

2000-11

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PERSPECTIVE

Volume 11, No 2 (November-December 2000)

Strategic Arms Control: Russia Takes the Offensive

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On 13 November, Russian President Vladimir Putin presented a new arms control proposal which would reduce the US and Russian inventories to 1,500 warheads each by 2008, representing accelerated reduction below the START-II levels. (1) This proposal was floated after a four-month lull in arms control discussions following President Clinton's decision to defer limited fielding of a US National Missile Defense (NMD) system to the next administration. Putin's comments indicate a push not only to reinvigorate the arms control discussions, but also to shift the dialogue to terms more favorable for the Russian side.

Whereas during the summer Russian officials threatened unilateral and "asymmetrical steps" if the Americans fielded NMD, in mid-November Russian officials sought to capture the public relations high ground by offering to accept very low warhead ceilings. This tactical shift allows Russia to seize the initiative in the international arms control community while continuing to play on anti-missile defense sentiment in China and among the Western European powers. The timing of the proposal capitalizes on America's preoccupation with the election and transition to a new administration.

From the vantage point of Russian defense planning, Putin's latest proposal follows through on a recent change in priorities to a course more closely aligned with current capabilities and resources. These budgetary concerns, and associated internal reorganizations, appear to influence Russian foreign policy as much as strategic and diplomatic considerations. Thus, Moscow's policies are aimed at preserving: 1) its status as a major power in the nuclear arena; and 2) unaltered continuation of the ABM treaty

and other strategic protocols, while simultaneously managing the inevitable atrophy of the Russian nuclear arsenal.

Diplomatic Considerations

Strategic forces and arms control constitute the last vestige of superpower status which the state inherited from the Soviet Union. Arms control has enjoyed high priority in US-Russian relations, and remains a weathervane of the bilateral relationship. Last summer, in the wake of US NMD testing, the arms control dialogue hit a deep rut. Moscow's rhetoric throughout the summer suggested that the former superpower would react quite negatively if the US chose to implement NMD. Russia threatened a variety of "asymmetrical steps" among which Strategic Rocket Forces (SRF) Commander Vladimir Yakovlev included rebuilding a Russian short- and intermediate-range missile force as well as "changing the principles of the combat equipment of intercontinental ballistic missiles" (in other words, increasing the number of nuclear warheads on the missiles, known as "mirving"). (2)

Putin's recent proposal reaffirms the importance Russia still attaches to arms control. Putin timed his nuclear proposal for his final meeting with President Clinton at the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) in Brunei to signal Russia's emphasis on the issue and to jump-start a new round of talks. During the meeting, Putin called for "no pause in nuclear disarmament," saying that "reaching radically lower levels ... is quite possible ... but is not the limit. We are prepared to consider lower levels in the future." (3)

The Russian leadership seems concerned about the lull in the bilateral arms relationship and its prolongation as a result of the US election and the possible decision by the new US administration to field a limited NMD. With these uncertainties looming ahead, sources in the Russian foreign ministry have reiterated that Putin's proposal "is not a propaganda gimmick but a position thoroughly verified by the military and political leaders and aimed at practical implementation." (4) In this manner, the Russian

government is presenting the image of a concerned, rational state, seeking to preserve international stability through practical peaceful measures.

Preservation of Strategic Protocols

The threat issued earlier this month by the head of the foreign ministry's Security and Disarmament Department, Yuri Kapralov, that Russia is "capable of responding to the deployment of NMD ... and we have the necessary technological means for this," was tempered by his statement that Russia "will not respond to the deployment with a similar step." Moreover, he said, "it is not in Russia's interest to spend money on this [since] we have other objectives, we must improve the living standards of our populations and pursue political reforms." (5)

However, as Kapralov's statements indicate, Putin's nuclear initiative and its implicit flexibility does not mean that Moscow has changed its stance on NMD or its desire to preserve the ABM treaty, which it continues to present as a cornerstone of international security. The initiative does allow Russia to paint itself as a prudent, peace-loving state both at home and abroad. In fact, internationally, Russia's apparent seriousness on the matter coincides with and bolsters its recent diplomatic efforts to build support in Europe and Asia for blocking change in the ABM treaty.

In the past six months, Putin has placed a diplomatic premium on rallying international support against NMD or abrogation of the ABM treaty, thereby raising the pressure on the next US administration to uphold the treaty and at least to continue the arms control and reduction dialogue. Whether courting the CIS, China, EU countries (or the very same "states of concern" against whom the US needs NMD to defend), Putin has taken every opportunity to attack US NMD plans. (6) Moreover, even though Russia's diplomatic maneuvering may not prevent a future US administration from developing NMD, it certainly does send a clear signal to the US about the global impact its decision could have. Even more importantly, with international support behind him, Putin has been able to capitalize on Russia's enhanced standing at the September Millennium

summit and the November APEC meeting. If nothing else, NMD has become just another point on which Russia, Europe and other non-Western states have found common ground.

Officials at various levels of the Russian military are also pushing Putin's initiative as they enter into discussions with their counterparts worldwide. While visiting senior Chinese military staff, First Deputy Chief of the General Staff Colonel-General Valery Manilov stated, "this is one of the most important problems concerning strategic stability, which is impossible without the observance of all the basic treaties and agreements, including the 1972 ABM Treaty. We are unanimous on this point with China and with our comrades [sic!] in the People's Liberation Army of China." (7) In upcoming visits to NATO headquarters in Brussels and London for bilateral talks in early December, Defense Minister Igor Sergeev is expected to bring up missile defense issues. This may include the Russian initiative for West European non-strategic missile defense as well as other bilateral discussions with British counterparts. (8)

For his part, SRF Commander Yakovlev predicted that "regardless of who heads the new US administration, there are considerable doubts as to whether America's senators will ratify the START-II treaty, given that the USA's withdrawal from the ABM treaty is now clearly being predicted." He characterized Putin's new arms reduction proposal as "... an invitation to dialogue on strategic arms reductions not only between Russia and the USA, but also with those countries that are striving to possess nuclear weapons." (9)

Implications

The practical aspects of an aging nuclear force structure coupled with modest budgets and other significant funding priorities constitute another key motivation behind the Russian initiative. Throughout recent military budget and restructuring discussions, there has been an explicit and implicit recognition that Russia must reduce its nuclear

forces as policy makers come to terms with fiscal limitations and the reality of equipment obsolescence.

The new military budget only provides for a modest increase in defense spending, most of which will fund current operations in Chechnya, fix personnel problems and allow for very limited modernization of the conventional forces. (10) Additionally, General Yakovlev has stated already that at least five of the new Topol-M strategic missile systems slated to be placed in service in the upcoming months may not be delivered due to "financial problems." (11) Based on one test flight each in the past year, the SRF is prepared to extend the service life of several aging strategic rockets without further maintenance or modernization. (12) While this may work as a stopgap measure, without significant investment in the nuclear forces it will be impossible for Russia to maintain the forces allowed under the current terms of START-II or any semblance of parity with the US.

Finally, the SRF is experiencing the same pressure to generate cash through foreign sales as the remainder of the Russian armed forces. Current proposals may accelerate the refit of ICBM rocket motors to serve as boosters for commercial satellite payloads. As the international demand for this service grows in the coming years, Russian officials see it as a possible revenue source of up to \$20 billion rubles. (13) Certainly, any further negotiated force reductions would boost the pace -- and profits -- of this program.

Aside from budgetary pressure, the debate on the size and shape of the Russian military also is influencing the push for negotiated arms reductions, as the once unquestioned prestige and priority of the SRF has come under attack. Recent military reorganization decisions have left the SRF intact as an independent military arm; however, indications point to an eventual breakup of the force and consolidation of its reduced segments with parts of the Army and Air Force. This appears to be the result of the internal struggle which erupted last summer between Defense Minister Igor Sergeev and Chief of Staff General Anatoli Kvashnin over the relative priorities of nuclear and conventional forces.

As a former commander of the SRF, it was not surprising that Sergeev advocated maintaining the SRF's independence and prominent funding. However, it appears Kvashnin's argument has won favor with Putin. Resources are being realigned to arrest the continuing decay of the conventional forces, partially at the expense of the SRF. The military's difficulties in Chechnya and the public attention focused on the conventional forces' state of readiness following the Kursk disaster are among the factors cementing the foundation of this new focus in the defense force. Moreover, in the light of increased discussions about appointing a civilian defense minister, execution of the SRF realignment initiative and further reforms with their associated funding shifts may be halted only until Sergeev can be retired and is unable to offer bureaucratic resistance from within. It has been rumored that Security Council Secretary Sergei Ivanov is a leading candidate to replace Sergeev. Ivanov is known to support the reform policies as currently proposed.

Summary

On the surface, the timing of Putin's nuclear proposal may appear to be simply a diplomatically motivated move meant to capitalize on the international climate and the travails of the US election cycle. Upon closer inspection, the proposal is rooted in deep Russian domestic political and military realities that policy makers no longer can afford to ignore. Negotiating a reduced warhead ceiling can serve two purposes: removing the financial burden of upkeep and uncertainty involved with maintaining an aging and potentially hazardous nuclear force and garnering international prestige by assuming the appearance of a prudent nuclear state that strives for arms control and reductions in the nuclear arsenal without making any concessions on the ABM or NMD. In this respect, Russia's move represents a clever tactic meant to reinvigorate Moscow's international standing, while minimizing the impact of the inevitable atrophy of its nuclear arsenal.

Notes:

1. ITAR-TASS, 1211 GMT, 13 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1113, via World News Connection.

2. RIA, 0848 GMT, 21 June 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-0621 via World News Connection.

3. ITAR-TASS, 1848 GMT 13 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1113, via World News Connection.

4. Interfax, 1659 GMT, 13 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1113, via World News Connection.

5. Agence France Presse, 14 November 00; via lexis-nexis.

6. See The NIS Observed, 12 July 2000, www.bu.edu/iscip.

7. ITAR-TASS, 1419 GMT, 14 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1114, via World News Connection.

8. ITAR-TASS, 0810 GMT, 11 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1111, via World News Connection.

9. Interfax, 1409 GMT, 15 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1115, via World News Connection.

10. ITAR-TASS, 1344 GMT, 14 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1114, via World News Connection.

11. Interfax, 1005 GMT, 16 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1116, via World News Connection.

12. Interfax, 1542 GMT, 14 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1114, via World News Connection.

13. Rossiyskaya gazeta, 10 November 00; FBIS-SOV-2000-1110, via World News Connection.

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