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Assessing the Implications of Changes in Russias Strategic Posture

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NPS NRP Executive Summary

Assessing the Implications of Changes in Russia's Strategic Posture
Report Date: 10/14/2019 Project Number (IREF ID): NPS-19-N258-A
Naval Postgraduate School/School of International Graduate Studies



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ASSESSING THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGES IN RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC POSTURE

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Project Summary

To what extent is Russia primarily interested in maintaining stable mutual deterrence? To what extent does it look beyond that goal to preparing for the operational use of nuclear weapons for political and strategic advantage? In our research, we examined the implications of changes in Russia's strategic posture, most notably since President Putin's announcement on 1 March 2018 of projected "super weapons," also called "novel systems." These include a hypersonic aeroballistic missile, a nuclear-powered cruise missile, the Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), and the nuclear-armed nuclear-propelled "Status 6" unmanned submarine (also known as Kanyon and Poseidon). Putin and other Russian officials have asserted that Moscow is pursuing these capabilities and others, including conventional forces and cyber and space assets, in response to U.S. missile defenses and the policies articulated in the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review. In addition to the several novel systems announced by Putin in March 2018, in February 2019 Putin threatened to develop and deploy Zircon hypersonic missiles on ships within range of the continental United States (CONUS), which would be capable of delivering a decapitating strike against the US National Command Authorities, and put the United States at risk.

After a review and analysis of current literature and discussions with experts, we determined that the principal operational stance among Russian leaders today regarding nuclear development and strategic posturing is one of manipulation and intimidation. These tactics are used in order to influence public opinion at home and abroad, and to register the Kremlin's displeasure with certain actions of the United States and NATO.

Keywords: Russia, nuclear weapons, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, deterrence, hypersonic missiles, missile defenses, escalation control, limited nuclear conflict

Background

This research was inspired by the work performed for the sponsor in previous fiscal years. The previous research efforts include *Responding to Russian Noncompliance with Nuclear Arms Control Agreements* (Fiscal Year 2016) and *Evolving Russian Views on Nuclear Weapons and Their Significance for the United States and NATO* (Fiscal Year 2017).

Some allied observers have speculated that Russia could seize a piece of Alliance territory and warn North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies that Moscow would be prepared to use nuclear weapons in order to retain it. Allied observers have not reached a consensus as to the extent to which Russian capabilities have established limits to French, British, or U.S. nuclear protection. Some observers suggest that the Russians may plan for a limited war, with or without nuclear weapons, based in part on their snap capacity for large-scale force mobilization and

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movement. Similar speculation holds that Russian aggression could take the form of a conventional-warhead SSC-8 strike against one of the Baltic States. In addition, the Russians might intend to divide NATO by threatening nuclear (or non-nuclear) retaliation against any NATO reply to a Russian attack.

Allied observers have also emphasized the domestic electoral purposes behind Putin's articulating the March 2018 list of super weapons, setting aside the nuclear-propelled cruise missile concept as the least plausible of the super weapons discussed by Russian authorities in recent years.

Findings and Conclusions

While allied observers generally agree that the essential objective of Russia's super weapons is to be able to penetrate or evade U.S. missile defenses, there is much speculation as to other motivations and objections. The theories of allied observers cover a wide range, including that the Russians have publicized Putin's super weapons because Russia has nothing else to boast of except energy resources, that the purpose of Poseidon may be to deepen doubts among U.S. allies about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments, or conversely, doubt as to whether the Poseidon nuclear-powered undersea attack drone would add much value to Russia's strategic capabilities or even require a response.

Our research indicates that the Russians may, however, see Western public intimidation advantages in the Poseidon. This seems to be one of the overall purposes of Russian super weapons as they present Russia as being at the forefront of technology development, thereby granting it international status and influence. However, the spectrum of views in NATO expert circles on Russia's super-weapons includes skeptics who question the general feasibility and affordability of these weapons. In fact, paradoxically, one effect of Russia publicizing its super-weapons is that the Russians may intensify a competition with China and the United States that they simply cannot afford.

In support of this theory, there is a notable lack of detail in Putin's February 2019 threat to deploy Zircon hypersonic missiles against U.S. National Command Authorities. This raises questions about the hypersonic missile's affordability and technical-industrial maturity. According to Putin, the Zircon missiles would be based on maritime platforms, submarines or surface ships, which would require a level of robust and reliable communications that Russia does not yet possess.

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These actions are compounded by the fact that the formally agreed to Soviet-U.S. definition of strategic stability in the June 1990 START negotiations has lost prominence. The agreement envisaged measures to remove incentives for either side to launch a nuclear first strike and to establish an appropriate relationship between strategic offenses and defenses. In recent years, high ranking Russian officials, including President Putin, have regularly used the term “strategic stability” to express critical views of U.S. policy. For example, Russians have asserted that the United States or NATO has threatened strategic stability by actions such as the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the enlargement of NATO, or the conduct of NATO exercises in Norway or in the Baltic states, etc. In addition to accusing the United States or NATO of threatening strategic stability, the Russians have used the term to express threats, to support propaganda purposes such as claiming that the Americans are unwilling to engage with them on arms control, and to construct arguments not only against U.S. missile defenses, but also against projected U.S. space defenses and non-nuclear strategic strike systems.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future researchers should examine the full range of implications arising from changes in Russia's strategic posture. Because Russian miscalculations could present risks of conflict, it remains essential for the United States and its NATO Allies to develop a more discerning and comprehensive understanding of how the Russians view their nuclear weapons and other instruments of influence, intimidation, coercion, and combat. As in the past, Russian concepts such as “de-escalation” and “strategic non-nuclear deterrence” deserve monitoring and careful analysis, together with Russian grand strategy and operational concepts for the employment of the novel systems announced as under development in 2018-2019.

Acronyms

North Atlantic Treaty Organization NATO