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CRITICAL COMMENT

Putin and Russia in retro and forward: the nuclear dimension

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ABSTRACT

Deterioration in security relations as between NATO and Russia reached boiling point in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its subsequent destabilization of Eastern Ukraine. As a result, some voices in the West look forward to the departure of Vladimir Putin from power, and others to the possible disintegration of Russia as a unitary state. However, both the departure of Putin and the collapse of Russia have a nuclear dimension. Putin has issued pointed reminders of Russia's status as a nuclear great power, and Russian military doctrine allows for nuclear first use in the event of a conventional war with extremely high stakes. Beyond Putin, a breakup of Russia would leave political chaos in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and elsewhere, inviting ambiguous command and control over formerly Russian nuclear forces.

KEYWORDS

Nuclear deterrence; Russia; Putin; Vladimir; NATO; Crimea; Ukraine; nuclear first use

Putin departure

Various Russian experts, pundits and politicians anticipate the eventual departure of Vladimir Putin from power in Russia as a welcome inevitability. Further, some argue that Putin's loss of power will be followed inevitably by the demise of post-Soviet Russia and its breakup into a much smaller Russia and a number of new mini-states. The expected fall of post-Soviet Russia is predicated on several assumptions. As Russia's petro-state economy gradually collapses, Putin will lose legitimacy and popular support, especially among Russia's professional middle class, which will turn decisively against him. In addition, Putin's ruling circle of kleptocrats and *siloviki* (people of force, including former and current holders of positions in intelligence, security and defense) will fall out among themselves and their control will disintegrate into internal political warfare. Finally, citizens and politicians in economically disadvantaged or politically restless regions of Russia will seize local powers of government and economic assets, making the "center" gradually irrelevant and its control, nonexistent.

The desire to expedite the departure of Putin is understandable.[1] He has scrambled the eggs of post-Cold War European stability by his annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of eastern Ukraine.[2] His autocratic rule is regarded as a trashing of some post-Soviet expectations for a peaceful security community from Vancouver to Vladivostok that included Russia, other post-Soviet states currently outside of Russia, and member states of the European Union and NATO. As well, Putin's internal wars against his domestic

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political opposition have traduced the lines of legal and moral legitimacy, including the control of media, the prosecution and incarceration of opposition leaders, and most troubling, the accusation of complicity in the deaths of prominent Russians at home and abroad.[3] Critics feel that Putin's crackdown on domestic critics and harassment of foreign non-governmental organizations go hand in hand with his escalation of military adventurism and political tensions abroad. In both domestic and foreign policy, he has sought to preserve the "power vertical" in Russia at a high cost, including the economic strangulation imposed on Russia by sanctions imposed in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Thus, it is quite reasonable to welcome a post-Putin Russia as a possible door opener to Russia's integration into the club of proto-democracies and well-behaved international actors. It is quite another, however, to root for Russia's demise as a unitary nation-state.

The collapse of post-Soviet Russia is unlikely to be as neat and fortuitous in its outcomes for the West as was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Whereas the departure of Vladimir Putin from the Russian Presidency is to be more welcomed than feared, the breakup of post-Soviet Russia is to be more feared than welcomed.

The disintegration of post-Soviet Russia will create new power vacuums in Eastern Europe, in Central Asia and in the North Caucasus region. These power vacuums could be filled by forces of political disorder, including terrorists of various political motivations, ethnic separatists, religious zealots, brigands and criminals. A collapse of political authority in these and nearby regions is not in anyone's interest, including that of the United States and NATO.

Optimistic forecasts of Russian collapse imagine a pile-up of former autocracies and emerging democracies seeking shelter under the umbrella of western international organizations and military alliances. On the other hand, post-Soviet Russia's collapse may not resemble the end of the former Soviet Union in 1991.[4] Instead, it might look like the fall of the Tsar and the end of autocracy in Russia as a result of World War I, except that no Soviet Communism would be waiting in the wings. Instead of tyranny or democracy, Eastern Europe and Central Asia would be marked by political disintegration and military autarchy. And, faced with Russia's loss of control over its own military and economy, what would its neighbors do – especially China?

And speaking of control – it should also be remembered that Russia is one of the world's two largest nuclear weapons states. Together, Russia and the United States account for some 93% of nuclear weapons worldwide. The collapse of political authority in Russia could create a hiatus in which its nuclear forces and command systems were operating without central political control and, therefore, potentially under the *de facto* command and control of others – including force commanders or renegade politicians with military connections. Recall the uncertainty that obtained during the abortive coup against then Russian President Gorbachev from 19 to 21 August 1991. Gorbachev was held in isolation at his vacation dacha in the Crimea and, for three days, it was unclear who had effective control over the portable launch control consoles with nuclear release codes.[5] Fortunately the situation was resolved before ambiguities of command and control were turned into enduring risks of unsanctioned authority over nuclear first use.

Further, in a situation of dispersed or ambiguous nuclear command authority, the danger is not only one of an actual firing of a nuclear weapon. Dissident officers and political allies could obtain nuclear weapons and use them for blackmail in a civil war against

other factions controlling other forces. One might think that dissidents getting hold of nuclear weapons would be unable to fire them because the weapons were protected by electronic locks and the dissidents would not have access to nuclear launch codes. This assumption would be true for US weapons, at least in the short run, but US officials cannot guarantee that it holds true for other nuclear forces. It might turn out that some nuclear weapons in other countries were well protected and others less so (one of our nightmares, e.g. about a breakdown of political authority in Pakistan).

In short, a collapse of post-Putin Russia invites political chaos, military extremism and international anarchy across a wide swath of Europe and Central Eurasia – with a nuclear back story. Better to support the constitutionally legitimate and domestically consensual retirement of Putin to some luxury villa in the Crimea, a suitable retreat under the exigent and foreseeable circumstances. Regardless Russia's decision for Putin to stay or to go, the discussion below will assume the "optimistic" outcome, in terms of our preferences as argued above, for Russia to avoid political fragmentation and dissolution. Under this assumption, Russia's nukes will remain under its firm political and military control. What are the implications of this assumption for Russia's future nuclear strategy and, therefore, for the US and NATO?

NATO challenges and options

Experts foresee little likelihood of a direct military clash between the United States and Russia or between Russia and NATO. One reason for this low probability of general war in Europe, even if Russian pressure is extended into other areas outside of NATO and formerly part of the Soviet Union, is the presence of nuclear weapons in Europe and offshore. Nuclear weapons provide a reminder that the risks of military escalation in East-Central Europe include the possibility of unforeseen costs unacceptable to either side.[6]

Unless and until Putin's long-term path is clearer, the United States and NATO should remind Russian and other audiences that American nuclear weapons currently deployed in Europe are important symbols of commitment to European security and democratic peace. Nor, despite the accomplishments of the US–Russia New START agreement (2010), should the United States offer further reductions in long-range nuclear arsenals without a *quid pro quo* that includes a stable and democratic Ukraine freed from Russian intimidation and blackmail, let alone oblique threats of military invasion. On the other hand, the Trump administration should remain open to the common interests that the United States and Russia have in nuclear arms control and in nonproliferation, regardless of other disagreements.

NATO member states on the eastern periphery will undoubtedly see an imminent threat to their own independence and expect greater commitments from the alliance. NATO agreed in February 2016 to enhance its deterrent against Russian pressure on its Baltic and East European member states, by increasing its ability to rapidly deploy ground, naval and air forces. NATO defense ministers agreed to create a network of approaches, including rotating troops, alliance outposts, pre-stored equipment and war games, that would provide for rapid response without depending upon Cold War-sized military bases.[7] NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, anticipating a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov later in the same week at the Munich Security

Conference, emphasized the defensive character of the alliance's strategy for the Baltics and Eastern Europe, noting that: "We believe that especially when times are difficult, as they are now, it's even more important that we have political dialogue, channels open, between NATO and Russia."[8] Meanwhile, President Obama's a defense budget proposal for 2017 called for a 200% increase in US military spending for Europe, and US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter explicitly stated that Russia now constituted a greater threat to US security than ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) (and with the agreement of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper).[9] Russia's reaction to these and other moves by the US and NATO appeared in the speech at the Munich Security Conference later in February 2016 by Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev:

> Speaking bluntly, we are rapidly rolling into a period of a new cold war. Russia has been presented as well-nigh the biggest threat to NATO, or to Europe, America and other countries (and Mr. Stoltenberg has just demonstrated that). They show frightening films about Russians starting a nuclear war. I am sometimes confused: is this 2016 or 1962?[10]

The New START agreement does not preclude the United States from deploying future missile defenses, despite Russian efforts during the negotiating process to restrict American degrees of freedom in this respect. But then-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and his predecessor–successor Vladimir Putin have made it clear that Russia's geostrategic perspective links US and NATO missile defenses to cooperation on other arms control issues. Meanwhile, the US and NATO in 2011 moved forward with the first phase of a four-phase deployment of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) for missile defenses.

In March 2013, US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced plans to modify the original plan for EPAA by abandoning the originally planned deployments of SM3 IIB interceptor missiles in Poland by 2022. However, this step failed to reassure Russian doubters about the US and NATO claims that their regional and global missile defenses were not oriented against Russia. Russian officials reiterated demands for a legally binding guarantee from the US and NATO that Russian strategic nuclear forces would not be targeted by the system. Ironically Putin's irredentism in Ukraine may result in a NATO re-reboot of its missile defense plans and a decision for placement of missile defense components in Poland after all. In turn, Russia's response might be to fortify its Kaliningrad exclave with Iskander missiles, a high precision tactical ballistic missile system very accurate for short distances and capable of being used with nuclear warheads.

Russian nuclear strategy

Russia's 2010 Military Doctrine averred that the role of nuclear weapons is "prevention of nuclear military conflict or any other military conflict" and that they are regarded as "an important factor in the prevention of nuclear conflicts and military conflicts that use conventional assets (large-scale and regional wars)."[11] The possibility that Russian nuclear weapons would be used in a conventional conflict for the purpose of de-escalation, by means of inflicting calibrated damage, first appeared in the 2000 Military Doctrine and is tacitly acknowledged as a possibility in the 2010 edition.[12] Calibrated damage is a proportional amount of damage that is subjectively unacceptable to the enemy and exceeds the benefits the aggressor expects to gain from the use of force. This possibility, of

using tactical nukes for strategic de-escalation of a conventional war in progress and threatening to Russia's vital interests, is not repudiated in Russia's revised Military Doctrine signed by President Putin in December 2016, nor in Russia's updated National Security Strategy signed by Putin in December 2015.[13]

Whether non-strategic or "tactical" nuclear weapons would be used for this mission is unclear: the role of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) in Russian military strategy is a subject of uncertainty.[14] Among the Russian armed forces, the navy is the principal advocate for maintaining NSNW capabilities, regarding them as essential for any conflict with the US Navy. Another possible use for theater or tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) is presented by Russia's conventional military weakness relative to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). In addition to the greater size of PLA forces deployed into the Far Eastern theater of operations, there is also the possible inability of Russia's air force to guarantee air superiority against attacking Chinese units.[15] Although some Western experts regard Russian NSNW (as well as NATO's) as *passé* and militarily superfluous, Russian arms control expert Alexei Arbatov commented in 2010 that the "colossal" US superiority in conventional weapons and the "growing lag" in delivery vehicles for the (Russian) strategic nuclear forces meant that "the role of TNW only grows as an instrument of foreign policy."[16]

Russia also considers its NSNW as a counterbalance to the nuclear forces of states other than the US and NATO, especially for those states whose nuclear capabilities are able to reach Russian territory. One prospective use for Russian tactical nukes might be to take out enemy precision strike and command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities, thereby leveling the playing field of advanced conventional warfare otherwise titled against Russia. For this and other reasons, NATO remains sensitive to the possible modernization of Russia's non-strategic missile forces. US reports to NATO in January, 2014, claimed that Russia had tested a new medium-range ground launched cruise missile, a possible violation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty signed by Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987.[17]

One school of thought holds that, had the United States not conveyed an image of weakness over the past five years, Russia may not have so brazenly risked a larger conflict in order to annex Crimea. Another school regards Russian behavior as driven by Putin's fears of losing power at home due to rising protest and economic stagnation, offset by Crimea and other demonstrations of nationalism and cries for "New Russia" outside its current borders. Regardless the causes, the US and NATO have choices about how to respond.

Russia and strategic history

Earlier discussion begs the question whether Russia's annexation of Crimea is part of a larger program of strategy and policy on the part of Putin and his advisors or, to the contrary, a somewhat improvised and hasty reaction to events in Ukraine and their implications. Perhaps there is some truth in both interpretations. Putin's actions in Crimea were not entirely *sui generis:* they were preceded by a context of demands upon Russia from its post-Cold War military and geostrategic setting, compared to that of the Soviet Union. Putin's policy is not the result of psychodrama. It is the product of his having

lived in strategic history and his (and our) understanding of that history. Neither in Russian nor in English is strategic history self-interpreting. Heads of state and military commanders make strategic history as they go, doing their best to tie together the ends, ways and means of politico-military action.[18]

The Barack Obama Administration sought to reset relations with Russia during that US President's first term in office, leading to the accomplishment of the New START agreement on strategic nuclear arms reductions in 2010 (taking effect in February 2011). However, subsequent US–Russian and NATO–Russian disputes over the Obama plan for deploying missile defenses in Europe created obstacles to further progress on nuclear arms limitation, on nonproliferation and on a revived Conventional Forces in Europe more acceptable to Russia than the defunct Cold War original version.[19]

In addition to an expanding NATO, encirclement by troubled or ambitious regional partners, and a deficient conventional military establishment, early twenty-first-century Russia faced the inevitable need to adjust to postmodern warfare and the impact of advanced technology, conventional weapons and command-control systems. Even if Russia could rebuild the Soviet ground forces of the 1980s it would not suffice to ensure against future threats based on newer weapons and the strategies made possible by postindustrial technology. Postindustrial or third-wave warfare created a new military cyberspace in which the capability for systems integration across the parts of a knowledge-based strategy would prove to be decisive. The various parts included: C4ISR; long range, precision strike; and stealth technology. And, even if Russia had the military-industrial complex that it had during the Soviet era, it would still lag in smart technology on account of its underdeveloped private sector economy. Russian economic performance improved in the first decade of the twenty-first century relative to the miserable performance of the 1990s, mostly due to oil prices but also on account of a widespread perception of stronger state leadership. However, it was a larger challenge to convert this or other economic boomlets into permanent improvements in Russia's hollowed-out and cash-strapped conventional forces.[20]

Improved economic performance is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for a Russian army that can cope with third wave, postindustrial warfare. Smart soldiers and innovative commanders who can think "out of the box" are as important as technology as the nature of warfare shifts from massive battles of attrition to flexible and small-scale military operations. In addition, future warfare will take place in at least five dimensions: land; sea; air; space and cyberspace.[21] These multiple environments for future warfighting make the challenges posed by the "initial period of war" especially problematical for technically backward militaries.[22] The possibility of decisive losses within minutes or seconds in the "initial period" of war, including a possible cyberwar that would create chaos with exclusively electronic casualties, is now within the reach of feasible or foreseeable military art.[23] Russia's historical exposure to attack and invasion, including the defeats imposed on the Soviet Union during the early stages of Hitler's Operation Barbarossa in 1941, remains in the DNA of today's and tomorrow's Russian political leaders and commanders.[24] On the other hand, technology has moved on, and the first stages of future conflict are unlikely to repeat the metal-eating clashes of the Eastern front in 1941. As two military experts noted in a recent report for the Valdai Discussion Club:

A future war among near peers is unlikely to start at the phalanx of formations arrayed at the front, but instead in space and cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum. The

first salvo will be fired almost entirely with electrons, seeking to degrade command and control, important national infrastructure, and knock out or disable key enablers for the opponent's military effort.[25]

Russia's national security concepts of the year 2010 and subsequently and its related military doctrine show its fears of surprise attack in the face of NATO conventional military superiority.[26] A "Barbarossa complex" is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for present day Russia to avoid wars or to prevail in war if necessary. However, Russian military planners might reasonably assume that the initial period of war can be one of great danger. What seemed politically absurd in a temporary surge of US–Russian "reset" and post-post-Cold War Europe was not necessarily impossible from the standpoint of Russian military pessimists. From the perspective of risk-averse Russian military planners, Russian forces drawn back to the western border districts of the current Federation will be in very much the same position as those which faced the onslaught of "Barbarossa" in 1941. Russian intelligence will place equally high importance on the detection of enemy political decision to attack (strategic warning) as on the acquisition of order-of-battle data and other information essential for response to tactical warning. As Graeme Herd has noted, after 1991 shocks to Russian national consciousness and identity have been numerous:

> These shocks helped fuel a sense of encirclement and a profound diminution of strategic presence and prestige and so the need to re-assert Russian Great Power. In the field of decision-making, priority-setting and strategy formation, the political response has been towards the creation of a regime which is perhaps even more centralized than the Soviet template it replaced, one that is based on aggrandized personal networks rather than functioning institutions.[27]

Therefore, the US would be well advised to continue its European Reassurance Initiative that provides additional support for in-place and reinforcing NATO conventional force capabilities, especially in the Baltics and Eastern Europe. In addition, NATO military muscle flexing should deemphasize the alliance's nuclear guaranty except as a last resort. In this regard, in the post-Obama world, the US and Russia would also be well advised to: (1) continue pursuit of strategic nuclear arms reductions beyond the limits agreed in the New START treaty, signed in 2010 and entered into force in 2011; (2) undertake NATO – Russian negotiations on the reduction and/or elimination of NSNW deployed in Europe and (3) further pursue Russian – NATO cooperation on European missile defenses as adumbrated in the Madrid discussions between Russian and NATO leaders in 2010. Reaching agreement on the reduction or elimination of European NSNW or on missile defenses may present both domestic and foreign policy difficulties. As Nikolai Sokov has noted with respect to Russia's perspective on NSNW:

> A solution to the paradox of TNW (theater nuclear weapons) – assets that Russia apparently does not need, but continues to hold on to – can be found in domestic politics rather than in strategic planning. The Russian government attitude toward TNW appears to represent a complex mix of domestic and bureaucratic politics, (mis)perceptions, and idiosyncrasies.[28]

In addition, the US and Russia have an objective community of interest in lowering the nuclear threshold by improving the quality of Russia's conventional forces (to a point) relative to its nuclear ones, so that Russia's nuclear employment policies and declaratory doctrines are less forward-leaning with respect to nuclear first or early use in a

conventional war. More specifically, Russia must be disabused of the notion that a nuclear first use in Europe or elsewhere would be an effective means of "de-escalation" of an otherwise conventional conflict on terms favorable to Russia. Escalators run in two directions.

Indeed, a more favorable climate for US – Russian and NATO – Russian cooperation on nuclear arms limitation should also contribute to more realistic threat assessments in Moscow with respect to the prevention or conduct of conventional warfare. Russia is not threatened primarily by NATO: unless Putin loses control of his limited-risk forward strategy in Ukraine and creates a self-negating feedback loop.[29] Instead, the threat of regional wars on Russia's periphery or terrorism and insurgent wars within Russia must now take pride of place in General Staff and Ministry of Defense contingency planning. Preparedness for these contingencies of limited and local wars, regular and irregular, will require a smaller, more professional and more mobile military than post-Soviet Russia has fielded hitherto.[30] As well, Russia's armed forces, together with the General Staff and Ministry of Defense, must be made accountable to its political leadership as an institutional, not a personal, matter. Unless these political and military building blocks are put into place, Russia's armed forces and military doctrine will be maladapted for the security challenges of the twenty-first century.

Conclusions

The role of nuclear weapons in the Ukrainian crisis, and in subsequent NATO relations with Russia, remains a subtle and important one. As Janis Berzins of the National Defence Academy of Latvia has noted, Russia's Crimean campaign (and subsequent disruption of eastern and southern Ukraine) was achieved by the operationalization of what Russian military thinkers refer to as "New Generation Warfare" that includes a coordinated campaign of strategic communications using political, psychological and information strategies.[31] As Berzins notes:

> Thus, the Russian view of modern warfare is based on the idea that the main battlespace is the mind and, as a result, new-generation wars are to be dominated by information and psychological warfare, in order to achieve superiority in troops and weapons control, morally and psychologically depressing the enemy's armed forces personnel and civil population. The main objective is to reduce the necessity for deploying hard military power to the minimum necessary, making the opponent's military and civilian population support the attacker to the detriment of their own government and country.[32]

Berzins' assessment, that Russia regards the mind as a key part of the battle space of future warfare, applies not only to the threat or use of conventional forces by Russia and/or possible opponents. The point also applies to the existence of nuclear deterrence and to the implicit threat of nuclear first use created by the very existence of nuclear weapons in Russia and NATO, and by their forward deployments in positions that make it impossible for either Russia or NATO to exclude them from a widening conventional war.

Therefore NATO and Russia, even into the post-Cold War world and the twenty-first century, have maintained a nuclear umbrella over conventional deterrence that creates a deterrence system that is both potentially stabilizing, if leaders are risk averse, and potentially destabilizing, and if risk acceptant leaders lose control over a process of escalation.

Nuclear weapons connect the start of a small conventional war in Europe into a possibly greater chain of escalation, the threat of which is supposed to deter because it is not entirely predictable or manageable. In addition, nuclear weapons make the possibility of Russia's disintegration in a conventional war very dangerous to Russia's adversaries as well as to Russians, as the ownership of Russia's post-Putin regime nukes becomes debatable, and possibly inscrutable. Meanwhile, Putin's short- and long-term motives, and Russia's broader geostrategic options, with or without Putin, are cannon fodder for expert and public debate.

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