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Strategic Sense and Nuclear Weapons Today

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The Problem

The basic requirements for deterrence have been well understood for millennia, and for nuclear deterrence since the mid-1950s at least – well before the missile age dawned in the close of that decade. For the subsequent fifty years, it appeared to be the case that both the technical and the intellectual challenges of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence had been met adequately. Would that such a satisfactory condition could hold indefinitely. Of course it could not and has not, which is the reason for this essay.

We in the West have fallen perilously behind Russia in the development and deployment of every category of what we understand and usually refer to as strategic forces. Furthermore, the general understanding of nuclear issues by the contemporary cohort of professionals and commentators has sagged deplorably. While there has been a trickle of excellent work on the subject of deterrence and missile defense, useful works on nuclear strategy are distinguished by their scarcity. In the early 1960s, there was a brief flurry of interest in variants of limited nuclear war, but this did not endure. Certainly the Pentagon was successful in leading a process of review and considerable change in refinement of actual nuclear targeting choice over the next decade.

However, what appears to have escaped particular close scrutiny is the Russian phenomenon that we see unmistakably today. Vladimir Putin is employing explicit and coercive nuclear



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first-use threats in pursuit of *current* Russian political objectives. These goals need to be seen both in historical and geopolitical context.

Context

As a matter of convenience and expediency, we are in the habit of applying simplifying labels to particular clusters of years in history. Both the years of Cold War and those since, however labelled, are unmistakable examples of thoroughly standard state political and strategic behaviour in international politics. *When two or more very great powers must co-exist, they are bound to be rivals as each is anxious about its security.* Of course, every rivalry in history differs from the rest in some, possibly significant detail, but the historical parallels are more than adequate as sources for our guidance. In short, we can and should be prepared to learn from the repeated parallels of history.

While we often, if not invariably, recognize the value in considering the relevance of the contexts to events from the past, there is another temporal zone that merits our attention. The future, of course, has no historical context to offer, but that does not mean we should ignore it. The vital key to aid in attempts to understand both past and future is the very high concept of the course of history comprising a great stream of time. This idea was central to the important book by Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, published in 1986, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*.¹ It is very helpful for us to take advantage of what the great stream of times can teach, take an honest look at the causes of our insecurity, and re-tool where necessary for the future. In particular, it is necessary to understand the relations of security and insecurity in which the United States cannot help but be enmeshed.

The first class players in the global political and hence also strategic context for American national security comprises only two players beyond North America. Each of the three in the geopolitical and strategic triangle comprising ourselves, the Russians, and now also the Chinese, have no choice other than to regard the others with suspicion and even occasionally worse. The fundamental reason for anxiety and even possible belligerence lies simply in the undoubted facts of their comparative greatness. Virtually all states at root are concerned to ensure their security and domestic tranquility. At times, admittedly, this essentially domestic need will find expression in policy and strategic objectives that other states have little practicable choice other than to regard as menacing.

What this means is that it is necessary to recognize that it is entirely normal behavior for great powers to regard each other with suspicion, and often some hostility. The reason for this is not difficult to understand. When Americans scan the horizon for threats to their security, they are able to locate only two first class adversaries, Russia and China. Every danger other than that posed by the other great powers fades into low, or even less, significance. A prudent superpower does not waste energy on trivial threats nor pursue goals that experience proves



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impossible of achievement. Rome simply gave up on its ambition to tame the Barbarians from beyond the Rhine and the Danube. They learnt also that they could co-exist warily with Persia. Closer to home temporally and geographically, Britain learnt that it could lose the American colonies without having the sky fall as a consequence.

Good strategic sense, which includes prudence, advises on a desirable sound relationship between effort and reward. This invaluable quality, usually in short supply, sadly was not much in evidence in the early Twenty-First Century with reference to American (and British) policy and consequent strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. The difficulties in both countries essentially were of the same character. Stated in the most summary of forms, we did not really understand what we needed to achieve and therefore, in consequence, we did not understand how it might be secured.

It was in no small measure ironic that while American, British and some other Allied efforts were struggling to find or make political capital in Iraq and Afghanistan, far more serious developments were happening in Europe and also across the Pacific. Though thoroughly purged of the poisonous nonsense of communism, the residual Russia—to no surprise—was *not* a great state liberated from tyranny and free to adopt the democratic habits that were forbidden in the dark decades of its communist past. What we discover, instead, is a Russia entirely familiar from its history, that behaves as we should have expected of a great power commanded by a political leadership utterly disdainful of our understanding and practice of international order. This is not to condemn Vladimir Putin or the Russian state he controls. I am not striving to score moral points. My sole concern is to seek to ensure we have an accurate understanding of what Mr. Putin is about, and why he is about it. Accordingly, there is no great mystery about Russian policy objectives and consequent strategic performance today. Putin's Russia is behaving as we should expect a highly competitive great power to behave, and the reality of nuclear weapons is, on balance, regarded by Putin as a helpful backdrop for his statecraft.

Danger

Today there is no doubt whatsoever that the demise of the Soviet Union and therefore the belated end of its vile political system did not mean what many in the West hoped and even came to believe, that the residual Russia would prove a benign, willing and somewhat capable partner for international security and stability, as defined in the West. Western policies came to be governed by the expectation that Russia would cooperate with the United States in the construction and, if necessary, the policing of a more cooperative New World Order.

Now we know, of course, that this powerful expectation of benign Russian behavior was pure fantasy. Many of us have some difficulty coming to terms realistically with the rather grim actuality of Russia today. But this is not to condemn Russia for disappointing extravagant



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Western hopes. Russia is a country led and run by people resolutely committed to the accumulation of personal wealth and power, who have no respect for supposedly enlightened Western theory or practice of law, domestic or international. It is a notable fact of contrasting national styles. Americans admire law, and the interpreters of law, but Russians do not. Americans are uniquely respectful of lawyers. Russians do not share this American trait for good historical reasons. This helps us to understand a contemporary example of a continuity connecting contemporary Russian leaders with their Soviet predecessors: they are in violation of virtually every arms control treaty they have signed.

The sharply contrasting American and Russian approach to international legal obligation is, unsurprisingly, exceedingly plain to see for anyone willing to look. It is almost amusing to witness both the facts of Soviet/Russian illegal misbehavior, and their subsequent insouciance about their persisting misbehaviour.

However, what is not so amusing is the new Russian style in coercive diplomacy. In a manner that is ominously reminiscent of Adolf Hitler, Putin and others have chosen to introduce explicitly ruthless threats, including nuclear threats, into Russian reasoning about acute international crises. They hypothesize about the high political value that would accrue as a result of nuclear use on a limited scale. The hope, apparently, is that the NATO enemy, certainly the less robust members, at least, would be out-gunned either by the actuality, or more likely only by the credible threat of nuclear use.

In the language of now-classic strategic theory from a past generation of theorists, the Russians currently are talking with apparent seriousness about *nuclear escalation dominance*. Russian theorists claim, perhaps expect, they could win a war wherein Russia employs nuclear weapons only on a very modest scale. This expectation follows from a Russian belief that Moscow's employment of a few nuclear weapons would give them a decisive coercive edge in the diplomacy that should follow. Russian authors have advised us ironically that the use of these weapons would prove to be a decisive de-escalatory move – de-escalatory because NATO would be expected to capitulate. The high determination shown unmistakably by the fact of Russian nuclear use would surprise, even shock, audiences politically around the world. Thus, with unmatched boldness Russia should achieve a considerable political, perhaps even military victory.

Happily, there is and has been no evidence to support the prospect of a NATO defeat along the lines I have suggested above. The simple scenario suggested here has the virtue of stating what the Russians are saying today; whether or not they mean it is unknown, and perhaps unknowable in advance. The prudent Western defender, however, must entertain the possibility that Putin is a believer and take into account the nuclear instruments he is accumulating.



Questions and Answers

So, what can and should be done about the problem of contemporary Russia?

The nuclear dimension to the Putin problem precludes non-nuclear answers alone. Truly, for the first time since the Cold War, the United States and its NATO allies need to think hard once again about what they would have to do were they to be faced with an explicitly nuclear crisis, possibly in the immediate context of ongoing warfare in Europe. This is a thought process all but banished in the West, and none of our leaders are at all experienced in the attempted management of exceptionally severe international crises.

Of course, when or if events move perilously to the zone wherein almost anything might occur, it is probable that highly-refined points of deterrence theory would matter less than the credibility of political leadership and the structure of competing nuclear postures. Quite likely, an ICBM squadron here or there would count comparatively less than would the combination of reputation and known mental character of the key individuals on both sides. By this I do not mean to imply that the physical details of posture are unimportant, but that any decision regarding nuclear use surely would be unambiguously one of a political kind.

Perhaps rather self-defensively with respect to some possible reader reactions, I need to comment, at least, that there is no obvious sense in which a Russian introduction of nuclear employment must prove self-defeating for Moscow, as NATO's European members may lack the determination for nuclear release. This appears to be the Russian expectation, an expectation that must be corrected.

We have a very troubling challenge. The more responsible we are and sound in talking down possible roles for nuclear weapons, the more we encourage the Russians (and probably the Chinese) in the belief that we are weak or unready to defend ourselves. Given that the U.S. strategic force posture is notably aged, to be polite, and given that it cannot be modernized in a hurry, we are obliged, for want of anything better, to look to the credibility and reputation of our politicians and high officials to buy us time while new metal is bent. Prudent Western leaders must now attach considerable urgency to the need both for manifest resolve and new metal.

1. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).