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The Emerging Nuclear Environment: Two Challenges Ahead

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My assigned task here is to discuss challenges ahead in the nuclear environment. There are, of course, a variety of interrelated challenges in the international environment that cross multiple domains, but my task here is to discuss nuclear challenges. That will be my focus.

There are two distinct but related nuclear challenges: 1) the challenge of external nuclear developments among potential adversaries; and, 2) the internal challenge of establishing an enduring, effective Western response to those foreign developments.

External Nuclear Developments

There are multiple emerging or potential nuclear challenges, including from North Korea, China, and Iran. But, here I will comment on only the most apparent, immediate external nuclear challenge—which I believe to be Russia. The Russian nuclear challenge follows from the combination of Russia’s goal to revise the existing international political order, and the apparent role Moscow envisages for its nuclear forces in advancing that goal.

What is the geographic extent of Russia’s revisionist goal? The answer to this key question is unclear. Perhaps the geographic extent corresponds to that of the former territory of the Soviet

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Union, or perhaps to the expanse of the earlier Imperial Russia. It is not obvious what the current leadership in Moscow believes to be the rightful boundaries of Russia. Whatever may be the case, it is clear that Moscow's leadership aspires to return to past greatness, and doing so involves geography.

While political geography may seem an archaic national focus to many in the West, it remains a prominent theme in Russian security thinking. This should be no surprise given Russian history and the value of its expansive territory for power and survival—from Napoleon's invasion in 1812 to Hitler's invasion in 1941.

It also is unclear whether, or how much of Russia's geographic goal would be satisfied with: 1) Political/economic hegemony over its desired historic space; 2) the actual incorporation within Russian borders of now-external territory and ethnic Russian populations; or, 3) a combination of these two.

The first of these—seeking political/economic hegemony—is a threat to the sovereignty of Russia's neighbors. The second of these—the incorporation of territory and ethnic Russian populations into the Russian homeland—is a possible threat to neighbors' national survival.

Over the past ten years, we have seen evidence of both approaches: Russia's operations in Crimea suggest the goal of expanding Russian borders and absorbing ethnic Russian populations. Russia's political and economic efforts elsewhere suggest the goal of establishing a form of economic and political hegemony.

Whatever are the parameters and nature of Russia's territorial ambitions, it is clear that, given the expansion of NATO since the end of the Cold War, Russia's revisionist goal may be satisfied at the expense of our allies' and partners' sovereignty or territory. As a former U.S. intelligence official reportedly stated, "Everything for Vladimir Putin is a zero-sum game, and we are his main enemy. The Russians are continually probing us, and they're going to keep going as far as they can until we push back in such a way that we deter them from taking even more aggressive action."¹ This Russian ambition and perspective is the disturbing reality we now confront.

In contrast to this disturbing reality, the possible good news is that the Putin regime—while revisionist and expansionist—also appears to be pragmatic and calculating. These characteristics are significant because a potential opponent's pragmatism, and related willingness to stand back following the calculation of risk, are necessary for deterrence to operate to prevent or defer aggression.

The good news here is that Russia appears not to be akin to National Socialist Germany in this regard. Where contemporary Russia appears pragmatic and calculating, Hitler had set expansionist goals and a timeline, and his dedication to the realization of those goals was not



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highly subject to pragmatism or the calculation of risk. Instead, Adolf Hitler often boasted of his unalterable goals and unhesitating decisions: “Neither threats nor warnings will prevent me from going my way. I follow the path assigned me by Providence with the instinctive sureness of a sleepwalker.”² With such an adversary, effective strategies of deterrence may be extremely difficult or even impossible. But, that does not appear to be Russia.

This difference between contemporary Russia and National Socialist Germany of the 1930’s is critical. Where Russia sees opportunity and the potential for expansion at tolerable risk and cost, it will likely act, including with hard and soft power. However, where Russia’s geographic appetite is opposed by countervailing Western power, Russia’s behavior will likely be limited by its pragmatism and related willingness to stand back in the face of too much calculated risk and cost.

I do not mean by this that Russia is likely to adopt amicable intentions in response to Western power. While an amicable relationship is a long-term goal, deterrence is not about creating amicable intentions. It is about preventing aggression in the context of less-than-amicable relations. The combination of Russian pragmatism and risk calculation suggests that in the face of countervailing Western power, there is room for Moscow to moderate its provocative pursuit of revisionist goals. This is good news because it means that there is the *potential* for Western power to deter extreme Russian behavior, at least in principle.

A Nuclear Challenge

The key question that follows is: How are these apparent Russian geopolitical aspirations and regime characteristics related to a Russian nuclear challenge? A very concise answer is as follows: Russia’s leadership reportedly believes that Moscow can use the threat of nuclear first-use, or actual limited nuclear first-use if necessary, to help advance its goal of revising the political order in Eurasia.³

In short, there is a link between Russia’s nuclear capabilities and its expansionist goals that includes two mechanisms. First, Moscow appears to believe that it can use nuclear threats against U.S. allies and partners to move them away from policies and positions Moscow opposes, and to compel their conciliation in crises. This apparent coercive role for nuclear threats is a return to Soviet Cold War practice.⁴ It goes beyond traditional Western notions of limiting the scope and purpose of nuclear deterrence to the protection of a country’s existence.

Rather, Russia appears to have lowered the threshold for making nuclear threats to include preventing Western actions that seem to have little to do with threats to Russia’s survival; to put it differently, Russia appears to have expanded the range of foreign behaviors it believes it can influence via explicit nuclear threats.



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For example, Russia has made explicit nuclear threats to allies regarding participation in the U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) program: In 2015, Russia's Ambassador to Denmark, Mikhail Vanin, reportedly made an explicit nuclear targeting threat: "I don't think that Danes fully understand the consequence if Denmark joins the American-led missile defence shield. If they do, then Danish warships will be targets for Russian nuclear missiles."⁵

The second linkage between Russia's geographic aspirations and nuclear weapons is that Moscow appears to believe that it can employ limited nuclear strikes against U.S. allies and possibly against the U.S. itself to prevent a cohesive, powerful Western response to Russia's use of hard power in support of its expansionist goals. This is the much-discussed Russian approach to "de-escalation." The underlying concept appears to be that a conflict is de-escalated because Russia's opponent decides to cease resistance in the face of limited Russian nuclear use.

In 2015, NATO Deputy Military Commander, Lieutenant General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, pointed out, "Russia might believe the large scale conventional force it has shown it can generate on very short notice...could in the future be used not only for intimidation and coercion but potentially to seize NATO territory after which the threat of escalation might be used to prevent reestablishment of territorial integrity."⁶ This apparent Russian notion again has little to do with Russia using nuclear threat or escalation in the protection of its existence; escalation here would be in the service of expansion.

I believe that this combination of Russian expansionist goals and nuclear concepts is the most obvious and immediate nuclear challenge. The questions that arise from this combination are: First, what is the basis for Russia's felt freedom to lower the threshold for nuclear threats and potentially nuclear first-use? What are the gaps, as perceived by Moscow, in the existing Western deterrence position that allow this perceived freedom? And, second, how can the West moderate Russian views about the potential value of nuclear threats and nuclear first-use in support of its expansionist goals?

The short answer to this latter question is that the West must take advantage of Russian pragmatism and risk calculation to move it away from nuclear threats and any anticipation of success via nuclear first use. What does this require in principle? The West must move Russia to see that:

- 1) its frequent nuclear threats are counterproductive; and
- 2) any level of nuclear first use would risk unleashing an uncontrollable process with potentially intolerable consequences for Russia.

This does not mean that the West must adopt the apparent Russian view that nuclear escalation is controllable. No, it means that the West must lead Russia to understand that: 1) it cannot



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fracture NATO cohesion via nuclear threats; and 2) it would not be able to control nuclear escalation to its advantage and success. Rather, such escalation would always entail too much risk. Western nuclear deterrence posturing and capabilities alone probably cannot produce this change in Russian thinking, but it cannot be accomplished without nuclear deterrence.

A Domestic Nuclear Challenge

At the outset of this discussion I suggested that there are two different but related nuclear challenges. One external, the other domestic. I have briefly described what I believe to be the most obvious and immediate external nuclear challenge: It is the linkage between Russian national aspirations and Moscow's apparent views regarding the value of nuclear weapons in the pursuit of those aspirations. The domestic challenge confronting us is whether there will be clear-eyed recognition of these external nuclear threat developments, and the corresponding establishment of an enduring and responsive deterrence policy and posture. Throughout much of the Cold War, the United States sustained a bipartisan deterrence policy and posture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. It was sufficiently effective to help bound U.S.-Soviet hostilities throughout the Cold War.

Doing so again in this new post-Cold War era will cut against considerable established thought: For almost three decades, the common Western expectation has been that great power nuclear threats were a thing of the past. That expectation led the United States and allies in a very particular direction. This direction was generally based on the underlying bipartisan presumption that nuclear deterrence and capabilities were of sharply declining value, and that continually reducing and limiting nuclear capabilities was synonymous with reducing nuclear dangers. That is, the security value of continuing to reduce and limit U.S. nuclear systems was deemed to be greater than the potential value of continuing to modernize and replace those nuclear systems.

If you doubt my point, I encourage you to read or reread President George H. W. Bush's landmark September 21, 1991 speech introducing the Presidential Nuclear Initiative, and President Obama's landmark 2009 Prague speech in favor of nuclear disarmament. The common apparent underlying current in each noted speech is the presumption that the great power nuclear environment was moving in an increasingly benign direction, would continue to do so, and that continuing reductions in U.S. nuclear forces would reduce nuclear dangers rather than risk endangering Western security.

There is this enduring strain in U.S. thinking about nuclear capabilities--that they should continually be reduced because greater safety is to be found in ever-lower numbers and greater limitations. I understand and would agree with that thought in the right context, but not in the context of the deep U.S. nuclear reductions already made and the emerging external nuclear challenges we now see.



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Instead, effective nuclear deterrence appears to be of increasing value, and U.S. nuclear capabilities again are needed to make deterrence as effective as possible given the reality of external nuclear challenges. That is, modernizing U.S. nuclear forces now in support of deterrence is more likely to reduce nuclear dangers than would their continuing reduction at the possible expense of sustaining effective deterrence capabilities.

This does not mean that the United States needs to increase the number of its strategic nuclear weapons, nor that future nuclear reductions must be avoided. Rather, it means recognizing that sustaining nuclear deterrence, and the needed nuclear posture for deterrence at multiple levels, is again a key to addressing emerging external nuclear dangers. That recognition should underlie how we think about these issues. The related internal challenge is whether the United States and key allies will be able to establish and sustain the domestic political consensus necessary for an enduring countervailing nuclear policy and posture designed to help address the gaps that Russia apparently perceives in the West's deterrence position. These are the gaps that appear to give Russia, *according to its perceptions*, the liberty to: 1) engage in unprecedented coercive nuclear threats, and, 2) potentially engage in coercive nuclear first-use to "de-escalate" or end a conflict on its favored terms.

That Russia perceives such liberty is, I believe, unarguable given its open statements and behavior. What may be the Western deterrence gaps in Russian perception is an important question for another day. The answer may be a moving target with multiple parts, but it is important to note that this is all about Russian perceptions and decision making. It is Moscow's perceptions that matter in this regard; it is irrelevant whether or not we in the West believe that Moscow *should* perceive whatever gaps it may see. Whether they are real or not by our calculations, they need to be addressed to move Russian views in a more benign direction.

Consequently, I will conclude with the two basic questions regarding our internal nuclear challenge. Will we have the courage and stamina to ask ourselves, without flinching, what are the possible gaps in our deterrence position as perceived by Russia? And, will we have the unity and stamina to do what we must do, possibly over many years, to address those gaps? That is the domestic challenge. It is the flip side of the external challenge.

I will conclude here by noting that I have no doubt that we will successfully address the external nuclear challenges if we are able to address the internal nuclear challenge. To do so will require the level of consistent bipartisanship that last enabled us to more than survive the Cold War.

1. Quoted in Guy Taylor and Ben Wolfgang, "'Zero-sum game': Russian Aggression tests Trump, US Power," *The Washington Times*, November 27, 2018, at



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- <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/nov/27/russia-ukraine-kerch-strait-incident-tests-trump-u/>.
2. Adolf Hitler, Speech, Munich Exhibition Halls, March 14, 1936. Quoted in Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945, The Chronicle of a Dictatorship, Vol. II, 1935-1938* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1992), p. 790.
 3. See the discussion in, Mark Schneider, "Russia and Conventional Deterrence," *Information Series*, No. 434, National Institute Press, December 13, 2018.
 4. See Hans Speier, *Force and Folly* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1969), pp. 70-99.
 5. Julian Isherwood, "Russia warns Denmark its warships could become nuclear targets," *The Telegraph*, March 21, 2015, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/denmark/11487509/Russia-warns-Denmark-its-warships->
 6. Adrian Bradshaw, "The Latest Security Challenges Facing NATO," *Royal United Services Institute*, February 20, 2015, <https://rusi.org/multimedia/latest-security-challenges-facing-nato>.

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