

# Beyond MAD

Ivan Safranchuk

## A Dangerous Game

**K**eir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press have aroused sharp and widespread criticism throughout Russia over the thesis put forward by “The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy.”<sup>1</sup> The authors conclusion that “...it probably will soon be possible for the United States to destroy the long-range nuclear arsenals of Russia or China with a first strike” has been seen in Russia not only as flawed logically and based on questionable methodology, but even irresponsible with regard to its affect on U.S.-Russian relations. While the Russian commentators were quick to dismiss the substantive aspect of the Press/Lieber nuclear primacy argument, they also rushed into speculation as to why the article was published and opinion about how unwise it was to do so.

A number of Russian technical experts, including Victor Esin, Vladimir Dvorkin and Pavel Podvig, focus on the argument that the American authors underestimated Russia’s current nuclear potential.<sup>2</sup> They believe that the article

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has exaggerated the degraded state of Russia's arsenal and early warning system. More conservative voices within the Russian political spectrum (such as retired Gen. Leonid Ivashov) also dismiss the emergence of nuclear primacy, reasoning that American nuclear primacy is presently a fiction, although it may emerge in the future, especially if Russia's own national defense remains underfunded.<sup>3</sup> Stoking mutual suspicion and justifying greater funding for relevant arms programs are exactly what worries some. Yegor Gaidar plainly defined the article as a provocation and complained how much it could undermine liberal pro-Western forces in Russia.<sup>4</sup> Sergey Karaganov, a prominent strategist, goes even further by suggesting that the article was actually intended to provoke Russia into wasting more money on ambitious military programs and to promote anti-American isolationist forces who would internally restrain Russia from having an active foreign policy, or to impede Russian-Chinese relations by showing China how weak and vulnerable Russia is.<sup>5</sup>

In short, many commentators in Russia took this article as a sort of test for Russia presented by the U.S. political/defense establishment. Yet unfortunately, while these rebuttals to American nuclear primacy gripped Russia's own experts, the controversy did not elicit a deeper discussion: that is, the question of the present nature of U.S.-Russian relations under the paradigm of mutually assured destruction (MAD) and the unknown future beyond.

### **Au Revoir to MAD?**

Mutually assured destruction is a balance of nuclear forces such that no one can win a nuclear war through first or second strike. Under the conditions of MAD, initiating a nuclear war would entail committing suicide and therefore cannot be a rational decision. Conversely, it is highly rational to demonstrate a technical, political and moral capability to dissuade a potential enemy from launching a nuclear first strike. This means that nuclear strategies within the MAD framework are defensive by definition.

The emergence of MAD from a concept into reality coincided with the era when the United States and the Soviet Union reached a state of nuclear parity. To be sure, such a nuclear balance was never based on a strict calculation, yet the size and quality of each country's arsenal guaranteed that the imbalances that existed in specific systems or "legs" of their nuclear triads did not compromise the basic architecture of absolute nuclear stalemate.

It follows logically that an erosion of this nuclear parity between the

United States and Russia would have consequences for MAD. The disparity in the levels of nuclear capability at which MAD ceases to exist is certainly a complex question. During the height of the Cold War, Russia and the United States had the nuclear forces to annihilate each other five times over. Presently, those capabilities have been reduced to the ability to destroy each other two and four times over, respectively. This relative gap likely has no real impact on MAD. However, a disparity in nuclear forces of the kind where one side's ability to retaliate is destroyed in a first strike may fundamentally change the calculus of MAD.

Overwhelming superiority, on the other hand, does not guarantee zero retaliation. Nuclear superiority may minimize the chances of retaliation. Missile defense may even further diminish the possibility of a second strike. Yet, absolute nuclear primacy – when there will be a high probability of zero retaliation – is impossible with thousands of deployed warheads. Relative nuclear primacy, where one side can conceivably win a nuclear war, also means that retaliation would lead to “acceptable damage.” But this opens up the question of what exactly that level of acceptable damage, or the “pain threshold,” is for the United States. Currently, the prevailing view is that even a single nuclear explosion (presumably of hundreds of kilotons yield) in any of the large American cities represents a level of damage unacceptable to the United States. With such a low pain threshold, reliance on nuclear primacy looks highly dubious. Nuclear primacy then, whether achieved or not, accidental or intentional, may be a great strategic disappointment, as the existing low pain threshold will not provide the opportunity for strategic benefit. A search for nuclear primacy then becomes a waste of taxpayers' money and security apparatus effort.

Despite flaws in the technical aspects of MAD, it will remain, from a political perspective, the only viable concept for the time being. A real, material erosion of MAD, let alone its elimination, will take time and for the foreseeable future MAD will continue to be the strategic framework between the nuclear powers.

### **Alternatives to MAD?**

Mutually assured destruction will remain dominant in the international security system, but only while it is a strategy of necessity. MAD cannot be a strategy of choice. It is impossible to imagine that a rational government

would willingly place its country at the precipice of destruction for the sake of stability and security. In addition, choosing MAD would mean subjecting the country to an extremely high level of vulnerability, which no democratically elected government would be able to sell to its public. Only under imminent threat of an enemy that can destroy you does a resignation to MAD become acceptable or advisable.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union forced the United States to accept MAD. However, under a transforming security environment, with China restrained in the

development of its nuclear arsenal and Russia only investing modestly in nuclear weapons, what is compelling the United States to remain within the structure of MAD? Is it out of habit or convention of security relations left from the Cold War? Or is it a sense of altruism?

In fact, without Russia or China forcing the United States to remain constrained within MAD logic, the domestic pressure or demands for a withdrawal from MAD is likely to grow within the United States. The liberal arms control community may lack sufficiently persuasive arguments to convince the general public of the wisdom of willingly staying within a framework that allows for the possibility of the destruction of its society.

In this sense, the debate about whether there is life beyond MAD is neither misleading nor irrelevant. The obvious alternative to MAD is nuclear primacy. Nuclear primacy was the goal of nuclear strategies before the advent of MAD, and nuclear strategies will likely return to it afterwards. Yet, it must be recognized that if American nuclear primacy was unacceptable to the Soviet Union throughout the early period of nuclear weapons development (from 1945 to the late 1950s), it will surely be unacceptable now as well. Russia will not be humbled by a new U.S. nuclear primacy when it believes that the new situation is real. If MAD dissipates, Russia will certainly take measures to catch up with the United States and restore the balance, though perhaps in a different form: a new MAD, if you will. Historically, this course of events would alternate between positions of nuclear primacy and MAD.

The current vociferous reaction in Russia to Press and Lieber's analysis that the United States may have reached nuclear primacy should be understood in

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***Even a single nuclear explosion in a large American city represents unacceptable to the United States.***

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this context. Russian experts' rebuttals do not mean that they are in a state of denial or that there is no concern about potential American nuclear primacy. Rather, they merely do not believe that it has materialized at this point in time.

If indeed MAD is eroding, then there is certainly a concern that a change to the new MAD security environment could be more destabilizing than a continuation of the current MAD structure. Restoring MAD would likely be accompanied by a qualitative and quantitative arms race that would have negative consequences for broader political and geopolitical relations. Yet the temptation to escape the logic of mutually assured destruction may be too powerful to resist.

For the arms control community, this may lead to the unexpected conclusion that for the sake of international peace, security and stability, it would be more advisable and realistic to call on Russia to take steps to underpin and reinforce MAD rather than require the United States to remain within MAD through goodwill. Expecting the U.S. government to remain within MAD based on altruism or by principles other than its national interest, based on the judgment of this author, is untenable in the long run and morally flawed.

The question remains open: are there other alternatives to MAD besides nuclear primacy? They are not apparent, but they may exist and other ways of heading off the trend toward MAD should be thoroughly explored.

### **Nuclear Strategy without Ideology**

Mutual assured destruction seems fundamentally irrelevant in the absence of ideological conflict as it existed during the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union had reason to threaten annihilation against each other throughout the Cold War. It was existential war. By nature, the Cold War was waged by zero-sum calculus. Nuclear weapons were first intended to help gain the advantage in a confrontation; however, with the emergence of MAD, the nature of the zero-sum game was dramatically revised: it was very possible, even likely, that both America and Russia would lose in a nuclear conflict. Thus, the strategic paradigm became dominated by a lose-lose option. And thus, "not losing together" became a sort of win-win option, which demanded codification of MAD through treaties.

In other words, MAD turned the Cold War into a complete stalemate. With all the moral flaws intrinsic to it, MAD could only be adopted under

Cold War pressures. However, the end of that era also brought the end of ideological confrontation. There is no other ideological (or non-ideological) conflict between the United States and Russia that can justify a readiness to devastate each other. Absent an ideological *raison d'être* for MAD, exploring possible nuclear relations in a bilateral (U.S.-Russian) or perhaps trilateral (U.S.-Russian-Chinese) format would be helpful to understand the conditions under which these countries would consider the use of nuclear weapons in the current security environment.

However, it seems that no one has yet figured out how to move beyond the rationale of MAD and the Cold War ideological battle underpinning it. After such a long period in which the nuclear powers held nuclear guns to each other's heads, both sides still hesitate to put them down. Paradoxically, this is the most powerful, if not the only, means of interdependence the Americans and Russians have. Unless other forms of co-dependence emerge, in energy or other spheres that can have a less-lethal deterrent characteristic, Russia will remain interested in nuclear deterrence and MAD in its relations with the United States.

Throughout the 1990s, the argument was popular in Russia that the United States would be much tougher on a Russia devoid of nuclear weapons. Consequently, nuclear weapons were taken as the primary vehicle underpinning Russia's "great power" status. Nuclear weapons were also widely perceived as the only available tool to compensate for the outstanding military disparity between America's growing power and Russia's relative decline. Presently, Russia continues to view nuclear weapons as a compensation for that loss of parity. Yet, the nature of its rationale has shifted. With the growth of what can be seen as a deep Russian skepticism of the United States -- Russia is no longer considered a threat, but it is not expected to become a partner with the United States -- Russia is losing its place of strategic importance. Nuclear weapons and a continuation of MAD appear to be the only means to preserve a measure of "strategic attention" towards Russia. Thus, if the viewpoint prevalent in the 1990s was, "The United States would bring harm to us, if not for nuclear weapons;" the formula now is, "The United States would not care about us at all, if not for nuclear weapons." Until

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Russia has other assets of strategic importance, nuclear weapons and MAD will continue to be very important for Russia.

Energy resources may be emerging as Russia's new strategic assets. Although there is a growing confluence of energy and politics, Russia still does not feel powerful or dominant enough in this sector to be sure that energy could act as a substitute for nuclear weapons as "insurance" against strategic loss. Nuclear strategy, at least on the Russian side, looks more and more like a "hedging" strategy. Ideologically, the United States and Russia do not need MAD and could go beyond nuclear deterrence. But presently, there is no viable alternative for nuclear deterrence relations.

### **MAD: Beyond the Bilateral Structure?**

Another fundamental question is whether mutually assured destruction can exist beyond a bilateral U.S.-Russian format. If a trilateral deterrent arrangement emerges between the United States, Russia and China – a scenario that grows increasingly likely as American nuclear posture takes China more and more into account – will the traditional MAD structure continue to exist? Or will it take some other form? What would the U.S. nuclear arsenal look like if it was designed to assure destruction to both Russia and China in one strike?

The problem goes beyond technical issues of whether one party (likely the United States) would have sufficient numbers and capability to carry out a first strike against Russia and China. The real issue would be in terms of the new strategic configuration and its stability. In a bilateral MAD relationship, mistrust was compensated for by a calculation that nuclear war was not in either party's interest. But in a MAD arrangement with three or more actors, party A may theoretically have an interest in war between the other two actors, assuming that war did not involve party A. In a trilateral MAD format, mistrust may be compounded by suspicion that one of the parties has an interest in nuclear war between the other two. Bilateral MAD was inherently stable and acceptable, because mistrust was offset by strategic clarity while a trilateral MAD maintains, even complicates the mistrust between parties without any strategic clarity. MAD is likely to be destabilizing and dysfunctional as a strategy to maintain peace in a triangular relationship.

In a situation of U.S. nuclear superiority, let alone nuclear primacy, Russia and China could cooperate to optimize their position confronting the United States. This would, in essence, be reverting to a derivative form of the tra-

ditional bilateral MAD, but on worse terms for the United States. Naturally, there are many reasons to question the possibility of a Russian-Chinese nuclear alliance. The likelihood of such an alliance at this time seems small, yet when they discover that traditional MAD calculations do not help to stabilize nuclear competition, some form of nuclear triangle may emerge as the only option.


Beyond the bilateral format, MAD looks risky and unstable. If the nuclear triangle continues to emerge, it will probably give birth to a new strategic architecture. This author would suggest that concepts like “minimum deterrence,” which has already been theoretically available for a while but not useful for Russia and the United States as they remain within MAD, should be given more serious attention.

### **Conclusions**

MAD is a strategy of necessity. Without the ideological opposition that defined the Cold War, MAD has become outdated and morally unjustifiable. It cannot be maintained as a policy of choice. Consequently, if Russia does not make efforts to reinforce strategic requisite for MAD, the doctrine will inevitably be challenged. The emergence of a nuclear U.S.-Russian-Chinese triangle will further add to the erosion of MAD, as it may not be as stable and useful as in its bilateral form. Currently, the only currently available option beyond MAD is U.S. nuclear primacy. This will not be acceptable to Russia, which, when it comprehends the emergence of this new nuclear status, will force the United States back into MAD. Understandably, U.S. resistance will only add to political complexities and the overall deterioration of relations, but may not change anything in the end: MAD will re-emerge.

Russia and the United States do not have any reason to remain within MAD, except that they do not know how to leave it. Joint efforts are needed to explore options regarding how to move beyond MAD without regressing toward nuclear primacy. It is likely that the arms control community will be tempted to offer the “tested” remedies of arms control treaties. Certain measures like “de-alerting” nuclear weapons do mitigate the urgency and reduce the risk of MAD. However, arms control regimes, as they emerged during Cold War, codified MAD. At base, the message of the traditional arms control movement is that MAD is acceptable, and can be made more predictable through carefully managed treaties. That was true for the Cold War. However, this overlooks the fact that MAD was the result of necessity. That was a



relatively easy message to sell to the public. Under the current conditions arms control proponents risk making the fundamental error of shifting from defending the means of managing the unavoidable strategic balance of mutually assured destruction toward defending MAD as an inherent principle. Any argument directly for MAD by the arms control community is highly vulnerable to rational and moral criticism. 

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, “The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Esin, *Nezavisimay Gazeta*, March 23, 2006; Vladimir Dvorkin, “The US: Is Nuclear Primacy Real?” *Argumentiy I Factiy*, April 5, 2006; Pavel Podvig, “Open to Question,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Leonid Ivashov, Interview with *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, March 23, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Yegor Gaidar, “Nuclear Punditry is a Dangerous Game,” *Financial Times*, March 29, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Seregey Karaganov, “Nuclear Rookies or Provocateurs?” *Rossiyskay Gazeta*, March 31, 2006.