

Caught Between Scylla and Charybdis: The Relationship between Conventional and Nuclear Capabilities in Russian Military Thought

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Russian security policies and military plans are undergoing the most profound set of changes of any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In some ways this is the best of times for the Russian military. For the first time in about a decade, Moscow has the fortune of a government in Washington committed to “pushing the reset button” in U.S.-Russian relations. The Obama Administration has made it clear that it intends to take Russian interests and opinions serious in everything from the deployment of missile defenses to the imposing of new U.N. sanctions on Iran. A new START agreement has been signed allowing Russia to make inevitable reductions in its strategic nuclear forces under the guise of the furtherance of strategic parity with the United States. If Russian sources are to be trusted, the U.S. government committed to limiting its deployments of missile defenses in Europe. The pace of NATO’s eastward expansion has been slowed, possibly halted for good. The Russian Navy’s lease on the naval bases at Sevastopol was extended for an additional 25 years. All in all, it has been a good year for the Russian military. It might be assumed that Russia has never been in a better position to develop a new security partnership with the West or to feel more secure in general.

Yet, this is the time when the Russian government has chosen to undertake an ambitious, even radical, transformation of its conventional and nuclear forces. The publication of both a new National Security Strategy and Military Doctrine provide the policy foundation, albeit somewhat schizophrenic, which justify, even demand, the creation of military capabilities commensurate with Russia’s self-defined status as a major global power. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has made a commitment to the military for more money and for an array of new weapons systems that is eye watering in terms of its breath and cost. Plans have been articulated by the Chiefs of the major Services intended to address the widely recognized problems of sclerotic command and control structures, obsolete personnel policies and aging equipment.

The path before Russia’s leaders may well be characterized as that between Scylla and Charybdis. As Homer’s epic the *Odyssey* tells the tale the challenge is to chart a course between two dangers. The problem is moving away from one danger causes an increase in the threat posed by the other. In the view of Russian leaders, Moscow cannot be too accommodating and forthcoming either politically or militarily without risking appearing weak. As Russia that is weak will have its interests ignored or even undermined. At the same time, if Russia is too belligerent it risks a confrontation with states incomparably stronger than it is, thereby revealing how truly weak she is.

The source of Russia’s Homeric problem is its determination to assert a position in global affairs completely out of proportion to its economic, political, technological, demographic or military situation. Moreover, its principal adversary is the most powerful

economic and military alliance in human history. Russia must do whatever it can to assert its position as an equal, recognizing that it lacks the means (with the exception, perhaps, of its nuclear arsenal) to enforce its claim of equality. As one observer described Russia's dilemma;

The Russian Federation is certainly not in an enviable situation when it comes to foreign or security policy. Devoid of significant alliances, with an economic output comparable to that of France, and a standard of living that is far below that in Europe at large, it must find the means to secure a huge territory and overextended borders, end the violent conflicts in the Northern Caucasus, and maintain the strategic nuclear balance with the US. At the same time, the Russian leadership is laying claim to act as a hegemon in the post-Soviet space and as a great power on the international stage. The question is whether Russia has the economic, military, and political potential to resolve security issues successfully and to back up its international ambitions. The fundamental problem to be resolved by the country's foreign and security policy is the disparity between aspirations and resources. That dilemma is further aggravated by the international financial crisis and plummeting energy prices, which have hit the Russian economy hard.¹

Professor Alexei Bogaturov of the Moscow Institute for International Security described the problem as "Medvedev's dilemma." On the one hand, Russia would prefer not to return to a policy of confrontation; on the other hand, the Kremlin cannot just stand by and watch the USA and NATO pursue their policy of military superiority. The Russian solution, reflected in the new National Security Strategy, is to pursue a two track policy:

. . . without interrupting the dialogue with the U.S. on strategic issues, try to concentrate resources in order to create the capacity for a political and diplomatic counterweight to NATO, while taking all necessary steps to prevent the possibility of the neutralization of Russia's ability to effectively confront even theoretically predicted attempts to dictate conditions under the threat of force.²

In order to understand the relationship between conventional and nuclear capabilities in Russian military thought it is necessary to appreciate the extent of the dilemma Russian political and military leaders have created for themselves. The international environment is filled with malevolent forces intent on the diminution of Russia and the undermining of its national interests. These adversaries must be directly and aggressively countered, preferably with non-military means. However, Russia cannot rely entirely on such means, particularly as its adversaries are intent on achieving overwhelming military superiority and undermining the strategic stability achieved through arms control agreements in the late 20th century. To be secure, Russia must develop a modern, largely non-nuclear

¹ Henning Schröder, "Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020," Russian Analytical Digest, June 18, 2009, p. 6

² Alexei Bogaturov, "Хочешь открытой системы – строй закрытый блок? Военно-стратегическая «дилемма Медведева»," Независима, June 15, 2009

military while retaining until the day that goal is achieved a nuclear capability that can deter both the conventional and nuclear might of its opponents.

The Director of National Intelligence observed that Russia continues to rely on its nuclear deterrent and retaliatory capability to counter the perceived threat from the United States and NATO. Moscow for the past several years has also been strengthening its conventional military force to make it a credible foreign policy instrument, both to signal its political resurgence and to assert its dominance over neighboring states, like Georgia. Moscow has actively engaged in foreign military cooperation with countries such as China and Venezuela, in part to remind the United States and others of Russia's global military relevance.³ This tendency has been reflected in scenes we hadn't seen in some two decades: Russian subs off U.S. coast, Bear bombers penetrating NATO airspace and Russian warships repeating the old Soviet era Caribbean cruise – this time to Venezuela.

Recent military demonstrations cannot hide the fact that Russia's conventional military stand on the precipice of irrelevance. Almost two decades of under funding has resulted in obsolete equipment, inadequate maintenance, poor training and low morale. In this same period there has been a revolution in military capabilities centered on the exploitation of information technologies. The result has been an order-of-magnitude improvement in the lethality and operational effectiveness of conventional military forces. This is a revolution in which the Russian military has yet to participate. Whatever may be the Kremlin's ambitions for the Russian military of 2020 and beyond, the decline of the Russian defense industrial base means there is little chance of Russia being able to reach those objectives.

The likelihood that Russia can achieve its goal of a thoroughly modern conventional capability, one able to take on the West in a regional conflict by 2020 is fanciful, at best. The Kremlin is left, therefore with two strategic options. One is to seek to constrain Western and particularly U.S. military advances through pursuit of an aggressive arms control agenda. The other is to try and return to the past, focusing the U.S.-Russian relationship on nuclear issues. In order to do this, Russia must take the necessary steps to maintain and modernize its nuclear arsenals, both strategic and tactical. Unfortunately, on this path lies confrontation.

New Security Strategy and Doctrines

The publication of a new National Security Strategy and Military Doctrine set the stage for Russia's Homeric challenge. These documents set out a formidable set of security challenges confronting Russia. In particular, both documents identify as the most serious threat activities and behaviors by foreign nations and groupings – read NATO – to create a condition of political and military superiority over Russia. In essence, the course

³ Admiral Dennis Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, February 12, 2009, p. 27

between Scylla and Charybdis is that between different modes of competition, not between competition and cooperation.

The new National Security Strategy (NSS) offers something for everyone. The list of potential dangers and challenges is long, broad and extremely varied. But with respect to military threats the NSS the focus of concern is not with irregular warfare or so-called rogue states but rather the behavior of the United States and its allies. In particular, the NSS identifies the threat as that posed by the drive of some countries to achieve overwhelming military superiority, to create new types of weapons and the means to engage in new forms of warfare and the impact on Russian security of attempts to overturn existing international agreements.

The threat of military security are: the policy of a number of leading foreign countries aimed at achieving overwhelming superiority in the military field, especially in the strategic nuclear forces, through the development of high-precision, information and other high-tech means of warfare, strategic weapons in nonnuclear form, the formation of a unilateral global missile defense system and the militarization of Earth's space environment that could lead to a new arms race, as well as the spread of nuclear, chemical, biological technology, the production of weapons of mass destruction or their components and delivery systems.

The negative impact on the military security of the Russian Federation and its allies exacerbated by a departure from international agreements on arms limitation and reduction, as well as actions aimed at violating the stability of systems of government and military control, missile warning, space control, the functioning of strategic nuclear forces, storage sites, nuclear weapons, nuclear energy, nuclear and chemical industries, and other potentially dangerous objects.⁴

This formulation is repeated almost endlessly in Russian political-military documents and articles by security analysts. It reflects the basic reality that the Russian leadership sees its security very much as a function of the ability to neutralize an ever-present threat posed by the West. One example is a report in the Guardian on remarks by Russia's Minister of Defense, Anatoly Serdyukov

Today, Russia's defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, said the world situation meant the "likelihood of armed conflicts and their potential danger for Russia" was rising. "The military-political situation is characterized by the US leadership's desire ... to expand its military presence and that of its allies in regions adjacent to Russia," he declared.

America was actively trying to steal energy and mineral resources in central Asia and other post-Soviet countries on Russia's borders, he complained, adding that

⁴ The National Security of the Russian Federation until 2020 (hereafter NSS), Presidential Decree No. 537, May 12, 2009

the US was "actively supporting processes aimed at ousting Russia from the area of its traditional interests."⁵

The existential nature of the threat means that it can only be countered by a condition not merely of military parity but of absolute Western vulnerability.

Moscow cannot conceive of its security in terms other than those of an adversarial relationship with the United States and NATO. That relationship is based on both global and regional deterrence and what Moscow calls strategic stability—where both sides are locked into the Cold War relationship of mutually assured destruction at the global and regional level. For Russia to be secure, not only must the United States not be able to defend itself against missile threats, neither can Europe, for then Russia cannot intimidate it by the threat of missile strikes. Russia still believes that the condition of its security is the insecurity of its neighbors and partners. Consequently, to secure itself, Russia must have the right to supervise the limits of Europe's defense activity, thereby revising the settlements of 1989-91.⁶

Much of the National Security Strategy focuses on the actions to reverse Russia's social, economic and technological inferiority. Such steps are necessary certainly to improve the welfare of the Russia people. But they are vital also to the Kremlin's goal of establishing Russia as a great power and creating the conditions to support a transformation of the Russian military.

The new Russian Military Doctrine, signed out on February 5, 2010, extends the vision of the threat contained in the National Security Strategy and brings it close to home. Although it acknowledges that the risk of large-scale conventional/nuclear war has declined, the overall external threat to Russian security has intensified. The list of external military dangers includes:

- The desire to endow the force potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with global functions carried out in violation of the norms of international law and to move the military infrastructure of NATO member countries closer to the borders of the Russian Federation, including by expanding the bloc;
- The attempts to destabilize the situation in individual states and regions and to undermine strategic stability;
- The deployment (buildup) of troop contingents of foreign states (groups of states) on the territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation and its allies and also in adjacent waters;
- The creation and deployment of strategic missile defense systems undermining global stability and violating the established correlation of forces in the nuclear-

⁵ Luke Harding, "Russia announces new arms race," The Guardian, March 17, 2009

⁶ Dr. Stephen Blank, "Russia Challenges the Obama Administration," Strategic Studies Institute OpED, Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, December 2008

missile sphere, and also the militarization of outer space and the deployment of strategic nonnuclear precision weapon systems;

- Territorial claims against the Russian Federation and its allies and interference in their internal affairs;
- The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, missiles, and missile technologies, and the increase in the number of states possessing nuclear weapons.⁷

The Military Doctrine provides a vision of future conflicts that frankly differs little from writings produced by the Soviet military some two decades ago. Future conflicts will involve the massed use of weapons systems based on new physical principles that are comparable to nuclear weapons in effectiveness; the expanded use of air space and outer space; intensified information warfare; reduced warning time based on an adversary's preparation to conduct military operations, and; an increase in the responsiveness of command and control systems. The characteristic features of future military conflicts will be the employment of forces based on speed, maneuverability and precision targeting. A wide variety of new technologies will be seen on these future battlefields beyond just precision-guided weapons including electromagnetic, laser, and infrasound weaponry, computer controlled systems, drones and autonomous maritime craft, and guided or robotic versions of manned platforms.⁸

There had been indications that the new Military Doctrine would expand further the role of Russian nuclear weapons in future conflicts. In an interview with *Izvestia*, Nikolay Patrushev, the secretary of the Russian Security Council was quoted saying that in the Military Doctrine "We have corrected the conditions for use of nuclear weapons to resist aggression with conventional forces not only in large-scale wars, but also in regional or even a local one." Moreover, he went on "There is also a multiple-options provision for use of nuclear weapons depending on the situation and intentions of the potential enemy. . . In a situation critical for national security, we don't exclude a preventive nuclear strike at the aggressor."⁹

As published, the Military Doctrine does not extend the role of nuclear weapons into the area of local wars. However, given expressions of concern made earlier in that document regarding the potential for future conflicts to involve destabilizing command and control, nuclear weapons sites and other critical government assets, the point at which a regional war would place the existence of the state at risk, thereby warranting a nuclear response, is ambiguous, at best.

Nuclear weapons will remain an important factor for preventing the outbreak of nuclear military conflicts and military conflicts involving the use of conventional means of attack (a large-scale war or regional war). In the event of the outbreak of

⁷ The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, February 5, 2010, p. 3

⁸ Ibid., p. 6

⁹ "Russia to broaden nuclear strike options," RT, October 14, 2009

a military conflict involving the utilization of conventional means of attack (a large-scale war or regional war) and imperiling the very existence of the state, the possession of nuclear weapons may lead to such a military conflict developing into a nuclear military conflict.

The National Security Strategy and Military Doctrine put enormous pressure on the Russian military to achieve across-the-board improvements in organization, capabilities, operations and personnel. It is not clear that the military and its supporting industrial base will be able to meet those challenges.

The Limits of Russian Conventional Force Restructuring

Russian leaders have long recognized the need for comprehensive structural reforms of the military. Several attempts since the early 1990s at reform have run afoul of a combination of institutional resistance, a lack of funds, the decline of the Russian defense industrial base and recruitment and retention problems. The National Security Strategy and Military Doctrine both emphasize the importance of a transformation of the Russian military.

The main task of national defense in the medium term is the transition to a qualitatively new look of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation to the conservation potential of the strategic nuclear forces by improving the organizational and staff structure and system of territorial-based troops and forces, increasing the number of units of permanent readiness, as well as improve the operational and training, organization of interspecies interaction forces and forces.¹⁰

President Medvedev personally committed his administration to a complete overhaul of the Russian armed forces.

A guaranteed nuclear deterrent system for various military and political circumstances must be provided by 2020. . . We must ensure air superiority, precision strikes on land and sea targets, and the timely deployment of troops. We are planning to launch large-scale production of warships, primarily, nuclear submarines with cruise missiles and multi-purpose attack submarines... We will also build an air and space defense network.¹¹

The weakness of Russia's conventional forces has not been a secret to anyone. But, the experiences of the Russian-Georgian conflict appear to have given the drive for reform a new impetus. The poor performance of Russian forces was an apparent shock to the Kremlin leadership. The conflict revealed a host of problems ranging from obsolescent equipment, an inability to operate during the night, archaic information systems, a lack of precision strike capabilities, communications failures, poor or non-existent computer

¹⁰ NSS

¹¹President Dmitry Medvedev, cited in "Russia ready for Meaningful Military reform. Again. Really," inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2008/09/27

systems, inadequate command and control capabilities, badly training, inflexible or non-existent logistics and manpower problems.¹² Equally important, the Georgian experience undermined a mixed conscript-contract Army. As Western militaries had discovered decades earlier, a mixed force of professionals and conscripts was on balance extremely expensive while providing little of value.¹³

The central purpose of the military reforms is to improve the ability of Russia's armed forces to engage successfully in relatively small conflicts along that country's periphery. If these reforms are successful, Russia would be able to place lesser reliance on its nuclear forces except to deter large scale conflicts.

The publicly stated goal of the reform is to create a compact army of constant readiness, designed mainly to fight local and regional conflicts. At the same time, Russia will maintain its strategic nuclear forces as a safeguard in the event of a "big war." The country's nuclear capability should guarantee the possibility of inflicting unacceptable damage on any aggressor or coalition of aggressors.¹⁴

The design of what some are calling Russia's New Model Army was announced by Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov on October 14, 2008. The main elements of the reform were to include the following:

- A cut in the total number of military personnel from 1,130,000 to one million, including a reduction in the total number of officers from 355,000 to just 150,000. The General Staff would be particularly affected, with 13,500 of its 22,000 personnel positions slated for elimination;
- Remaining officers and contract soldiers will see a significant pay increase over the next four years.
- Henceforth, all military units will be considered permanent readiness units and be fully staffed with both officers and enlisted soldiers..
- The existing 140,000 non-commissioned officers will be replaced by 85,000 professional sergeants trained over the next three years;
- The four-tiered command structure will be replaced with a three-tiered structure, with the brigade serving as the basic unit;
- The disbandment of 23 divisions and 12 brigades and the creation of 39 fully manned, combat ready all-arms brigades;
- The military's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) will be cut in size and subordinated directly to the civilian defense minister;
- The consolidation of military institutes and medical facilities.¹⁵

¹² Roger McDermott, Russia's Armed Forces: The Power of Illusion, Russie.Nei.Visions No. 37, IFRI, March 2009, pp. 16-18. Also, Roger McDermott, "Russia's 'Lessons' from the Georgia War: Impacts on Military Reform Plans," CACI Analyst, November 12, 2008

¹³ Andrew Liaropoulos, "The Russian Defense Reform and its Limitations," Caucasian Review of International Affairs, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter 2008, pp. 44-45

¹⁴ "Military reform: Basic guidelines," RIA Novosti, February 24, 2010

¹⁵ Dmitriy Gorenburg, "Russia's New Model Army: Radical Reform in the Russian Military," August 14, 2009, russiamil.wordpress.com

The to-be formed combat brigades must be equipped with modernized or upgraded equipment. Shrinking the size of the ground Forces will result in an excess of equipment. Unfortunately, virtually of it is aging and even obsolete. Moreover, the Ground Forces lack the equipment and systems in such areas as logistics, intelligence, medical care and engineering needed to support a proposed mobile, high-readiness force.

Restructuring of the ground forces is only one thread in a complex weave of actions that must be taken in order create a modern Russian conventional military. Similar initiatives have been declared in the Air Force and Navy. Air Force Commander in Chief, Colonel General Alexander Zelin, announced a series of reforms in his Service including a new command structure, consolidated logistics and modernized weapons. The number of commands and air bases was to be drastically reduced. Army aviation and air transportation assets were being integrated into the new structure.¹⁶ The new Air Force structure appears to be designed to parallel the reforms in the Ground Forces so as to all the creation of a truly joint capability.¹⁷

Organizational reforms will be meaningless unless the Air Force is able to overcome an almost twenty year procurement holiday. No less a figure than First Deputy Defense Minister Army-General Nikolai Makarov recently warned that the Russian air force was not procuring sufficient numbers of new modern aircraft and has fewer serviceable aircraft, manned by insufficiently combat-trained pilots, which are incapable of conducting modern era combat operations.¹⁸

Former Chief of the Air Force, General Anatoly Kornukov, painted an even more dismal picture of conditions in the Air Force. According to him, Russia is lagging 25 to 30 years behind the United States in developing prospective air defense weapons because of a meltdown of its defense industries. General Kornukov complained that the nation's air defense capabilities were waning with the S-330 approaching retirement and only two batteries of the new S-400 deployed. In addition, air defense fighters were often grounded due to a lack of engines and spare parts "Regrettably, our air defense forces only have a limited capability to protect the nation's security,"¹⁹

Colonel General Zilin claims that a major program to upgrade the Air Forces platforms and systems was being undertaken. Central to these was the introduction of a so-called fifth-generation fighter, the TA-50, purchases of advanced fourth generation aircraft such as the SU-34 and 35, S-400 and S-550 air and missile defense systems and the KA-52 alligator. In addition, the Air Force is reported to be receiving refurbished versions of older systems, such as the MiG-29s and 31s, and Su-27 and 30 fighter, TU-22 bomber

¹⁶ Lt Col. Andrew Wallace, "Challenges to Russia's Air Force Reform," *The ISCIP Analyst*, Vo. 16, No. 12, April 22, 2010

¹⁷ Roger McDermott, "Stall and Spin in Russian Air Force Reform," *Asia Times Online*, August 22, 2009

¹⁸ David Eschel, "In Spite of Medvedev's Optimism, Russian Military is Facing Severe Crisis," *Defense Update online*, July 24, 2009, at defense-update.com/analysis/russian_military_crisis_240709.html

¹⁹ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Former Russian Air Force Chief says Air Defenses have Weakened," *AP*, May 13th, 2010

and Il-76 transport. One report suggests that by 2020 the Air Force will have upgraded some 1,500 aircraft while also introducing brand new platforms.²⁰

The Russian Navy is facing the end of the projected service lives for virtually all of its deployed platforms. What scarce resources have been made available since the fall of the Soviet Union have gone largely to maintain the SSBN Fleet. Even this portion of the Fleet is on shaky ground with the Delta class SSBNs fast becoming obsolete and the new Boray class just entering service. Even then, repeated test failures of the Bulova SLBM raise concerns that one leg of the Russian strategic Triad may be at risk. Elsewhere in the Fleet, the number of surface combatants and submarines continues to decline. There are programs to build new SSNs, SSGNs, SSKs, frigates and corvettes but these are all progressing slowly. The most significant reform step the Navy took was to propose the creation of five or six carrier task groups build around a new aircraft carrier the first of which will begin construction in 2012 or 2013.²¹

The sheer magnitude of reforms must give any reasonable observer pause. President Medvedev is reported to have ordered the upgrading of an average of 9-11 per cent of the military's weapons and military equipment each year resulting in an overall modernization level of approximately 70 per cent by 2020. According to one Russian source this means annual deliveries of 35 ballistic missiles, 50 new and 50 upgraded warplanes, 20 to 25 military helicopters, 3-4 sea-going and ocean-going warships, 2 nuclear-powered submarines and 1 diesel-powered submarine.²²

The current plan requires the Air Force to receive 100 new or refurbished aircraft a year. But even with all of these programs, the overall number of aircraft would decline by nearly 50 per cent. In 2008, however, the Air Force received five Su-24M2s, eight Su-27SMs, four Su-25SMs, a couple of upgraded MiG-31Ms, one new and one upgraded Tu-160 strategic bombers, and a single Su-34 fighter for a total of only 21. The current plan requires the Air Force to receive 100 new or refurbished aircraft a year. But even with all of these programs, the overall number of aircraft would decline by nearly 50 per cent. In 2008, however, it received five Su-24M2s, eight Su-27SMs, four Su-25SMs, a couple of upgraded MiG-31Ms, one new and one upgraded Tu-160 strategic bombers, and a single Su-34 fighter for a total of 21.²³

If anything, the Navy is in the worst condition of all the Services. According to the Independent Military Review, Russia's shipbuilding industry cannot sustain the overly ambitious plan proposed by the Ministry of Defense. The Russian shipbuilding industry is "incapable of producing warships in either the quantity or at the level of quality that their navy customer requires."²⁴ Perhaps reflecting this reality, in June, 2009 the Ministry

²⁰ "The Future of the Russia Air Force: Ten Years On," RIA Novosti, at <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20100317/158228523.html>

²¹ Milan Vego, "The Russian Navy Revitalized," Armed Forces Journal, April 2009

²² "Russian Military Reform in a Time of Crisis," RIA Novosti, March 15, 2010

²³ Alexey Komarov, "Russian Air Force Expects 100 New Aircraft," Aviation Week, March 10, 2009

²⁴ Cited in Reuben F. Johnson, "Russian Navy Facing 'Irreversible Collapse,'" The Weekly Standard, July 13, 2009

of Defense announced that the widely touted plan to build five or six carrier battle groups had been postponed.²⁵

It is clear that Russian military leaders are intent not simply on streamlining their military and making its assets more deployable and employable but of developing means for neutralizing what they perceive as the most significant threat to Russia's security: the advanced conventional military capabilities being deployed by the U.S. and to a lesser extent NATO and China. Russian defense experts recognize that they have little hope of matching the U.S. military's conventional capabilities. Russia lacks the technological base or the financial resources for such an arms race. It is extremely unlikely that the Russian military will receive the quantities of new and upgraded platforms and systems it desires. But even were a miracle to occur, the Russian military would still continue to fall behind the West (and China) which, as Russian threat statements underscore, are investing heavily in a wide range of military technologies including advanced C3, information warfare, unmanned systems, hypervelocity platforms and weapons and directed energy.

This had led Russian them to examine the possibility asymmetric responses. Then President Putin described such an approach in 2006. "We are to keep our eyes open on the plans and development trends of other countries' armed forces, and to know about their future developments. Quantity is not the end, however. ... Our responses are to be based on intellectual superiority. They will be asymmetrical, and less costly."²⁶

What form might such an asymmetric response take? One Russian author suggests that this would involve horizontal escalation against strategic targets in the enemy's territory.

Combining defensive operations undertaken to beat off aggression and asymmetrical actions relying on the efficiency of modern high-precision conventionally equipped strategic weapons systems, supported by subversive and reconnaissance groups is a persuasive enough factor for the enemy to cease military operations on terms favorable for Russia. This conclusion has a practical significance and relevance in view of the fact that the economy and infrastructure of any European country has a large number of objectives, some of them potentially dangerous, vital for the survival of its population and government.

Strategically important targets that, if destroyed, lead to unacceptable damage include the top government administration and military control systems; major manufacturing, fuel, and energy enterprises (steel and engineering plants, oil refineries, defense industry enterprises, electric power plants and substations, oil and gas production, accumulation, and storage facilities, life support facilities, and so on); vitally important transportation facilities across the adversary's entire territory (railroad hubs, bridges, strategic ports, airports, tunnels, and so on); potentially dangerous objectives (hydroelectric power dams and hydroelectric

²⁵ Roger McDermott, "Naval Overhaul Slides off Russia's Agenda," *Asia Times online*, June 26, 2009

²⁶ V.V. Putin, Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, No. 89, May 11, 2006.

power complexes, processing units of chemical plants, nuclear power facilities, storages of strong poisons, and so on).²⁷

The Continuing Lure of Nuclear Weapons

Russian leadership's sense of their own vulnerability and, perversely, causes them to behave in a certain way on the international stage. Secular demographic, social and economic trends argue that Russia's sense of its own weakness and hence of vulnerability will only grow. Moscow is determined to take what little time it has and few resources are available to try and leverage itself into a secure position as a co-equal of the world's great and rising powers.

As noted above, the NSS makes clear the Kremlin's view that the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and refusal to continue the bilateral process of strategic arms negotiations of its predecessors created a threat to the Russian federation. From this point is easy to conclude that what the Russian leaders seek is a return to the bygone days of mutual assured destruction and continuous repetitive arms control. This relationship served three functions. First, it justifies the Kremlin's threat perceptions as detailed in the NSS and Military Doctrines. Second, it justifies a continuing reliance on nuclear weapons in military strategy and obviates the need for reforms of the scale and scope necessitated by an alternative strategy. Finally the very process of negotiations serves to validate Russian claims of relevance and status in the international system. As one eminent analyst of both Soviet and Russian military thought observed recently

The MAD-based U.S.-RF relationship organically presupposes continued tensions and the need for rigid controls over the nuclear weapons of both countries. Moscow is interested in maintaining the system of continuous strategic negotiations for many reasons. These negotiations are marked by the aura of uniqueness and unparalleled significance in international relations. They symbolize the equal status of the involved parties. Russians, like the Soviets before them, believe that the negotiations together with the accompanying summitry create a powerful background for and define the tone of all other bilateral exchanges. They also see direct linkages between maintaining the bilateral strategic balance and the global security situation, including Russia's relations with NATO, the fate of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, the role of tactical nuclear weapons systems and anti-ballistic missile defenses in Europe and other regions, the future of nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear weapons testing.²⁸

The threat environment fabricated by the Russian government may serve obvious domestic political needs. But it creates an important dilemma for Russia internationally.

²⁷ Col. S.G. Chekinov and Lt. Gen. S.A. Bogdanov, "Asymmetric Actions to Maintain Russia's Military Security," *Military Thought*, No.1, 2010, p. 8

²⁸ Andrei Schoumekhin and Baker Spring, Strategic Nuclear Arms Control for the Protect and Defend Strategy, Backgrounder No. 2266. The Heritage Foundation, May 4, 2009, pp. 7-8

How can Moscow agree to the elimination of its nuclear weapons when they alone are the essential bulwark against those threats? Additionally, what would be the basis for Russia's claim for a high place and unique status in the world were they not to retain one of the world's largest arsenals of nuclear weapons?

The combination of domestic weakness and a sense of a continuing, even intensifying external threat leads the Russian leadership to look for areas where they can shore up their situation. The truth is the Russia desperately needs nuclear weapons. It is a power on the international stage almost solely because it possesses nuclear weapons. The collapse of Russia's economy following the end of the Cold War, the parlous state of Russian conventional forces and the sense of proliferating threats results in, in the minds of the Kremlin oligarchs, a logical argument for increased reliance on nuclear weapons. It is no wonder that under these conditions, Russian leaders in general, and certainly the military, would view nuclear weapons as being the one capability that guaranteed Russia's ability to deter aggression. Indeed, it appears as if strategic nuclear weapons are the only factor that contributes to Russia having any relevance in the evolving international system.

One Western political scientist with extensive experience in Moscow made the connection between the retention of nuclear weapons and Russian political and psychological needs explicit.

“As the self-perceived isolated great power in a highly competitive global environment, Russia regards nuclear weapons as the mainstay of both its security posture and status among the major powers of the 21st century. Even though the likelihood of a war with its ex-Cold War adversaries—America, its European allies, and China—is extremely low, nuclear deterrence gives a measure of comfort to the Kremlin that Russia's vital interests will be respected under all circumstances by Washington and Beijing, whose military power and “combined national might,” respectively, are now far greater than Russia's.

We should not be confused by Russia's willingness to pursue strategic arms reductions and to sign a new arms limitation treaty with the United States. This is not a sign of a change in Moscow's views of international relations or of an acceptance of the need to move beyond relations based on “old style” measures of national power. The new START Treaty was a matter of absolute necessity for Russia. Absent the new agreement, Russia would have been forced to reduce its strategic nuclear forces unilaterally. In an era in which the two former adversaries no longer view each other as principal threats, why should this be a problem? But for the leaders of the Kremlin it was imperative that they bring down U.S. strategic forces equally. Any other outcome would be a clear admission of Russian weakness.

Russia's nuclear strategy also does not help. Faced with a decaying conventional military and the perception of external threat, the Russian military doctrine focused on an expanded role for nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons became the way not to lose a conventional conflict. As a senior U.S. defense official commented:

“There are aspects to their nuclear doctrine, their military activities that we find very troubling. “if you read recent Russian military doctrine they are going in the other direction, they are actually increasing their reliance on nuclear weapons, the role in nuclear weapons in their strategy”.

To make matters worse for Russia, the world is experiencing ongoing revolution in the means of conventional warfare. As Secretary of Defense Gates has pointed out in a number of recent speeches, the capabilities that underlie this revolution are proliferating. He has made repeated reference to the so-called anti-access/area denial capabilities being deployed by China, Iran and even Hezbollah. In response to such dangers, the Secretary as well as other military leaders and defense experts advocate accelerating investments in revolutionary capabilities. In many instances, these are precisely the kinds of weapons platforms and systems identified as leading threats in the new Military Doctrine. One senior Russian military leader put the problem this way:

“By 2030 ... foreign countries, particularly the United States, will be able to deliver coordinated, high-precision strikes against any target on the whole territory of Russia,”²⁹

The Final Report of the Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States noted that “Ironically, our edge in conventional capabilities has induced the Russians, now feeling their conventional deficiencies, to increase their reliance on both tactical and strategic nuclear weapons.”³⁰

In a larger sense, nuclear weapons are an all-purpose instrument with which to address most of the military security challenges of the 21st Century.³¹ Russian political and military leaders and defense analysts, echoing arguments made by their predecessors in the 1980s, have repeatedly argued that the threat of conventional precision-strike weapons could be countered by the employment of theater nuclear weapons.³² According to the NSS:

In the interest of ensuring strategic stability and equitable multilateral cooperation in the international arena Russia during the implementation of this Strategy will make every effort at the least cost level to maintain parity with the United States in the field of strategic offensive weapons under the conditions of deployment of a global missile defense system and realization of the concept of global lightning strike using strategic delivery systems with nuclear and conventional warheads.³³

²⁹ Col. Gen. Alexander Zelin, Chief VVS, cited in RIA Novosti August 11, 2009

³⁰ Commission on the U.S. Strategic Posture

³¹ Stephen Blank, *Russia and Arms Control: Are There Opportunities for the Obama Administration?* Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, March 2009, p. xi

³² Stephen Blank, “Undeterred: The Return of Nuclear War,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. I, No. 2, Summer/Fall 2000, pp. 55-63

³³ NSS

Arms Control, Missile Defenses and Strategic Stability

The recent “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations should not be taken as a sign that all the difficulties between these two countries are a thing of the past. In fact, in many ways recent events may create a false expectation on both sides that it will be easy to bridge remaining differences on matters of security. In fact, the opposite condition may be true.

Were Moscow able to achieve its desired ends with respect to conventional force modernization, there might be a reasonable chance that Russia and the United States could move along a common path towards a stable strategic relationship at very low numbers of nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, Russia and the United States are on divergent strategic paths that are likely to result in greater friction and a more difficult security dialogue in the future. Simply put, the U.S. position is that conventional means, including missile defenses, offers a means for maintaining deterrence and reassuring allies while relying less on nuclear weapons and, possibly, even dissuading some potential proliferators from pursuing a nuclear capability.

But it is precisely the U.S. advantage in advanced conventional weapons and defensive technologies, broadly defined, that poses the greatest near-term threat to the Kremlin’s conception of its security needs. The focus on conventional forces reduces the salience of nuclear weapons, certainly as a means of deterrence but also as the political lodestone of great power status. The growing U.S. concern about China’s military might is a reaction to that country’s investments in advanced conventional capabilities, particularly so-called anti-access and area denial systems and not to the modernization of China’s nuclear arsenal.

Some in the West have worried that if the promises held by the revolution in military affairs materialize, even incompletely, they may significantly lower the threshold of military intervention. And this is exactly the outcome that Russia is worried about, for it believes that the new capabilities might open the way to a more aggressive interventionist policy of the United States and NATO that might well challenge Russia’s interests in various regions and especially in areas close to the Russian borders.³⁴

There is virtually no chance that Moscow can meet its objectives for reforming the Russian military by 2020. It will be a monumental challenge for the Kremlin simply to slow the pace of erosion of the Russian military. Technology limitations, industrial decay, resource constraints and personnel problems may well force the Russian leaders to seek security in a smaller but modernized nuclear posture.

Another issue that holds the potential to increasingly divide the two countries is that of missile defenses, particularly the proposed deployment of a limited missile defense system in Europe. The Obama Administration has confirmed the view of its predecessor

³⁴ Pavel Podvig, *Revolution in Military Affairs: Challenge to Russia’s Security*,” Paper Presented at the VTT Energy Styx Seminar, Helsinki, Finland, September 4, 2001

that missile defenses are a legitimate, even central part of the deterrence and reassurance equation. Properly managed in a so-called phased, adaptive strategy, such defenses can provide deterrence of missile threats and reassurance to allies that might otherwise only be attainable by explicit nuclear guarantees.

The Russian government and leading strategic experts were highly critical of the U.S. proposal to deploy a limited ballistic missile defense system in Eastern Europe. A number of officials have gone so far as to warn that Moscow will take offensive countermeasures, some of which would increase the threat to Europe, in the event that the system went forward. On the day President Obama was elected, President Medvedev warned that unless the plan to deploy the missiles in Europe was halted, Russia would deploy additional short-range ballistic and cruise missiles against Eastern Europe.³⁵

While it was assumed that Russian opposition to missile defenses in Europe was a function of their deployment in the absence of a formal agreement as well as the nature of the defenses themselves (the original Third Site was an extension of the National Missile Defense system) this may not be the case. Russia has raised concerns about the deployment of a land-based version of the Aegis/Standard Missile system in Europe. Recently, Moscow even objected to the deployment of a U.S. patriot battery to Poland.

Russia has a two-fold problem with U.S. pursuing effective theater defenses. The first is the impact defenses may have on their efforts to deploy superior theater capabilities, both conventional and nuclear. Second, is their belief that theater defenses, particularly if internetted and connected to space-based and other mobile sensors, will be a dandy platform for creation of a highly effective strategic defense capability. Such a defense, employed in conjunction with an advanced, precision conventional offense, could provide the basis for a disarming first strike scenario.

Missile defenses, particularly those in Europe, appear to strike at the very heart of the Russian concept of strategic stability and Moscow's requirement to be able to hold Europe at risk regardless of the balance of forces between Russia and the United States. One analyst sought to answer the question why a defense of only 10 interceptors oriented towards the threat from Iran would so antagonize the Russian government.

Close examination of Russian policy reveals that these defenses entrench the United States in Eastern Europe's military defense and foreclose Russia's hope of intimidating Central and Eastern Europe or of reestablishing its hegemony there and possibly even in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). If missile defenses exist in Europe, Russian missile threats are greatly diminished, if not negated. Because empire and the creation of a fearsome domestic enemy justify and are the inextricable corollaries of internal autocracy, the end of empire allegedly entails Russia's irrevocable decline as a great power and—the crucial point—generates tremendous pressure for domestic reform.³⁶

³⁵ Stephen J. Blank, "Russia Challenges the Bush Administration," Op-Ed, The U.S. Army's Strategic Studies Institute, December 2008.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Russia needs either to build a conventional military commensurate with its sense of itself as a great power and reflecting its concern over the threat posed by the United States and NATO or to drag the focus of the U.S.-Russian strategic relationship back to its erstwhile preoccupation with nuclear weapons and a stable balance of terror. The former is unlikely to happen. The latter strategy is the source of Medvedev's Dilemma referenced above. Russia cannot take the bilateral strategic relationship back to the future without, at a minimum, undermining the Obama Administration's goal of moving towards zero or, more problematic still, stimulating a new era of confrontation.