

A RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE FUTURE OF ARMS CONTROL AND MUTUAL DETERRENCE¹

Vladimir Rybachenkov²

There is a basic contradiction in the concept of nuclear deterrence as an inalienable element of military-political relations between Russia and the USA. On the one hand, 20 years after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the end of ideological confrontation there is a growing understanding that mutually assured destruction is a relic of the Cold War, since it staves off already nonexistent threat of a premeditated mass attack of great powers against each other and does not deter the real challenges of modern times – international terrorism, proliferation of WMD and means of their delivery, ethnic and religious conflicts. On the other hand, both countries declare that as long as nuclear weapons exist they will continue to sustain a safe, secure and effective nuclear arsenal to deter potential adversaries and reassure allies of security commitments to them.

Though the Military doctrine of Russia and the US Nuclear Posture Review (both documents adopted in 2010) stipulate that the use of nuclear weapons would only be considered in extreme circumstance when the very existence of the state is under a threat, there is still a risk of an unauthorized or accidental launch. Moreover, in the era of globalization nuclear deterrence is inevitably conducive to further nuclear proliferation.

A question emerges at this point: what should be done to move our countries away from relations framed by a model of mutually assured destruction which continues to prevail in the US – Russian dialogue? The logical answer would be to proceed gradually with further reductions of nuclear arms levels on the basis of the minimal sufficiency principle, to enhance strategic stability in the context of equal security for all and to exclude the possibility of first nuclear strike or missile launch due to a technical failure or shortage of time for the political leaders to make a decision.

The New START Treaty, which reduced nuclear arsenals of Russia and the USA by 30% in comparison with the 2003 Moscow Treaty, made an important contribution to building predictability and confidence between our countries. A stage was set to further reductions eventually going down to the level of 1000 deployed warheads but evidently this would require involvement of other nuclear states.

¹ Text of presentation at the Fourth Annual Nuclear Deterrence Summit, Arlington, VA, USA, February 14-17, 2012.

² Senior Research Scientist, Center for Arms Control, Energy & Environment Studies.

In the course of last 20 years substantial efforts were undertaken by both countries to diminish the possibility of nuclear launches resulting from accidents, unauthorized actions or misinterpretation. The most prominent among them were:

- The USA and Russia put heavy bombers off full time alert;
- “Open Ocean Targeting“ was mutually agreed upon meaning that in case of an accidental launch a missile would land in the open ocean. The US Nuclear Posture Review considered the possibility of reducing alert rates for ICBMs and at-see rates of SSBNs but concluded that such steps could reduce crisis stability by giving an adversary the incentive to attack before “re-alerting“ was complete. Similar attitude was expressed by the Russian military who think time is not yet ripe for such a move which does not mean that further exploration of this important issue should be discontinued;
- In accordance with the 1991 Presidential Initiatives all Russian tactical nuclear weapons were removed from delivery means and placed at central storage facilities within national territory with adequate safety and security measures³.

It goes without saying that the best way to discard the concept of nuclear deterrence would be to achieve a world without nuclear weapons but the implementation of this idea put forward by President Obama in Prague almost three years ago may take several decades. It is worth noting that the Russian expert community is of the view that giving up nuclear weapons does not mean “green light“ to regional or local wars with resort to conventional arms or systems using new physical principles. In other words a non-nuclear world is equivalent not to the current world after deduction of nuclear weapons but to a transformed international community based on the principles of equal security to all countries independent of their size and military power.

It is also evident that arms control remains a key element in a gradual move towards the world without nuclear weapons. Impartial assessment of arms control process shows that nuclear potentials of Russia and the USA were steadily going down during last years. The 1994 START I Treaty resulted in the removal of about 80% of all strategic nuclear weapons in existence at the time. The 2010 New START Treaty further provided for fourfold reduction of deployed strategic nuclear weapons and twofold reduction of strategic carriers.

Nevertheless, pessimistic appraisals concerning the prospects of further nuclear cuts started showing up recently in both countries. The gist of this mood is that the US – Russian reset is allegedly in recess and arms control process mothballed due to the fact that the two countries are in disagreement over the missile defense issue. Moreover, some American independent experts asserted that 2011 was the year when the momentum of the new era slowed down in comparison with the 2010 successes since

³ Statement of the Russian delegation at the first session of the NPT Preparatory Committee, New York, April 11, 2002

the CTBT was not ratified or even seriously discussed in the USA and negotiations on FM Cut off Treaty remained stuck in the CD in Geneva.

The overall situation was aggravated by the exchange of harsh rhetoric on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In Russia some military experts went on claiming that one of the goals of the US nuclear weapons complex refurbishment plan was the production of so called clean bomb as though there were no unambiguous statement in the Nuclear Posture Review that the US will not develop new nuclear warheads. A newly elected Member of the Russian Parliament started his political activity by declaring that a weak Russia seems to be a preferable partner to the USA by reason of the American international predominance policy – a vision that is not necessarily shared by all my compatriots.

In the US Senate the nomination of a new Ambassador to Moscow was coupled with a demand not to disclose confidential information on SM-3 Aegis missile for the European missile defense system to Russians under pretext that it could be passed on to Iranians. Such an assumption seems to ignore a spirit of cooperation between our countries in trying to reach a mutually accepted settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue. Some American experts started dramatizing a point that Russia was supposedly on the verge of launching a new arms race but this view does not correspond to reality. In fact the current military reform in Russia has a declared goal of restoring the defense potential drastically reduced during a long and devastating period of economic crisis and many years of scarce financing. Anyway, the defense budget of Russia even in 2020 will be at least seven times less than that of the USA. Frankly speaking I do not think that the above mentioned lamentations may have a serious impact on US – Russian relations but surely they do not help to enhance mutual confidence.

Thereupon it would be appropriate to say that when President D. Medvedev expressed concerns last November over US plans to deploy missile defenses in Europe and announced some eventual countermeasures in case these concerns were not taken into consideration he stressed that the doors for negotiation were not closed. In this context are also worth noting the words of the US Secretary of State H. Clinton pronounced at a recent swearing-in ceremony for Ambassador-designate to Russia Mike McFaul: “The Administration has placed a particular emphasis on working together with Russia, one of the most complex and consequential relations we have with any nation in the world“.

I do not share the view of those who consider the year 2011 as a failure for the arms control. First of all it was the year of a smooth New START Treaty implementation with 16 inspections in Russia and 17 inspections in the USA, and 3 exchanges of a comprehensive data base, creating, as R. Gottemoeller rightly put it, a living document that provides a comprehensive look into other’s strategic nuclear forces. In addition to that the Plutonium management and disposition Agreement entered into force which will irreversibly and transparently dispose of the equivalent of 17 thousand nuclear weapons worth of plutonium by burning it in the fuel of nuclear power plants in both countries.

Another issue, which may impede the launch of substantive negotiations on further nuclear cuts is tactical nuclear weapons (TNW).

While the recently adopted military doctrine of Russia does not provide specific information on the TNW role in the national security policy independent experts concur that Russia's apparently increasing reliance on nuclear weapons, including the tactical component, is determined by geostrategic and economic factors. Firstly, as opposed to the USA, Russia is within the reach of nuclear weapons of several de jure and de facto nuclear states and this reality must be adequately tackled. Secondly, Russian Nuclear Posture is directly linked to Russia's perception of NATO superiority in conventional forces in Europe against the background of a weakened military capability of Russia⁴. In this context it would be fair to speak about a compensatory role of Russian TNW vis-a-vis not only NATO but also against eventual threats from China though such a perspective is not officially articulated. Moreover, American TNW in Europe due to their range and location are considered by Moscow as a supplement to the US strategic forces adding over 10% to the New START Treaty accountable limits.

To sum up, a standing Russian position on TNW, which is repeatedly confirmed by the high-ranking officials is that the withdrawal of US TNW from Europe constitutes a precondition for beginning substantive negotiations with the USA on this issue⁵. The dialogue is complicated by other difficult subjects in the security agenda such as missile defenses and arrangements concerning conventional forces in Europe.

At the same time the size and location of the Russian TNW stockpile has become a serious source of concern to the USA and other NATO country-members. The final US Senate resolution on New START Treaty ratification stipulates "initiation, following consultations with NATO Allies but not later one year after New START entry into force, negotiations with Russia on agreement to address disparity between TNW stockpiles of Russia and the USA and to secure and reduce TNW in verifiable manner."

The Nuclear Posture Review reiterated the reasons for the presence of the US TNW in Europe, namely maintenance of NATO cohesion and reassurance of Allies. The NATO Strategic Concept adopted in November 2010 underlined the importance of seeking Russian agreement to increase transparency of Russian TNW in Europe and relocating these weapons away from the territory of NATO member-states. This document also stated that the supreme guarantee of the NATO security is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particular those of the USA. Such a stance apparently reflected a scant support of TNW in Europe among the US military. For example, general J. Cartwright, the Vice-Chairman of Chiefs of Staff, recently stated that these arms do not serve a military function not already addressed by US strate-

⁴ General Makarov: Tactical nuclear weapons – a deterrence against enormous arms stockpiles accumulated in Europe. ITAR –TASS, December 10, 2008.

⁵ Remarks and Responses to questions by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov at the press conference at MFA on 2010 foreign policy outcomes, January 13, 2011.

gic and conventional forces⁶. Several NATO member-countries such as Germany, Belgium, Netherlands and Norway would support withdrawal as long as it involves reciprocal measures from Russia. The more recent NATO members from Central and Eastern Europe resist change because for them the American nuclear presence symbolizes strategic link with the USA.

Interestingly, the statement that the credibility of NATO's extended deterrence would necessarily require a TNW presence in Europe contradicts the situation in Asia: the USA has extended its nuclear umbrella over Japan, South Korea and Australia for two decades without having stationed nuclear weapons on the territory of these states. Additional factor in favor of the US TNW removal from Europe – enormous costs of the forthcoming NATO dual capable aircraft replacement to be partially covered by the European member-countries currently under economic crisis.

After the Lisbon Summit the North Atlantic Council was tasked with conducting NATO Defense and Deterrence Posture Review to further discuss the role of nuclear weapons and future relations with Russia. The document is slated to be presented at the NATO Summit in May 2012. This event could become a tipping point in shaping cooperative approaches with Russia towards the TNW issue but one can presume that no recommendation on TNW withdrawal from Europe will be put forward in Chicago due to serious divide among NATO member-countries on this matter.

Taking into account existing divergences of views on the ways of tackling the TNW problem I am inclined to share the view of Senator S. Nunn who recently stated that a treaty-based approach is not a priority at this time and one should rather concentrate on coordinated unilateral transparency measures⁷. In practical terms it means that a more promising way to begin the process of engagement on TNW would be for the USA, NATO and Russia to proceed with data exchange and associated confidence building measures. I will not dwell at length on such procedures since they are amply described in the recent papers by my colleagues A. Diakov and E. Miasnikov, and can be found on the website of our Center www.armscontrol.ru. To put it shortly, the proposed measures include voluntary exchange of confidential information about the total number of TNW eliminated since 1992 as well as annual exchange of data on number of warheads in active arsenals and their storage locations. At the second stage the sides could share information on the number of TNW warheads associated with each type of delivery systems and allow visits to facilities where active TNW are stored.

In conclusion let me share with you a recollection from 10 years ago.

Just two weeks after the tragic 9/11 events a similar Conference organized by my friend E. Helminski was taking place in Washington. At the beginning of the first session Ed announced the arrival of the Russian delegation and reminded that Presi-

⁶ Council of Foreign Relations meeting on Nuclear Posture Review, Washington, April 8, 2010.

⁷ Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe. A Framework for Action. Nuclear Threat Initiative, Washington, 2011.

dent V. Putin was the first among the foreign leaders to send his condolences to the American people. I will not forget the hearty reaction of the audience, which stood up to welcome us.

Since then the US – Russian relations went through ups and downs but the resulting vector remained positive. Being an optimist by nature I strongly believe that Russia and the USA are doomed to cooperation due to the commonality of interests in a wide range of international security issues, including arms control and WMD non-proliferation.

February 16, 2012.

© Center for Arms Control, Energy, and Environmental Studies, 2012.