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**Nuclear Incoherence:  
Deterrence Theory and Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Russia**

**POSSE Policy Memo**

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This memo<sup>1</sup> illuminates how various factions of the Russian strategic community perceive non strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW), their role in national security, their potential use, and their modernization paths. The study offers an alternative and novel argument about the notion of Russian *regional nuclear deterrence*, and puts forth practical and theoretical implications.

The main empirical finding of this article is that the set of Russian ideas pertaining to *regional nuclear deterrence* (RND) is detached from the arsenal which should supposedly support it. The RND is a vague notion, not coherently formulated, not codified doctrinally, and not calibrated among different parts of the Russian strategic community. Two factors mainly account for this puzzle. One is conceptual. The Western theory of deterrence was a novelty for Russian strategic studies discipline. The latter started to co-opt the former only recently and the concept of deterrence remains under construction. The second is bureaucratic. Russian national level strategic declarations have minor bearing on the actual force posture and concept of operations. Contradictory white papers neither reflected nor framed intellectual and professional dynamics within the nuclear, and broader, strategic community. Consequently, budgetary, planning, procurement, and military-technical decisions in the nuclear field have been un-coordinated. Un-coordination of national security priorities and threat perceptions produced a chronic inconsistency between official nuclear policies, theoretical nuclear thinking, and actual practice on the ground.

Theoretical and historical evidence suggest that one should not set the bar for coherence between external (declaratory) and internal (operational) aspects of nuclear doctrine too high. Orchestrating policy, science, strategy, procurement, and execution is a challenging enterprise

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<sup>1</sup> This memo is based on the paper that is under review in an academic journal. The draft is not for citation/circulation.

for any country, particularly with nuclear weapons. States' national security and military policies are frequently saturated with bureaucratic parochialism, disconnects between declarations and implementation, organizational complexities, and variations in managerial views on the "theory of victory," especially during defense transformations. More specifically, incoherence and lack of tight integration between strategy and policies, operational concepts, and forces evident in the Russian case are not unique if compared to the Cold War U.S./NATO approach to TNW. Historical evidence about Flexible Response suggests that establishing a coherent theater nuclear posture and streamlining it with national deterrence strategy has been a demanding and frequently unfulfilled task. Thus, the Russian case is unique, not so much when compared to other states, but primarily when observed from the perspective of Russian history and continuity of its strategic culture. Tsarist and Soviet military innovations demonstrated that it is not unusual for Russian doctrine to outpace the actual capabilities, but not the other way around, as in the present case.

Why should one care about Russian nuclear incoherence? If it is a relatively typical phenomenon what difference does it make? Some challenges may be just too hard to solve or do not have a solution. This issue, however, is too important to be just left aside, because nuclear incoherence may enhance regional crisis instability in light of Russia's current security policy. Today, Russia aims to restore itself as a great power in economic, military and political terms. It does not have global power projection aspirations, but its revisionist worldview makes it readier than before to use military force against neighboring countries, as it did in Georgia in 2008. Great power status restoration includes radical military, industrial and technological modernization and reestablishing dominance in the post-Soviet space, which the Kremlin sees as a zone of its privileged interests. Moscow views pro-Western former Soviet republics as potential adversaries,

backed by the US-led alliance that is opposing Russian efforts to reestablish its dominance, and works to limit Western influence. Russia's current military policy prepares its armed forces to fight low-intensity conflicts with separatists inside Russia and in neighboring states, and to prevent the incursion of US forces into the post-Soviet space by conventional and limited nuclear means.<sup>2</sup> In such a crisis, Russian nuclear incoherence may play the most destabilizing role as it enhances the probability of inadvertent or accidental war. Availability of TNW for early deployment, ambiguous pre-delegation procedures, unclear posture, deployment of dual use weapon systems, and a non-binding nature of doctrinal papers will make misperceptions and miscommunications among the adversaries issues of particular concern. A local conflict that starts as a conventional one may inadvertently escalate to a major international crisis involving limited nuclear exchange.

Another empirical finding relates to the fundamental scientific research of a new generation of nuclear munitions. Often overlooked, this ongoing enterprise may profoundly shape future Russian nuclear reality and have major implications for international politics. Weapons designers traditionally operate under the assumption that munitions and not declarations determine a state's actual nuclear doctrine. Their influence on policymaking is significant today, and it may gather further momentum in light of chaotic Russian nuclear reality. Given the advanced state of scientific research, production and procurement of miniature nuclear munitions may be a question of Russian political will. The latter is directly linked to U.S nuclear innovations. If the role of mini-nukes increases in the United States, Russian leadership will become more receptive to the recommendations of its domestic "nuclear scalpel lobby". As of this writing and analogous

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<sup>2</sup> Pukhov, 2012; de Haas, p.35.

to the case of the IT-Revolution in Military Affairs during the Cold War, Russian experts attribute more innovative ideas and industrial progress to the United States than probably exist.

What if the Russian regional nuclear deterrence ideas mature and supported by a new generation of nuclear munitions, materialize into solid “asymmetric escalation posture”? What if scientific and doctrinal concepts proliferate to other nuclear powers, or the latter emulate them? Presumably, the current nuclear taboo norm would erode, significantly transforming the nature of future warfare. A shift in perception would make nuclear weapons usable, legitimate, and a strategically desired battlefield tool, and thus would lower the nuclear threshold level. This, in turn, may stimulate a new era of nuclear competition and arms racing. This imagined second nuclear RMA might have major implications for international politics.

It is unclear how expensive and complicated adoption of this class of munitions would be for current and prospective owners of military and civilian nuclear programs. Although developing forth generation of nuclear weapons would be a significant scientific-technological challenge demanding political will and financial investment, it may be more feasible than one would expect. In principle, the literature expects technology transfers, doctrinal diffusions, and adoption capacity pertaining to such capabilities among and the old and new members of the nuclear club.<sup>3</sup> It is possible, that in frames of the scientific cooperation during the last decade, Russian nuclear weapons designers might have shared their innovative ideas with Chinese colleagues. Deterrence models and campaign designs based on “asymmetrical nuclear posture” may be immediately useful for China and Pakistan, along with other states in East Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, as a countermeasure against adversaries possessing various forms of conventional

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<sup>3</sup> For example see: Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010). Matthew Kroenig, *Exporting the Bomb* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2010).

precision or nuclear capabilities. However, as this article demonstrated, formulation of asymmetrical deterrence strategy is a complicated, demanding, and long learning process that does not necessarily result in coherent posture. This has been true in case of those countries that had decades of nuclear education and experience. The process may be even more demanding for newcomers to the nuclear club.

Recent work exploring the missions of TNW for the United States and NATO argued that tactical nuclear weapons “carry significant security and political risks, and they have not received the attention” both inside and outside of government “that is commensurate with their importance.”<sup>4</sup> This article tried to fill in this void by disentangling Russian thoughts and deeds about regional nuclear deterrence and the role of NSNW in it. The findings of the article support the argument that the division between strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons may be an irrelevant relic of the Cold War that does not bear much political, operational, or theoretical utility today.<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Larsen argues that “the denomination of certain U.S. nuclear weapons as ‘non-strategic’ should not continue much longer. His view is that NSNW should remain in the inventory but the categorization should change. Larsen suggests absorbing NSNW, operationally and conceptually, into a general nuclear arsenal, “due to the growing recognition that *any* nuclear use would have strategic consequences.”<sup>6</sup>

Conceptual difficulties associated with NSNW observed in the Russian case also suggest that the term itself may be a misnomer and that sometime soon Russian theoreticians and politicians may arrive at similar conclusions. Presumably, the Russian military expert community realized that none of the streams of regional deterrence thought offers a feasible strategic option. Operational

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<sup>4</sup> Nichols, p. 507.

<sup>5</sup> Kristensen, p.10.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey A. Larsen, “The Role of Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons: An American Perspective,” In Nichols, p.327

doctrine for NSNW use in regional hostilities is not agreed upon; a new generation of nuclear weapons is a futuristic idea, and a massive leaning on the IT-RMA capabilities is bordering on wishful thinking. Thus, one may expect a merger of all Russian nuclear capabilities into one arsenal and a return to global nuclear deterrence as a panacea for both nuclear and regional aggression. This article demonstrated that even today, despite *de jure* division of the Russian nuclear arsenal into two inventories—strategic and non-strategic—this division is actually blurred in Russian thought.