

Russia's Strategic View: Diminished Threats and Diminished Capabilities

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A recent Congressional Research Service report states that Russia is a "nuclear superpower" intent on "maintaining rough parity with the United States." In fact, Russians no longer view their state as a superpower and see parity as a relic of the past. The Russian government's recently issued National Security Concept (December 1997) acknowledges a worldview that much of the Russian public has believed for some time, namely that Russia is no longer a superpower, but at best a great power with regional and local interests. The document also underscores another well known facet of Russian life: the economy is the fulcrum on which all other improvements in the country depend, especially national security. As a result of Russia's decline in the international arena and its dire economic problems, Russia no longer seeks strategic parity with the US, but rather strategic stability. The difference is profound and has implications for the US defense posture, particularly for prospective START III negotiations.

Background

In 1993, the Russian government approved the Basic Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, the first reformulation of military doctrine since the demise of the Soviet Union. This doctrine identified "local wars and armed conflicts" as posing the main external threat to Russian security, rejecting the traditional Soviet view of NATO and the US as the main threats. A 1996 RF Presidential Memorandum (Poslanie) on National Security reaffirmed the view articulated in the Basic Provisions that the primary external threat to national security was regional. Concern over "uncontrollable processes" on the territory of the former Soviet Union figured more prominently in the government's thinking than did any threat from the West.

This de-emphasis on a threat from the West was further underscored in December 1997 with the publication of the long-awaited National Security Concept of the Russian Federation. This document identified internal and local conflicts as the main threats to the state. The National Security Concept also differed from previous documents in its emphasis on the economy rather than democracy as the key variable in assuring national security: "the economy is the main cause of the emergence of a threat to the Russian Federation's national security." The critical condition of the economy has caused numerous problems including a rise in unemployment and organized crime, increased social stratification and ethnic divisions, a reduction in intellectual activity, population, spiritual growth, and depleted natural resources all of which "could lead to the loss of democratic gains." Thus, there is recognition in Russia today that democracy and national security will proceed only from a sound economy.

Strategic Stability over Parity

Russia's economic crisis coupled with the changing world order has been an important component of Russia's reevaluation of its strategic capability. Cold war notions of developing a robust war-fighting capability have given way to an emphasis on nuclear deterrence as the best means of preventing both nuclear and conventional large-scale or regional wars, and to the development of smaller, more mobile forces to manage local and regional conflicts. Given Russia's weak conventional capability and the time and investment needed to develop stronger conventional forces, in the near term Russia seeks a robust nuclear deterrent capability to reduce the probability of both a nuclear and conventional attack, and to respond should an attack occur. Accordingly, it has adopted a policy of reserving the right of "first use" of nuclear weapons in response to external attacks, whether they are nuclear or conventional.

The change in Russia's perception of its capability to confront various threats is consistent with its perception of the nature of future threats. There is thus no disconnect between Russia's perception of the threat and its perceived ability to confront the threat. Therefore, rather than overinflating either its capabilities or the type of future threats, Russia seems to have a realistic view of both. Russia's threat perceptions can be summarized as follows:

| Type of threat | Probability of attack | Policy |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| Strategic nuclear attack against Russia or the CIS | very low probability | deterred by Russian strategic nuclear forces |
| Conventional attack against Russia or the CIS | low probability | deterred by conventional and nuclear forces (flexible response approach) |
| Conflict within the CIS or Russia | much higher probability | met with conventional forces |

Russia is also realistic about its inability to attain strategic parity with the US. Russia thus no longer seeks strategic parity with the US, but rather strategic stability. In other words, Russia is less concerned with maintaining quantitative parity in the military sphere than in providing a "realistic deterrence" against various threats. They are particularly concerned with regional stability since it is the territory in "immediate proximity to Russian borders" that constitutes Russia's greatest concern.

The emphasis on stability rather than parity is consistent with Russia's perception of itself as a great power rather than a superpower. In 1992, after the demise of the Soviet Union, an intense debate took place regarding Russia's role in the world. The communist vision of encouraging revolution throughout the world was, of course, no longer relevant. The issue focused on whether Russia should be isolationist, a great power, or a superpower. Isolationism refers to little or no involvement in the world; a superpower plays a leading and active role throughout the world;

and a great power is a regional power pursuing its own interests, but having special international status as evidenced by its role on the UN Security Council. The debate has long been resolved in favor of great power status, as reflected in public discussion of Russian national security. Even the military, which arguably experienced the greatest loss with the end of the cold war, systematically refers to Russia as a great power. *Armeiskii sbornik*, the journal of the Russian General Staff, repeatedly assesses the current and future military status of Russia as a *velikaia derzhava* (great power). *Krasnaia zvezda*, the military's daily newspaper maintains that Russia "has the potential to continue its free and ongoing development as an independent geopolitical force separate from the West, as a great power. *Military Thought*, the Ministry of Defense's main theoretical journal, is even more realistic in its assessment of Russia's international standing, describing Russia as a state that "has lost the status of a superpower, and quickly slipped first into the category of developing and then regressive states."

A survey of 600 field-grade officers that I conducted three years ago showed significant agreement with the leadership's perception that Russia is no longer a superpower. Only 1% of the officers strongly agreed that Russia was a military superpower equal to the US. Over 80% strongly or somewhat disagreed that Russia remains a military superpower. The future did not look much better: over 60% thought that in ten years Russia would at most be a great power whereas almost one-third thought it would be neither a great power nor a superpower. How important is this loss of superpower status to the Russian officer corps? A German survey of Russian officers from the rank of lieutenant colonel through general revealed that more than 80% believe it is important to "restore Russia's status as a superpower which is respected all over the world."

Implications

The decline in conventional forces' capability has changed the national security equation giving nuclear weapons a larger role in Russia's strategic doctrine. The good news is that Russia is unlikely to be attacked, thereby reducing the probability of nuclear weapons use. The bad news is that a relatively low-level attack could trigger a nuclear response. In addition, the state of Russia's command, control, and communications systems may come into question if the economy continues to worsen and as a result sustainment of capability is placed at risk.

As each side develops its position on a possible START III treaty, the US should keep in mind that Russia has a realistic view of its security situation. Although Russia still requires nuclear weapons to deter a strategic nuclear attack, that number is not very high because the immediate threats to Russia are not global, but regional and local (specifically, the Balkans, Abkhazia, Central Asia, and the Near East).

Russia's assessment of the threat as more local and regional, when combined with its conventional inferiority and geographic location, drive a dependency on tactical nuclear weapons. The US, in contrast, is more reliant on strategic nuclear weapons to meet its security needs and is considerably less concerned with tactical nuclear weapons. As both sides begin to think about their respective approaches to START III negotiations, they might consider adopting a strategy which provides for an aggregate number of nuclear weapons that would be acceptable

to both sides and which concedes different numbers of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons to meet the different security realities of both Russia and the US.

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