

Nuclear Factor in New Russian Military Doctrine: A Case Study of a Wrong Political and Military Assessment

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ABSTRACT

The new military doctrine of the Russian Federation officially introduced in April 2000 puts an emphasis on potential first use of nuclear weapons by Russia. At first sight it seems to be a natural reaction of Russian defense planners concerned with growing Russia's vulnerability on the conventional level. An analysis developed in the paper demonstrates however that this concept of reliance on the nuclear factor is excessive in the first, senseless in the second, and dangerous and counter-productive in the third strategic direction. As a whole the doctrine represents a case of a wrong evaluation and assessment of the spectrum of threats to the national security.

THE MILITARY DOCTRINE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation was approved by presidential decree of April 21, 2000. (*Voennaya doctrina rossiiskoi federatsii – Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 2000, July 14th). The point 8 of this doctrine, concerning the use of nuclear weapons, is the most referred to element in Russia and abroad. It says: "The Russian Federation retains the right to use nuclear weapons in reply to the use of nuclear and other mass destruction weapons against it and/or its allies, as well as in reply to a large-scale aggression with the use of conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation."

The ado created by that phrase was partially unexpected. First, it contains nothing new from the viewpoint of Russia's official military strategy. A similar thesis replaced the

traditional Soviet pledge not to be the first to use nuclear weapons in “The Basic Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” approved by presidential decree on November 2, 1993. And second, this is a rather standard provision for Western military doctrines, including the NATO strategy concept. Russia has lost its superiority in conventional weapons, and countries and military blocs have appeared close to Russia, which are superior to it in this sphere. The new Russian military doctrine stipulates that nuclear weapons have become the main deterrence factor in this situation. Consequently, it would be inexpedient to make a no-first-use pledge now. As long as Russia feels a potential non-nuclear threat, it will pursue the logical strategy of “defence in all directions,” with the possession of nuclear weapons being a substantial element thereof. This strategy, which was clearly and openly formulated in the new military doctrine (although it contains some rhetorical confrontation passages), is apparently defensive and should not worry too much our neighbours and partners. Whether it adequately corresponds to real threats to Russian national security is another question. We offer you the analysis of the situation in specific directions to answer this question beginning with the western direction.

THE WESTERN DIRECTION: RUSSIA-NATO RELATIONS

Most experts agree that the 1999 Kosovo crisis was the pivotal element in Russia-NATO relations. But neither Brussels, nor Moscow drew the proper conclusions from it, for they would be embarrassing to both sides on different reasons. The NATO operation in Yugoslavia reached a dead-end in mid-May 1999. NATO was tottering on the brink of a split over two key questions: the continuation of the air strikes, and the committing of ground forces. The bombing raids, however pinpoint they were, still increased “collateral damage,” meaning the death of peaceful civilians and the destruction of Yugoslavia’s infrastructure, which dramatically undermined the European public support for the operation. Democratic countries cannot wage wars without public support. Greece virtually spoke up against the military operation. The governments of Italy and Germany were on the verge of getting a no-confidence vote from their parliaments.

Besides, it turned out that the bombing raids alone could not force the Yugoslav army to leave Kosovo. NATO has admitted today, a year after the Kosovo operation, that the air operation against the Yugoslav army brought minuscule results. Military logic demanded use of ground forces. But the modern Western society today is not prepared to sustain military losses, at least in a war that does not threaten its existence. This is the effect of the Mogadishu criterion: The war ends if five servicemen are killed and their dead bodies are shown on TV. NATO was not ready to wage a ground operation in Yugoslavia, even under the threat of public humiliation and a review of the Cold War results. We must agree with the opinion of General Klaus Naumann, the recently retired chairman of the NATO Military Committee, who said that NATO was saved by a miracle in Kosovo. That miracle has a name — Viktor Chernomyrdin. (We are not going to criticise Moscow’s position at the final stage of the Kosovo conflict. Despite some attractive features of the confrontation scenario, which would provide Moscow a chance “to put NATO in its place,” it would be counterproductive in the long-term perspective from the viewpoint of Russia’s interests).

The new strategic concept, which was approved at the NATO jubilee session and provides for humanitarian interventions beyond the framework of Article 5 of the NATO Charter, was stillborn. Kosovo was the first and only instance when it was applied. This is the

main lesson of the Kosovo conflict. The NATO military experts are perfectly aware of this, but prefer not to speak about it — for understandable reasons.

Our military experts are top-class professionals, too, but it was not in their interests to hinder the anti-Western and anti-NATO hysteria, which swept our politicians off their feet. “Yugoslavia yesterday, Russia tomorrow.” This slogan is still popular. It is much easier to lobby for larger military allocations in this atmosphere. On the other hand, this cause must in no way prevent our political and military establishment from adequately evaluating the world around us. They can dislike the West for the very fact of its existence. Or they can regard it as a kind of an economic, information and spiritual challenge. Or they can believe in the immanent hostility and evil intentions of the West with regard to Russia - if they like this and think that this flatters their vanity. But we must realize that the modern democratic West with its concept of value of human life, does not present a military threat to Russia.

As for nuclear weapons, their possession is a major political and psychological factor in Russia-West relations. But as for the particular scenario stipulated in the Point 8 of the Russian military doctrine - the use of tactical nuclear weapons to deter or repel an aggression, it is just not plausible in the Western direction. The nuclear factor is excessive in deterring a potential aggression in the Western direction.

THREATS FROM THE SOUTH

Let's look now at the southern direction. The nature of threats coming from it is connected above all with the possible involvement of Russia in local conflicts close to the state borders of Russia and its allies. No matter what political or legal description we provide for the Chechen conflict, it is military-wise a guerrilla war with separatists in a border region of Russia. It is clear that nuclear weapons cannot be used in such conflicts as a means of deterrence, let alone as a means of warfare. We should train special professional units.

But it is even more important to use political methods to preclude the involvement of Russia in local conflicts on its southern borders. To make these methods effective, we should have an adequate understanding of the neighboring culture. This means above all Islamic countries in the south. The Islamic world is highly unstable and plagued by social and ethnic conflicts, which sometimes result in the appearance of extremist groups. Initially, these groups were not hostile to Russia. Moreover, the attitude of the Islamic world to Moscow had been more or less positive. But we seem to be doing everything possible to ruin our relations with the Islamic world and to incur the wrath of its most radical factions.

Do our strategists ever think about this? Especially when they encourage our leaders, who visit Western capitals, to laud Russia as the shield protecting the Western civilization from Islamic extremism? These propaganda efforts would have been laughable, if they were not dangerous. The recent statement made by our high-ranking officials on Russia's intention to deliver strikes at the fighters' bases in Afghanistan was particularly irresponsible. It is apparent that it will be used as a weighty argument by the Islamic extremists and attract thousands of fanatics into the terrorist groups. We cannot understand the military goal of the suggested action. The bombing of terrorist training camps is an unrealistic task, since it is virtually impossible to organise effective reconnaissance of the Afghan territory. Strikes can be delivered only at large stationary objects, such as cities, military bases of government

troops, and airfields, which would be tantamount to beginning a new Afghan war, with catastrophic consequences for Russia. Maybe we want to scare the Taliban, who have been waging a war in their country for more than ten years now? It is time to see that deterrence does not mean anything to ideological fanatics.

THE FAR EAST: RUSSIA AND CHINA

As for the Far Eastern direction, we have developed a strange tradition of avoiding a comparative analysis of the Russian and the Chinese armed forces. Although we have been analyzing for years possible speculative scenarios of potential conflicts between Russia and the USA or Russia and NATO. This professionally aloof analysis is an obligatory element of creating a stability system and has nothing in common with fostering hostility. Well, if we regard Russia and China as a couple of states with their military capabilities, we might think at first sight that this is the classical case when the conventional superiority of one country (China) is counterbalanced by the threat of the first use of nuclear weapons by the other country (Russia). But such analysis disregards such vital parameter of military strategy as unacceptable damage. Since nuclear strategy is in fact to much extent psychology, the advantage in this psychological duel can be snatched not by a country that has more sophisticated nuclear weapons, but by a country whose culture is more tolerant of human losses.

If we regard the potential Russia-China conflict from this viewpoint, we will have to drop the illusion that the threat of tactical nuclear weapons will deter the opponent. The readiness to lose human lives will allow China to up the stakes in this nuclear gamble. If China becomes our military opponent, it will be a superior opponent at all stages of the escalation of the conflict. With the exception of the last stage — an all-out nuclear war, in which we are assured a draw with total destruction of each other.

China is however moving, although slowly, in the same direction as the bulk of civilized countries. This is why the best guarantee of Russia's security is the political and ideological evolution of China towards the Western values, above all the fundamental value of human life.

CONCLUSION

So, despite its seeming logic and attractiveness, the concept of reliance on the nuclear factor is vulnerable. It is excessive in the first, senseless in the second, and dangerous and counter-productive in the third strategic direction. Even a cursory analysis of the nature of threats in each of these directions shows that Russia's security cannot be guaranteed only by a package of military means now. Political and civilization factors, and their adequate understanding and use, have a no less important part to play in relations with our neighbors and partners.