



BULLETIN

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The Role of Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Posture

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Russia possesses the largest tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) arsenal in the world. The assumed main role of Russian TNW is to balance NATO and China superiority in conventional arms. Russian authorities have not revealed information about either the size of this arsenal or its role in defence planning, which has caused concerns that these weapons may be used widely in an armed conflict. For this reason it is extremely important to initiate talks between NATO and Russia on transparency and confidence-building measures. Still, a potential reduction in the number of these weapons will depend on a broader change in the threat perception among the political elites in Russia.

Although official data on the Russian TNW arsenal have not been revealed publicly, various assessments put the number of warheads in the range of 5,000 to 8,000, of which, between 1,000 and 4,000 have a status of operational readiness. This means that Russia possesses the biggest TNW arsenal in the world, outnumbering the U.S., which is estimated to have about 760 warheads.

The Russian TNW arsenal includes short- and medium-range weapons. Most of the warheads are assigned to the navy, while the air forces and missile defences and air defences are also equipped with nuclear warheads. Some experts suggest that ground forces have been equipped with nuclear warheads as well, which would contradict assurances by Russia's authorities that these types of TNW have been eliminated from service.

Political Context of Russian TNW. The significant increase in the role TNW play in the defence thinking in Russia is a result of the transformation of its defence environment after the Cold War. The changes of circumstances have brought certain challenges to Russia's security, such that the deterrence potential of its strategic nuclear forces (SNF) carries only limited effectiveness in dealing with them.

Among these challenges are, first, the asymmetry in the conventional arms balance between Russia and, separately, the U.S., NATO and China. Moreover, the development of capabilities such as missile defence, precision weapons, strategic non-nuclear weapons and unmanned aerial vehicles, may be causing more and more concerns to be raised in Moscow. For example, the use of modern sea- and air-launched cruise missiles is considered by both the expert community and Russian authorities in official documents as the most probable method for the U.S.–NATO to use in conducting military operations against Russia.

The corresponding decrease in the sense of security in Russia has also been influenced by destabilisation in its southern neighbourhood. At present, its nuclear deterrence is mostly irrelevant in managing the most key risks originating in this region, such as the threat of terrorist attacks or guerrilla warfare. Also, in the longer term, further challenges may be presented by states that already possess nuclear weapons or those that are seeking to develop them (Iran, primarily).

The Military Role of TNW for Russia. The military doctrine of Russia allows for the use of its nuclear forces in response to an attack by conventional forces that would threaten the existence of the Russian state. Taking into account the asymmetry in conventional arms with the U.S. and others, it is difficult not to assume that in case of aggression against Russia (hypothetical at the moment given the present conditions), it would threaten to use or actually would use TNW.

In response to such an attack, TNW may be perceived as more usable compared to use of its SNF. Russia may assume that TNW are less risky to deploy than the use of its SNF as such a scenario would not necessarily lead to an uncontrolled escalation to nuclear war. Furthermore, the use of TNW would not degrade the status of its SNF.

The use of TNW in such an attack is part of Russia's widely discussed—though never officially confirmed—de-escalation doctrine. According to that doctrine, the detonation of a small number of TNW warheads would demonstrate Russia's readiness to use all available means to protect itself and its interests. At the same time, the limited extent of damage to an enemy would prevent the escalation of the war to the strategic level.

Taking into account the de-escalation doctrine's assumptions, as well as Russian military exercise scenarios, targets for retaliation include an enemy's uninhabited territories (including its territorial waters), its naval bases, as well as concentrations of land and naval forces.

Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the use of TNW according to the de-escalation doctrine would be exercised by medium- or long-range air forces. This assumption is supported by the reported course of past Russian military exercises. Such retaliation missions may also be accomplished with the use of missiles launched from surface warships or submarines. Additionally, the use of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles has been simulated, reportedly during the *Zapad 2009* military exercises.

If the scenario is applied to China, from which a massive attack by ground forces is considered the most likely scenario of aggression against Russia, Russia's room to manoeuvre would be constrained by the fact that the main military operations would be located on its territory. While an attack on supporting forces stationed on Chinese territory (including second-line forces or infrastructure supporting the offensive) seems relatively plausible in such a scenario, the price to repel the attack itself using TNW may prove to be too high.

The situation in the southern neighbourhood looks substantially different as Russian TNW currently seem to have significantly less value in both the context of the de-escalation doctrine and for the purpose of using it to destroy the forces of a potential enemy.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Although the threat of the use of nuclear weapons is hypothetical, it seems logical to assume that the probability that TNW held by Russia would be used is higher than for the nuclear weapons at the disposal of the U.S. (and other NATO members) or China. Because of a lack of information from Russian authorities, most of the assumptions about the size of the TNW arsenal as well as the possibilities for its use are speculative in nature, which may lead to a situation in which Russia's neighbours use worst-case scenarios as the basis of their defence planning.

For this reason it is important that talks begin between Russia and NATO about transparency and confidence-building measures with regard to TNW, including the issue of doctrines of use. Given that the lack of transparency related to Russia's TNW arsenal influences the sense of security in Central and Eastern Europe, Poland and other countries in the region should actively support the initiation of this dialogue. The natural platform for potential steps in this direction would be NATO, for which Poland has already co-authored specific proposals (non-papers) on this issue. In preparing future initiatives it is important to make efforts to gain the support of all of the countries of the region and to conduct a regional dialogue at the expert level.

The perception of TNW in Russia as a substitute for conventional arms means that arriving at agreement on the issue of a reduction of its TNW arsenal will be extremely difficult. Given there is little chance to reduce the imbalance in conventional arms, a major change in the perception of Russia's security by its authorities seems necessary. Military reform in Russia and successful economic modernisation, as well as wider political stabilisation in the country and in its relations with its neighbours, would be conducive factors for a change of thinking on TNW.

The highest chance for a reduction in the number of TNW exist in regards to the types that would be recognised by the Russian authorities as having little utility for a demonstrative attack or for destroying an enemy's forces. It seems that these could be higher-yield weapons or those assigned to short-range delivery means, for example, high-yield aerial bombs, nuclear warheads for air-defence systems and nuclear weapons for surface vessels (given the high probability the vessel would be destroyed in an early phase of a potential conflict).