

## CHAPTER 11

### **Diplomatic Solutions to the “Problem” of Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons**

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Recently, analysts and military officers have once again become concerned over so-called non-strategic nuclear weapons,<sup>2</sup> those designed for theater nuclear conflict. Existing bilateral nuclear arms control agreements leave these weapons uncontrolled except for the limited case of intermediate-range weapons covered by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the reciprocal unilateral, informal restrictions (with no verification provisions) that were agreed to by Presidents Bush, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin in the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) of 1991-92. The prospect of deep reductions under a hypothetical third Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START III) has caused some to fear that a continued Russian advantage in non-strategic nuclear weapons could put the United States at a significant overall strategic disadvantage.

The problem is exacerbated by the great uncertainty over the number, location, and condition of many of the Russian weapons. While there is near-universal agreement that the Russian inventory far exceeds that of the United States, estimates of the number of theater nuclear weapons in the Russian nuclear inventory vary widely.<sup>3</sup> Whatever that number, those weapons could, in the minds of many, pose a direct threat to the interests of the United States, to our European allies, to U.S. forces deployed in Europe, or to the U.S. ballistic missile submarine force. Some estimate of the degree of concern can be judged from the convening document of the November 2000 Airlie House Conference on Dealing with Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons, on which this volume is based:

First, many of them pose a direct threat to the continental United States. Russian long-range theater nuclear strike aircraft, cruise-missile-armed surface

combatants, and cruise missile submarines can attack important military and political targets along the coasts and deep inside the United States. Second, Russian nuclear-armed anti-submarine warfare aircraft, submarines, and ships threaten the U.S. ballistic missile submarine force, undermining the U.S. deterrent.... Non-strategic nuclear weapons are an important emerging national security policy issue.... [that] could affect perceptions of the U.S.-Russian nuclear balance, progress on nuclear arms control, and perceptions of nuclear proliferation's risk. [They] pose policy, planning, and operational challenges [that].... are likely to grow worse with time.<sup>4</sup>

Even those who doubt that there is a military threat question the safety, security, and accountability of Russian theater nuclear weapons. The lack of any verification associated with the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives and the continued doubt over how much progress Russia has made in implementing those initiatives only heighten the concern.

### **What is the Real Concern?**

This chapter surveys diplomatic or negotiated options for dealing with the problems posed by Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons. The premise of the Airlie House conference was that Russian non-strategic weapons present a “problem” to be solved. This is obviously true in terms of safety and security, but less certain in pure military terms. Russian non-strategic weapons pose little threat to the United States and its allies. Most systems do not allow weapons to be delivered beyond Russian borders. In some ways, their retention is a mystery.

A look at Russian formal security policy quickly solves this mystery, however. Russian nuclear weapons are being maintained in a desperate attempt to compensate for Russian conventional inferiority. The Russian military doctrine makes this clear. It reads: “The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to...large-scale aggression

using conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation.”<sup>5</sup>

Official Russian statements don’t distinguish between strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons. The Russian doctrine obviously is intended to refer to both, just as U.S. and NATO doctrine referred to both strategic and tactical weapons in the days when we feared Soviet conventional superiority. Thus non-strategic nuclear weapons are important to Russia primarily, maybe exclusively, as part of a hedge against conventional inferiority.<sup>6</sup>

Compensating for conventional inferiority was important to the United States during the Cold War. It is no longer necessary for America in a world in which it is the single military superpower. For Russia, however, the situation is quite different. Russia sees itself as vulnerable to conventional attack both by NATO and, in the more distant future, by China.<sup>7</sup> This is the basis for renewed Russian interest in nuclear weapons. They are a sign of weakness, not strength.

The conference paper referred to above suggested several specific threats from non-strategic nuclear weapons. Few of them are persuasive. For example, the paper suggests a direct threat to the continental United States from theater strike aircraft (presumably Backfires) or from cruise-missile-armed surface ships and submarines. But the Russian Navy is in such dire straits—witness the disastrous loss of *Kursk*, one of the newest and most capable ships in the Russian arsenal—that at most we see a single ship in each ocean make periodic deployments. One or two ships would add little to Russian strategic capability even if the ships involved could survive in wartime to reach launch positions. Thus, while at-sea redeployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons would matter in political terms, it wouldn’t matter militarily. After all, if the Russians want to threaten the U.S. homeland, they already can do so with intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and, to a lesser extent, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs).

The conference paper also suggested that Russian tactical nuclear weapons pose a threat to U.S. nuclear ballistic missile

submarines (SSBNs). But the problem in countering SSBNs is locating them, and there is no evidence the Russians have solved, or are likely to solve, this problem. Indeed, Russia's ability to threaten U.S. submarines is almost certainly less than it was during the Cold War.

Only the third issue—safety and security of non-strategic weapons—seems worth worrying about. Concerns with “loose nukes” arise almost entirely from fears over the security of Russian inventories of tactical weapons. The problem would become more acute if the Russians were to re-deploy these weapons to operational units. This is why the United States should worry about the Presidential Nuclear Initiative of 1991-2 unraveling.

### **The First Approach: Concentrate on Safety and Security**

The security of Russian weapons is important, but is not best dealt with through traditional arms control. At its most fundamental level, improving security requires reducing Russian perceptions of the external threat, hastening Russia's integration into Western political and economic institutions, and reviving the Russian economy so that Russia can afford both adequate protection for nuclear weapons and a strong enough conventional force to lessen the perceived need to depend on nuclear weapons.

Pending these improvements, the Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons problem is best dealt with through the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program. Sustaining and, if possible, expanding that program is more important than any arms control measures. In this regard it would be an important step if the administration and Congress were to eliminate the current practice of limiting CTR funding to implementing formal agreements, so that the United States could fund safety and security improvements for tactical weapons.<sup>8</sup>

So the first possible “solution” is to be clear about the problem and to focus on what really matters, which is safety and security.

## A Second Approach: Traditional Arms Control Options

Many, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff,<sup>9</sup> disagree with my analysis that Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons pose a safety and security problem but not a military one. Those who take this point of view will find it attractive to try to reduce the threat posed by Russian weapons through more or less traditional arms control measures. Can such options be negotiated? The question presupposes that an agreement that can be negotiated can be both verified and ratified. Neither is certain.

Verification cannot be assessed until specific proposals are crafted, but the United States has no experience in verification at the warhead level. A verification regime for non-strategic nuclear weapons is likely to be both highly intrusive and marginally effective (although verification of warhead destruction would be somewhat easier).<sup>10</sup>

Ratification of any future agreement cannot be assured, especially if the agreement becomes captured in the ongoing congressional debate over national missile defense and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Verification difficulties will also translate into ratification problems. The discussion that follows will *assume* that a verifiable and ratifiable agreement is possible, but readers should be aware that this might not be the case.

The simplest approach is a stand-alone negotiation of some type. Options range from codifying the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-2 to making more ambitious efforts to reduce the imbalance between numbers of U.S. and Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Codifying the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives has considerable merit. Such codification could make it easier to implement Nunn-Lugar assistance, in which case it would be a good thing. Codification might also include some form of verification, or at least of increased transparency. Verification or transparency improvements would reduce the current uncertainty over the status of the Russian nuclear weapons affected by the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives.

But seeing codification as the entire “solution” to the “problem” of non-strategic nuclear weapons assumes that it is the uncertainty over Russian compliance that bothers the United States. That may not be correct. Those who worry about the “imbalance” in non-strategic weapons are unlikely to be satisfied by having their suspicions of imbalance formally confirmed. Thus, standing alone, codification is unlikely to resolve the issues that led to the convening of the Airlie workshop or to the continuing concern of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Unfortunately, while codification may be possible as a stand-alone effort, negotiation of actual reductions is not. There seems little chance of more than symbolic agreements covering non-strategic nuclear weapons. Russia has a huge advantage in numbers of these weapons, and the United States has few incentives to offer Russia to reduce that imbalance. We could agree to eliminate nuclear Tomahawk Land-Attack Missiles (TLAM/N)<sup>11</sup> or to remove the remaining nuclear weapons from Europe. Eliminating TLAM/N would pose little problem, but our NATO allies might have significant problems with the United States withdrawing nuclear weapons from Europe.<sup>12</sup> Although the military rationale for these weapons no longer exists, they continue to play an important symbolic and political role.

Even if we decide the NATO problem can be overcome, it is difficult to see how that buys much, given the renewed importance of nuclear weapons in Russian doctrine, especially if the conventional wisdom is correct and tactical weapons have become more important in Russia as the ultimate deterrent against invasion or coercion by NATO or, in the future, China. If Russian tactical nuclear weapons are a counter not to U.S. tactical weapons but to U.S. conventional forces, reducing U.S. tactical nuclear deployments won't provide much incentive for Russia to reduce its own capabilities.

Slightly more promising is a formal integration of non-strategic nuclear weapons into a future START III Treaty negotiation. This was the Clinton administration's approach to future arms control discussions involving non-strategic nuclear weapons. Its

essence was set forth in the Clinton-Yeltsin Helsinki joint summit statement of March 1997:

The Presidents also agreed that in the context of START III negotiations their experts will explore, *as separate issues*, possible measures relating to nuclear long-range sea-launched cruise missile and tactical nuclear systems... [emphasis added]<sup>13</sup>

There is, however, a significant problem with this approach. It assumes that there is a viable START III process. But there was not such a process as of early 2001, and is unlikely there will be one for some time, if ever. Despite significant efforts by the Clinton administration and an almost unending series of meetings, no progress has been made. The United States had thought that the replacement of Boris Yeltsin with Vladimir Putin as Russia's President might offer new opportunities (previously there was no effective Russian interagency process and no one to negotiate with). This hasn't proven true.<sup>14</sup>

The reason for Russian intransigence is, of course, national missile defense. Arms control in the waning days of the Clinton administration was dominated by a totally unsuccessful attempt to find some formula to allow modification of the ABM Treaty to allow minimal deployment of a ground-based ABM system.

The extremely modest U.S. proposal would not even have allowed deployment of the second ABM site called for in the administration's plans. Despite this, the Russians totally rejected the U.S. approach. The degree of Russian opposition became clear when the U.S. position was posted on the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* web site.<sup>15</sup>

The impasse on the ABM Treaty and national missile defense has also blocked any progress toward START III. Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov made this clear in late 2000 when he wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, "Lifting the ban on deployment would deprive the [ABM] Treaty of its essence.... Further nuclear arms reductions will not happen without the ABM Treaty."<sup>16</sup>

*America's One Available Negotiating Coin*

Even if the issues surrounding national missile defense could be resolved, the United States still might not be able to make any progress on the core issues of START III, let alone expand START III to cover non-strategic weapons. As a practical matter, the United States has only one concession to make in strategic arms control negotiations: it can meet the Russian demands to set strategic force levels well below the Helsinki agreed-upon level of 2,000-2,500 strategic nuclear warheads. In essence, we have one coin to spend. With this coin, we want to buy agreement to ABM deployment, new bomber counting rules, rejection of all Russian attempts to limit conventional forces, constraints on non-strategic nuclear weapons, improved transparency and warhead destruction, and simplification of verification in order to save money.

Thus far, however, the United States has not been willing to spend that coin at all, let alone to choose which of the competing objectives to spend it on. Spurred by concerns from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, especially, the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Strategic Command, the U.S. government has determined that it cannot accept levels of strategic warheads below those agreed to at Helsinki without first conducting a formal review of U.S. targeting strategy.<sup>17</sup> The congressionally mandated Nuclear Posture Review<sup>18</sup> will provide an opportunity to conduct this review. Reducing strategic offensive arms to the level of 1,500 warheads, as many Russians suggest, will almost certainly require changes in the targeting approach that the United States has followed for the past two decades. It is clear that such changes are possible; the question is whether they will be acceptable to the political leadership.

Further, if modifying the ABM Treaty to permit limited deployment of national missile defense remains a key objective of U.S. arms control policy, then that objective will probably preclude any progress on non-strategic nuclear weapon reductions. If our only leverage is accepting Russian-proposed strategic force levels, there is a limit to what we can extract for that concession, especially since in most other areas we are the *demandeur*. To return to the coin metaphor, if the United States has only one coin to spend, we may be able to buy limited NMD agreement, but we can't buy much else. Therefore, the second

broad approach—traditional arms control—probably won't work.

### **The Third Approach: External Trade-Offs**

Thus far I have argued that stand-alone negotiations on non-strategic nuclear weapons won't work and that combined negotiations probably won't either. Are there other approaches? One possibility is to seek some other form of trade-off. In principle, future trade-offs need not be limited to the nuclear arena but could include reductions in Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons in return for, say, U.S. economic assistance or help with the environmental cleanup of nuclear facilities.<sup>19</sup>

This idea is superficially attractive, but there are no historical examples of such a trade-off in the Russian-American context.<sup>20</sup> Further, if Russians see tactical nuclear weapons as crucial to compensate for conventional inferiority, they may be unwilling to reduce them in any case. Finally, it could prove politically very difficult to obtain approval for such an approach in either the United States or Russia. Still, this is an interesting option that deserves further study. Strong Presidential leadership on both sides would be necessary to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles.

A variant to this idea of external trade-offs is a suggestion made by Sergey Rogov, Director of the Institute of the USA and Canada of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Rogov suggested that Russian concessions on arms control issues might be accompanied by concessions from the International Monetary Fund to Russia or by agreement to reschedule or forgive Soviet-era (and perhaps even Russian) debt. It seems very difficult to see how such an arrangement might work; the bureaucratic and procedural obstacles appear insurmountable, even assuming—as is far from clear—that political conditions in the United States and Russia made it attractive.

The final possibility is to look for trade-offs in conventional forces. Although the Helsinki agreement promised to discuss only nuclear forces, the Russians clearly want to discuss all sea-launched and air-launched conventional cruise missiles. Russian

Navy leaders have stated a concern in unofficial dialogues that conventional strikes could destroy their fragile command and control system for communicating with ballistic missile submarines. Similarly, some Russians advocate various types of restrictions on, for example, anti-submarine warfare, as a way of protecting their strategic forces. More generally, Russians are exceptionally concerned with advanced conventional weapons. They would welcome limits on such weapons.<sup>21</sup>

The United States has always resisted suggestions for limits on conventional military technology and should probably continue to do so. The United States depends on conventional high-technology weapons and unrestricted freedom of the seas in meeting its worldwide responsibilities. Whatever the benefits of new limits on tactical nuclear weapons, they don't appear to be worth constraining these conventional capabilities. Certainly the very limited military threat from non-strategic nuclear forces is insufficient to justify such a major change in U.S. policy.

It is theoretically possible that some form of NATO agreement to limit placing conventional forces on the territory of the new NATO members could play a role in a complex agreement involving non-strategic nuclear forces, but the negotiating complexities and NATO policy issues are daunting. Still, if non-strategic nuclear forces are as important as some claim, this option too may be worth pursuing.

### **Conclusion**

To solve any problem, we must first be clear on what the problem is. If the problem with Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons is that we fear they will fall into the wrong hands, then the solution is straightforward in principle, although difficult in practice. First, the United States and NATO must continue to build a cooperative relationship with the Russian Federation to reduce Russian perceptions of the threat from the West. Otherwise, these perceptions, combined with the weakness of Russian conventional forces, may cause Russia to re-deploy its non-strategic nuclear weapons to tactical units. Second, the United States should continue to expand efforts under the Cooperative Threat Reduction program to strengthen safety and

security and to assist in dismantlement. Formal agreements have only a modest role to play in these endeavors.

If, however, as suggested by the organizers of the Airlie House conference, the problem is that we want to reduce actual Russian military capability through diplomatic means, then the situation is more complex and there may be no solution. This essay has assumed that there may still be a role for traditional East- West arms control, but it is an open question whether any such role remains. It may be time to simply abandon the process. The United States has no affirmative, achievable goals in a hypothetical START III except to preserve the regime of the ABM Treaty while allowing deployment of national missile defense. This may not be possible in a way that allows anything more than an extremely minimal NMD deployment. Abandoning traditional East-West arms control would free us to seek a fundamentally new relationship between the United States and the Russian Federation. Many have called for such a step,<sup>22</sup> although there is no good model for such a new relationship.

But even if traditional arms control continues, it probably can't play a significant role in capturing Russian non-strategic weapons. One of the biggest myths in Washington is that the ability to identify a problem proves there must be a solution. This case is an example of that myth: the "solution" of a traditional arms control arrangement may seem attractive, but it is unlikely to solve the "problem" of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons. Some things really are too hard.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This essay has been adapted from remarks made at the U.S. Air Force-sponsored November 2000 Airlie House Conference on Dealing with Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons. The views expressed are the author's and not those of the Center for Naval Analyses; its parent, The CNA Corporation; or any component of the Department of Defense. I am grateful to my CNA colleagues Daniel Whiteneck and Richard Weitz for their helpful comments on this draft.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between strategic and other nuclear weapons has almost certainly lost whatever utility it may once have had. By any

rational definition, all nuclear weapons are “strategic.” Despite this, I will use the term “non-strategic nuclear weapons” in this chapter to mean those weapons not covered by the various START treaties.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent, non-alarmist summary of various estimates of Russian inventories, see Chapter 12 by William C. Potter. Although Potter estimates that there are only a few thousand Russian weapons, others estimate that close to 20,000 such weapons exist.

<sup>4</sup> Untitled and undated paper (September 2000) provided by the U.S. Air Force Directorate for Nuclear and Counterproliferation as part of the registration package for the November 2-3, 2000 Airlie House Conference on Dealing with Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons.

<sup>5</sup> *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, approved by a presidential decree dated April 21, 2000, published in Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on April 22, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> For a more robust description of the role of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons, see Chapter 9 by David S. Yost, “Russia and Arms Control for Non-Strategic Nuclear Forces.” While Yost identifies more roles for Russian non-strategic weapons than simply countering conventional inferiority, his broad conclusion is consistent with those in this chapter: Russia sees many disincentives to negotiated reductions in non-strategic nuclear weapons.

<sup>7</sup> Americans tend to dismiss Russian concerns over a potential NATO attack, assuming that the Russians cannot be serious. This is probably a mistake. For at least some Russians, nuclear coercion by NATO—and even actual attack—is a genuine fear.

<sup>8</sup> The CTR Program (also referred to as the Nunn-Lugar Program after its sponsors in the U.S. Senate) is managed by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency and helps Russia dismantle excess nuclear warheads and improve the safety and security of those that remain. It is thus the ideal vehicle for dealing with safety and security concerns. For additional information, see [www.dtra.mil/ctr/ctr\\_index.html](http://www.dtra.mil/ctr/ctr_index.html).

<sup>9</sup> For an indication of military concern, see the testimony of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Strategic Command on “U.S. Strategic Nuclear Force Requirements,” delivered May 23, 2000 before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

<sup>10</sup> For additional details on the challenges posed by warhead verification, see Chapter 7 by Philip (Tony) Foley.

<sup>11</sup> TLAM/N is a nuclear-armed cruise missile originally designed for launch from U.S. Navy surface ships and attack submarines. All TLAM/N were removed and stored ashore under the Presidential Nuclear Initiative of late 1991. Subsequently the United States abandoned the capability to re-deploy these missiles on surface ships, while retaining the ability for submarine deployment.

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<sup>12</sup> Because the United States and NATO do not make public the number of weapons in Europe, reductions in that number (generally already assumed to be relatively low) would probably have little diplomatic impact and give the United States little leverage in negotiations with Russia.

<sup>13</sup> “Joint Statement on Parameters on Future Reductions in Nuclear Forces,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Helsinki, Finland, March 21, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> START II approval by the Russian Duma is, of course, a good sign, but because of the relations with national missile defense and the ABM Treaty it really doesn’t move us very far. There is no near-term chance of U.S. Senate ratification of START II, because of ABM Treaty issues.

<sup>15</sup> See

[www.bullatomsci.org/issues/2000/mj00/treaty\\_doc.html#ANCHOR1](http://www.bullatomsci.org/issues/2000/mj00/treaty_doc.html#ANCHOR1).

<sup>16</sup> Igor Ivanov, “The Missile Defense Mistake: Undermining Strategic Stability and the ABM Treaty,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2000, pp. 16, 18.

<sup>17</sup> See the May 23, 2000 testimony cited above (footnote 9) for a public example of this position.

<sup>18</sup> Mandated by Section 1041 of the Fiscal Year 2001 National Defense Authorization Act. The Congress explicitly calls for an assessment of “the levels and composition of the nuclear delivery systems” that will be required for implementing U.S. strategy.

<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to Richard Weitz for suggesting this possible approach.

<sup>20</sup> The early 1990s agreement that the United States would purchase 500 metric tons of highly enriched uranium from Russian weapons for blending and subsequent re-sale as commercial reactor fuel may be an exception.

<sup>21</sup> These conclusions on Russian attitudes are based on a number of private and seminar discussions with Russia military officers, government officials, and academics that I have conducted over the past several years.

<sup>22</sup> Among them: then-candidate George W. Bush, who said that the current situation calls for “nothing short of a new strategic relationship” with Russia. See [www.georgebush.com/issues/foreignpolicy.html](http://www.georgebush.com/issues/foreignpolicy.html).