

Managed Instability

The NATO–Russia Strategic Relationship

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The Ukrainian crisis, in particular the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula, has underscored in dramatic fashion the need for a reassessment of the Euro-Atlantic strategic environment. This reassessment will take many forms, with the most important part addressing those most dangerous of weapons: nuclear warheads and their delivery systems.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 it took many decades for the statesmen and women of the two major Cold War alliances to construct a nuclear security architecture that rested on continual dialogue, mutual reassurance and a commitment to reduce nuclear stockpiles. The events of the twenty-first century have seen this architecture threatened as the NATO–Russia relationship has deteriorated, a process that has recently accelerated.

It is not an exaggeration to say that over the last year and a half the security situation in Europe has dramatically deteriorated, with the post-Cold War consensus – to the extent that this ever really existed – buckling under the strain. This deterioration has inevitably affected the nuclear relationship in Europe, and managing this change will be a major focus in the months and years ahead.

Concepts of Strategic Stability and Assessing the Nuclear Threat

It should come as a surprise to nobody that NATO and Russia have inherently different views of what constitutes a stable strategic environment in Europe. This paper will very briefly outline these conceptions as well as the role nuclear weapons play in the military doctrines of the region's nuclear powers.

The Russian leadership views the current strategic environment as inherently unstable. This view is informed by Moscow's conception of the asymmetrical imbalance between Russia and NATO in conventional military terms. Put simply, the Russian military is inferior to that of the Atlantic Alliance in every sense, but particularly in terms of technology and military spending. This is compounded by specific programmes – in particular the US Prompt Global Strike initiative and missile defence – that Russia feels pose a direct threat to its nuclear capabilities,¹ which represent the only area in which Russia can match NATO.

1. *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, 'Военная доктрина Российской Федерации [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation]', 30 December 2014, <<http://www.rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>>, accessed 15 July 2015.

The primary role of nuclear weapons has remained the same in the two most recent iterations of Russian military doctrine, issued in 2010 and 2014 respectively:²

Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to a use of nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction against her and (or) her allies, and in a case of an aggression against her with conventional weapons that would put in danger the very existence of the state.

However, this position is somewhat undermined by the use of simulated nuclear strikes in Russian military exercises, which is consistent with a supposedly redundant feature of Russian military doctrine, the 'de-escalatory strike'.

NATO draws a very different conclusion from Russia in terms of the stability of the strategic environment and the role of nuclear weapons. As is firmly and frequently reiterated, the US Prompt Global Strike and missile-defence programmes are not aimed at neutralising Russia's nuclear arsenal, and in any case are simply not capable of doing so.³ This suggests that the nuclear balance is viewed by NATO as being predominantly stable, although such a perspective is currently under stress.

NATO, at an alliance level, maintains little in the way of nuclear doctrine, with the 2014 Wales Summit declaration simply reiterating in formulaic language that nuclear weapons are the 'supreme guarantee of the security of the allies'.⁴ This situation is unlikely to change due to a reluctance within the Alliance to expose disagreement publicly.

NATO nuclear posture is given a little more substance by the individual doctrines of the nuclear-armed allies, with the US, France and the UK all clarifying that nuclear weapons are only to be used in extreme circumstances in order to defend themselves and their allies from a state aggressor. It is also important to highlight that NATO's nuclear-armed members do not maintain a no-first-use policy, supposedly to strengthen the credibility of extended nuclear-deterrence guarantees.

The Current Nuclear Regime

It is not the place of this paper to discuss in detail the regime governing the Russia–NATO nuclear relationship, but it is necessary to highlight three key relevant aspects of the relationship. First, the 2011 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) provides a framework for limiting the number and deployment options of strategic weapons and, perhaps most importantly, provides mechanisms by which this can be monitored.⁵ Secondly, the 1987 Intermediate-Range

2. *Ibid.*

3. Greg Thielmann, 'Strategic Missile Defense: A Reality Check', Arms Control Association, 21 May 2009.

4. NATO, 'Wales Summit Declaration', press release, 5 September 2014, <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm>, accessed 15 July 2015.

5. 'Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms', 8 April 2010, <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf>>, accessed 15 July 2015.

Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty prohibits the possession of intermediate-range nuclear-capable systems.⁶ Thirdly, the NATO-Russia Council, at least before its suspension, provided a dialogue framework to discuss and manage the wider relationship, including nuclear issues.⁷

Outstanding Threats

There are a number of specific factors that have undermined the existing regime. The following list is by no means comprehensive, nor are all the issues listed new, but they have been made more prominent by the ongoing fallout from the Ukraine crisis. First is the challenge to the INF treaty system. There are a number of claims and counter-claims in this area but chief among them is the assertion by the US that Russia has breached the INF treaty by testing a new medium-range, ground-launched cruise missile.⁸ Moscow has countered that US long-range drones and missile-defence systems that are capable of launching cruise missiles also violate the treaty.⁹

Second is the interminable issue of missile defence. Russia deems the deployment of US missile-defence systems to Europe as a threat to its ballistic-missile systems, putting them at a strategic disadvantage and thus destabilising the region. Indeed, the threat of a missile-defence system in Eastern Europe is believed by some to have been the catalyst for the Russian development of the R-500 cruise missile for the Iskander system. This was the system initially suspected by the US of violating the INF treaty.¹⁰

Third, and the primary focus of this part of the paper, is the role of dual-use delivery systems and tactical nuclear weapons. Discussion of the role of tactical, or non-strategic, nuclear weapons has been a persistent but low-key topic of discussion in NATO and civil society, but events in Ukraine have given the issue new salience. Tactical nuclear weapons remain unconstrained by international treaties, in stark contrast to the well-regulated intercontinental and intermediate-range categories, and information regarding their possible uses is scarce. Furthermore, whilst the number of US B-61 tactical nuclear systems hosted by European NATO members is broadly accepted to be around 200, the number and location of Russian tactical nuclear systems remain

6. 'Treaty Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles', 1 June 1988, <<http://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm#text>>, accessed 15 July 2015.

7. 'Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation', 27 May 1997, <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm>, accessed 15 July 2015.

8. Tom Z Collina, 'Russia Breaches INF Treaty, US Says', Arms Control Association, 28 August 2014, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2014_09/News/Russia-Breaches-INF-Treaty-US-Says>, accessed 15 July 2015.

9. *Ibid.*

10. See Yury Fedorov, 'American Ballistic Missile Defence, Russian Iskanders and a New Missile Crisis in Europe', Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme Roundtable Summary, 22 May 2009, <<http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/220509summary.pdf>>, accessed 15 July 2015.

shrouded in secrecy. Numerical estimates range from 1,000 to 2,000, whilst the only assurance provided by the Russian authorities is that these weapons are held in 'central storage'.¹¹

The prominence in news coverage of the movement of Russian dual-capable delivery systems in part reflects this worrisome ambiguity. Such concern may once have seemed exaggerated, but given the simulated use of nuclear strikes by such systems in recent Russian military exercises, these concerns appear ever-more vindicated.

As previously mentioned, such strikes are synonymous with the Russian concept of 'de-escalatory strikes', aimed at forcing an opponent either to accept a return to the status quo of the Cold War, when there was considered to be a symmetry between Russian and NATO capabilities, or to accept what Russia has termed in the past 'new political realities' – a status quo altered in Russia's favour. A feature of public Russian military doctrine between 2000 and 2010 was the persistence of simulated nuclear strikes in exercises, which, when combined with Moscow's rhetoric regarding its willingness to put nuclear forces on alert during the Crimea crisis, indicate that de-escalatory strikes may remain a feature of unpublished nuclear doctrine.

Lack of information in this regard can be severely destabilising. It can lead to a dangerous misinterpretation of Russia's actions, particularly during a period of confrontation marked by large-scale, high-tempo military exercises.

The 'Use' of Nuclear Weapons in the Ukraine Crisis

The Ukraine crisis provides an excellent case study for the political usage of nuclear weapons, but also highlights the inherent dangers of such nuclear signalling. Strategic nuclear weapons have played a constant role through the implicit limitation placed on NATO responses to Russia's actions in Ukraine, as well as through strategic nuclear exercises by both sides. However, it is the movement of dual-capable systems by both sides that has the biggest potential for further heightening the confrontation. Russia has been particularly active in this regard, having dramatically increased the number and geographical scope of its strategic-bomber flights as well as openly discussing the deployment of modern strategic bombers and ground-based missile systems to Kaliningrad and Crimea.

The map on the next page, taken from a European Leadership Network report on military encounters between Russia and the West last year, whilst not limited to dual-purpose systems, serves to illustrate the numbers of areas in which Russian and NATO militaries are in close proximity within a broadly unregulated environment.¹²

11. Gareth Evens, Tanya Ogilvie-White and Ramesh Thakur, *Nuclear Weapons: The State of Play 2015* (Canberra: Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, 2015), p. 54.

12. Thomas Frear, Lukasz Kulesa and Ian Kearns, 'Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014', Policy Brief, European Leadership Network, November 2014.

Figure 1: Map Showing Incidents between Russian and Western Forces in Europe in 2014.



Source: European Leadership Network, <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/russia--west-dangerous-brinkmanship-continues-_2529.html>, accessed 8 December 2015.

Key: Red: high-risk incident; yellow: serious incident; blue: near-routine incident; green: miscellaneous.

These actions are not necessarily direct threats, but serve to press those on the receiving end to be more amenable to Russian demands.

Prospects for the Future

First, it is important to qualify that the NATO–Russia nuclear relationship cannot be viewed in isolation. The poor state of relations as a whole means that prospective actions in the nuclear sphere must be incremental in order to achieve meaningful results. The issue of tactical nuclear weapons is one that needs to be discussed more openly in light of the Ukraine crisis. Primarily, efforts should focus on information sharing, both in terms of numbers and positioning, with mutual verification mechanisms. This is crucial to avoid escalation based on misunderstanding. It must be acknowledged, however, that previous US and NATO efforts in this respect have been rebuffed by Russia.

Second, it is important to emphasise that there is still value in the INF treaty. The US and Russia must now decide where to go next with their allegations, and if mutually acceptable action cannot be agreed upon there is a dangerous risk of escalation. The US is currently exploring military responses should Russian compliance not be forthcoming. These responses might involve a US breach of – or even a withdrawal from – the treaty, leaving it defunct and raising the prospect of an arms race.

Similarly, the value of upholding the New START must be emphasised. Both sides have highlighted its importance but it is worth noting that Russia now deploys more strategic warheads and

delivery systems than it did in 2011, and with New START due to expire in 2021, it is unclear in the present circumstances what might come next.

Finally, NATO must decide how to respond to Russian nuclear belligerence. One option – however unlikely – may be to increase the importance and visibility of nuclear weapons in NATO doctrine, somehow factoring nuclear weapons into the new force posture in Eastern Europe. This would, of course, be an escalatory move and would be at odds with non-proliferation rhetoric – not to mention the NATO-Russia Founding Act, to which all Alliance members are subscribed.

A second perspective is to accept that NATO cannot undo its conventional superiority over Russia, so perhaps the latter's belligerence will have to be accepted. If this is the case, then it must be better managed, establishing a fine balance between reassuring vulnerable NATO allies and entering a phase of successive escalation with Russia. This is a very difficult task, but at least the conversation has begun.

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