Eurasia. It was also a warning of how Western military coercion could be used for political purposes in the region, with Russia as a potential target. U.S. bases and military cooperation programs in the Caucasus and Central Asia are seen in the same light.

In this sense, nonproliferation would serve such a U.S. strategy by weakening Russia's economy and nuclear industry through limiting its opportunities to grow and develop. It would also weaken Russia's political relationships with important countries, primarily Iran, and force Russia to forego strong relationships with countries likely to be important to its future security.

4) *Russian leaders and analysts do not believe that Russia is a likely target of potential WMD by proliferating states or non-state actors.*

Russian officials and analysts point out that Iran and North Korea do not fear Russia, that their security concerns focus on the United States or U.S. allies, and that while their acquisition of WMD may not be desirable, it is not a likely security problem for Russia. Similarly, U.S. concerns that al Qaeda might acquire a nuclear device (though considered unlikely) were acknowledged by most analysts and officials in Russia we spoke with, but, in terms of Russian security, dismissed as a realistic security threat. Despite trying to draw a connection between Chechnya and al Qaeda, Russian analysts and officials in private for the most part dismiss the possibility that an al Qaeda WMD threat could mean that Chechens would acquire and use WMD against Russia. Statements making this connection in public by Russian officials arise not from genuine belief or evidence, but from Russian interest in linking their policy in Chechnya to the U.S. global policy on fighting terrorism in order to inoculate Russia from U.S. criticism.

5) *Putin has an incentive to appear not to be simply following U.S. wishes and priorities on proliferation.*

Although not rooted solely in the U.S. war in Iraq, the importance to Russia of balancing and resisting the United States on the world stage has been seriously enhanced by U.S. policy in the past two years. While the movement away from democracy in Russia's political system over the past few years means that the Putin leadership does not risk free and fair elections, managed democracy is easier to manage as long as Putin's popularity and support is high. Putin's popularity is rooted in the image of Russia as having again become a strong and capable country after the humiliation of the breakup of the USSR and the circus atmosphere of the Yeltsin years. The Putin leadership values highly its freedom from Western pressure and its escape from reliance on IMF credits and Paris Club debt. It also values its UN Security Council seat and veto, its position as a G8 member, and Putin's successful summitry with leaders in Europe and Asia. Putin is popular when Russia appears to be cooperating with the United States, but only from a position of strength and equality. Insofar as Russian and U.S. interests on nonproliferation do not perfectly match, agreeing with U.S. positions on nonproliferation issues undermines this image and this source of popularity and stability in domestic politics. Furthermore, with the rise of rightist national socialist politics in Russia, there is even more incentive for Putin not to appear weak in dealing with the United States.

6) *Russian officials would be interested in revision of international law and the nonproliferation regime, but only if revision redresses perceived asymmetries that favor U.S. political and economic relations with WMD dual-use customers.*

Our interviews and discussions covered this quite often. Russian officials and analysts for the most part support the current nonproliferation regime, but they are wary about following U.S. policies and preferences regarding the system. They claimed that Russia would be willing to support revisions to the regime to make it more effective, but expressed the view that if the process were led by the United States the result would be a system of nonproliferation that further enabled the United States to support its friends and allies, and benefited U.S. commercial entities, at Russia's expense.

7) *On Iran and other cases, Russian officials and analysts emphasize insecurity and vulnerability as motivators and, thus, reassurance and engagement as nonproliferation policies.*

Consistent with the trend in overall Russian foreign policy that sees U.S. power and unilateralism as a main factor in the international system,

Russian officials and analysts argue that potential proliferators, especially Iran, are motivated primarily by insecurity and a desire to acquire military technology for defensive purposes. In this view, the source of any proliferating action on the part of regional powers such as Iran is aggressive U.S. counterproliferation policy itself. In this view, the United States should pay more attention to fixing the demand side of proliferation (insecurity and fear of U.S. policy) and less on the supply side. Russians argue that the European approach for engaging Iran with carrots and sticks is better suited to addressing the sources of proliferation. They further argue that cutting off countries motivated by insecurity from peaceful commercial markets in nuclear technology creates an incentive for such countries to create their own capabilities outside of IAEA inspections which, while imperfect, offer some monitoring. They argue that incremental changes such as requiring the return of spent fuel can be part of a policy that better addresses the supply and demand balance, and that Russia is fully justified in taking this approach.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Cooperation with Russia to prevent proliferation of nuclear materials should remain a high priority goal of U.S. foreign policy. The findings of this study do not contradict the importance of that goal, nor the potential for productive U.S.-Russian cooperation. However, the U.S. approach to the challenge of nonproliferation must be informed by a realistic understanding of Russian concepts and strategies if cooperation is to be fruitful and effective. Most importantly, understanding that the Russian government sees the issue of proliferation primarily in geopolitical terms and doubts that the United States is motivated primarily by nonproliferation goals is important for understanding Russian assessments of cost-benefit tradeoffs on whether and how to pressure countries like Iran to maintain their non-nuclear status. Furthermore, understanding that nuclear technology sales and assistance serve high priority Russian ambitions to be a global political and economic leader should help U.S. officials understand Russia's hesitation to adopt American views on the urgency of dismantling the Soviet nuclear weapons legacy.

Perhaps most importantly, U.S. nonproliferation policy and attempts to cooperate with Russia would be better served if the issue were framed and managed more as a high priority foreign policy concern and less a matter for technical nonproliferation experts. Relegating policy in this issue area to nonproliferation fora assumes that the United States and Russia have essentially common goals, prioritize objectives in the issue area similarly, and conceive of the role of nuclear weapons in twenty-first century global politics in essentially similar terms. The findings reported here strongly contradict that assumption and highlight the complicated

foreign policy aspects of the issue, which require that officials and experts responsible for U.S.-Russian relations in a broader foreign policy context have to take the lead in finding a basis for cooperation on nonproliferation.