

Opinion

Ukraine and the American nuclear arsenal

Steve Cimbala and Adam B. Lowther

With President Putin standing before the Russian Duma on Tuesday, March 18 to welcome Crimea into the Russian Federation, Americans should be concerned with the invasion, occupation, and carving up of Ukraine. Given Russia's possible breach of its obligations under the Intermediate Nuclear Force Treaty, Americans should be doubly concerned.

Given Russia's apparent desire to turn countries in its near-abroad into vassals or failed states, leaders in Washington and the intelligentsia that informs them should be far more cautious in their advocacy of diminishing the nation's nuclear arsenal. Even more important than the harm these efforts are causing to the actual weapons and delivery systems is the harm their efforts are causing to our credibility.

If deterrence equals capability plus will, then a slippage in US nuclear modernization or deterrence will undermine both at a time when Vladimir Putin is watching President Obama and wondering just how much he can take before Obama and the West respond with more than sanctions on Russian plutocrats.

Putin's future decision making is uncertain, but the US and its NATO allies must be prepared for the possibility that he will push his aggressive designs beyond annexing Crimea and creating chaos in Eastern Ukraine. Much depends on Russian domestic politics. Putin is an autocratic kleptocrat who lives in fear of a democratic revolution in Russia. A more democratic and western-leaning Ukraine threatens to spread the virus of another Orange revolution to Moscow, shaking the foundations of a ruling order now dividing up the spoils of Russia among military and security *siloviki*, Putin cronies, and friendly oligarchs. History provides many examples of nervous autocrats who engaged in foreign adventurism in order to distract their publics from domestic problems.

New START and missile defense

Experts foresee little likelihood of a direct military clash between the United States and Russia or between Russia and NATO. One reason for this low probability of general war in Europe, even if Russian pressure is extended into other areas outside of NATO and formerly part of the Soviet Union, is the presence of nuclear weapons in Europe and offshore. Nuclear weapons provide a reminder that the risks of military escalation in East-Central Europe include the possibility of unforeseen costs unacceptable to either side.

If NATO sends mistaken signals of irresolution, Putin is likely to think American red lines are no further east than the Polish border. Putin's calculations are in part influenced by the surety of NATO's nuclear guaranty to its members. Russian aggression against non-NATO states — bordering NATO members — might inadvertently expand into unmanageable provocations.

Unless and until Putin's long term path is clearer, the United States and NATO should remind Russian and other audiences that American nuclear weapons currently deployed in Europe are important symbols of commitment to European security and democratic peace. Nor, despite the accomplishments of the US-Russia New START agreement (2010), should the United States offer further reductions in long range nuclear arsenals without a *quid pro quo* that includes a stable and democratic Ukraine freed from Russian intimidation and blackmail, let alone oblique threats of military invasion.

If President Obama ever had a rationale for moving away from his personal belief in nuclear disarmament, Vladimir Putin has provided one. Russia's annexation is a game-changer that will likely change the strategic dynamic in Europe in ways that neither Putin nor Obama fully understands.

NATO member states on the eastern periphery will undoubtedly see an imminent threat to their own independence and expect greater commitments from NATO. Poland, for example, may very well seek to speed up deployment of Standard Missile 3 (SM3) batteries on their soil. Currently, they are not scheduled to be complete until 2018.

The Czechs may also seek to reopen talks with the United States regarding the deployment of anti-ballistic missile radars on their soil. The Romanians, also scheduled to receive SM3 batteries, may join the Poles in seeking to speed up deployment of these systems.

The New START agreement does not preclude the United States from deploying future missile defenses, despite Russian efforts during the negotiating process to restrict American degrees of freedom in this respect. But then-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and his predecessor-successor Vladimir Putin have made it clear that Russia's geostrategic perspective links US and NATO missile defenses to cooperation on other arms control issues. Meanwhile, the US and NATO in 2011 moved forward with the first phase of a four-phase deployment of the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) for missile defenses. In March 2013, US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced plans to modify the original plan for EPAA by abandoning the originally planned deployments of SM3 IIB interceptor missiles in Poland by 2022. However, this step failed to reassure Russian doubters about the US and NATO claims that their regional and global missile defenses were not oriented against Russia. Russian officials reiterated demands for a legally binding guarantee from the US and NATO that Russian strategic nuclear forces would not be targeted by the system.

Obstacles in US/NATO-Russian cooperation

The military-technical obstacles to Russo-American and NATO-Russia cooperation in deploying missile defenses are not necessarily insurmountable. The US has offered to permit Russian experts to observe tests of the various phases of its missile defense interceptor program based on the SM3's currently and prospectively deployed at sea and on land. Russia regards the latter phases of this interceptor and its supporting systems, including improved sensors and C2BMC (command-control, battle management and communications), as potentially threatening to the survivability of its long range nuclear strike force of land and sea based intercontinental missiles

permitted under New START. For its part, NATO regards Russia's stance as a proposal for shared sovereignty over decisions to launch missile defense interceptors, impossible under NATO's commitment to members only as participants in such a decision making process.

Regardless the military-technical obstacles to NATO-Russian cooperation on missile defenses and nuclear arms reductions, political factors may be even more important.¹ Russian political and military leaders and official policy statements continue to speak of NATO as a danger to Russia's security. Russia is especially sensitive to NATO's reach into former Soviet, and now extended-Russian security space, within which Russia claims privileged interests. These sensitivities to NATO visibility in post-Soviet space bordering or near Russia extend to any plans for NATO land based interceptors, radars or other components of a European missile defense plan. Doubtless Russia's peevishness over NATO missile defenses is related to Vladimir Putin's deep resentment of what he sees as US preferences for a unipolar international system dominated by the United States — an angst manifest, for example, in Putin's decision to occupy Crimea in February and March, 2014.²

Nuclear weapons in Europe

It may not be a stretch to suggest that Poland and the Baltic states are contemplating the benefits of dual capable aircraft and American nuclear weapons on their soil. On 6 January, two months before Russia's seizure of Crimea, the Defense Minister of Estonia, Urmas Reinsalu, told a public audience in Washington, D.C. that "nuclear deterrence is badly needed for NATO. Surely it is a very valuable 'pro' which the US provides to the security of the alliance."

Given the current circumstances, Baltic leaders would be particularly reasonable to approach the United States with such a request. If Russia's annexation of Crimea taught the Ukrainians — and everyone else watching — anything, it was that their decision to give up nuclear weapons two decades ago was a mistake.

In Western Europe, any serious thoughts of removing American nuclear weapons from Europe are dead. Leaders across NATO's member-states will undoubtedly seek to keep every last nuclear weapon in Europe, right where it is. In fact, NATO member states may begin to more forcefully encourage President Obama to pull back from further reductions in the nuclear arsenal and cuts in funding to the programs that sustain weapons and delivery platforms.

Russian nuclear strategy

Russia's 2010 Military Doctrine avers that the role of nuclear weapons is "prevention of nuclear military conflict or any other military conflict" and that they are regarded as "an important factor in the prevention of nuclear conflicts and military conflicts that use conventional assets (large-scale and regional wars)."³ The possibility that Russian nuclear weapons would be used in a conventional conflict for the purpose of de-escalation, by means of inflicting calibrated damage, first appeared in the 2000 Military Doctrine and is tacitly acknowledged as a possibility in the 2010 version.⁴ Calibrated damage is a proportional amount of damage that is subjectively

unacceptable to the enemy and exceeds the benefits the aggressor expects to gain from the use of force.

Whether non-strategic or “tactical” nuclear weapons would be used for this mission is unclear: the role of non-strategic nuclear weapons in Russian military strategy is a subject of uncertainty.⁵ Among the Russian armed forces, the navy is the principal advocate for maintaining non-strategic nuclear weapons capabilities, regarding them as essential for any conflict with the US Navy.⁶ Another possible use for theater or tactical nuclear weapons is presented by Russia’s conventional military weakness relative to the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. In addition to the greater size of PLA forces deployed into the Far Eastern theater of operations, there is also the possible inability of Russia’s air force to guarantee air superiority against attacking Chinese units.⁷ Although some Western experts regard Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons (as well as NATO’s) as *passé* and militarily superfluous, Russian arms control expert Alexei Arbatov commented in 2010 that the “colossal” US superiority in conventional weapons and the “growing lag” in delivery vehicles for the (Russian) strategic nuclear forces meant that “the role of TNW only grows as an instrument of foreign policy.”⁸

Russia also considers its non-strategic nuclear weapons as a counterbalance to the nuclear forces of states other than the US and NATO, especially for those states whose nuclear capabilities are able to reach Russian territory.⁹ One prospective use for Russian tactical nukes might be to take out enemy precision strike and C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) capabilities, thereby leveling the playing field of advanced conventional warfare otherwise tilted against Russia. For this and other reasons, NATO remains sensitive to the possible modernization of Russia’s non-strategic missile forces. US reports to NATO in January, 2014, claimed that Russia had tested a new medium-range ground launched cruise missile (GLCM), a possible violation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty signed by Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987.¹⁰

One school of thought holds that, had the United States not conveyed an image of weakness over the past five years, Russia may not have so brazenly risked a larger conflict in order to annex Crimea. Another school regards Russian behavior as driven by Putin’s fears of losing power at home due to rising protest and economic stagnation, offset by Crimea and other demonstrations of nationalism and cries for “New Russia” outside its current borders. Regardless the causes, the US has choices about how to respond. All is not lost.

Improving deterrence credibility

The United States still fields the world’s most comprehensive and capable nuclear arsenal. Increasingly its credibility should become a top priority for the Obama administration. This can be done in several ways.

First, talk of further reductions in the American nuclear arsenal within the administration and Congress should be clearly tied to US deterrent and nonproliferation objectives and not seen as

rewards to Russia or others for bad behavior. Gratuitous nuclear cuts only serve to undermine the perceived will of the President to use nuclear weapons.

Second, research and development funding for a Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) replacement and the next generation nuclear bomber should be dramatically increased. The administration could also end the delay in funding the nuclear air launched cruise missile replacement. Nothing signals what is important better than where you spend your money.

Third, Congress should ensure that the nation's nuclear programs are fully funded. At less than 5 percent of the defense budget, the advantages of signaling support for the arsenal outweigh any savings that could be gained from delaying funding for necessary life extension or other programs.

Fourth, the American people must come to grips with the fact that we live in a world where nuclear weapons are still the single most important weapon in the American arsenal. The Cold War's end did not bring about the peace many sought. Rather, we are discovering the world is no less dangerous today than it was twenty-five years ago.

Conclusion

If the United States is to effectively deter Vladimir Putin from furthering his revisionist ambitions, it will require an increase in the credibility of the American nuclear arsenal — increasing the perceived risk of any further deliberate aggression and reducing the risk of inadvertent escalation in Europe. Nuclear weapons concentrate the minds of otherwise risk acceptant heads of state and government. And with the fiscal constraints of the Budget Control Act reducing the United States' conventional capabilities, the nuclear arsenal is likely to increase in importance rather than diminish. While no American seeks to go to war with Russia, deterrence of miscreant behavior otherwise leading to war requires military preparedness, political leadership, and clear message sending about the costs of miscalculation.

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1. A proposal for US-Russian missile defense cooperation based on prior cooperation in space and rocket science is discussed in Kevin Ryan and Simon Saradzhyan, "How US, Russia Can Agree on Missile Defense", *Christian Science Monitor*, July 29, 2013.
2. Steven Lee Myers, "Putin, Flashing Disdain, Defends Action in Crimea", *New York Times*, March 5, 2014, p. A1, A6.
3. "The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation", text, www.Kremlin.ru.
4. Ibid.

5. Andrei Kokoshin, *Ensuring Strategic Stability in the Past and Present: Theoretical and Applied Questions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, June 2011), p. 33.
6. Roger N. McDermott, "Russia's Conventional Armed Forces: Reform and Nuclear Posture to 2020", Ch. 2 in Blank, ed., *Russian Nuclear Weapons: Past, Present and Future* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, November 2011), pp. 33-97, esp. pp. 70-72.
7. Ibid., pp. 71-72. See also Jacob W. Kipp, "Russia's Nuclear Posture and the Threat that Dare Not Speak its Name", Ch. 10 in Blank, ed., *Russian Nuclear Weapons: Past, Present and Future*, pp. 459-503.
8. Arbatov, cited in McDermott, "Russia's Conventional Armed Forces: Reform and Nuclear Posture to 2020", p. 72.
9. Ibid.
10. Michael R. Gordon, "US Says Russia Tested Missile, Despite Treaty", *New York Times*, January 29, 2014. The Treaty bans deployment of nuclear or conventional ground based missiles by NATO or the former Soviet Union (and now Russia) with ranges from 500 to 5,500 kilometers.