

Russia Looks to Expand Nuclear Weapons Option

Maria Katsva

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Although NATO stopped its air strikes on Yugoslavia, many analysts cite its campaign as marking the end of nuclear disarmament in Russia, a process that involved help from the United States. The ratification of the START II Treaty, which would have reduced the number of nuclear warheads to 3,000 for Russia and 3,500 for the United States, is all but dead; ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) is next to impossible; and attempts in Russia to stiffen Export Control regulations to curb military equipment sales are unlikely to pass.

Angered by the air strikes, the Duma is expected to vote for a law guaranteeing funding for strategic nuclear forces. On April 25, generals from the Defense Ministry and General Staff went on record, saying Russia was preparing proposals on the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. Similar proposals were actively discussed throughout 1996-1999 as NATO expanded to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. To many observers of Russia's military establishment, the proposal to place weapons in Belarus signals a clear intent to increase defense spending, particularly in the nuclear arena since the country cannot afford to build a robust conventional force.

Russia May Place Nuclear Weapons in Belarus

During this meeting, three issues were discussed: deployment of strategic weapons under the Russian-Belarus Unification Treaty (Topol ICBMs that were removed according to the START I Treaty); deployment of tactical nuclear weapons; and the deployment of denuclearized medium-range Pioneer missiles in western regions of Russia and in neighboring Belarus. Russia also expects to operate an early-warning system in Belarus that will replace the dismantled Scrunde radar in Latvia. Belarus will also produce trucks for Russia's mobile SS-25 strategic missiles and for new Topol-M SS-27s.

According to press reports, the Ministry of Defense decided to extend the life of the offensive Delta III nuclear submarines and SS-18 ICBMs by at least two years. It is also possible that Russia will buy back from Ukraine some of the Tu-160 and Tu-95 heavy bombers that have remained in operational condition. Roman Popkovich, head of the Duma's Defense Committee, has said Russia's nuclear strategy would include preemptive strike capabilities, and The Guardian newspaper reported that President Boris Yeltsin called for the deployment of tactical weapons to resist a threat from NATO. In addition, reports have surfaced that Russia may be developing MIRVed SS-27 ICBMs.

Decrees Call for Repair of Nuclear Weapons Complex

After a highly secretive meeting on April 29, Security Council Head, Vladimir Putin told reporters that documents were signed for development of the nuclear military complex. One dealt with programs of non-strategic nuclear weapons. Some believe Iskander tactical missiles currently under development will be equipped with nuclear warheads, and these complexes would be used for joint Russian-Belarus military forces. A second decree dealt with developing a testing and experimental base within the nuclear-military complex, including facilities for simulations and hydro-nuclear tests as well as the production of special software to ensure the reliability of the strategic nuclear arsenal. Very little has been made public about the April 29 meeting. But statements made by those who prepared documents for it confirm that sub-critical nuclear testing was discussed as well as further discussions of tactical nuclear weapon development. According to an initiative signed in 1991 by President Bush and President Gorbachev, Russia must eliminate all its tactical nuclear weapons by 2004. Most have been destroyed, but researchers acknowledge they have no evidence of exactly how many remain.

New Generation of Weapons Foreseen

It is also believed that development of a new generation of non-strategic medium- and short-range nuclear weapons with low and super-low yields was discussed at the meeting in late April. In 1996, former Atomic Energy Minister Victor Mikhailov promoted non-strategic weapons as a possible reply to NATO expansion. Russia, he argued, could develop a new generation of battlefield nuclear arms with relatively low capacity and reduced side-effects. He believed Russia could produce 10,000 such warheads for theater missiles, front-line aviation and for anti-aircraft. In addition, a host of doctrinal issues was considered. Some say they have confirmation that first-strike and preemptive nuclear strike policies and capabilities as well as other strategic issues were discussed.

Since the April 29 meeting, Yeltsin has said nuclear forces remain the key element of Russia's military power. Promising that Russia would maintain as many nuclear weapons as would guarantee the country's security, he called for an increase in defense spending. The 1999 military budget was 2.6 percent of the GNP — the lowest recorded ever. Some Duma deputies would like to see the military budget set at 5 percent of GNP. According to a special Presidential decree, military expenditure should not be less than 3.5 percent.

Salaries Take Bulk of Defense Budget

About 70 percent of this is spent on salaries and army support. Twenty five percent or less is spent on modernization, new military equipment and purchases. During 1998, almost all purchases, as well as R & D, were for the SS-27 Topol-M ICBM program. Nonetheless, Russian military experts say it was underfinanced by 50 percent, and that it is doubtful that even this much will be available this year for nuclear force development. There is also a need to fund anti-aircraft systems and ground forces.

President Yeltsin wants to increase the military budget for several reasons. Nearly 70 percent of the nuclear facilities are in disrepair; according to Duma accounts, by 2001 the life span of all long-range cruise missiles will expire; and by 2003, Russia may have as few as 1,000 strategic nuclear warheads. Yeltsin is also concerned about army and military elite support, which could push him to increase military spending further. At the same time many priority programs are under-financed and Defense Ministry debt to contractors exceeds budget allocations. There just is not enough money for Yeltsin or his successors to build the kind of military many Russians want.

Regional Cooperation Seen as Key

To have a successful nuclear deterrent, Russia would need to increase spending to develop nuclear submarines, which comprise the most expensive part of the nuclear triad. The new Yuri Dolgorukiy nuclear submarine development currently faces great financial obstacles which can hardly be overcome.

In case of an international crisis, Russia could find an additional \$600 million from non-budget sources. It has been pointed out that S-400 anti-aircraft testing was financed through non-budget funding sources. But others look to regional budgets as the main source of funding for Russia's future military.

By 2010, they say, Russia could deploy from 600 to 1,000 strategic nuclear warheads, and could modernize some of its existing nuclear weapons systems. Regional cooperation is key then — and friendship with Belarus. The main question is whether Russia's regional governors are interested in helping Moscow finance its nuclear weapons programs. If not, it may be that pronouncements to reinvigorate the military are groundless.

Maria Katsva, a Russian journalist, is a graduate associate at the University of Georgia's Center for

Economists for Peace and Security
<http://www.epsusa.org>