Russia's "Nuclear Renaissance"

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These days, Kremlinologists are once again immersed in the persistent post-Cold War question of "who lost Russia."[1] Whatever one might think about the future course of Russia, now emerging from its much-touted presidential elections, it is obvious that the Kremlin is bent on restoring the country's image as a great power on a par with the United States and Europe.

In this calculus, nuclear weapons matter a great deal. The conventional wisdom in Moscow is that Russia, "rising from its knees" in the eyes of the overwhelming majority of its citizens, must be a strong, independent great power with a foreign policy of its own. Not surprisingly, the country's leadership is overtly promoting the modernization of its strategic weapons potential—a capability which is increasingly perceived in Moscow (and elsewhere) as the major facilitator of an independent role in global affairs. This is being done primarily for domestic or PR considerations. But Washington's foreign and military policies also play a significant part in the Kremlin's stratagems.

Fear and loathing in Moscow

Russian experts and politicians today harbor a great deal of suspicion regarding Washington's intentions.[2] They claim that since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has pursued an aggressive policy toward the "post-Soviet states"—one aimed at encircling Russia with military bases, deploying

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missiles on its borders, toppling allies in Central Asia, and inciting internal turmoil in the Commonwealth of Independent States (and Russia itself) through "orange revolutions" fomented by U.S.-backed "pro-democracy" groups. This perceived policy, according to Russian officials, is a reflection of American power that has gone unbridled for too long. As Russian President Vladimir Putin put it in his landmark 2007 address in Munich, "The unipolar world, in which there is one master, is… pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within." It is also a state of affairs that "stimulates an arms race" in response.[3]

Russian commentators have been quick to take up this call, blasting the "unilateral and illegitimate military actions" of the United States, its "uncontained hyper-use of force," and its "disdain for the basic principles of international law." Moscow's spin doctors tend to ignore the fact that the West, in turn, is repulsed by the rollback of democracy that has taken place in Russia.

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It is clear, moreover, that the anti-Western campaign in Russia is only in its early stages, and will be raging for several more years to come. Its longevity is a reflection of the fact that anti-Western orientation has become the main ideological line of the current Russian regime. Moscow's recent moves away from Western values and the deterioration of its cooperation with Europe and the United States should be seen in this context.

This domestic urge has influenced Moscow's attitudes toward weapons procurement and nuclear issues. It may be tempting to disregard Russia's recent moves toward "strategic modernization" as mere insignificant bluster. After all, the United States still can assuredly dissuade a nuclear attack from Russia, and is largely immune to any conceivable Russian strategic threat. Yet, a closer look suggests that Russia's recent moves are part of a more profound shift in the country's military/strategic priorities.

In recent times, Russia has suspended its obligations under the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and threatened to walk out of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Perhaps the most telling sign of Russia's new, more confrontational strategic posture, however, has been the resumption in August of last year of "combat patrol" by Russian bombers in the vicinity of NATO airspace. Naval vessels from Russia's Black Sea and Northern Fleets have also resumed their patrol missions in international waters. And the tempo of Russian military exercises has risen, with some of the largest taking place within the framework of the Russian- and Chinese-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These serve as overt reminders that Russia seeks a return to global status. Just as importantly, they appear to be wildly popular with a Russian public craving a great-power role for their country.[4]

In this vein, Russia's efforts to boost the power and reach of its nuclear forces have been less conspicuous. But they are of even greater significance than the more public displays of Russian rising might.

Indeed, Russian President Vladimir Putin has endorsed an extensive strategic rearmament plan, worth $200 billion over the next seven years, and entailing massive, unprecedented procurement of advanced weaponry (including a new generation of advanced ballistic missiles).[5] This expansion is already under way; official defense procurement by the Russian state jumped from approximately $2 billion in 2000 to $7.5 billion in 2005 and $9.5 billion in 2006.

Nuclear Russia, resurgent

Nuclear forces are the pride of the inferiority-complex-stricken Russian military. So the revitalization of Russia's nuclear triad is enormously significant from both a practical and an ideological perspective. Indeed, Russia's focus on such capabilities is consuming a significant part of the country's defense budget, while the conventional arsenal of the Russian army remains decrepit and declining. Russia's armed forces received just 31 T-90 tanks in 2003; by way of comparison, during the same period 310 such tanks were exported to India alone.[6]

In contrast, tactical nuclear weapons have received considerably more attention from the Kremlin. So have Russian efforts to defeat U.S. missile defenses, the latter through the development of a maneuverable hypersonic missile with an unpredictable flight trajectory (a multiple warhead version of Russia's advanced "Topol" intercontinental ballistic missile is also allegedly being developed). These efforts, fueled by skyrocketing revenues from the global sale of oil and natural gas, stand in stark contrast to the situation that prevailed at the end of the 1990s, when Russia's Strategic Nuclear Forces were among the principal casualties of the country's imploding economy.

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This is not to say that Russia's strategic modernization plans are without their setbacks. While the "Topol-M" has been the only strategic nuclear weapon added to Russia's arsenal since the end of the USSR, its rate of production and commissioning has fallen substantially behind schedule. Indeed, the planning and construction of Russia's missiles was and is rather chaotic and jerky. The R-30 "Bulava," or SS-NX-30, a naval version of the land-based Topol-M ICBM, is experiencing protracted difficulties, and will not be deployed any time soon. The building of the nuclear-powered submarine "Yury Dolgoruky," the first boat of Russia's new *Borey 955*-class strategic nuclear submarines, is also far behind schedule.

Yet there is no mistaking that work on these projects is more intensive than ever. Russian elites have become fixated on U.S. plans to deploy a third missile defense site in Europe, and are actively working to counteract this development. Most Russian specialists now concur that the European basing site will become an integral part of America's nuclear capability, and therefore will pose a direct threat to Russia's national security. In response, Moscow has threatened to retarget nuclear missiles on Europe, and the Russian public in

general is wholeheartedly supportive of the Kremlin's vocal opposition to U.S. "encirclement." On the whole, the official propaganda campaign now under way against U.S. missile defense is reminiscent of those of the mid-1980s, portraying belligerent American actions as the cause of a new arms race.

Russian officials have a tendency to portray their shipments of sophisticated weaponry and dual-use items to states such as China, India, Iran and Syria as legitimate transactions carried out in compliance with nonproliferation and export control norms. But the rationale for these ties is not strictly economic.

All of which is highly significant. It suggests that Russian generals still view a nuclear war with either the U.S. or NATO as theoretically possible and consider the latter their main strategic adversaries. On a very basic level, then, nothing has really changed since Soviet times.

Luckily, the next cold war is not quite upon us. Moscow does not have the necessary clout to control its half of the world. Some nationalistic impulses aside, neither does it now have an ideology fundamentally antagonistic to the capitalist West. The segment of the Russian strategic arsenal still targeting the United States and NATO has dwindled considerably over the past decade-and-a-half, and will be further reduced in the years ahead, either as a result of bilateral agreement or through the simple attrition of hardware. And politically, Russia's elites depend too much on established relations with the West, where their monies are secured and where their families reside or vacation, to sever their links with American and its allies.

Forging a new nuclear relationship

This, then, is the current state of the U.S.-Russian nuclear relationship, in which dialogue may be continuous but is mired in mistrust, suspicion and mutual recriminations. Both countries remain locked in their Cold War military postures, and mutual assured destruction (MAD) continues to be an underlying premise of Moscow-Washington ties.

Should Russia's discomfort regarding its loss of military superpower status be taken into account, or simply ignored? How can the United States and Russia move from "nuclear parity" or "stability" toward a new strategic framework in which Moscow will become a reliable ally of the West? These questions will undoubtedly animate the next American president's approach to relations with Russia. The answers may differ, depending upon the inhabitant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, but one thing is clear: the United States cannot simply ignore Russia. It is and remains a major global player, by virtue of its nuclear status, its permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, the sheer vastness of its resources, and its remaining strategic capabilities.

In many respects, the issue of missile defense holds a number of the answers U.S. policymakers seek. At its core, Moscow's current opposition comes from the perception that U.S. efforts are in essence transient, and reversible. Once the Kremlin is finally persuaded that U.S. missile defenses are in fact inevitable,

Russia—despite its objections—will abide by (and perhaps even participate in) American efforts, sanctioning some kind of limited deployment of strategic defenses.

Beyond this détente over missile defense, however, additional steps are needed. Nuclear weapons naturally will continue to play an essential role in the military doctrines and political undertakings of both countries, as well as those of other nuclear powers. What is needed is a new, coherent doctrine of "collaborative, nonprovocative nuclear defense" built around three main pillars.

Disarmament

There is a more or less stable bipartisan consensus in the United States regarding the usefulness of the "Global Partnership" (GP) nonproliferation initiative and its predecessor, "Cooperative Threat Reduction" (CTR), the so-called Nunn-Lugar programs in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Both Congress and successive presidential administrations are fully aware of the importance of the continuation of these efforts as part of what former Defense Secretary William Perry has termed "defense by other means."[7] Nevertheless, there is a certain reluctance to extend the scope of CTR beyond its traditional bounds. And many U.S. policymakers have supported the notion that such disarmament assistance should be linked to changes in Russia's policies on a number of domestic and foreign policy issues. The result has been inertia on a number of important GP/CTR projects, which have fallen victim to a lack of funding and political support.

Under the plan envisioned by policymakers in Washington, Russia in the future will gradually begin to assume greater responsibility in joint disarmament programs, and eventually start investing substantial funds of its own in such efforts. As a practical matter this means that, like so many other issues in contemporary Russia, the fate of disarmament depends directly on the status of domestic reforms. After all, a government in Moscow that is committed to pluralism and accountability is more likely to be a stable security partner—including on issues of proliferation and nuclear disarmament. What is needed, therefore, are pragmatic suggestions for U.S. decisionmakers about how current GP/CTR programs—from chemical weapons destruction to the much-touted "nuclear cities initiative"—could be upgraded, and how new initiatives could be created to assist Moscow in neutralizing the imminent dangers from its WMD–related assets and industries.

> Ultimately, the choice is Russia's to make. It can continue as a semi-capitalist "clone" of the USSR, complete with Bolshevik-style policy patterns. Or it can become a "normal," authentically democratic state and ally of the West.

Domestic energy development

Such a revitalized nonproliferation partnership could facilitate Russia's own civilian nuclear revival. Nuclear industry is one of Russia's commercial trump cards; Russia currently controls about 40 percent of global reprocessing capacities. But domestic utilization of nuclear power for energy generation has lagged behind the times. President Putin

is now seeking to correct this deficit, launching an ambitious program to raise the share of nuclear energy in Russian total energy consumption from the current 16 percent to 25 percent by 2030. The reasons are pragmatic; by 2015, experts say, Russian oil and natural gas supplies will decline significantly, necessitating new forms of energy. To achieve this goal, however, Russia must build 40 additional reactors to supplement the 23 active now. And that requires from $30 to $40 billion in additional funding—financial assistance that could, under the proper circumstances, come from the United States.

What is needed is for Washington to show respect for Moscow's growing international clout, and its status as an equal—or almost equal—geopolitical partner. The key is persuading the increasingly independent-minded Kremlin that acting as a "good cop" does not automatically mean that it is carrying the water for Washington.

Nuclear transfers

Many of Russia's military and foreign policies still smack of traditional Soviet attitudes. This is especially evident in Moscow's external partnerships. Though promoting good relations with Western states is vital for Russia's economic interests, Moscow has tended in practice to tilt toward countries of proliferation concern.

Russian officials have a tendency to portray their shipments of sophisticated weaponry and dual-use items to states such as China, India, Iran and Syria as legitimate transactions carried out in compliance with nonproliferation and export control norms. But the rationale for these ties is not strictly economic. Under the ideological banner of "multipolarity," Moscow is promoting its own network of alliances, for the purpose of offsetting current U.S. "unilateralism" and shoring up its position vis-à-vis the West.

There is no question that this arrangement has commercial appeal in Moscow. After all, most of the critical WMD-linked technologies and sophisticated weaponry sought after by rogue states were in fact produced or designed in Soviet times. The negligible "production cost" of such items makes them continuously competitive on the global market.[8] Thus, for comparatively minor sums, rogue states can obtain usable Soviet-vintage weapons—or worse. The revenues generated as a result of such sales are substantial, and have led some Russian officials to conclude that trade with rogues (even at the risk of a major international scandal) is worth the risk. All of which has bred a domestic climate inhospitable to U.S. nonproliferation initiatives.

Ultimately, the choice is Russia's to make. It can continue as a semi-capitalist "clone" of the USSR, complete with Bolshevik-style policy patterns. Or it can become a "normal," authentically democratic state and ally of the West. But the United States can facilitate Russia's choice by offering a "bailout" package of sorts to the Russian leadership—one that compensates Kremlin elites for the loss of their clientele in Damascus and Tehran. Such a strategy would require the United States to do three things:

1. To actively engage Russia in political dialogue and practical programs/projects to promote global nonproliferation, specifically with the goal of thwarting attempts of

global terrorism to gain access to the still unsecured WMD-related assets of the "post-Soviet space."

2. To promote collaboration between U.S. companies and their Russian/CIS partners in the defense/space/high-technology sectors as a way of more closely monitoring—and influencing—compliance with nonproliferation norms.

3. To enforce accountability on the Kremlin should it engage in questionable proliferation practices by "naming and shaming" suspect Russian entities and prosecuting any WMD-related assistance given to terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah or rogue states like Iran and Syria.

Learning to live with Moscow

As the foregoing makes clear, Russia could surely play a special role in world affairs if the proper conditions are present. What is needed is for Washington to show respect for Moscow's growing international clout, and its status as an equal—or almost equal—geopolitical partner. The key is persuading the increasingly independent-minded Kremlin that acting as a "good cop" does not automatically mean that it is carrying the water for Washington. Indeed, for Moscow, a more constructive international stance toward issues such as nonproliferation is politically prudent. It has the power to mend bilateral relations soured in recent months by Russia's assertive foreign policy as Washington transitions to a new—and potentially very different—presidency.

Russia would obviously expect rewards for its good behavior—chief among them a recognition of its global importance. Because of its growing international stature, Russia is unlikely to be content with the role of a "tutored undergraduate," or accept any kind of financial buyout. Rather, America and its allies will need to work with, and adapt to, Moscow's growing international presence. This will not be an easy thing for the West to do, because of Russia's imperial past as well as its ambitions for the future. But on a number of fronts, chief among them those of nuclear security and strategic stability, the benefits of a more pragmatic approach would be substantial.

1. See, for example, Dmitri K. Simes, "Losing Russia: The Costs of Renewed Confrontation," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2007.
2. Sergei Lavrov, "Containing Russia: Back to the Future?" *Russia in Global Affairs* no. 4, October-December 2007, http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/21/1147.html. In Lavrov's words, influential political forces on both sides of the Atlantic apparently want to launch a discussion about whether or not to "contain Russia."
3. Vladimir Putin, Speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, Munich, Germany, February 10, 2007, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml.
4. Simon Tisdall, "How Putin Could Be Heading for a Fall," *Guardian* (London), October 3, 2007.
5. Michael McFaul, "New Russia , New Threat," *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 2007.
6. Anatoly Tzyganok, "Gosoboronilluziya Podmenila Gosoboronpokaz (State Defense Illusions Substitute for State Defense Procurement)," polit.ru, November 11, 2005, http://www.polit.ru/analytics/2005/11/11/zakaz.html.
7. William J. Perry, "Defense in an Age of Hope," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1996.
8. See, for example, Vitaly Shlykov, "Potemkin Complex," *Itogi* no. 14 (Moscow), June 12, 2002.