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Russia and Conventional Deterrence

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Introduction

The concept of a conventional deterrent appeared in President Vladimir Putin's December 2014 version of "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation."¹ The document states, "In the context of the implementation by the Russia Federation of strategic deterrence measures of a forceful nature, provision is made for the utilization of precision weapons."² This concept was in the context of a nuclear escalation strategy outlined in the same document. In March 2018, Russian Chief of the General Staff General of the Army Valery Gerasimov stated, "In the long term, an increase of capacities of high-precisions weapons, including hypersonic ones, will allow moving the main part of strategic deterrence to the non-nuclear sector from the nuclear one."³ Is this real or simply a self-serving effort to make Russia look more reasonable as part of a broader Russian campaign to end the sanctions against it over Ukraine and Syria, end defensive NATO exercises against Russia and terminate the modernization of the U.S. nuclear deterrent?

Unfortunately, the suggestion that Russia has changed its nuclear escalation strategy is wishful thinking at best. As the noted Finnish analyst Katarzyna Zysk has pointed out, "Critics [of the U.S. 2018 NPR] have inaccurately asserted that there is no evidence of the Russian strategy either in doctrinal documents or in exercises, and that a limited nuclear first use (also referred to as the 'escalate to de-escalate' concept) cannot be a part of a rational strategy given the risk of a rapid escalation to global nuclear war. They also see Russia's increasing emphasis on non-



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nuclear deterrence as supposedly incompatible with relying on a limited nuclear first strike, in line with the fact that Russia's military doctrine is supposedly 'defensive'."⁴

Russian Nuclear Doctrine

Russia's strategy of nuclear escalation (or nuclear "de-escalation" in their terminology) has not changed. Russia reserves the right for nuclear weapons first use in every public version of its Military Doctrine.⁵ The nuclear escalation element of Russian military strategy was reiterated by President Putin in his July 2017 decree on the "Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period until 2030" which says, "During the escalation of military conflict, demonstration of readiness and determination to employ non-strategic nuclear weapons capabilities is an effective deterrent," and it requires the Navy to be able to "damage an enemy's fleet at a level not lower than critical with the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons."⁶ The first use of nuclear weapons in response to chemical or biological attack and conventional attack threatening the existence of the state was reiterated by Putin and his subordinates in March and November 2018.⁷

Reportedly, "...all large-scale military exercises that Russia conducted beginning in 2000 featured simulations of limited nuclear strikes."⁸ Nuclear threats by the most senior Russian officials, including President Putin, are common,⁹ and there is substantial evidence that Russia has developed and deployed precision low-yield nuclear weapons to implement its nuclear "de-escalation" strategy.¹⁰ In 2017, then-DIA Director Lieutenant General Vincent Stewart affirmed that Russia is "the only country that I know of that has this concept of escalate to terminate or escalate to deescalate but they do have that built into their operational concept. We have seen them exercise that idea and it's really kind of a dangerous idea..."¹¹ He also said that he had seen no evidence that this policy was changing.¹²

Conventional Weapons and Russian Military Policy

The Russian "escalate to de-escalate" concept was announced in an October 2003 Russian Defense Ministry publication which stated, "De-escalation of aggression is forcing the enemy to halt military action by a threat to deliver or by actual delivery of strikes of varying intensity with reliance on conventional and (or) nuclear weapons."¹³ It also says "highly-equipped and combat-ready general-purpose forces" are necessary to make "the threat to use nuclear weapons in response to an attack involving conventional armed forces...look convincing."¹⁴ Recognition of the potential of advanced precision conventional weapons goes back to the Soviet period, but the Soviets made little progress on it.¹⁵

Unlike nuclear "de-escalation," the logic of which has been laid out in substantial detail in open Russian doctrinal literature, the concept of conventional "de-escalation" has been left more ambiguous. Russian use of the same language to describe their nuclear and conventional targeting plans reduces its credibility because it masks the fundamental differences between



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conventional and nuclear weapons in terms of the costs, effects, and consequences. Targeting nuclear and conventional weapons is substantially different. The more than 100 cruise missiles reportedly employed by the U.S., the UK and France against a few chemical weapons facilities in Syria in 2018 illustrates the very large number of conventional cruise missiles that would be necessary for conventional “de-escalation.”¹⁶

“Assured destruction” deterrence threats with nuclear weapons are relatively easy; it is much more expensive and far less feasible with conventional weapons. Conventional weapons do not generate the same fear factor, which is central to the Russian “de-escalation” concept. Precision missiles have obvious warfighting advantages. However, it is unclear how increasing the intensity and geographical scope of conventional strikes will help Russia when NATO is generally regarded to be superior in precision weapons and stealth, and is unlikely to be deterred with Russian use of conventional weapons.

In addition, Dave Johnson, a staff officer in the NATO International Staff Defense Policy and Planning Division, has observed that Russian precision strike weapons systems “...all... are dual-capable or have nuclear analogs.”¹⁷ The 2018 NPR confirmed that Russia “is also building a large, diverse, and modern set of non-strategic systems that are dual-capable (may be armed with nuclear or conventional weapons).”¹⁸ An important 2013 *Military Thought* article suggested that Russia’s decision concerning how many of its cruise missiles were to be reserved for the conventional and nuclear missions would be made just before the conflict.¹⁹

In January 2017, General of the Army Sergei Shoigu stated that deterrence may eventually shift from nuclear to non-nuclear weapons due to “precision-guidance weapons.”²⁰ Yet, in the same month, he also said that the development of its strategic nuclear force was Russia’s first priority, declaring Russia will “continue a massive program of nuclear rearmament, deploying modern ICBMs on land and sea, [and] modernizing the strategic bomber force.”²¹ As Dave Johnson has noted, “Russian leaders have consistently identified modernization of the nuclear forces as the number one priority even as they pursued conventional precision strike capabilities.”²²

In November 2017, General Shoigu stated that by 2020 the Russian goal was, “To strengthen the combat potential of the Strategic nuclear forces, to continue perfecting the system of comprehensive provision and combat control. To bring the strategic non-nuclear forces to a level enabling neutralization of military threats to Russia and assured protection of the country’[s] national interests.”²³

When General Gerasimov announced that in “the long term” Russia would increase the “part of strategic deterrence to the non-nuclear sector from the nuclear one,” he said that the, “President announced measures that are being assumed in this field in his address to the Federal Assembly on March 1.”²⁴ Amazingly, the most notable aspect of Putin’s March 1st speech was his five new nuclear weapons, not conventional precision strike weapons.²⁵ Based



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upon what Putin and other Russian officials have openly said, Russian press reports, and the *Nuclear Posture Review*, it appears that four of Putin's five systems are nuclear only and the fifth is nuclear capable.²⁶ This hardly represents a shift to conventional systems and subordination of nuclear capabilities.

In December 2018, General Gerasimov announced that in its supposed response to a U.S. missile defense capability, "Russia was increasing the combat potential of its ground-based strategic nuclear forces" by rearming its forces with the Yars ICBM, the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle, developing the Sarmat heavy ICBM, improving its nuclear bombers, and putting its missile submarines on Arctic "combat patrols," making only a passing reference to precision weapons.²⁷

Western commentary on Russian pursuit of conventional deterrence generally involves discussion of the new Russian "conventional" cruise missiles. Yet, the Russians almost always talk about "precision weapons", not "precision conventional weapons," perhaps because they are dual capable. President Putin, other Russian officials and the Russian state media have said openly that the Kh-101, the Kh-555, the Kinzhal hypersonic missile and Kalibr missile are nuclear capable and the 2018 NPR says that the Kh-32 (also Russian state media),²⁸ the SSC-8, the Iskander-M (also the Russian Defense Ministry)²⁹ and Russia's CRBMs (Close Range Ballistic Missiles) are nuclear capable.³⁰

In January 2018, the Commander of the Russian Navy Admiral Vladimir Korolyov stated, "The Navy General Command will particularly focus on forming strategic non-nuclear deterrence groups that will include vessels armed with long-range precision weapons..."³¹ However, he also put Russia's new strategic nuclear Borey submarines at the top of his current priority list.³² Notably absent were precision land-attack missiles.

Conclusion

Noted former Russian officials Alexey Arbatov and Andrei Kokoshin have suggested "the role of precision weapons is to offer the option of being used as one additional step on the ladder to nuclear deterrence, making it into a 'pre-nuclear' deterrent."³³ This makes sense because it is obviously safer to win at a lower level of violence. However, as Dave Johnson has pointed out, "Barring capitulation, nuclear employment would follow..."³⁴

Russia will continue to modernize its entire armed forces although likely at a slower rate than it claims. The issue is not really about "deterrence." A main function of the Russian military today is to dominate Russia's neighbors. Russia appears already to have achieved the capability to quickly mass 100,000 troops on weakly defended NATO borders.³⁵ However, it may be unable to hold seized NATO territory without the threat of nuclear escalation.³⁶ This is apparently the scenario played out in Zapad-2017.³⁷ Russia's pursuit of precision conventional



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capabilities and the priority it places on nuclear capabilities are not in opposition, they are mutually reinforcing.

Despite several Russian claims about moving toward conventional deterrence, nuclear weapons are its first priority. Russia seeks asymmetric capabilities to deter a NATO counter attack and that strongly suggests nuclear weapons. Russia is not going to attempt to match overall NATO conventional capabilities because this is impossible in light of the very large difference in GNP, manpower and technology and Putin's continuing economic failures. Instead, Russia can and will continue to exploit its nuclear weapons advantages for coercion because it can easily compete in the nuclear arena.

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