

Russian Strategic Deterrence – Beyond the Brinkmanship?

Gudrun Persson

When President Vladimir Putin was interviewed in March 2015, he said that he had considered increasing the alert level of the nuclear forces in connection with the Crimean operation. In recent years Russia has increased its aggressive behaviour with nuclear weapons in and around the Baltic Sea, and its official nuclear rhetoric has been unprecedented in Russian and Soviet history. The Russian Ambassador to Denmark threatened Denmark with Russian nuclear missiles should Denmark join NATO's missile defence. At a meeting with the so-called Elbe Group in March 2015, the Russian envoys allegedly said that Russia would use nuclear weapons in the event of a NATO build-up in the Baltic states. This threatening rhetoric is remarkable not least because it comes from one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

In addition to the official rhetoric, the number of exercises involving both strategic and tactical (sub-strategic) nuclear weapons has increased in recent years. In the first week of September 2015, the Russian Strategic Missile Forces conducted a large-scale exercise; and, if such behaviour was disturbing news to outsiders, it is noteworthy that it seemed to cause concern in Russia as well. An anonymous editorial entitled "Russia prepares for victory in a nuclear war" in the newspaper *Nezavisimaia gazeta* referred to the exercise and asked whether "... the military no longer considers the use of weapons of mass destruction to be the end of the human race? And if so, please tell us straight out".

The role of nuclear weapons in Russian security policy is traditionally defined in the Military Doctrine, in nuclear deterrence policy documents, and in key speeches and declarations by the political leadership. At the doctrinal level there has been no change in the Russian nuclear position. The newly revised Military Doctrine 2014 has the same wording as was previously used to explain Russia's policy with respect to the use

of nuclear weapons. Paragraph 27 states: "The Russian Federation reserves the right to utilize nuclear weapons in response to the utilization of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, and also in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation involving the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat. The decision to utilize nuclear weapons is made by the President of the Russian Federation."

In addition to the latest public declarations and the increase in nuclear exercises for the last three years (both in size and duration), a debate is going on in military newspapers and journals regarding the use of nuclear weapons to de-escalate a conflict, and this needs to be highlighted. According to the Russian researcher Andrei Zagorski, nuclear de-escalation has been a part of Russia's nuclear deterrence policy since 2000. Nuclear de-escalation means the use of sub-strategic nuclear weapons when a local war is escalating into a regional war. The use of nuclear weapons should, according to this line of thought, scare the enemy away and de-escalate the conflict. In the military debate over the past few years, these ideas have become more frequent. Konstantin Sivkov, a known hardliner at the Academy for Geopolitical Problems, argued in March 2014 (before the revision of the Military Doctrine had been completed) that a preventive strike with tactical nuclear arms against an enemy would be not only possible but also right. He and others argued for a change in the official doctrine that would explicitly regulate Russia's possible use of a preventive nuclear strike. Makhmut Gareev, influential military theorist and a veteran of the Second World War, stated in July 2013 that the destruction of the intermediate-range ballistic missiles in the late 1980s and 1990s was a mistake. "Now also the highest leadership of the Russian Federation recognizes this mistake," he wrote.

It would be too easy to write off this line of thought as something coming from single, self-proclaimed experts – or to trivialise it by claiming that it is the task of every military staff to make plans for any conceivable event. It is more sinister than that. The advocates of a preventive nuclear strike are challenging another school of thought that has been emphasising the importance of a non-nuclear strategic deterrence for Russia. Andrei Kokoshin, one of Russia's leading strategic thinkers, has been arguing for this for years – that Russia should look beyond nuclear weapons to other modern, high-precision weapon systems. “Excessive confidence in nuclear deterrence in national security policy is detrimental and even dangerous for Russia,” he wrote in 2011. And, although the revised Military Doctrine contains the phrase “non-nuclear deterrence” (§ 21 l), it does not seem to have gained any broader acceptance within the Armed Forces and society.

So how can the recent nuclear frenzy be explained? The official nuclear posturing is obviously a part of Russian strategic deterrence, as Aleksei Arbatov, a well-known nuclear expert, has observed. It is a political signal to the West not to interfere in Ukraine or anywhere else that the Russian political leadership considers as being within Russia's sphere of influence.

But the nuclear posturing is not occurring in a vacuum. It is taking place against the background of a surge of nationalism in Russia in the wake of the annexation of Crimea. The new Military Doctrine emphasises increased tensions and a growing rivalry between values and development models (§ 9), whereas the Doctrine of 2010 described a world of weakening ideological confrontation (§ 7). It reached a climax when, in 2014, t-shirts were sold in Moscow with Topol-M (an intercontinental ballistic missile) printed on them, and posters with pictures of the t-shirts could be seen in the city. They were clearly designed to appeal

to a younger generation, a generation who had not grown up under the threat of the mushroom cloud.

Add to this the rewriting of school history books, and President Putin publicly defending the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact not excluding the secret protocol. Amid the military-patriotic enthusiasm, the Russian President repeatedly glorifies dying when defending your country. Recently, on 1 September when speaking to children who are especially gifted within the natural sciences, sports, and arts, between 10 and 17 years old, he did just that. And, as an example of a Russian scientific innovation to be proud of, made by young scientists, Putin took an example from the defence industry – the Iskander missile system. When the (reportedly) first ever Army World Championships were held in Russia in August 2015, the event was covered extensively by national TV. The armed forces and military-patriotic education are being glorified even more than in the past two decades. In brief, the social contract in Russia has been changed from less human rights in exchange for stability and economic growth to one of Russian uniqueness and great-power identity.

It is quite misleading to explain the current nuclear rhetoric as a generational issue, i.e. language from a political and military leadership that is the first generation with no direct experience of the Second World War. There might be a grain of truth in such a notion, but the crux of the problem lies elsewhere. It is deeply tied to the current political situation in Russia – the dynamics of inner repression and outer aggression, the belief in a strong hand, and the glorification of Russia's military victories. It is a far from stable situation.

Please visit www.foi.se/russia to find out more about the FOI's Russia Studies Programme.