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THE RUSSIAN NUCLEAR ARSENAL – A THREAT TO THE COUNTRIES OF NATO

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Abstract: *This article analyzes current and potential threats to NATO, such as Russia's nuclear arsenal, as a means of pressure and use, and the risk of weapons of mass destruction. The main source of destabilization is considered to be the policy of the Russian Federation, the internal challenges and those caused by the complicated and dynamic situation in Crimea, the Middle East and North Africa. This, in turn, requires an increase in the Alliance's expertise, but also the need for coordination, cooperation and even possible harmonization on a number of policies with the EU. Only by continuing to maintain its deterrent force, its technological advantage, as well as to remain attractive for democracies around the world, will NATO be able to legitimize not only its strength, but also its very existence and supremacy.*

Keywords: *NATO, EU, Russia, nuclear weapons, weapons of mass destruction*

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Introduction

This article aims to provide an insight into the threats and challenges that are or could potentially be within the competence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This is due to the fact that, NATO, together with the European Union (EU), which have the capacity and potential to make the most significant contribution to the fight against a number of global challenges, both within the member states and, if necessary, beyond them. Particular attention will be paid to Russia's policy of using their nuclear weapons. Regardless of the horizontal development of the definition of war, as well as the preferred so-called hybrid methods, a significant threat to global security, remains the nuclear threat. Since NATO was created to counter the USSR, the Russian Federation is the first successor to the Soviet Union and it is appropriate to provide an overview of Russia's position on the use of nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict. One of Russia's most prominent international security experts, Alexey Arbatov, said: “In the West, there is a tradition of analyzing Russia's nuclear policy by projecting “Western thinking on Russian experts” (Arbatov, Alexey 2016), which ignores differences of opinion. Arbatov rightly explains that these differences

in worldviews regarding nuclear weapons policies are much deeper than those in official documents; these differences stem from history, political systems, administrative experience, bureaucratic mechanisms, geography, technological developments and priorities, and so on. As a result, in order to understand the Russian perspective optimally in depth, an analysis will be provided mainly of Russian literature on the subject.

Official documents of the Russian government systematically emphasize the deterrent and defensive function of its nuclear arsenal, indicating that it officially views them as a means of defense (Rossia mozhet primenit yadernoe oruzhie... 2016). According to the military doctrine from 1993, the Russian government can first use nuclear weapons in the event of: a direct attack on the country or its allies; a global war that will inevitably lead to an attack on Russian territory or its armed forces; or in the joint actions of a non-nuclear state that attacks Russia in alliance with a state with a nuclear weapon. Since then, the Russian government has drafted several updated versions of the Military Doctrine and somewhat raised the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. The version from 2000 (when Vladimir Putin is still in the process of consolidating power (Sokov, Nikolay N. 2014)), in Article 8 reads: “The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear weapons against Russia and/or its allies, as well as in response to large-scale aggression using conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation” (Ukaz Prezidenta Rossyiskoy Federatsii ot 21.04.2000). In the 2010 Doctrine, Russia reiterated its policy on nuclear weapons as: “The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in case of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons, when the very existence of the state is threatened” (Voennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii 2010). The addition of the “when the very existence of the state is threatened” clause may reflect a higher threshold for nuclear use than the 2000 Doctrine. The wording in the December 2014 issue of the Doctrine also describes Russian nuclear weapons as a prevention of large-scale and regional wars. It states that Russia will use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and

other weapons of mass destruction against it or Moscow's allies or in the event of aggression against Russia by conventional weapons, which jeopardizes the existence of the Russian Federation (Voennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii 2014). Related Russian government documents reiterate this phrase “deterrence and protection”. Russia's national security strategy, signed by Putin in December 2015, states that the prevention of armed conflict, as well as the protection of Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity, are “achieved by maintaining nuclear deterrence capacity” and preparedness of Russia's conventional forces (Strategiya natsionalnoy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii 2015).

Russian government officials have publicly reaffirmed the deterring and defensive functions of the nuclear arsenal, found in official government documents. In 2015, Ministry of Foreign Affairs employee Mikhail Ulyanov said that Russia's nuclear weapons doctrine was strictly defensive and aimed at deterring any potential aggressor, and that Russia would use nuclear weapons only to protect itself and its allies in cases of nuclear or large-scale conventional aggression (V MID poyasnili polozheniya rossiyskoy voennoy doktrinyi... 2015; V Rossii rasskazali pri kakih usloviyah... 2015). Vladimir Yakovlev, the former commander of Russia's strategic missile forces, said Russia's weapons of mass destruction deter not only nuclear and large-scale conventional wars, but also regional and even local military conflicts, which could include NATO's tactical nuclear weapons, missile and/or air defense and other strategic systems (Yaroshinskaya, Alla 2015).

Russian non-governmental experts in the country also emphasize the defense value of the nuclear arsenal. According to Sergey Karaganov, an international relations expert and adviser to Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, putting nuclear weapons at the heart of Russia's defense policy not only contributes to national and regional security, but also reduces the risk of conventional conflicts in general. Karaganov also argues that nuclear weapons not only prevented enemy and neighboring countries from taking advantage of Russia's difficult position in the 1990s, but also preserved its territorial integrity, citing NATO operations in the Republic of Yugoslavia as an example (Karaganov, Sergey 2017). For his part, political analyst Dmitriy Evstafiev believes that Russia's nuclear arsenal is the last

line of defense against US global political and military hegemony, and according to journalist Anna Yaroshinskaya, nuclear weapons actually provide international respect for the country (Yaroshinskaya, Alla 2015).

Regardless of the positions of governmental and non-governmental experts, as well as official documents, it is almost certain that a decision on the use of nuclear weapons will be left to the discretion of the president and close advisers. This is an important aspect from an analytical point of view, as nuclear weapons have not been so central to Russian politics since Nikita Khrushchev's rule. In October 2016, at a meeting of the Valdai discussion club, Putin pointed to nuclear weapons as a stabilizing factor in international relations and assessed that they actually reduce the risk of large-scale conventional wars. The Russian president also shared the opinion of a number of experts that it was nuclear weapons that prevented the “warming of the Cold War”, as the price would be prohibitive (Vladimir Putin Meets with Members... 2017).

In context of the high level of centralization of the Russian political system and the President's view on nuclear weapons, it is appropriate to point out that the main difference between the 2010 and 2014 editions of the Russian Military Doctrine is the expanded focus in the updated version on Russia's internal security challenges. The 2010 document simply referred to “attempts to forcibly change the constitutional order of the Russian Federation”, while the 2014 document also warned of “destabilization of the domestic political and social situation in the country” and even “information-related activities aimed at influencing the population, mainly the young citizens of the country, in order to undermine the historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions in the field of protection of the Fatherland”.

As a result, it is particularly important for NATO to have an optimally clear idea of when and under what circumstances the Russian Federation would first use nuclear weapons. Public and open official and unofficial documents do not specify the exact conditions and circumstances that pose a threat, “the very existence of the state”. At the same time, there is no Russian equivalent to the American Nuclear Posture Review, which Washington publishes every few years. At the same time, it can be assumed that much of Moscow's rhetoric about nuclear weapons is also

intended to influence the behavior of other countries as a form of indirect intimidation. Over the past decade, there have been a number of examples in which Moscow has openly threatened other countries if they join the US missile defense programs. In March 2015, Russia's ambassador to Denmark, Mihail Vanin, said: "I don't think the Danes fully understand the consequences if Denmark joins the US-led missile defense shield. If they do, then Danish warships will be targeted by Russian nuclear missiles" (Rossiyskiy posol prigrozil Danii yadernym oruzhiem... 2015). Even if this does not have a direct impact on a country's foreign policy, it is significant that Western countries regularly prefer to emphasize the need for dialogue with the Russian Federation instead of proportional responses, which would probably be more appropriate in Ukraine and Georgia, for example.

Despite the official shortage of literature on the Russian side, there are Russian military and civilian experts who discuss both the threat and the actual use of nuclear weapons in the context of conventional and/or nuclear war. At the same time, there are some official Russian references to the "escalation for de-escalation" strategy, in which Russia will seek to end a conventional conflict by first using one or a small number of nuclear weapons to demonstrate readiness to force the enemy to retreat. The Russian presumption is that by demonstrating such determination, Moscow can win by exploiting the enemy's fears of escalation. This Russian strategy is often mentioned in official comments from the United States. In March 2016, STRATCOM Commander Cecil Haney said that Russia "declares and recklessly demonstrates its readiness to escalate to de-escalation, if necessary" (Haney, Cecil 2016; Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work's comments in David Alexander...). For his part, Arbatov shared about the formal consideration in 2003 of plans to "de-escalate aggression by threatening to strike or directly carry out strikes of various scales using conventional and/or nuclear means of destruction". Arbatov notes that they suggest options for "dosed [measured] combat use of individual components of the strategic deterrence force". Although this discussion of limited nuclear capabilities subsequently largely disappeared from public discourse, Arbatov explained that a limited first nuclear strike was not intended to demonstrate Moscow's determination, but to sober up an aggressor and force him to stop the attack and begin negotiations.

If this first use fails, “there will be increasing use of nuclear weapons” (Arbatov, Aleksey 2017).

In 2009, the then commander of the Strategic Missile Forces, General Andrei Shvaichenko, discussed the escalation scenario: “In a conventional war, they [strategic nuclear missiles] ensure that the enemy is forced to cease hostilities on favorable terms for Russia, through single or multiple preventive strikes against the most important installations of the aggressors” (Schneider, Mark B. 2013). At the same time, in a 2011 article, two Russian scientists, Vasiliy Belozerov and Elena Lebedkova, described the country's tactical nuclear weapons as a “trump card” through which Moscow could end the conflict, including conventional, at an early enough stage to be beneficial to Russia (Belozerov, Vasiliy, Elena Lebedkova 2011). According to General Shvaichenko, in the event of a need for nuclear strikes, Russia will first seek to strike targets that contribute to the enemy's military and economic potential, with the first massive strike and subsequent smaller ones (Schneider, Mark B. 2013). For her part, Arbatova added that according to the Russian understanding, once nuclear strikes occur, this will be seen as a failure of the deterrent potential of nuclear weapons, which will result in a desire to destroy strategic enemy targets, instead of looking for controlled “escalation for de-escalation”, enshrined in the Military Doctrine of the country (Arbatov, Alexey 2016). In parallel, Russian military exercises regularly include scenarios in which Moscow is the first to launch a nuclear strike to prevent a more serious conventional conflict (Schneider, Mark B. 2017; Voennyye nazvali yadernoe planirovanie Rossii... 2016).

At the same time, it is worth mentioning the presence of unconfirmed information about the existence of the so-called Perimeter system, which must automatically reciprocate a nuclear strike (Vruchnyi, Maksim 2017; Hoffman, David E. 2009). According to unconfirmed reports, the system has autonomous control and management systems based at a number of independent command posts, as well as sensors for monitoring data on seismic activity, radiation levels and other indications of a used nuclear weapon (Rossia obladaet “chudovishtnyim oruzhiem vozmezdiya” 2009). In an interview with Komsomolskaya Pravda in December 2011, the then commander of the Strategic Missile Forces, Sergey Karakaev, stated that the

Perimeter system was active and, if necessary, if a retaliatory order could not be given in accordance with the established command order, the signal will come from Perimeter (Timoshenko, Mihail 2015). Although it is not clear how many of these are targeted messages and what the actual capacity of such a system is, if not at the moment, its existence is a matter of time. At the same time, such autonomous systems operate on the basis of algorithms for which it can be assumed that the error is not inherent, thus calling into question its security in a tense environment.

Meanwhile, the opinion of independent Russian experts on the US nuclear capabilities and, by default, NATO, if they are the first to strike, is also evident. In an August 2010 article by the Independent Military Review, Sergey Rogov, Valeriy Yarynich, Viktor Yesin and Pavel Zolotarev estimated that the possible use of conventional cruise missiles and other high-precision conventional weapons against Russian strategic targets by the United States justified the lowering of the nuclear threshold in the military doctrine of 2010 (Rogov, Sergey, Valeriy Yarynich, Viktor Yesin, and Pavel Zolotarev, 2010). General Vladimir Dvorkin, a former head of Russia's 4th Central Research Institute, also supports the “use it or lose it” logic. According to him, foreign efforts are possible to hinder the work of state and military command and control systems, which would disrupt the functioning of the strategic nuclear forces (Dvorkin, Vladimir, 2011). In an article for the Military-Industrial Courier, Pavel Grachev, Dmitriy Kornev and Alexey Ramm openly warn about the vulnerability of Russia's strategic nuclear weapons to conventional US weapons (Grachev, Pavel, Dmitriy Kornev, and Alexey Ramm 2013). In 2015, Konstantin Sivkov openly stated that Washington could “decapitate” Russia's nuclear forces both by launching a direct attack on them and by eliminating Russia's command and control system to launch an effective response. According to him, the US rapid global attack system may in the near future be able to neutralize all or most of Russia's nuclear forces by a combination of strikes aimed at “decapitation” (in command sites controlling the use of strategic nuclear weapons) and “disarmament” (directly on the holders of strategic nuclear weapons) (Sivkov, Konstantin 2015; Novikova, Inna 2014).

In parallel, it is necessary to consider Russia's readiness to use nuclear weapons in a geographical context, i.e. to take into account and what, Moscow values as its inviolable territory. Undoubtedly, for example, the Kremlin will value Kaliningrad as an integral part of its territory, even though it is actually an enclave (The Berlin (Potsdam) Conference 1945). Vladimir Putin even commented in September 2016 that if someone demanded a review of the status of Kaliningrad, it would require a review of the status of territories such as East Germany, parts of Poland and even Hungary and Romania, which would be a “Pandora's box” (Putin sravnil peresmotr itogov Vtoroy mirovoy voyni... 2016). But while the position on Kaliningrad seems entirely conditioned by the Russian side, that on more disputed territories is not so clear. This is the situation in the eastern part of the country, where Russian authorities acknowledge that Japan is challenging Moscow's control over the Russian-occupied Kuril Islands. At the same time, although the Kremlin does not rule out a possible transfer or sharing of sovereignty over some of the islands as part of a political agreement with Tokyo, in an address to the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg in 2017, Putin commented on the danger of US troops returning to the islands. if they fall under the sovereignty of Japan. According to the Russian president, it is possible, if not immediately, then in the medium or long term American bases or elements of missile defense to appear on the islands, which is unacceptable for Russia (Putin rasskazal o budushchem Kuril... 2017). It is also worth mentioning that against the background of this rhetoric of cooperation, there is evidence that Russia is increasing its military presence, both in the region and on the islands themselves (Syisoev, Grigoriy 2016). In 2009, nearly a decade before Vladimir Putin's speech, Nikolay Patrushev, as director of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, said it was possible and justified for his country to use nuclear weapons to protect the Kuril Islands (McDermott, Roger N.). And while they are far from Europe in March 2015, Vladimir Putin said that Moscow was ready to use nuclear weapons if there was an external attempt to prevent the annexation of Crimea (Smith-Spark, Laura, Alla Eshchenko and Emma Burrows, 2015), and since then the Kremlin has assessed that it has a legal right to do so and/or the need to deploy

nuclear weapons on the Crimean peninsula (Muzhenko zayavil, shto Rossia mozhet razmestit..., 2015).

The situation with the understanding of the Russian position on when it is justified to use these weapons is further complicated by the fact that, according to the Kremlin, strikes can also be carried out in support/defense of an allied or partner country. From here, almost all post-Soviet republics that are not part of NATO and/or the EU, as well as countries in Central Asia and the Middle East, can be included in the first reading. In Syria, for example, although Putin and Lavrov have openly stated that they would not launch nuclear strikes (Lavrov isklyuchil primenenie yadernogo oruzhiya... 2015; “Hopefully, no nukes will be needed”... 2015), there are Russian bases that may be an exception to this, given their strategic importance to Russia. At the same time, there are open Russian sources that allow the use of nuclear weapons against Russia's neighboring countries that are members of NATO. Such is the case with Turkey and Romania, for example, where US nuclear weapons or ballistic missile interceptors are deployed, which Moscow sees as a threat. According to Gabriel Mihalik, it is possible, if necessary, for the Kremlin to use short-range nuclear missiles to strike such targets in order to show determination in line with the concept of escalation for de-escalation (Mihalik, Gabriel, 2016).

In the event that Moscow decides to resort to the use of nuclear weapons, the preferred type is likely to depend on the specific situation and not on what is established in the official documentation, i.e. a key role will almost certainly be played by the assessment of the situation by the top state leadership and the extent to which this leadership will evaluate its own expertise in comparison with that of the military leadership. At the same time, there may be opposition to the magnitude of the planned strike. As stated in the official documentation, it must be powerful enough to demonstrate readiness and determination, but there are also opinions that in fact a small precision blow will be enough (Rossiyskaya armiya budet nanosit preventivnyie yadernyie udaryi... 2009; Vot yadernaya pulya proletela, i aga... 2003). Meanwhile, the Minister of Defense, Sergey Lavrov, said in January 2017 that although nuclear weapons are the mainstay of Russia's defense, it is possible that at some point with the development of technology they will be replaced by conventional

weapons (Putin poruchil uvelichit udarnyi potentsial...; Acton, James M. 2015). Experts such as Sergey Karaganov believe that cyber-capabilities are likely to gradually displace weapons of mass destruction in capacity and importance (Karaganov, Sergey 2017).

Moscow has publicly pursued a policy of deliberate uncertainty about when and under what circumstances it would use nuclear weapons. Nuclear policy is drafted by a limited group of senior state officials in the field of national security, with minimal control, even by the Russian Duma or other state bodies (Tseplyaev, Vitaliy 2016). At the same time, the country's military doctrine almost certainly has classified annexes on the use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the Russian media sometimes refer to unconfirmed allegations on this issue, which allows some attitudes and trends to be observed. Some Russian experts share concern that heightened official rhetoric regarding the use of nuclear weapons makes the likelihood of escalation in a crisis more likely (Arbatov, Aleksey 2017). At the same time, according to Russian publications, the country's military leadership has insisted that the 2014 Military Doctrine explicitly mention the possibility of preemptive nuclear strikes (Gordeev, Vladislav 2014; Rossiyskaya armiya budet nanosit preventivnyie yadernyie udaryi... 2009). General Yuriy Yakubov was even mentioned by name as the man who insisted that NATO be identified as a specific threat and target of such a preventive strike [Russian general calls for preemptive nuclear strike doctrine against NATO 2014]. In the end, however, these proposals were rejected and only the purposefully vague wording of self-defense remains (Preemptive nuclear strike omitted from Russia's new military doctrine 2014).

Of course, whether the Russian government will actually use or even threaten to use nuclear weapons in a conflict will depend not only on the geography of the conflict or on Russian military doctrine, but also on the context and assessed possible scenarios according to Moscow. It can be estimated that it is very likely that such a decision will be made by the political rather than the military leadership. At the same time, Russia appears to be increasingly seeking to rely on conventional, cyber and other forces to achieve a "non-nuclear deterrence system" (Kashin, Vasiliy, and Michael Raska 2017). Russia's capacity for cyber escalation is great, but its

willingness to use such an unpredictable tool, especially given the potentially stronger US capabilities in this area, is unknown. According to the available information, it seems plausible that, although nuclear weapons will remain the basis of Russian military power in the medium term, a gradual “transition” of some missions from tactical nuclear weapons to conventional weapons will begin. At the same time, this depends on the uncertain implementation of the expected improvements in the Russian military-industrial complex, adequate funding against the background of other priorities and the growing conventional capabilities of the United States, China and other adversaries.

Conclusion

NATO faces increasing and overarching challenges, both external and internal, that require innovation and adaptability. Addressing and overcoming them requires optimal levels of cooperation, both within the Union and with the EU. This article presents and analyzes only some of these threats. For a more in-depth study of the topic, it will be appropriate to take into account: the relationship between Russia and Belarus and the possibility of permanent deployment of Russian armed forces in the country; Moscow's role in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan; Russia's subversive activities in Europe through energy projects; the activities of Russian private military companies such as Wagner in the Middle East and Africa; the country's policies and actions in countries such as Syria and Libya; its influence in Central Asia and the deployment of S-300 systems in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which allows monitoring of the NATO mission in Afghanistan; relations between Moscow and Beijing; China's investments in NATO and EU member states; Chinese state-owned companies that use Western funds to finance military technology; China's influence in South Asia; as well as the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

A significant part of these proposed *prima vista* themes and challenges does not imply that the competence of the North Atlantic Alliance is necessary. However, each of them has the potential, indirectly or directly, to become a destabilizing factor for NATO. This, in turn, requires an increase in the Alliance's expertise, but also the need for coordination, cooperation and even possible harmonization on a number of policies with the EU. But only by continuing to maintain its deterrent force,

technological superiority, innovative approach, levels of cooperation and exchange of good practice and experience, timely and coordinated actions and operations, and to remain attractive for democracies around the world, will NATO succeed in legitimizing not only its power, but also its very existence.

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