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SHOULD THE WEST BE WORRIED?

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Summary

- The self-assertive rhetoric of the Russian leadership, in which President Putin's Munich speech marked a shift towards a more aggressive style, has been translated into such demonstrative actions as the resumption of regular patrols by Long Range Aviation and the unilateral suspension of the CFE Treaty.
- Despite new funding and against confident self-assessments, Russia's strategic arsenal continues to shrink, and many key modernization projects, such as the Bulava missile for strategic submarines, have encountered setbacks.
- The need for brandishing the diminishing capabilities is driven by the desire to deter the perceived threat of a 'coloured revolution' sponsored by the West, the urge to assert a more solid status than just that of an 'energy super-power', and the complicated intrigues surrounding the on-going reconfiguration of the political leadership.
- Expanding demonstrations of the dilapidated strategic arsenal increase the risks of technical failures but fall far short of initiating a new confrontation of the Cold War type.
- The most worrisome point in Russia's ambivalent power policy is Georgia, which has been the target of choice for multiple propaganda attacks, but which now faces the challenge of an external intervention in its domestic crises since Moscow has built up usable military instruments in the North Caucasus.
- Russia's desire to secure higher international status does not amount to malicious revisionism; so over-reaction to its experiments with muscle-flexing could constitute a greater risk to the Western strategy of engagement than underestimating its ambitions.

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Russian Tu-95 Bear Bomber intercepted by American F-15C

Photo: U.S. Air Force photo

Words and Deeds

‘Russia has been gaining in strength and becoming stronger’ – these words in President Putin’s New Year 2008 address contained a hidden reference to his Beslan speech in September 2004: ‘We showed ourselves to be weak. And the weak get beaten.’ They also remind about his more elaborate proposition in the 2006 address to the parliament: ‘We must be able to respond to attempts from any quarters to put foreign policy pressure on Russia, including with the aim of strengthening one’s own position at our expense. We also need to make clear that the stronger our armed forces are, the lesser the temptation for anyone to put such pressure on us, no matter under what pretext this is done.’

Typically, it is Putin’s Munich speech (February 2007) that is regarded as the turning point towards a more aggressive discourse, but in fact poignant remarks about ‘Comrade Wolf’ and about unnamed ‘others’ who help terrorists, ‘reasoning that Russia still remains one of the world’s major nuclear powers, and as such still represents a threat to them’, have been strewn throughout his presentations since the start of the second term. What has made a difference in 2007 is the readiness to act upon the self-assertive claims.

The list of ‘deeds’ includes two main entries: the unilateral moratorium on implementing the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and the resumption of regular patrols by Long Range Aviation. Three smaller exploits could be added: the much-advertised joint exercises with China in the ‘Peace Mission 2007’; the provocative exercises of

the ‘Caucasian Frontier 2007’ in the North Caucasus; and the Mediterranean cruise of the aircraft carrier the *Admiral Kuznetsov*. This combination of words and deeds appears to be sufficient reason for many commentators to engage in speculation about a ‘new Cold War’, despite the undeniable fact that the last two years of Putin’s presidency have been the most peaceful period in Russia’s post-Soviet history. His record of troop withdrawals is underappreciated, but the steady growth of tensions in relations with the US, as well as a pronounced estrangement from the EU are unmistakable – so the speculation is not without grounds, and the hackneyed ‘Cold War’ cliché helps in circumventing the need to define an elusive new quality in the confront/cooperation.

Learning on the job

It is worth pondering that Vladimir Putin arrived at the Kremlin singularly unprepared for the job, and that he had not graduated from so much as a pre-class in the school of nuclear deterrence; his myrmidons (including the designated successor) fared no better. He gained his first experience in spring 1999 when President Yeltsin, greatly alarmed by the Kosovo War, ordered the Security Council to prepare secret decrees on modernizing Russia’s nuclear arsenal. Putin, as the Secretary of that Council, supervised the work – but had every reason to conclude that in a real-life crisis, a company of paratroopers was worth more than a dozen strategic delivery vehicles.

His first Defence Minister, Igor Sergeev, was a bona fide ‘missile-man’, but before he could impress upon the Commander-in-Chief that strategic forces



RT-2UTTH Topol M

Photo: <http://tripatlas.com/>

provided the best returns on meagre investments, he was challenged head-on by Anatoly Kvashnin, the Chief of the General Staff, who demanded priority funding for the Chechen War. Putin had little choice in that matter since victory in Chechnya was a *sine qua non*, so Sergeev got the sack – and Sergei Ivanov, the most reliable of Putin’s lieutenants, was put in charge of keeping the ‘Chechen generals’ under control. Many strategic programmes were curtailed in the first years of Putin’s ‘era’, and the US abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in late 2001 did not alarm the Kremlin that much. Putin merely called it a ‘mistake’, and the Moscow Treaty (2002) confirmed the readiness to continue a range of cooperative projects in reducing nuclear risks.

It was the spectacular US invasion of Iraq that altered that relaxed strategic perspective and forced Russia to re-assess its military posture; in May 2003 Putin vaguely alluded to the fact that ‘work is underway on creating new types of Russian weaponry, new generation weaponry’, and in the autumn he firmly asserted that ‘the main foundation of national security in Russia remains, and will remain for a long time to come, nuclear deterrence forces.’ New funds were urgently channelled into upgrading the strategic triad, but the returns were disappointingly low.

Capabilities, real and virtual

The surest bet appeared to be the Strategic Rocket Forces, where the *Topol-M* programme (the key part of Sergeev’s heritage) was well on track and had options for expansion, first of all by deploying multiple warheads on this inter-continental ballistic missile

(ICBM). Two kinds of problems, however, eroded the value of this traditionally strongest asset. The first one is that even with the increased funding the Votkinsk plant is not able to produce more than 6–7 *Topol-M* a year, so the total number of deployed ICBMs continues to diminish as older models are retired (from 489 to 452 during 2007). Every effort is made to extend their service life, but in the next four years, some 250 missiles have to be scrapped. The second problem is that the ‘super-sonic manoeuvrable’ warhead which, according to Putin, could penetrate any missile defence system, is in fact quite unreliable and not very accurate, so most probably it will never be deployed.

The situation with the naval leg of the nuclear triad is even worse, but Putin apparently had high hopes of achieving a breakthrough by inaugurating a new strategic submarine, the *Yuri Dolgoruky* (started back in 1996) armed with new *Bulava* missiles. Two more submarines of this class are under construction, but this presidential pet project was derailed by a series of unsuccessful *Bulava* tests in 2007. It is unlikely that the *Yuri Dolgoruky* will enter service before 2010, and in the meantime 6 old subs of the *Delta-III* class have to be retired, which would leave Russia with only 6 operational platforms.

These setbacks left Putin with only one ‘last resort’ option for demonstrating strategic might – Long Range Aviation, which was always perceived as the weakest link in the triad. First-hand experience gained in August 2005 on board a Tu-160 bomber convinced Putin that these assets could be useful, so funds were granted for maintenance and training. In August 2007, this provided Putin with an



Tu-95MS Bear Photo: <http://kr.blog.yahoo.com/shinecommerce/>

opportunity to declare the resumption of ‘strategic patrolling’, which technically means that one pair of bombers armed with nuclear weapons should always be in the air. In reality, long flights take place about twice a month and the bombers carry no weapons at all. Still, it is a sharply increased level of activity, and there are already reports that the engines on the 14 operational Tu-160 will soon require complicated repairs. One Tu-160 may enter service this year and one more could be assembled in Kazan by 2010, but in the meantime some 30 Tu-95MS *Bear* have to be retired, so the total size of the fleet would decrease to about 50 planes.

There have been some improvements in the early warning and space surveillance systems, but overall the command and control system of the strategic forces, based on the concepts and technologies of the 1970s, is hopelessly outdated and, according to many experts, constitutes a significant source of risk.

As for the conventional forces, their overall strength is assessed as minimally sufficient – but is set to go down because the cohort available for conscription is steadily diminishing while the draft period is reduced to one year. Modernization has been declared the top priority, but the acquisition of modern weapons has been extremely limited (for example, some 30 tanks a year), while many much-advertised systems (tactical missile *Iskander*, fighter Su-34) are still delivered as single items. The CFE total limits are therefore quite safe, and the arms industry continues to work predominantly for export.

Means to what end?

This fast-shrinking strategic arsenal is still sufficient to guarantee Russia’s security according to the principles of ‘minimal deterrence’, but the question about the real aims of the constant demonstration of residual ‘muscle’ and the vociferous bragging about the virtual capabilities inevitably arises. Public opinion in Russia is generally quite indifferent to these matters, and the ‘potential adversaries’, whom Putin keeps calling ‘partners’ (albeit with discernible difficulty), are well-informed about the real picture. The true rationale may be neither rock-solid nor exactly Aristotelian in its logic, but it appears possible to offer three non-alternative explanations.

The first one is centred on the acute fear of a ‘coloured revolution’ in Putin’s political ‘class’. The shock delivered by the jubilant crowds in the orange-coloured Kiev in late 2004 was so profound that the turn of the revolutionary tide since the end of 2005 has not alleviated the fear of the spectre that is still haunting the post-Soviet space. The idea of deterring the threat of domestic turmoil with strategic weapons might seem nonsensical, but in Putin’s court the proposition that ‘coloured revolutions’ were orchestrated and micro-managed by the US is accepted as an axiom – so it makes sense to wield the nuclear weapons in order to make the point that Russia is ‘off limits’ and should never be seen as an object of revolutionary experiments.

The second explanation proceeds from the flop of the ‘energy super-power’ illusion, which was enthusiastically conjured up in 2006 in the context of Russia’s chairmanship of the G8. Putin was deeply



Admiral Kuznetsov

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

hurt by the unambiguous rejection of his reading of the ‘energy security’ concept, focused on Russia’s and *Gazprom*’s pivotal role in supplying Europe, by his counterparts, who insisted on liberalization and diversification. The conclusion was that ‘petro-state’ Russia would not be accepted as an ‘equal’ among the major powers, so other instruments had to be added to the ‘gas lever’ in order to earn true respect. To that end, several projects have been launched with much fanfare, including nanotechnologies, but it was the *Bears*’ gate-crashing of a NATO defence ministers gathering which had an immediate effect.

The third plausible reason concerned the delicate process of reconfiguring the power structures in the course of Putin’s departure from the Kremlin. Several groupings of courtiers have engaged in vicious squabbling, and it was essential to demonstrate to the military and other *siloviki* (while keeping them away from key decision-making) that security issues were a high priority on the political agenda. Dmitri Medvedev, Putin’s designated successor, has neither a background in special services nor any experience in ‘hard security’ matters; it is imperative to demonstrate that he is able to shoulder the responsibility of Commander-in-Chief – and several cheap flourishes of the nuclear ‘wand’ may be just the way to do it.

There could be other reasons for brandishing the strategic arsenal, but what is clear is that their sum total has been steadily increasing as Putin’s ‘era’ draws to a close.

Rationalizing the worries

Advancing the argument that the Russian leadership has neither the intent nor the capability to engage in a Cold War type of confrontation is not the same as arguing that there are no reasons to worry about its words and deeds. NATO fighters might enjoy intercepting ancient *Bears*, but the Russian Air Force has an alarming safety record. Many elements of the strategic forces are past their expiration date and prone to accidents that could be aggravated by human error. The command of the Northern Fleet was surprised at the *StatoilHydro* decision to stop the helicopter traffic to its platforms when the *Admiral Kuznetsov* had a ‘flight day’ in the vicinity; there was certainly no hostile intent, just a different definition of ‘acceptable risk’. Other than that, the Norwegian Coast Guard has a slim chance of seeing the Russian Navy protecting poaching trawlers anytime soon, as Dmitri Medvedev explained in Murmansk that there were no ships for that. The often-cited threats of targeting Russian missiles at US strategic assets in Poland and the Czech Republic and of deploying tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus could hardly materialize since the former is not verifiable and the latter would grant Lukashenko too much leverage in the next round of disputes.

There is, however, one area where threat assessment is alarmingly high – the Caucasus, and more specifically, Georgia. Russian propaganda has for years portrayed it as an unfriendly and failing state, and these efforts have resonated with the public opinion. The sustained decline of hostilities in Chechnya has left the Russian Army with significant ‘free capacity’, which has been built up by deploying new units



Russian Typhoon SSBN

Photo: <http://kr.blog.yahoo.com/shinecommerce/>

in the North Caucasus and ‘covered up’ by the withdrawal from the CFE Treaty. Improvements in logistics and training have made these instruments usable – and politicians in Moscow could discover convincing reasons for ‘punishing’ Georgia, while there are ‘triggers’ aplenty. Such blitz-operations as landing in Poti (similar to the one in October 1993) and/or in Batumi (reinstalling the Abashidze regime) would by no means constitute a threat to the West, but they could push Russia into a very tight corner where confrontation might acquire significantly more dangerous features. Western support for Georgia is crucial, but putting it on the ‘fast track’ to join NATO might provoke Moscow.

The Russian leadership is perfectly aware that the security environment is very favourable for the country, as external threats remain low and even the problem of terrorism has been minimized. Its desire to secure a higher international status should not be seen as malicious revisionism since the experiments with exploiting the opportunities arising from the erosion of US global leadership have been quite cautious and the demonstrations of military muscle have not amounted to much in terms of real power projection. Avoiding unilateralist over-reaction and securing the unity of Western efforts in engaging Russia continues to be the most promising strategy.

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