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Russia's Nuclear Strategy

Changes or Continuities

Arushi Singh

Abstract: Contemporaneous events such as the invasion of Ukraine in 24 February 2022 by Russia has brought to the front debates and discussions concerning nuclear weapons and their potential uses in warfare that encompass nuclear strategy, tactics, and doctrines. The current nuclear strategy of Russia has been informed by the nuclear strategies under different leaders of its predecessor state, the Soviet Union. This article attempts to understand the evolution of the USSR's nuclear strategy and its continuation toward Russia's strategy; to assesses the reasons behind the changes in Russia's nuclear strategy in the twenty-first century; to study the major factors that influence the nuclear strategy of Russia under Vladimir Putin; and to evaluate the possible geopolitical implications of the current Russian nuclear strategy.

Keywords: Russia, technology, nuclear, USSR, strategy

Introduction

Warfare is conducted in various distinct conditions and under different contexts.¹ Every country has a driving strategy based on the rationale to assist its defense establishment in fulfilling policy objectives efficiently for both times of war and peace. Therefore, warfare is to be guided by a strategy that is a dynamic process that transforms “military power into policy effect.”² However, the strategy related to nuclear power is operational and based solely on the theoretical and conceptual purview as the nuclear strategy is concerned with the strategy of the “non-use” of nuclear weapons.³

The earliest nuclear weapons were employed in the Second World War by

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Allies for effective strategic bombardment. The Soviet Union conducted its first nuclear test in 1949 and thermonuclear test in 1953. The 1950s were a time of innovative development for the Soviet Union regarding technology, henceforth referred to as revolution in military affairs.⁴ The country's technological advancements encompassed ballistic and cruise missile technology, which transformed armed struggle on a strategic level, notably where nuclear weapons were considered. However, nuclear strategy gained incredible relevance especially in the 1960s, after the Soviet Union attained nuclear capability parity with the United States wherein both countries possessed the ability to absorb a first strike and to launch a second strike. Other strategies included limited forward deployment while numerous flexible responses were likewise developed. This led to a reliance on nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional force vulnerability.⁵ Furthermore, in the 1970s, the Soviet Union's revolution in military affairs, or *military-technical revolution*, the term utilized by the Soviets, wielded great effect.⁶

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union commenced a reduction in prominence of nuclear weapons in its strategies under Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev.⁷ After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia modified and amended the Soviet nuclear strategy in accordance with the post-Cold War environment. In 1993, Russia unambiguously disregarded the Soviet Union's no-first-use pledge, thereby showcasing incorporation of nuclear weapons in its nuclear strategy as a key aspect of its defense and security strategies. Furthermore, Russia likewise did not retain the Soviet Union's strategic considerations of surprise and preemptive nuclear attacks.⁸

The Evolution of the USSR's Nuclear Strategy and Its Continuation toward Russia's Strategy

Nuclear weapons have not been used since the Second World War. However, the significance of nuclear strategy has never diminished. Nuclear strategy came to the fore during the Cold War, which remained laden with emphasis on nuclear strategy and on strategic stability contingent on nuclear weapons.⁹ The genesis of nuclear strategy, however, commences with initial postwar stances wherein nuclear weapons were thought to be formidable means of airpower. This line of thinking persisted until 1949 when Bernard Brodie accentuated the importance of nuclear weapons in averting war.¹⁰ This aversion of war was spoken about in the perspective of deterrence where the threat of force is applied to thwart conflict influenced by factors involving the ability, credibility, gravity, and guarantee of following through with the threat.¹¹

Furthermore, these strategic concepts were formulated into a coherent strategy that included military organization, nuclear doctrine, weapons systems, and the weapons themselves.¹² Moreover, nuclear weapons as such have been classified into tactical and strategic. Tactical nuclear warheads have shorter yield and are envisioned for combat zone usage. Strategic nuclear warheads commonly have a greater range yield and range.¹³ The means of delivery of these warheads

employ the triad of air, sea, and land, which is strategically important in case of a second strike. Other terminologies also started emerging such as counterforce, mutually assured destruction, countervalue, tailored deterrence, and deterrence by punishment and by denial, which remains relevant to this day.¹⁴

Deterrence has been viewed as the coaxing and persuasion of a prospective foe that the self-interest must be observed through the avoidance of assured sequence of actions. The realization of deterrence requires three general conditions, which includes adequate understanding of the capacity of the antagonist, credibility, and the clear articulation of the threat to the antagonist.¹⁵ Other elements remain: the threat must be planned to increase the perceived cost of an adversary who takes a particular course of action and incentives to make the adversary refrain from undesirable action.¹⁶

Joseph Stalin

At the advent of the nuclear age, Joseph Stalin grasped the significance of nuclear weapons particularly pertaining to defense and political spheres. Nevertheless, his *modus operandi* was still based on the operational setting of assumptions and familiarity of the pre-nuclear age.¹⁷ Yet, Stalin led the formation of a military-industrial complex that established the apparatus with the potential for his inheritors to attain strategic parity with America.¹⁸ At the time, however, considerations related to the strategic dimensions of the military use of nuclear weapons were based on the emergence of the two power blocs. This was demonstrated after the United States used nuclear weapons against Japan, this steered Stalin to authorize a Special Committee on the Atomic Bomb to undermine the U.S. nuclear monopoly.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Stalin was reluctant to incorporate nuclear weapons into the strategic calculations of the Soviet Union, and thus diminished their significance to the Soviet strategic realm. Nevertheless, the formation of balance of power through the development of nuclear weapons remained one of the considerations in the emerging Soviet nuclear strategy.²⁰ Additionally, Stalin considered that nuclear weapons were intended to “deprive the Soviet Union of strategic gains in the Far East and more generally to give the United States the upper hand.”²¹

Notably, the Soviet Union, in the wake of the attainment of nuclear weapons by the United States for the first five years, seemingly spurned the incomparable advantage of nuclear weapons. Stalin’s distinctive methodology to security was autarchic and territorial wherein the security of the USSR was contingent on the “insecurity of others.”²² The time under Stalin from 1949 to 1953 has been referred to as the “Stalinist lag,” and this is crucial in respect to understanding the emphasis placed by the Soviets on a single cohesive leadership wherein the political leadership prevailed over the military tacticians and strategists.²³ More important, historically, Russia relied on its numeric superiority to prevail and this influenced the thinking of the Soviet leadership. Hence, the Soviet approach to nuclear weapons has also been referred to as “war fighting” because of its stress on winning rather than deterrence.²⁴

Moreover, the Soviets during the 1950s were disinclined to be predominantly dependent on any one weapon system such as an “absolute weapon” or one weapon strategies.²⁵ The Soviet military establishment at the time believed no one weapon could solve all the complications in the combat zone but rather the combined effect of all kinds of weapons leads to victory.²⁶ The focus, however, was on the conclusive obliteration of the enemy forces including a surprise nuclear attack at the most expedient moment of escalation as well as on the deep offensive operation.

The Soviet nuclear strategy advocated for preemptive use of nuclear weapons for enormous and concurrent devastation of strategic and tactical targets in addition to facilitating full infiltration of adversary space at the inception of nuclear operations.²⁷ The Soviet nuclear strategy focused on reconnaissance, concealment, the covert nature of operations, and high war preparedness. Stalin focused on winning a war of attrition against capitalism, which had to be reflected in Soviet nuclear strategy where the fact had to be overlooked that nuclear weapons could compress years of effects of a war of attrition into a few days.²⁸ Soviet nuclear strategy at the time also advocated for the utilization of nonstrategic nuclear weapons in strategic missions in the different theaters of operation to strengthen conventional forces in order to assist the Soviets with the attainment of victory, while adversarial armed forces were rerouted away from its territorial interests.

Another dimension of Soviet nuclear considerations included the Soviet strategic policy, which has been described in the terminology utilized by the Soviets as the military facets of the actions taken by the Soviet regime to avert war while affording a pedestal of strength to the Soviets when dealing with other nations as was warranted by its recently minted status as a superpower.²⁹ The policy was likewise concerned with winning a war in case the deterrence did not work anymore.³⁰

Additionally, there are four foundational factors that are essential for the construction of Soviet strategic policy. These are the extent and geographical location of the Soviet Union; the might of Russian national heritage; the duality of the Soviet state that entails considerations regarding not only the function of the Soviet Union as a nation’s government as well as the leadership of the Communist sphere; and the bearing of nuclear weapons and missiles on warfare.³¹ The first two have always been a consideration from the times of the tsars and have compelled the Russians to seek new frontiers and buffer areas, however, the last were the phenomenon of the twentieth century. The Soviets were able to overcome these problems, however, attacks from a U.S. bomber into the Soviet territory emerged as a threat at roughly the same time as these other threats subsided with the Soviets taking a damage limitation role.³² The deliberations then included a strategic clash with the American, Chinese, and European theaters of war and the use of military around the world in peace times to effectively assist the Soviet foreign policy.

Notably, in 1957, aspects for the formulation of a nuclear strategy were

constructed through a series of seminars. However, in 1962, military strategists under Marshal Vasily Sokolovsky worked on military strategy. Sokolovsky believed the adversary and its collaborators could be defeated through enormous nuclear strikes. The effect was thought to be dual, for the achievement of the “final victory” the destruction of the enemy infrastructure along with the will of the enemy to continue, thereby leading to limitation of destruction that otherwise might have occurred due to a retaliatory strike.³³

Nikita Khrushchev

While the successor of Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev had an important role and a range of options such as the adoption of minimum deterrent strategy and the preventive war strategy. The considerations, however, were many as well, encompassing the balance of power, which would deter both sides from general war; the intentions of the West; repercussions of conventional war; and the efforts to be expended to acquire multiple levels of capability.³⁴

Under Khrushchev, nuclear weapons gained a major place of prominence, and the Strategic Rocket Forces was established.³⁵ The Soviet nuclear strategy under him was based on preemptive international and theater nuclear weapons usage. Khrushchev was also concerned with deterrence, a concept of a preemptive nuclear strategy aimed at denial to the United States amid the USSR's manpower reductions.

Leonid Brezhnev

With the removal of Khrushchev from power in 1964, Leonid Brezhnev was in charge of the Soviet Union. Brezhnev did not see much need to threaten Europe with his country's vast nuclear arsenal.³⁶ The USSR's overwhelming advantage in tanks, artillery, and personnel meant that the United States had to be ambiguous about the first use of its nuclear weapons to stop a potential Soviet juggernaut.³⁷ Brezhnev held the advance of Soviet military might, with the realization of strategic parity with the United States as a critical element in the change toward détente.³⁸

Moreover, under Brezhnev, the concept of a controllable nuclear war was a prominent thought and retaliatory strikes with both regional and global reach took prominence. Brezhnev championed deterrence and the principles of deterrence became part of the doctrine. Furthermore, Brezhnev organized arms control talks with American presidents Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford, and James E. “Jimmy” Carter.

Yuri Andropov

Yuri Andropov succeeded Brezhnev and he was convinced that the West was intent on a “surprise nuclear missile attack” and developed Raketno Yadernoye Napadenie in response, referred to as Project RYaN.³⁹ The surprise nuclear missile attack was thought to be proposed to incapacitate the Soviet leadership along with Soviet nuclear potential to accomplish a victory in an ensuing war.

Moreover, Andropov worked on achieving Soviet military preparedness for the eventuality when need arose of a Soviet preemptive strike and it became the focus of the Soviet nuclear strategy at the time.⁴⁰

Konstantin Chernenko

Konstantin Chernenko emerged out of the fray as the seventh leader of the Soviet Union. More importantly, Chernenko was a protégé of Brezhnev who favored détente and his term in office witnessed the commencement of negotiations on restricting the strategic and intermediate-range missiles as well as space-based weapons.⁴¹ Notably, Chernenko has been accredited with facilitating the revival of arms limitations talks with the United States. However, under his leadership the concept of surprise during the initial stages of a nuclear war was given special attention, referred to as a “surprise nuclear strike,” which could decide the progression of the war as well.⁴²

Mikhail Gorbachev

Gorbachev succeeded Chernenko and was part of a new generation of Soviet leaders.⁴³ When Gorbachev came to power, the technological gap between the United States and the Soviet Union portended a vast military vulnerability for the Soviet Union in the future.⁴⁴ Additionally, Gorbachev had moved beyond the thinking that nuclear-strategic parity as being vital as a guarantor of peace.

One of the driving factors for Gorbachev was the peril of nuclear disaster, which motivated him to push for disarmament.⁴⁵ To that end, Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and in the process eradicated the Saber SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missile, an important constituent of the Soviet conventional strategy. Gorbachev likewise approved the decommissioning of the OTR-23 Oka tactical nuclear missile as well as the industrial units to manufacture those missiles in 1987.⁴⁶ This resulted in Russia possessing an extremely limited cache of tactical missiles whose range was too short to reach targets in Europe.

The Transition from Soviet Nuclear Strategy to Russian Nuclear Strategy

However, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and transition into Russia and 14 newly independent nations, priorities transformed related to nuclear strategy.⁴⁷ The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to the decision that a single nuclear successor state should emerge, which was to be Russia rather than multiple small nuclear states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union.

The immediate post-Soviet period witnessed two coups, termination of the ruling Communist Party in Russia, extensive privatization, the suspension of state sanctioned price controls combined with liberal market reforms resulting in hyperinflation, as well as the formation of an oligarchy.⁴⁸ This period also saw decreased defense procurement of approximately 90 percent and drastic nuclear disarmament in conjunction with the United States.⁴⁹

Boris Yeltsin

The Yeltsin era started with great promise for arms control such as the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaties (START I and II), which contributed to strategic stability, reduced the risk of accidental nuclear attacks, and disarmed counterforce nuclear strike and fortified the nonproliferation framework.

Experts have put forth the concept of strategic stability as being in force when the country that was the victim of an attack could inflict unacceptable damage on the aggressor under any conditions. Strategic stability additionally determined minimal nuclear deterrence. Moreover, in the Yeltsin era, the strategic nuclear forces concepts came to the fore, which included a preemptive strike, launch on warning, and retaliatory strikes. However, financial constraints, war in Chechnya, and internal conflicts acted as great impediments for further actions. Notably, a document was adopted in 1993, referred to as the Basic Guidelines of Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation.⁵⁰ Most significantly, under Boris Yeltsin, Russia, which from 1982 had a no-first-use policy, altered its policy due to its vulnerability stemming from its conventional forces that could not possibly deter the United States while being deprived of the threat of use of nuclear weapons.⁵¹

Vladimir Putin

The early years of Putin's leadership saw the implementation of minimal sufficiency in place of strategic parity due to the implausibility of nuclear war.⁵² However, Putin rescinded this strategy in a speech in 2004 and emphasized the strategic significance of the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Under Putin, the Russian nuclear doctrine has maintained its nonstrategic nuclear forces emphasis and as such has concentrated on developing huge, varied, and advanced nonstrategic systems capable of being utilized for both conventional and nuclear weapons. Russia is also expanding the aggregate quantity of these weapons in its cache while substantially enhancing its delivery competencies.

A typology of war is utilized to decide on the approach and instruments to be used including nuclear weapons. One of the factors that influences Putin's nuclear strategy is the classification of conflicts by the impact on different weapons and different deterrence approaches to be undertaken. Therefore, a typology for conflicts has been compiled and armed engagements have been divided into armed conflict, local, regional, and large-scale war as part of an escalation management strategy through dissuasion of head-on aggression, thwart or preempt the application of decidedly detrimental capabilities against the Russian territory or the regime, and dismiss antagonisms on terms deemed satisfactory to Russia.

Moreover, escalation management has been founded on deterrence through "fear-inducement" as well as on deterrence based on restricted utilization of force. Other elements of Russian nuclear strategy include the dissuasion approach, "dosed" damage, progressive application of force to increase the costs to an adversary, coercion, or realization of de-escalation at crucial transition stages and initial periods of conflict.⁵³ These strategies operate by assimilating

the threat to impose destruction with conventional means as well as nuclear capabilities. Furthermore, there are assumptions that underpin de-escalation strategy such as the implausibility of a large-scale conflict with the United States; limited level utilization of conventional forces by the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against Russia; understanding of the asymmetry of stakes between Russia and the United States; and the assumption that credible strategic deterrence acts as a stabilizing foundation.⁵⁴

Putin's office released "On the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence," a document on Russian nuclear strategy that focused on preemption to avert an incapacitating first strike and highlighted nuclear doctrine concentrating on guaranteeing deterrence and less on nuclear intimidation.⁵⁵

The Reasons behind the Changes in Russia's Nuclear Strategy in the Twenty-first Century

The reason Russia increased its dependence on nuclear weapons in its strategy has been attributed to multiple factors including the disintegration of the Soviet Union followed by the economic disruptions that put limitations on the amount of conventional army forces that could be retained. This was followed by the First Chechen War from 1994 to 1996, Russo-Georgian War in 2008, and the Second Chechen War from 1999 to 2009, which shined a light on the vulnerabilities of Russian military forces. Contemporary Russian strategic thinking was that nuclear weapons could augment Russian power to prevent analogous regional wars and increased threat perception posed by NATO enlargement. NATO's bombardment in Kosovo in 1999 accentuated Russia's mounting vulnerability as it underscored NATO's rising inclination to imperil Russian geopolitical considerations. Subsequently, Russia determined that it was necessary to retain nuclear forces adept at ensuring the imposition of the preplanned preferred degree and magnitude of destruction to any hostile state or coalition of nations under all circumstances.

The government resolved to upgrade and develop nonstrategic nuclear weapons in 1999, soon after the war in Kosovo. President Yeltsin concurred that Russia should build up and deploy both strategic and tactical strategic nuclear weapons. Vladimir Putin, who was the chairman of the Security Council, affirmed that President Yeltsin advocated for the development and utilization of nonstrategic nuclear weapons.⁵⁶ Yeltsin also agreed to the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, which was a non-legally binding agreement of mutual independent obligations.

However, the twenty-first century saw Russia struggling to maintain its sphere of influence, preserve its strategic parity with the United States, and maintain its border security while simultaneously dealing with an economic crisis and stagnation with revenues being cripplingly dependent on hydrocarbons exports and incapacitated by sanctions. Moreover, policies of other countries whose objective is to revise the status quo in contradiction to Russian interest

in strategic areas including the Arctic and the Caspian Sea could lead to military action under certain circumstances, thereby contributing to the threat perceptions that might impact the Russian nuclear strategy decision-making process.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, in the international milieu, Russia has chosen the path wherein it exhibits belligerence in Ukraine. Its repeated “nuclear saber-rattling” has emphasized the presence and significance of nuclear weapons, Russian military exercises, and nuclear weapons delivery systems to establish Russian competencies, coupled with an inclination to confront NATO’s member states. Russia’s “escalate to de-escalate” strategy appears to be devised to compel a retreat of forces or to cease a dispute on conditions and provisions beneficial to Russia.⁵⁸ Nonstrategic nuclear weapons seem to perform a substantial part in Russia’s doctrine, for instance, in case of assistance for probable military actions west of the Urals.

Notably, Russia has amended its strategy in the twenty-first century with different versions emerging to place a larger dependence on nuclear weapons. For instance, in 1997, nuclear weapons were to be used only when there was a risk to the survival of the Russian Federation. However, the doctrine in 2000 extended the conditions for the employment of nuclear weapons to embrace occurrences wherein weapons of mass destruction were directed toward Russia or its partners. The 2001 doctrine also included large-magnitude assault using conventional weapons in circumstances crucial to the state security of Russia, which could warrant the use by Russia of nuclear weapons in retaliation. Moreover, the evolving threats premised on instability, violent nonstate actors, and terrorism have the potential to undermine Russian national sovereignty, and the vastness of Russian borders makes it marginally probable that a local conflict could potentially escalate to include the usage of nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, Russia has been focusing on modernizing its nuclear triad, however, some have opined that procurement and acquisition have been excessive due to influence of the industry, which has encouraged overreliance on nuclear weapons. Another consideration has been securing latent exposure in Crimea and Kaliningrad, a Russian western enclave that straddles the borders of Poland as well as Lithuania, both NATO members. This perception is reinforced by the Aegis Ashore launchers, part of the European Phased Adaptive Approach missile defense system, which increases Russian vulnerability.⁵⁹

Russians have also been managing the development of nonmilitary along with conventional capabilities to decrease its dependence on nuclear weapons at initial phases of engagement along with nuclear capabilities for use in both times of peace and war. Moreover, as a measure of strategic deterrence, emphasis had been placed on tailored escalation to gain a lead over a rival.⁶⁰ Russian experts stress that one of the factors has been repudiating the adversary’s claim to escalation dominance while securing victory in the early phases of the conflict itself.

Furthermore, Russian involvement with cognitive electronic and cyber warfare, coupled with mobilization along with deterrence signaling against the West and its NATO allies has shifted the Western defense deterrence posture.⁶¹

Concerns have also been raised from Russian defense and military establishment figures of an “aerospace attack” that could wreak destruction utilizing traditional precision-strike weapons on Russian strategic nuclear forces.⁶² The lethal combination of precision strikes and cyber and electronic warfare have been theorized to possess the possibility of inadvertent nuclear escalation.⁶³

Major Factors that Influence the Nuclear Strategy of Russia under Vladimir Putin

Since Putin came to power, the threat perceptions of the Russian Federation have been evolving. In the mid-2000s, the Russian defense establishment was focused on a conventional strike during a relentless airborne operation poised to perpetrate unacceptable damage not only to Russian vital infrastructure but to armed forces. The threat perception has evolved into concurrent attacks including a large-scale aerospace attack and political struggle simultaneously. As such, in contemporary Russian strategic thinking, there exists a persistent dread of strategic bombings coupled with the conviction that in the likelihood of escalatory behavior, Russia should be on the offensive rather than on the defensive. Furthermore, a persistent comparison persists in Russia of its current capabilities with its Soviet counterpart.

Nevertheless, the Russians have been focused on seeking solutions based on deterrence, which encompass management of escalation, contemplation of scenarios that are not receptive to warfighting and their resolutions, and seeking answers wherein the escalation dilemmas proliferate due to an inflexible force structure with an incapability to deter conventional attacks. However, Russian nuclear forces have undergone extensive modernization over the last two decades. Russian officials contend it as an effort to maintain parity with the U.S. nuclear arsenal and to shed Soviet legacy systems.

Nonetheless, both U.S. and Russian forces are bound by numerical limits and tracked by both sides through an intrusive reciprocal verification and transparency arrangement under START. They are also observable through national technical means with which both sides have pledged not to interfere. This verifiable balance is the cornerstone of present-day “strategic stability” between the United States and Russia. The Russian military pursues a course wherein easy victories are denied in the initial periods of war.

However, under Putin, the implications conveyed through the nuclear strategy encompass the understanding that any conflicts with Russia will always tacitly stress its nuclear options.⁶⁴ Moreover, to drive this point home Russia has been conducting theater exercises with simulated nuclear weapons use such as the Russian Vostok 2010 and Vostok 2014 exercise, which involved the Kuril Islands where territorial claims remain contested by long-time U.S. ally Japan.

The Possible Geopolitical Implications of the Current Russian Nuclear Strategy

A modernized nuclear arsenal remains of vital interest to Russians to uphold

strategic deterrence based on conventional weaponry to safeguard against prospective enemies and to abjure aggression from them. A nuclear arsenal to Russia signifies power, authority, and protection for its international standing along with its capability to counter developing threats.⁶⁵ Additionally, nuclear weapons have been regarded as an imperative in the preservation of the sovereignty of Russia and the Russian homeland along with the ability of nuclear weapons to deter regional and large-scale wars, particularly in the current context of worldwide challenges and heightened threats. However, modernization coupled with an enhanced size and scope of exercises conducted by Russia in addition to the threatening demeanor has resulted in increased defense expenditure as well as the launch of a phase of modernization programs.

Consequently, Russia has sustained its focus on the crucial part in its strategic and security stance of nuclear forces to compensate for its conventional vulnerability concerning the United States, NATO, and China.⁶⁶ The contemporary nuclear doctrine has showcased the lowering of the Russian nuclear threshold, and when taken together Russian mobilization abilities have been revealed to be quicker than NATO's 30-30-30 strategy, which has led to increased threat perception in the region.

Further, in Putin's 2020 decree, there exist statements that proclaim that Russian nuclear deterrence policy is to defend and assure the "sovereignty and territorial integrity" of Russia and its partners in the event of an armed conflict by thwarting the escalation of military actions and focusing on the culmination of the armed conflict to be on terms that favor Russia.⁶⁷ However, this has massive implications as "territorial integrity" could apply to contested regions such as Crimea where an endeavor to utilize force to return could warrant the use of nuclear weapons. Therefore, Russia has linked the first use of nuclear weapons to sovereignty. This becomes especially challenging keeping in mind the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine.

The usage of nuclear weapons in retaliation to attacks on nuclear forces by nonnuclear means leads to the likelihood of a nuclear reaction to multiple non-nuclear strikes on a wide range of Russian military infrastructure including air and army bases as well as ships operated by the Russian navy. This is an effort by the Russians to use the threat of nuclear escalation to contravene American conventional as well as cyber abilities. It has been opined that the new nuclear doctrine justifies any kind of serious threat to warrant the use of nuclear weapons.⁶⁸

The United States' position along with NATO allies has been implicitly conveyed with the positioning of ballistic missile defenses. For the INF Treaty, missile systems, both nuclear and conventional, as well other advanced weaponry that are non-nuclear weapons placed in countries adjacent to Russian borders is enough to make them subject to Russian nuclear deterrence. This development has been, in part, a response to NATO's progress in relation to small-yield nuclear weapons and propositions of transportation of American

tactical nuclear weaponry closer to Russia. Moreover, the timing of the Russian nuclear deterrence policy guidelines signals that Russia understands the fragility of the arms controls regime and has been organizing for it.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Strategy is not simply a theory that gains importance during times of war but an inextricable constant component of “statecraft.”⁷⁰ Nuclear weapons drive strategy to extraordinary limits as an ostensibly goal-directed and coherent structure of connecting capabilities and ends.⁷¹ Moreover, over the decades, defense revaluation has been fused with political sensitivities to shift military doctrine in the direction of and in tune with tenets of defensive adequacy.⁷² Issues include credibility deterrence and fulfilling three criteria, which are “capability, commitment and communication” that have also come to the fore.⁷³

The Soviet Union attained certain technological triumphs in the nuclear domain including nuclear warhead technology with the development of the hydrogen bomb as well as advanced warheads and spearheaded a strategic progression largely encompassing missiles; early warning mechanisms; delivery systems; interceptors; and command, control, and communications systems. There were likewise intangible achievements such as considerable levels of deterrence that acted as a bulwark against the United States and NATO. These achievements accelerated the race to the fulfillment of parity with the United States and compelled the leaders to institute greater emphasis on the Soviet strategy concerning nuclear weapons.

The West’s apparent superiority in non-nuclear armed forces currently has been utilized to justify the Russians’ right to a first nuclear strike. Moreover, the updated doctrine under Putin states that in the event of an armed struggle, the usage of nonconventional arms that ensure state survival is warranted. However, securing nuclear weapons may possibly start the escalation of the conflict into a nuclear military conflict. This can be construed as recognizing the likelihood of nuclear weapons use by nations not officially recognized but castigated with prolonged politically strained exchanges, which may start off an unpredictable escalation.⁷⁴

This likewise sheds light on Russian strategic thinking wherein Russia maintains a substantial advantage over China in both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons as a regional conflict can occur. This probable regional conflict requires investing in increasing Russia’s conventional capabilities or when the Russian state’s existence is threatened by some other nation in its region.⁷⁵ Space for bilateral regulatory mechanisms is kept open. It has also been observed that Russia appears to perceive nuclear weapons as more defensive and retaliatory in disposition rather than a deterrent. However, Putin’s Russia, as opportunistic as it has demonstrated it is, would not spare the occasion to use the nuclear weapon as it would also discourage the West from activities in Russia’s area of influence.

Endnotes

1. The research article was based on a student paper that was part of a master's program requirement. Arushi Singh, "Russia's Nuclear Strategy: Changes or Continuities" (master's diss., Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, July 2021).
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