Future Russian Strategic Challenges

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Russia clearly represents a very serious strategic challenge. Russia has become increasingly anti-democratic and hostile to the US. Alexei Kudrin, Russian Finance Minister until September 2011, has noted: “Xenophobia is widespread” in Russia; the Kremlin encourages nationalism; Putin is militarizing the country; his regime voices “anti-Western rhetoric”; and, “a sizeable number of Russians…see neighboring countries as part of our zone of influence.” Russian nuclear weapons policy derives from these attitudes.

Russia reserves the right of first use of nuclear weapons in conventional war, which they amazingly characterize as “de-escalation” of the conflict. In December 2012, the National Intelligence Council, stated, “Nuclear ambitions in the US and Russia over the last 20 years have evolved in opposite directions. Reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US security strategy is a US objective, while Russia is pursuing new concepts and capabilities for expanding the role of nuclear weapons in its security strategy.”

In 2009, then-Commander of the Strategic Missile Forces Lt.-Gen. Andrey Shvaychenko outlined Russian strategic nuclear targeting: “In peacetime, they [strategic nuclear missiles] are intended to ensure deterrence of large-scale non-nuclear or nuclear aggression against Russia and its allies. In a conventional war, they ensure that the opponent is forced to cease hostilities, on advantageous conditions for Russia, by means of single or multiple preventive strikes against the aggressors’ most important facilities. In a nuclear war, they ensure the destruction of facilities of the opponent’s military and economic potential by means of an initial massive nuclear missile strike and subsequent multiple and single nuclear missile strikes.”

According to then-Russian Chief of the General Staff General Nikolai Makarov in 2009, “The strategic nuclear forces for us are a sacred issue…” Senior Russian officials often make nuclear threats, including direct targeting threats and threats of preemptive nuclear attack against US allies. There are only two countries in the world that do this routinely – Russia and North Korea. China is a poor third in this arena but is moving in their direction.

Russia routinely exercises its nuclear forces against NATO and the US. Indeed, two weeks before the 2012 US election the Kremlin announced “strategic nuclear forces’ exercises” in
which President Putin “oversaw test launches of strategic and cruise missiles which reached set
targets at various military testing grounds.” Moreover, Russia routinely flies nuclear capable
bombers into the air defense identification zones of the US, NATO nations, and Japan.
Russia has virtually ceased eliminating legacy strategic forces. Russian data released by the
State Department in April 2013 record that Russia has increased its strategic delivery vehicles in
the two years since New START has been in effect. The number of deployed warheads has
decreased by 57, but this is apparently largely the result of the fact that New START does not
count warheads on submarines in overhaul.

Russia’s nuclear modernization program is amazingly broad. Russia aims to modernize
virtually its entire strategic missile force by 2021. In February 2012, Vladimir Putin announced
that Russia would procure more than 400 new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by
2020. The Obama administration has said Russia will deploy “several substantially MIRVed
new strategic missiles [missiles with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles],
including the MIRVed Yars ICBM, new Borey-class missile submarines carrying 16 MIRVed
Bulava SLBMs, and, in the event it is deployed during the life of the [New START] Treaty, a
planned new ‘heavy’ ICBM to replace the SS-18 that will almost certainly carry several
MIRVs.” In recent testimony the administration has confirmed the deployment of a new long-
range nuclear ALCM. Russia has said it is deploying KH-102 nuclear cruise missiles on
modernized bombers.

Reportedly, the new heavy ICBM will carry 10-15 warheads. In May 2012, Russia
announced the testing of a “new” mobile ICBM. This is apparently the YARS-M which the
Commander of the Strategic Missile Force has just stated that Russia will deploy this year. The
Russian terminology equates to a further modification of the missile we call the SS-27 Mod 2,
the MIRVed version of the SS-27. The Russians are also developing a missile they call the
Avangard “medium” ICBM. This may be the YARS-M or something beyond it. The Avangard
is variously reported as carrying 10 warheads and having a MIRVed capability without a post-
boost vehicle. Russia has also announced it is developing a new stealthy heavy bomber similar
to the B-2. A recent press report says Russia will start adding these in 2020. In January 2013,
Russia announced that it would lay down the fifth and sixth Borey ballistic missile submarines
this year. Russia plans to deploy 8 Borey class SSBNs by 2020. In March 2013, a contract for a
new fifth generation SSBN was announced with a 2020 completion date. Russia has also
announced the development of a rail mobile ICBM and there is a press report of a decision to deploy it.

According to the Obama administration, Russia has between 4,000-6,500 nuclear weapons. Apparently this counts only operational weapons. In 2009, ITAR-TASS reported that Russia probably had “in the range of 15,000 to 17,000 total [nuclear] warheads.” In 2011, then-senior White House official Gary Samore said Russia probably maintains ten times as many tactical nuclear weapons as the U.S. – thousands versus hundreds.

Russia continues to develop and field new nuclear weapons, including strategic and tactical nuclear weapons and low-collateral-damage designs, reportedly with the aid of continued hydronuclear testing. In 2006, then-Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov declared that Russia would soon have “unique” nuclear weapons that would “allow us to guarantee our security and sovereignty against any threat, absolutely any threat that exists...or could arise in the future.”

How do we deal with this growing threat? The announced program of the Obama administration comprises nuclear reductions, minimum modernization of US nuclear forces and more arms control. New START data indicate that the US reduced its strategic nuclear forces by 146 deployed nuclear warheads and 90 deployed delivery vehicles over the last two years. Strategic delivery vehicles will be replaced when they are 40 to 80 years of age and there is no commitment to sustain the ICBM force beyond 2030. In the words of Acting Under Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller, “We’re not modernizing. We’re not modernizing. That is one of the basic, basic, I would say, principles and rules that have really been part of our nuclear posture view and part of the policy.”

U.S. policy precludes new or improved nuclear weapons and there are restrictions on delivery vehicle improvements. The announced arms control agenda involves additional reductions in strategic nuclear warhead numbers and a limit on both non-deployed nuclear weapons and tactical nuclear weapons.

The administration reportedly plans to reduce deployed warheads to between 300 and 1,100, from the New START limit of 1,550, with more recent reports of 1,000 warheads or less. The State Department arms control advisory group urged 700. Moreover, it advocates a non-legally binding agreement based on the 1991-1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, despite admitting that Russia has not completely complied with them.
There are press reports that the administration will attempt to evade Congressional approval of a new arms control agreement. According to the *New York Times*, the Obama administration is considering an “informal agreement with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia for mutual cuts within the framework of the new Start — but without the need for ratification.” This apparently reflects the fact that the administration has little credibility with either the Russians or the US Congress on nuclear arms control and expects an outcome it cannot defend before the Congress. Its testimony in support of New START was frequently questionable and it reneged on many of its ratification commitments regarding nuclear modernization.

Russian attitudes toward nuclear weapons make a new arms control agreement a hard sell with the Kremlin. According to well-known Russian journalist Alexander Golts, “The Kremlin and military brass realize that Russia’s huge nuclear arsenal is the only remaining symbol of its superpower status, a trump card that they will protect at all costs. This is the main reason Moscow is opposed to cutting any further than START limits. Trying to convince Russia to reduce its nonstrategic nuclear weapons will be an even harder sell.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, when speaking before the Russian Duma just after the US Senate ratified New START, rejected near term negotiations concerning tactical nuclear weapons, stating, “Our absolute priority is the implementation of the treaty [which is] being debated today. Our other priorities include a need to understand how the situation will unfold around the missile defense shield, how issues of conventional weapons are tackled in Europe, and certainly whether or not the problem of preventing the deployment of any weapons in space is resolved.” He also announced that Russia would be increasing the number of its deployed nuclear warheads in delivery vehicles. Russian officials have linked further reductions to a missile defense agreement and a multilateral agreement involving the U.K., France and even China.

The Russian position has not changed since New START was ratified in December 2010. In March 2013, *Interfax* reported former Defense Minister and now Kremlin Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov indicated Russia was not interested in the reductions proposed by the US and explained it as follows: “When I hear our American partners say: ‘Let's reduce something else,’ I would like to say to them: ‘Excuse me, but what we have is relatively new.’ They [the US] have not conducted any upgrades for a long time. They still use Trident [missiles].”
The Obama administration is in a poor position to negotiate with Russia. It squandered the leverage it had with Russia in the New START negotiation and at the same time destroyed its credibility. Its flawed approach with Russia resulted in an agreement that does not require Russian reductions in deployed warheads or delivery systems and with a seriously degraded verification regime. The New START Treaty has many loopholes only the Russians will exploit. This includes, according to Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists, a “totally nuts” bomber weapons counting rule, and the complete exclusion from the Treaty limits of even nuclear armed air-launched ballistic missiles, surface ship-launched ballistic missiles and rail mobile ICBMs. We do not hear a word out of the administration about fixing any of these problems in the next round of nuclear arms control talks.

The New START verification regime is a terrible base for a more ambitious agreement. This is quite probably why we hear more out of the State Department arms control bureau about transparency than verification. Building on the base of New START makes a verifiable agreement reducing strategic forces and limiting non-deployed and tactical nuclear weapons virtually impossible.

New START features fewer types of inspections, fewer inspections, less short notice in the inspections, fewer notifications, and less data exchange than the original START Treaty. Additionally, the START Treaty telemetry regime and the mobile ICBM verification were almost completely eliminated. The New START Treaty retained the START Treaty verification regime for deployed warheads but there is a slight problem – it never really worked. Paula DeSutter, former Assistant Secretary of State for Verification and Compliance, summed up the New START outcome as follows: “The verification measures in the New START treaty add nothing to what was there before in the original START treaty. They are using the original START Reentry Vehicle On-Site Inspection regime, complete with all of the same shrouds and covers that were used during the original START, some of which we found to violate the Treaty because we couldn’t confirm the number of Reentry Vehicles (RVs).” To make matters worse New START eliminated all START constraints upon the power of ballistic missiles and the number of warheads that can be tested on them.

The New START Treaty verification regime will not be able to verify Russian compliance with the central limits of a new treaty because: 1) the failure to deal with Russian START warhead inspection violations, in the context of eliminating the START qualitative
constraints on ICBMs and SLBMs, will make it possible to have at least twice as many warheads on a missile than what is declared; 2) the loss of the START telemetry regime will make it more difficult to evaluate warhead cover size (a key component to monitoring the number of deployed warheads) in the future; 3) the loss of the mobile ICBM verification regime will make it possible to have a covert mobile ICBM force; and 4) the reduction in the number of inspections and notifications and the elimination of short notice inspections will make all types of inspections less effective. Unfortunately, this is the easy part of the verification problem.

The hardest verification problem associated with the Obama administration’s new nuclear arms control agenda is the counting of non-deployed nuclear weapons and tactical nuclear weapons. According to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy James Miller, we don’t know if the Russians have 2,000 or 4,000 tactical nuclear weapons. *ITAR-TASS*, in 2009, reported that the Russian nuclear stockpile was much larger than this. In addition, we really do not know how small the smallest Russian nuclear weapons are today. We do know that even the weapons they had in the 1980s -- nuclear artillery and backpack nuclear weapons – were very light and small and, hence, easy to hide.

How do we distinguish between nuclear weapons and non-nuclear weapons and other objects not declared to be nuclear weapons? New START does this by neutron detection. The only problem with this is that neutron detection is not very good at detecting weapons which use only Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU). In the context of nuclear terrorism, there is extensive literature on the problems of detecting HEU, particularly when there is shielding. Yet, the Obama administration ignored that problem in New START.

How do we monitor the production and storage of nuclear weapons? We have no experience in doing this. The smallest item of inspection that was numerically limited in Russia under the original START Treaty was mobile ICBMs which were probably two orders of magnitude larger and heavier than a nuclear weapon. To make the problem even more difficult, the Russians reportedly rejected a nuclear weapons inspection regime during the Clinton administration’s failed START III negotiation and the Obama administration’s New START negotiation.

The top State Department arms control leadership now talk about verifying future arms control agreements with the aid of social media. Somehow I do not think this will be a substitute for national technical means of verification and an effective inspection regime.
In addition to verification, we have a serious compliance problem that dates back to the Soviet period. If we don’t solve this problem, even effective verification will be no panacea.

For the foreseeable future Vladimir Putin will rule Russia. He man actually is the main author of Russia’s low nuclear weapons use threshold which he developed as National Security Secretary and signed into law in 2000 as acting President. Therefore, arms control is unlikely to be the solution to the security problem posed by Russian attitudes toward nuclear weapon use and modernization programs.