

Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine and beyond: threat perceptions, capabilities and ambitions

by Polina Sinovets and Bettina Renz¹



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“Today the major part of the structure of Soviet power is committed to the perfection of the dictatorship and to the maintenance of the concept of Russia as in a state of siege, with the enemy lowering beyond the walls. And the millions of human beings who form that part of the structure of power must defend at all costs this concept of Russia's position, for without it they are themselves superfluous ...”

The gist of this 1947 quotation, attributable to the father of containment strategy George Kennan, is in some ways an accurate ideological summary of Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine.

Published on 26 December 2014,³ the new doctrine did not attract a large deal of public attention, especially in the West. Contrary to expectations and widespread rumours in the run-up of its publication, the Kremlin neither issued a doctrine of nuclear pre-emption, nor explicitly named its perceived foes. Indeed, at first sight, the new text looks very similar to the Military Doctrine of 2010. Like the previous doctrine, the current document contains some chapters dedicated to military dangers as well as military threats. Military *threats* include international factors and external events, which could trigger a conflict involving the use of armed force. In contrast, military *dangers* are situations with the potential to escalate into a military

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² X. [G. Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, p.571.

³ *Voyennaya Doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii* [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation], December 26, 2014, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>



threat. Like in the 2010 doctrine, the movement of military infrastructure of NATO member states towards Russia's borders as well as the development and deployment of strategic missile defence systems are considered military dangers. Large-scale military exercises in Russia's neighbourhood are described as threats. An important nuance in the 2014 doctrine is the fact that, unlike in the 2010 version, cooperation with NATO is no longer regarded as a means to reinforcing collective security.⁴ The 2014 doctrine merely mentions NATO as a potential partner for "equal dialogue." This seems to indicate that Moscow abandoned any hope or ambition for future cooperation with NATO. Instead, the doctrine emphasises the importance of cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) as well as partners in the CIS and OSCE. As Heidi Reisinger has put it, "the Russian leadership has turned its back on cooperation with Western partners and is working on the creation of alternatives."⁵

The 2014 doctrine, in comparison to its predecessor, stands out for emphasizing domestic threats to national security. Such threats include destabilisation of the political situation, including terrorist activities as well as outside political influence on Russia's population.

The 2014 military doctrine's major changes and messages can be summarised as follows:

- 1) The chapter on "military dangers" was expanded to include the "information space and the internal sphere." For the first time, the doctrine contains a chapter dedicated to domestic military dangers. This emphasises in particular the threat of what the doctrine calls "the informational influence over

the population ... aimed at undermining spiritual and patriotic traditions." This clearly demonstrates the Kremlin's anxiety over social stability, expressed in the explicit fear of subversive activities conducted by the intelligence services of Western states aimed at provoking social unrest in Russia. One of the principal refrains in the doctrine is the importance of state policy aimed at countering the influence of outside actors/the West in Russia's domestic affairs and in its so-called sphere of vital interests.

- 2) As discussed in more detail below, Russia's perceived need to defend what it sees as its vital sphere of interest is central to the 2014 doctrine. No state belonging to this sphere of influence is named explicitly, but Russia's concern over the establishment of regimes in "bordering states, whose policy threatens the interests of the Russian Federation," is unambiguous. According to Sergey Karaganov, the West misperceives Moscow's policy as being concentrated only on Ukraine, whereas Russia's aim is broader and aims at "preserving the territories, which must be considered of vital importance for its survival."⁶ In terms of averting perceived threats to Russia's vital sphere of influence the doctrine is sending a clear message to potential foes and neighbouring states that it not only regards military exercises and the mobilization of forces in bordering states as a military threat. The military dangers chapter also expresses concerns about "the use of information and communication technologies ... against sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity of certain states,

⁴ *Voyennaya Doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, February 5, 2010, http://news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/461

⁵ H. Reisinger, *Putin's neue Militaerdoktrin*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, February 19, 2015, www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/putins-neue-militaerdoktrin-gefahren-lauern-ueberall-1.2356395

⁶ S. Karaganov, *Prichina etogo konflikta – zabluzhdeniya Zapada, poetomu russkiye ne sdadutsya*, *Rossiya v Globalnoy Politike*, September 24, 2014, www.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Prichina-etogo-konflikta-zabluzhdeniya-Zapada-poetomu-russkie-ne-sdadutsya-16975



endangering peace and international security.” And in spite of the fact that this information has already been published at the Kremlin website, it is quite new in the text of the military doctrine. It seems to be a telling case of “mirror-imaging” that exactly such an approach characterises Russia’s current strategy vis-à-vis Ukraine.

3) For the first time, the 2014 doctrine mentions the “prompt global strike” concept as a military danger.⁷ It seeks to counter this challenge by strategic deterrence with high-precision conventional arms. Although the latter point was carried over from the 2010 doctrine, Russia’s ambitions to strengthen its non-nuclear deterrence capabilities look more credible today in light of extensive modernisation plans and investments in the development of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) and other high-tech weaponry. Although, as discussed further below, contemporary Russian conventional deterrence cannot yet compete with more developed militaries, and especially with NATO, the new doctrine clearly shows the country’s ambition to develop such capabilities in the long term.

Russia’s perception of strategic vulnerability

The term “neighbourhood” (more precisely “states bordering the Russian Federation”) is widely used in the 2014 doctrine. Some main military dangers and threats, according to the doctrine, stem from: a) regime change in the neighbourhood, and b) military exercises, as well as military mobilization in the neighbourhood.⁸ Clearly, these concerns are closely connected to current events in Ukraine.

However, as Karaganov pointed out above, it would be a strategic mistake to consider Russian interests as limited to Ukraine and perhaps Georgia.

Russia does not explicitly outline the perimeter of its sphere of vital interest. A likely explanation for this is the wish to create some strategic ambiguity for potential opponents, including NATO. Certainly, this ambiguity poses serious questions that the Alliance will need to address. Does “bordering states” include only those former Soviet states that still do not have NATO membership? Would Alliance membership guarantee that there will be no “little green men” on a country’s? It is impossible to answer these questions conclusively. However, it is clear that, although Russia’s geographical “red lines” are not explicitly defined, the 2014 military doctrine is sending clear message to Russia’s neighbours and beyond: the Kremlin considers the former Soviet area its vital sphere of interest and has a high level of commitment to its defence.

To a certain extent, the doctrine’s emphasis on the need to protect the country’s vital sphere of interest can be explained by peculiarities in Russian strategic culture, usually recognized as a deep-set feeling of insecurity and the desire for projecting a great power status.⁹ Despite the enormous size of Russia, the strategic depth of its European territory is limited, and it has regularly been attacked and occasionally invaded by different enemies throughout history: Tatars, Poles, French, and Germans – some of whom were successful in reaching Moscow. The 2014 doctrine, as did its predecessors, addresses a multitude of geographical threats, including potential instability and conflict in the Caucasus and Central Asia and so-called “emerging security challenges” like transnational terrorism and organised crime. However, in addition to this, all post-Soviet Russian

⁷ The concept of Prompt Global Strike was developed by the U.S. department of defense. It enables US to develop non-nuclear weapons capable of hitting distant targets anywhere around the world within just one hour’s notice.

⁸ *Voyennaya Doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, December 26, 2014, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>

⁹ I. Facon, “The Russian Way of War: In Crisis?,” in *The Oxford Handbook of War*, ed. Julian Lindley- French and Yves Boyer, Oxford University Press, January 2012.



military doctrines and other security documents have continuously emphasised “traditional” threats, such as the need to project global power and compete with rival state actors and military alliances, especially in the West. From this point of view, Russia’s perceived vital sphere of influence is to be maintained as an important buffer zone, which explains the fact that the enlargement of NATO has been consistently seen as a central threat to Russia’s national interests and security since the early post-Soviet years. This point is important particularly for NATO vis-à-vis the potential success of any renewed future cooperation with Russia. It also goes some way towards explaining Russia’s resistance against the costs of economic sanctions and its readiness to persist engaging in the Ukrainian conflict.

Another interesting nuance of the 2014 doctrine is the inclusion of the Arctic in Russia’s vital sphere of interest for the first time. In connection with this, some previous comments by Vladimir Putin on the Arctic issue further confirms Russia’s feeling of strategic vulnerability. When in 2013 a Professor of the Higher School of Economics, Sergey Medvedev, suggested that Russian should take control over the Arctic for the benefit of the international community as a whole, Putin dismissed his remarks as “unpatriotic.” He also reminded the audience that US nuclear submarines based near Norway would take only 16-17 minutes for their SLBMs to strike Moscow.¹⁰ The inclusion of the Arctic in Russia’s proclaimed vital sphere of interest in the 2014 doctrine could be interpreted as a signifier by Russia to other states with a stake in the Arctic region that perceived undue influence will not be acceptable.

The restoration of Russia's great power status and military might?

A peculiarity of Russian strategic culture is the clear interconnectedness of the “greatness” of the state and its military power. This idea was borne out by the experience of the Russian empire, when military power became the “chief institutional foundation of Russian statehood.”¹¹ This peculiarity goes some way towards explaining the renewed attention paid to the restoration of Russia’s great power status and military might under the Putin regime.

Conventional military capabilities

Until recently, conventional capabilities and deterrence were considered Russia’s weakest points, although the situation has started to change. A significant and steady rise in the defence budget over the past decade in addition to the implementation of systematic reforms since 2008 has led to a resurgence of Russian conventional military capabilities. However, conclusions that the Russians have “regained their capability to mount large conventional military operations [and are] now some years ahead of us if we started to train for the same thing today” require contextualisation.¹² Recent improvements in Russian military capabilities – though impressive – need to be seen against the background of almost total neglect throughout much of the post-Soviet era. Boris Yeltsin’s relationship with the armed forces was shaped by mutual mistrust and he lacked both the political will and financial means required for pushing through fundamental modernisation. Although several rounds of reforms were announced during his presidency, they amounted to little more than a

¹⁰ *Putin nazval professora VSHE “Pridurkom,”* Interfax, October 13, 2013, http://tvrain.ru/articles/putin_nazval_professora_vshe_pridurkom-353637/

¹¹ F.W. Ermarth, “Russian Strategic Culture in Flix Back to the Future?” *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction. Culturally-based insights into Comparative National Security Policy Making*, ed. J.J. Johnson, K.K. Kartchner and J.A. Larsen, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.

¹² UK House of Commons Defence Committee, *Oral evidence: Towards the next security and defence review*, Part II: NATO, HC 358, June 24, 2014, <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/defence-committee/towards-the-next-defence-and-security-review-part-two-nato/oral/11114.html>



scaling down of the remnants of the Soviet army he had inherited. Throughout the 1990s the Russian armed forces received next to no new hardware like tanks, aircraft or naval vessels, not even to mention the high-tech equipment their Western counterparts were increasingly growing accustomed to. With a defence budget that had collapsed from more than \$ 300 billion towards the end of the Cold-war era to a mere \$ 20.8 billion by 1998 there was no money for training flights or large-scale military exercises.¹³ As a result of low salaries, poor working conditions and corruption, the prestige of the military profession slumped, making any ambitions Yeltsin might have had to do away with the unpopular system of conscription and move towards a professional military a pipe dream.

The Russian military's fortunes changed with Putin's election to the presidency in 2000. From the outset he afforded military-related matters more political importance and pledged to return the defence budget to a more realistic level. Assisted by a recovering economy and growing GDP, not least due to rising oil and gas prices, the Russian defence budget has increased to almost \$ 90 billion by 2013. The boost in funding was accompanied by thorough and systematic plans for reforms, announced by then-Defence Minister Anatoly Serdiukov in 2008. In addition to emphasising the need to procure new equipment with the goal of modernising 70% of military hardware and technology by 2020, the reforms sought to increase the general efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the armed forces: streamlining central command bodies; decreasing the size of the officer corps, which had made the Russian military particularly top-heavy; cutting the number of military units in favour of a smaller band with permanent readiness status; and

driving up the recruitment of professional soldiers to lessen reliance on conscription. As the 2008 reforms were distinguished by unprecedented political will at the highest level, significant structural changes were implemented with impressive speed. The modernisation of equipment has also proceeded at a rapid pace. Some questions remain about the Russian defence industry's ability to deliver certain products in the areas of sophisticated computer technology and shipbuilding. Western economic sanctions will exacerbate this problem. The inability to acquire such technology domestically meant that defence procurement included foreign imports for the first time in recent years. As none of Russia's allies within the former Soviet space are in a position to supply the latest in military equipment, purchases have been made from Western states, including the US, France, the United Kingdom and Germany. Of course, the sanctions have closed Russia's access to Western advanced military technology, at least for the foreseeable future. Having said this, the achievement of 2020 procurement and modernisation targets does not seem entirely unrealistic.¹⁴ Problems with the recruitment and retention of military personnel, however, do not yet seem to have been resolved. On the one hand, serious efforts have been made to improve service conditions, including a significant increase of salaries paid to officers and privates. On the other hand, the continuing low prestige of military service, coupled with Russia's demographic challenges, has meant that the recruitment of sufficient numbers of conscripts, let alone enough soldiers for a fully professional force, continues to be a challenge.

Improvements in Russian military capabilities since 2000 are certainly impressive. However, given the neglect the armed forces had experienced

¹³ Figures in \$ US in constant 2011 prices and exchange rates as per the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2014, www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database

¹⁴ For a more detailed assessment of rearmament see Dmitry Gorenburg's posts on the state of procurement plans of the Russian ground forces, navy and air force posted on his <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/> blog on January 5, 14 and 27 respectively.



throughout the 1990s, recent developments first of all should be evaluated as salvaging measures that were long overdue, rather than *per se* as a quest for “remilitarisation.” Even a cursory look at developments in the Russian defence budget supports this point. Throughout Yeltsin’s presidency the defence budget consistently fell to reach a low of \$ 20.8 billion in 1998. To put this figure into context, the United Kingdom and France, both with much smaller countries to secure and militaries to maintain, in the same year spent \$ 46.8 billion and over \$ 60 billion respectively. Although the Russian defence budget rose steadily starting from 2000 it only caught up and overtook UK defence spending by 2009 and that of France by 2011. With a budget of around \$ 90 billion by 2013, Russian defence spending is still a far cry from the around \$ 619 billion spent by the US or even the \$ 171 spent by China in the same year.¹⁵ Especially compared to China, whose current impressive expenditure on defence increased from a budget not dissimilar to Russia’s in 1998 (\$ 29.9 billion), the rate of change in Russia’s defence budget appears not all that spectacular. A look at Russian defence spending as percentage of GDP further puts increases experienced under Putin or the perception of “militarisation” into perspective. As table 1 below shows, the percentage of GDP expended on defence has been fairly consistent throughout the post-Cold war era. Average spending as percentage of GDP under Yeltsin (1992 – 1999) was 4.1 percent, which even exceeded the average of 3.7 percent of the GDP spent on defence under Putin and Medvedev between 2000 and 2013.

1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
4.8	4.5	4.9	4.1	4.0	4.3

1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
2.9	3.3	3.6	3.8	4.1	3.9

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
3.5	3.6	3.5	3.4	3.3	4.1

2010	2011	2012	2013
3.8	3.7	3.9	4.1

Table 1: Russian military expenditure as percentage of gross domestic product

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2014

Whilst in a European context Russia’s 4.1 percent of GDP spent on defence in 2013 are, of course, far above average (only Azerbaijan spent more with 4.7 percent), the country is roughly on a par with the US, where 3.8 percent of the GDP were spent on defence in 2013 (a decrease from 4.4 percent in 2012).

An issue worth mentioning here is the fact that in 2015 Russia finally withdrew from the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). From a practical standpoint this might not mean a great deal, as Russia ceased abiding by its obligations under the Treaty some years ago. Moscow’s subsequent announcement on the future of the CFE looked to be symbolic, implying the final removal of the integrated CFE-based confidence-building and arms control measures, as an integral part of the security system.¹⁶ This may or may not signal Russia’s readiness to escalate the conflict were NATO to increase its pressure over the Ukrainian issue. The

¹⁵ Figures in \$ US in constant 2011 prices and exchange rates as per the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2014, www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database

¹⁶ I. Antony, 12 Mar.2015: *Death of the CFE Treaty: The need to move arms control back to the centre of security policy*, SIPRI, March 17, 2015, www.sipri.org/media/expert-comments/12-mar-2015-death-of-the-cfe-treaty



recent large-scale military exercises, demonstrating the rapid deployment of the “Iskander” missiles in the Kaliningrad oblast, seem to add credibility to this signal.¹⁷ Alternatively, it may carry the message that Moscow is ready to start a dialogue over the proposal of a new treaty on conventional forces in Europe. Such an ambiguous “carrot and stick” approach seems to be a characteristic of the 2014 doctrine, as currently demonstrated by Russia’s behaviour.

Russian conventional military capabilities have experienced a resurgence of kind in recent years. The 2008 reform programme’s structural and organisational changes as well as a significantly bigger spending compared to the 1990s have borne fruits and these efforts will continue making the Russian military increasingly more effective. However, these developments need to be seen within the context of neglect of the armed forces throughout the 1990s. The idea that the Russian military transformed itself into a conventional rival to NATO within the matter of a few years is simply unrealistic. Large-scale military exercises Russia is again able to stage, like *Zapad* 2013 or the snap exercise held near the Ukrainian border in spring 2014, are certainly intimidating in terms of the sheer size of troops deployed and serve as a show of force to its neighbours and to the West. However, the bulk of the troops deployed in these exercises continue to be poorly trained conscripts and the combat readiness of the soldiers involved remains far from certain.¹⁸ Russia’s operational performance in Crimea was down to small units of elite special forces, which account for less than

one percent of Russia’s armed forces overall.¹⁹ From this point of view it needs to be borne in mind, as Dmitry Gorenburg has argued, that Russian operations in Crimea and in East Ukraine tell us nothing about “the extent to which the Russian military has increased its ability to conduct complex combined arms operations that involve ground, naval and air units all working together against a capable enemy.”²⁰ Recent evidence also suggests that the crisis in Ukraine has overstretched Russian military capabilities, and limitations in military and financial resources mean that military operations in and around Ukraine could not be sustained for more than one year.²¹

Russian “hybrid warfare” tactics have attracted particular attention in the aftermath of Crimea and in view of the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine. However, as discussed elsewhere, the implications of this particularly vis-à-vis NATO defence capabilities are not straightforward.²² Crimea demonstrated that Russian military thinking was not as stuck in Cold-war conventional warfighting as often presumed. It also showed that the 2008 military reform aims of increasing mobility and rapid reaction capabilities were achieved inasmuch as the country now has the capacity for well-coordinated special operations work. However, the effectiveness of similar approaches in countries other than former Soviet states that cannot match these capabilities is far from certain. As a result, to make up for shortcomings in conventional capabilities, Russia’s nuclear arsenal is likely to continue to form the backbone

¹⁷ Vzgl'yad, *U NATO net zashchity ot operatsii, khod kotoroy otrabatyvaet Rossiya*, 2015, <http://vz.ru/politics/2015/3/17/734911.html>

¹⁸ See also: J. Norberg, *The use of Russia’s military in the Crimea crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 13, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/13/use-of-russia-s-military-in-crimean-crisis/>

¹⁹ I. Sutyagin quoted in UK House of Commons Defence Committee, *Oral evidence: Towards the next security and defence review*, Part II: NATO’, HC 358, June 24, 2014.

²⁰ D. Gorenburg, *Crimea taught is a lesson, but not about how the Russian military fights*, War on the Rocks (blog), May 14, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/05/crimea-taught-us-a-lesson-but-not-about-how-the-russian-military-fights/>

²¹ I. Sutyagin, *Russian Forces in Ukraine*, RUSI Briefing Paper, March 2015, p. 2, www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/201503_BP_Russian_Forces_in_Ukraine_FINAL.pdf

²² H. Reisinger and A. Golts, *Russia’s hybrid warfare: waging war below the radar of traditional collective defence*, NATO Defence College, Research Paper No. 105, November 2014, www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=455



of the country's deterrence against the West for the foreseeable future.

The role of nuclear weapons

Nuclear weapons continue to form the cornerstone of the Russian deterrence arsenal. Besides the seat in the UN Security Council, the only superpower criterion Moscow inherited from the Soviet Union was nuclear weapons, so they still play a paramount role not only in Russian military strategy, but also in its worldview.

In particular, nuclear weapons occupy special place in Russian religious, ideological as well as political posturing. In particular, the Russian Orthodox Church accepts the idea of a nuclear Russia in the spirit of a so-called Russian Doctrine, or nationalist worldview, based on the idea of Russian consolidation and confrontation with the West. In particular, Patriarch Cyril, who was appointed Honorary Professor of the Russian Academy of Strategic Nuclear Forces in 2010,²³ publically referred to the opening of the Federal Nuclear Centre in the city of the holy Seraphim Sarovsky as “God’s commandment” (“bozhiy promysel”). He has also often stated that nuclear weapons “provide sovereignty to Russia.”²⁴

In the words of Egor Holmogorov, journalist and philosopher, former editor of the *Edinaya Rossiya* website and author of the Atomic Orthodoxy concept: “In order to fulfil this mission successfully [to approach God], Russia cannot be an Orthodox state only; it should be a powerful state so that nobody and no weapon could silence our testimony

of Christ.”²⁵ The main principle of the “Atomic Orthodoxy” idea, according to Holmogorov, is that “to stay Orthodox, Russia should be a strong nuclear power, and to stay a nuclear power it should be Orthodox.” Holmogorov takes this idea from the concept of nuclear parity, which not only prevents states from waging war, but brings their rivalry into the mental and spiritual arena. That is why, together with a traditional military defence, “the Russian State has to protect the nation, by conceptual means from mental threats.”²⁶

From the political standpoint Moscow’s attitude towards nuclear weapons was perfectly expressed by Russian experts, who always attributed the United States’ support of global zero to its desire to “secure its overwhelming military superiority in the field of high precision munitions and to diminish the nuclear potential of other nuclear states by radical nuclear disarmament and the creation of a global American BMD system.”²⁷ This situation, the reasoning goes, is unfolding at a time when a global struggle for domination still exists and the predictability of the Cold War has been replaced by multiple sources of instability and growing international asymmetries. This, in turn, increases the possibility of war between Russia and the West. According to Nikolai Kosolapov, “a war between the United States and Russia appears possible now, not only technically, but also politically and psychologically. The two countries are gradually approaching the line at which they risk being much closer to war than the USSR and the United States ever were.”²⁸

In spite of the fears expressed by some observers in the run-up to the publication of the 2014 doctrines that

²³ RIA Novosti, *Patriarkh Kirill stal pochetnym professorom akademii RVSN*, April 7, 2010, <http://ria.ru/religion/20100407/219137447.html#ixzz3UZvKTLiq>

²⁴ Grani.ru, *Patriarkh Sozdanie yadernogo oruzhiya - bozhiy promysel*, September 12, 2009, <http://grani.ru/War/Arms/Nukes/m.157112.html>

²⁵ Y. Kholmogorov, *Atomnoe Pravoslavie*, Pravaya.ru, 2007, www.pravaya.ru/leftright/472/12686

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ S. Kortunov, “Yaderniy Gambit Baraka Obamy,” *Indeks Bezopasnosti* No. 3, 2011, p. 42.

²⁸ N. Kosolapov, *Porogovyy uroven i veroyatnost konflikta SShAs Rossiey*, Mezhdunarodnye Protssesy, November 12, 2013, www.intertrends.ru/eighteenth/003.htm



Russia might decide to lower its nuclear threshold in response to heightened tensions with the West, the nuclear component of the latest doctrine did not change substantially. On the contrary, the notion of a nuclear first strike in “situations critical for national security,” which had been mentioned in the 2000 doctrine, disappeared from the text already in the 2010 edition. Having said this, the idea underlying this concept was not abandoned altogether. The current doctrine still envisages the potential use of nuclear weapons in two types of conflict: large-scale and regional ones. This typology had already been introduced in the 2000 doctrine to define the role of nuclear weapons as a deterrent against any aggression against the Russian Federation, including the use of conventional force. The fact that the main task assigned to Russian military forces in the current doctrine is not only to defeat potential enemies, but also to compel them to stop military actions against Russia, is reminiscent of the concept of “tailored damage,” which was developed in the 2000 military doctrine and is still implicit in the most recent doctrine. “Tailored damage” was defined in 2000 as “damage subjectively unacceptable to the enemy, as being higher than the advantages the aggressor expects to gain from the application of military force.”²⁹ The advantage of using the term “tailored damage” is its greater flexibility compared to the classical notion of “unacceptable damage,” as it links the damage, necessary for effective deterrence to the opponent’s specific stakes in a conflict. The “tailored damage” concept is addressed to the two types of conflict – deterrence of the large-scale war, and the deterrence of a regional war with the use of conventional weapons.

The implications of the “tailored damage” concept

for any potential adversary are clear: intervention by outside actors into Russia’s vital sphere of influence will be deterred by the country’s full spectrum of capabilities to compel the enemy “to stop military actions” and to withdraw from the region. For NATO this implies that military support to Ukraine or Georgia might not be an option unless it is willing to risk nuclear escalation, at least in theory. The 2014 doctrine contains a similar warning in specifying that any military exercises held close to Russia’s borders are considered a military threat. In this context, it is clear that Russian tactical nuclear weapons (of which Russia still has the largest stockpile, totalling more than 2,000 warheads³⁰) are still seen as a compensatory measure for conventional inferiority vis-à-vis the West and NATO. Indeed, official statements prove that some tactical as well as certain strategic nuclear weapons (equipped on the bombers Tu-22M3) have already been deployed in Crimea.³¹

Although the 2014 doctrine did not significantly change its stance on strategic nuclear weapons, the number of deployed Russian nuclear warheads has actually increased. The New START Treaty biannual exchange of data shows that, contrary to the imposed limitations (1550 warheads and 700 carriers deployed), since 2012 Russia increased the number of deployed warheads from 1,492 to 1,643, thus exceeding treaty limits. For the moment the significance of this should not be overstated, as both sides agreed to comply with the treaty until 2018. Having said this, it could be regarded as a gesture aimed at catching public attention domestically and internationally. The number of deployed delivery vehicles was increased from 494 to 528, which still keeps Russia within the START limits, but it might indicate Russia’s desire to demonstrate its current

²⁹ Nezavisimaya Gazeta, *Voyennaya Doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, April 21, 2000, www.ng.ru/politics/2000-04-22/5_doktrina.html

³⁰ The Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation, *Fact Sheet: Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories in 2014*, April 30, 2014, http://armscontrolcenter.org/issues/nuclearweapons/articles/fact_sheet_global_nuclear_weapons_inventories_in_2014/

³¹ Espresso TV, *Turchinov rospoviv yaku yadernu zbroyu Rosia roztashuvala v Krymu*, May 28, 2015, http://espresso.tv/news/2015/05/28/turchynov_rozpoviv_yaku_yadernu_zbroyu_rosiya_roztashuvala_v_krymu



nuclear capabilities more explicitly.³² Of course, this step is more a symbolic flexing of muscles than a real act of intimidation. However, it may be interpreted as a potential signal to the West, especially as the gap between Russia and the US in this respect is expected to grow in the coming decade. Owing to the planned mass withdrawal of the old ICBM-like SS-18s in 2022 and a low deployment rate for new systems (even considering new rapid modernization programmes), by 2020 Russia is projected to have 220-250 ICBMs, three or four ballistic missile submarines with 44-60 deployed submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and 40-50 heavy bombers. In other words, Russia will have 350-400 delivery vehicles and 1,000-1,100 warheads.³³ The START statistics for 2015 show that today Russia is still mostly relying on old Soviet ICBMs, produced by Ukrainian industries. The rising number of warheads is mostly due to the increase in warheads on the delivery systems, a process which will increase the percentage of MIRved ICBMs from 35% in 2013 to 70% in 2022.³⁴ This step also might be regarded symbolic for the time being but, taking into consideration the rapid shift in the global security situation, it might carry a number of risks for future strategic stability. The assumption is that Russia will substitute its old, outdated ICBMs with new, solely Russian-made ones by 2022.

Certain plans in this field have already been adopted. According to the state armament programme, the new edition of the “Topol-M,” called “Yars,” started deployment in 2009. From 2018 onwards, the “SS-18” will be gradually substituted by the new heavy liquid-fuel ICBM “Sarmat,” capable of carrying ten nuclear warheads.³⁵ Unlike the modernisation

plans for conventional capabilities discussed above, this domain will not substantively be affected by Western economic sanctions, as most nuclear technologies were inherited from the Soviet Union and the investments in research and development have already been made.

Missile defence – a stumbling block or real chances for cooperation?

The 2014 doctrine seemingly has kept open a window of opportunity for cooperation with the West by referring to the possibility of creating “common missile defense systems with equitable Russian participation.”³⁶ Unfortunately, it is less than clear whether this point is aimed at the Russian public, rather than presenting a real opportunity for re-engagement with the West. In some ways, it is reminiscent of the spirit of Soviet “peace-making” initiatives, which were presented to domestic audiences as a struggle for peace at a time when official military doctrine called for preemptive nuclear action.

It is a fact that Russia considered the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001 as a major strike against the “cornerstone of strategic stability.” In Moscow’s eyes, the US withdrawal was a first step towards nullifying the deterring effects of mutually assured destruction, which maintained a strategic balance between the two nuclear giants during the Cold War, and is still seen by many nuclear proponents as relevant today. In light of this any subsequent US plans of a related nature,

³² U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, *New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms*, April 6, 2012, www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/178058.htm ; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, *New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms*, September 1, 2014, www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/235606.htm

³³ A. Arbatov, *Gambit or Endgame?* The New State of Arms Control, *The Carnegie Papers*, March 2011, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/gambit_endgame.pdf

³⁴ H. Kristensen and R. Norris, *Russian Nuclear Forces in 2014*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists No. 70, 2014, <http://bos.sagepub.com/content/70/2/75.full.pdf+html>

³⁵ N. Sokov, *Upping the Ante: The Implications of Russia’s Pursuit of Precision Conventional Strike Weapons*, December 20, 2013, WMD Junction, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, http://wmdjunction.com/131220_russia_precision_conventional_strike.htm

³⁶ *Voyennaya Doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, February 5, 2010, http://news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/461



for instance the deployment of missile defence in Europe, were interpreted by Russia as an attempt to undermine its capabilities for strategic deterrence.

The Obama administration's "reset" policy in the dialogue with Russia gave hope for the possibility of NATO-Russia cooperation over a missile defence project. This was proposed to Russia at the 2010 NATO Summit in Lisbon, but it did not deliver the desired results. Moscow met this gesture with continued opposition to any European missile defence system that did not include binding guarantees to respect Russia's nuclear deterrent.

It is unlikely to have come as a surprise to Moscow that its own demands regarding the creation of common missile defence systems were unacceptable to the US and NATO. Russia pushed the idea of creating a system where it would be responsible for the security of the Eastern flank of NATO (Poland and the Baltic states), and also be able to provide common missile defence capabilities if considered necessary. This proposal challenged NATO's Article 5 commitment to collective defense and also was rejected by the United States, which does not consider missile defence as a subject for bargaining. From this point of view, the 2014 military doctrine's article on "equal cooperation" on missile defence might not so much be a step towards cooperation, but rather Russia's demand for parity with NATO. If indeed this article is intended foremost for a domestic audience, as speculated above, it could be used as the pretext for the growing militarization of the Russian economy. Officially, Moscow professes to strive for dialogue and cooperation. At the same time NATO is portrayed in a negative light, rejecting the Kremlin's peaceful initiatives and inspiring anti-Russian revolutions in the neighbourhood. Again, such an interpretation of events evokes images of past practices that emphasised the purportedly peaceful initiatives of the Soviet Union whilst blaming the West for warmongering.

Conclusion

To what extent does the 2014 military doctrine add anything substantially new to the understanding of contemporary Russian politics? Although on the surface the 2014 doctrine does not differ significantly from its previous versions, the devil is as always in the detail. And this detail, as it turns out, is not very reassuring. The main theme of the doctrine is rivalry with the West, which it politely calls "equitable cooperation" whilst avoiding the word "partnership." It is important to bear in mind that the doctrine has two audiences: internal and external. The internal Russian audience receives the message that all signs of social unrest in the state, as well as Moscow's role and position in neighbourhood crises, are the result of the West's unlimited geopolitical aspirations and of the activities of their foreign services, aimed at undermining the prestige of the Kremlin. The second message is that Russia should confront these challenges with dignity, while developing conventional and nuclear arms. "Si vis pacem, para bellum" (if you want peace, prepare for war), as one expert kindly characterized the 2014 Military Doctrine.³⁷

For foreign audiences the message also appears to be quite clear. Changes made since the 2010 version explain Russia's vital concerns vis-à-vis its neighbourhood, which are discussed under both headings of military dangers and military threats. The implication of the latter is to show potential adversaries, including NATO, that intervention in Russia's neighbourhood could, in certain circumstances, be interpreted by Russia as a *casus belli*. Those states considered part of this neighbourhood are not explicitly named in order to preserve ambiguity. Overall, the 2014 doctrine gives an impression of déjà-vu, and harks back to the great power doctrines of the past. In the manner of the Monroe doctrine, it sends Western powers the message that Russia's neighbourhood should be

³⁷ A. Baklitsky, *Si vis pacem*, December 29, 2014, www.pircenter.org/blog/view/id/180



regarded as its sphere of influence, which Moscow is ready to defend, if necessary by all means. The implicit concern in the doctrine over the threat to Kremlin-friendly regimes in neighbouring states is like a modern version of the Brezhnev doctrine, where direct military intervention is camouflaged by hybrid war-type activity.

The successful use of hybrid tactics in Crimea and to an extent in eastern Ukraine has been the Kremlin's most successful military endeavour in the past two decades for those states that Russia considers to be a part of its sphere of vital interests, this is a major concern, especially since those outside of the NATO alliance do not have the capacity to stand up against such approaches alone. Improving conventional capabilities and strong nuclear posture will only exacerbate such fears, as they deter any powerful actor or nation from interfering in conflicts in Russia's neighbourhood.