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### **Nuclear Security and Strategic Force Modernization**

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There is nothing extraordinary about current Russian-American dislike, distrust, and antagonism. What is happening today is not a return to the much unbeloved Cold War of quite recent memory (only 26 years), but rather to the enduring reality of international politics as usual. This persisting condition has always been characterized by competition – political, economic, and inevitably military also. If we read history as we should, we learn that distrust or more active dislike among great powers, including actual warfare, is both normal and to a degree inevitable. The most persisting reason is not hard to fathom. When security/threat analysts of national security scan the current and anticipatable international horizon, quite properly they look out first and primarily for the larger, indeed existential, threats to the wellbeing of their home country. Americans today are almost spoiled for choice among somewhat villainous regional and even sub-regional local states, as well as a more serious malevolent one. The latter category only has one member, Vladimir Putin's recovering Russia.

### **The Problem of Russia**

When considered in historical context it is unlikely that Putin would warrant nomination even for the 'B' list of 'bad guys'. Yes, he lies, cheats, bullies and threatens neighbors, and flexes his growing military muscles to change borders, which makes him seriously unsuited for partnership in a top state duopoly of cooperative powers alongside Uncle Sam. Lest we forget, the sundry crimes and misdemeanors his particular Russian regime has committed have been entirely standard practice by Moscow for decades. It is necessary to remember always that Russia lives, and has always lived, in a very rough geopolitical neighborhood, one bereft of geographical help for defense, save for sheer space with the distances it provides and its weather. From the time of Tamerlane's rampaging Mongols in the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century to Hitler's storming Teutons in the 20<sup>th</sup>, Russians have learnt that national history has been one characterized by loss of life on a very large scale. They know, really know, that history periodically



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produces horrific tragedies. Even if or when victory eventually is achieved, not infrequently it has been earned at an extremely high price.

Russia can never be an enduring friend and well trusted ally because international politics almost literally mandates antagonism, if not outright hostility in the relations between near-equals with competing interests. There is no inevitability of war between the two states, but the danger and risk of such an eventuality cannot be totally expunged. There is an apparent permanence in the mutuality of nuclear deterrence that holds in Russo-American relations. Nonetheless, given the danger that lurks in the situation it is desirable that some anxieties should be present in both countries. This is truly serious business and it is necessary that neither party should forget that fact. Given its history, it is perhaps no surprise that Russian leaders have not forgotten this point over the past two decades, unlike many in Washington.

The future is not foreordained and therefore reliably predictable, not, at least, so far as we know or can ascertain. Nonetheless, there are grounds for considerable optimism. While Russia will never be our friend, with prudent Western steps there is ample reason to believe that Russia will never be convinced she can take advantage of the United States over a matter about which the American public cares profoundly. Of course, even confident expectations of expert analysts, occasionally are proven wrong by the actual unfolding of history – demonstrating once again the inherent uncertainty of political decision-making. The demise of the deeply unlovable USSR in late 1991, for example, generally was neither anticipated nor expected.

Alas, the end of that great socialist experiment did not herald the emergence of a new and benign dawn, one shedding light on old problems and illuminating a path forward for the human race. There was no tomorrow garlanded with evidence of good intentions for international peace and security. Not only did that fail to happen, its occurrence was not possible. The reasons were both all too human and also rather abstract. On the human front, when the United States emerged from a condition of Cold War warrior as the victor (and survivor) its leaders were more than somewhat surprised by the precipitate and non-violent collapse of its rival of the preceding 46 years. A few people were not surprised, Dr. Andrew Marshall and his Office of Net Assessment in the Pentagon, for honorable example. Understandably, it took some little time for Americans to absorb fully the definitive fact of Soviet disintegration and collapse; but what did it mean for the near term and beyond? Politics, internal, international, and a mix of the two, were as unpleasant as ever, if not worse, from the 'Horn' of Africa to Cambodia, and especially in the Balkans, where the death of Marshal Tito was taken as a 'start' signal seemingly for every ambitious politician in states or nascent 'statelets' in the region. The new, currently much disordered and seriously demographically and geographically diminished, Russia unsurprisingly meddled. However, it did not do so in a way or with a weight that much troubled the White House of Bill Clinton in the 1990s, nor did more significant and violent meddling appear to much trouble subsequent American administrations.

### **Russia's Revival**

By the end of the Millennium and for a very few years thereafter it was not understood with much clarity in the United States that great states may be shaken, but that is unlikely to be the end of the story. As a consequence of a fall from greatness they can be stirred into revival in a form that works well enough



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for a while. In 1917 Russia was stirred by defeats and poor military performances both at home and abroad, but following four terrible years of civil war and foreign intervention the country was obliged to try something new, whether or not it so desired. The choice of the time was less than glittering – leading to the rise of Josef Stalin without any resemblance of free and fair elections.

What we need to appreciate is that Russia's history bequeathed a political culture that has expression in a strategic culture utterly unlike the American. To back up briefly: it is entirely usual for powerful states to be suspicious of each other. What has been, historically unusual, though not unprecedented, has been for there to be only two states in a topmost class of superpowers. Russia slipped in the competitive ratings seriously in the decade that followed immediately after the official dissolution of the USSR. Rather superficially this wounded condition was partially repaired in the 2000s, in the 'guided democracy' of neo-czarist Vladimir Putin. His Russia is a state back both with a vengeance, and very evidently seeking some vengeance upon those who disrespected the interest and wishes of a distinctly unholy recreation of Holy Russia.

It is important for us to recognize that our current troubles with Russia reflect not only the disagreements of here and now, but also are faithfully reflective of the entire historical narrative. When two powers rise far above the rest of the world they are almost condemned by what is common to their natures to be rivals. Blame for the antagonism always can be located if one looks hard enough, but that exercise is futile, often misleading at least. The hostility is an inevitable and unavoidable consequence of the geometry of power. Each of two superpowers, even only great powers, have no prudent choice in their statecraft other than to regard the other through a lens colored by suspicion. It is only prudent for them to stress the taking of measures for the practical goal of prevention of possible subsequent regret. This is the demonstrated way of international relations and the rather unhappy context within which the United States and the West more broadly finds itself today.

### **Nuclear Weapons**

We have lived with nuclear weapons for so long now (72 years) that it can prove quite a challenge to try to think through just how great their influence has been for both national and global security. Whether or not they are widely understood, two facts govern the reality of nuclear arsenals. The first pertains to the permanence of these weapons: they are here to stay. I need to cite this certainty since some people hold deeply moral and possibly religious objections to nuclear weapons. I do not doubt their sincerity or even the sense in some of their arguments. However, I am no less sincerely convinced that nuclear weapons have entered human weapons' arsenals on a permanent basis. Indeed, it may be unfortunate but still probable that it would prove extraordinarily dangerous to attempt to implement very large scale denuclearization, unilaterally, bilaterally, or on a global basis. It is all too easy to forget that although these weapons are indeed fearsome tools of state they did not appear, as it were magically from nowhere. Rather they were and remain the products of political competition between politically organized communities. The weapons exist because of the needs driven by human insecurities. History provides ample evidence of the bad results that tend to flow as a consequence of undeserved optimism about the amity possible in international relations. Nuclear weapons and their various means of delivery are not and cannot be the problem. The problem, rather, is the enduring search for security manifested in the struggle to attain influence. Given that this character of our behavior often is judged in moral terms, we can appreciate that such fundamental debate over nuclear weapons is not likely to be helpful for policy



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and strategy. Nuclear weapons are what they are, and they are what they are because international relations are a reflection of us as we are, and by all appearances have always been.

The second often under-recognized fact about nuclear weapons is that they do not lend themselves at all easily to a strategic framework for employment in and by statecraft. The idea of nuclear strategy trips readily enough off a lecturer's tongue but familiarity should not be permitted to promote foolish disrespect. It may be helpful to recall the bare basic structure of strategy which is expressed in the standard formula comprising these elements: Ends, Ways, Means – and Assumptions. I will admit that the tail-end concept here is a personal insistence of mine. The United States has a nuclear strategy as it must, as does Russia. However, there is little doubt that an actual war would rapidly find nuclear expression that must strain toward and beyond breaking point the resilience of any state's society. It is relatively easy to conceive of a very small number of these weapons being employed to make a political point, but it is difficult to conceive how the hundreds and more weapons in both superpowers' arsenals could be employed for any politically meaningful, sensible purpose. Obviously, one would think, this has to mean that the superpowers could not risk causing catastrophe that easily would be far worse than any in humanity's bloody history—exceeding by far even the excesses in slaughter effected by Tamerlane's Mongols.

What is almost all too obvious is the strong likelihood that the slide from small (even just token) nuclear use on or for the battlefield in Europe, to a 'central' (homeland to homeland) war, could be unstoppable. Virtually any size of nuclear war would be catastrophic, and possibly nationally terminal for the relatively small states that comprise NATO in Europe. It is not self-evident that even the super-size superpower states—the United States, Russia, and China—could wage nuclear war for prudent political ends. In short, major nuclear war would not only be grossly imprudent, it would be literally beyond the bounds of strategy. Nonetheless, it is not a physical impossibility. All too plainly, nuclear employment needs to be deterred, and, in the case of some lesser nuclear-armed states, even physically disabled where feasible.

With considerable reluctance this essay is obliged to recognize the inevitability of an enduring nuclear policing role for the United States. This is not a matter for choice; it is driven by the realities of international politics. In practice, the only prudent question to pose is that of the nuclear capable armament required for American weapons today and tomorrow given that our choice is distinctly limited by the facts we know about our principal state competitor. The Russia we know well enough by now is a ruthless competitor for influence in the search for ever greater security. This is not an immoral goal, although it may be carried out in immoral ways. Rather it is usual for great states to press their influence outwards until it runs into a barrier that can only be overcome by the threat or use of countervailing force. All great powers, not excluding the United States, behave similarly. However, this time in the lengthy historical narrative, the great power that is striving to expand its domain both of actual ownership and influence at least, runs up against an opposing Alliance system in the character of a NATO that remains nuclear armed, despite some internal pressures to disarm. In order to stand some reasonable chance of deterring or frustrating any Russian invasion, the Alliance will need to have some resort to nuclear weapons. If such resort would be a NATO initiative sought in military desperation, we might assume that the number of weapons used would be few. However, that cannot be a prudent assumption because the Russian military incentive to launch a preemptive nuclear attack might well be compelling.





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### Prudent Modernization of the Triad

The sad state of world affairs sketched briefly above leaves us with little prudent choice for national and international security. What we can do, however, is ensure that such prospects as there might be for careful control and limitation of nuclear weapon employment, are fully prepared. A survivable and flexible nuclear force has long been recognized as key to this deterrence goal.

It is in that context that we need to address the urgent issue of modernization and, where necessary, replacement of elements in America's Triad of strategic forces (ICBMs, SLBMs, and Manned Bombers). Not all audiences appreciate just why this Triad needs attention. First and foremost is the fact that these strategic forces are akin to being the crown jewels of our country in strategic terms. They comprise complementary capabilities that could ruin any foe far beyond any possibility of recovery, and as part of a proper deterrence strategy, can effectively communicate this result to a spectrum of bad actors and thereby help deter their provocations. As much to the point, the performance of America's non-nuclear conventional forces to support our interests and allies abroad is given needed deterrence cover by the dreadful menace posed by our strategic forces. As Herman Khan explained more than fifty years ago, a process of escalation connects the different kinds, levels, and amounts of force employed.<sup>1</sup>

The entire American Triad now begs for modernization to remain operational in coming years, and deserves the attention and support of the U.S. leadership. In particular, the Long Range Stand-Off (LRSO) cruise missile will be a weapon with a performance character that must be highly desirable, even essential, to meet the kind of challenges of most concern here. Replacing the old ALCMs (Air-Launch Cruise Missiles) of 1980s vintage, the LRSO will be "stealthy" and have the extensive range to ensure that our manned bomber force is not compelled of necessity to attempt to penetrate the advanced air defenses of the late 2020s and beyond.

Uniquely among strategic forces, manned bombers are relatively slow to complete their missions and are recallable on command, which may be of great utility during a crisis. Yet, our bombers could have difficulty penetrating opponents' active defenses in future years—hence the clear need for the "stand off" capability inherent in the LRSO. The weapons carried primarily could be conventional and precisely targetable for counterforce effect or they could be nuclear. Analysis shows that the LRSO option all but makes itself as being vital for the long-term health of the U.S. Triad of strategic forces. While the ICBM force is needed in order to hold heavily protected and probably defended targets at prompt risk, and the SLBM force to provide enduring deterrent effect, the airborne leg of the Triad can offer purposeful delay, even recall response in real-time to orders, and high flexibility as to use, timing, and signaling. The B-21/LRSO marriage offers an excellent investment prospect for a notably insecure world and wider flexibility for deterrence and assurance missions in the future; much more so than the B-21 and nuclear gravity bombs alone could credibly accomplish.

An issue for LRSO critics is an overwrought concern that an adversary, presumably Russia, could mistake a *conventionally* armed U.S. cruise missile for a *nuclear*-armed LRSO during a crisis, and that this misunderstanding could escalate a crisis dramatically.<sup>2</sup> Many things are possible, of course, but recent history demonstrates that this concern is overstated. The United States has employed dual-capable cruise missiles in conflicts around Russia's periphery on multiple occasions in recent decades, for example: in Iraq in 1991, in Bosnia in 1995, in Kosovo in 1999, in Afghanistan in 2001, in Iraq in 2003, and



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against Syria in 2017, without any such problems. Indeed, Russia itself seems to have no qualms about launching dual-capable cruise missiles over and near stationed U.S. forces in the Middle East. In addition, if dual-capable cruise missiles are deemed so “destabilizing,” then U.S. bombers and dual-capable aircraft must similarly be labelled since they too can carry both conventional and nuclear weapons. But any such designation can only be considered far-fetched, and indeed LRSO critics have not made this charge against our bombers or other dual-capable aircraft. Finally, the concern about LRSO and dual-use technology, beyond being unpersuasive, is vastly outweighed in a net assessment because LRSO will be uniquely valuable for the priority goals of deterrence, assurance, and damage limitation.

### Conclusion

The international security environment breeds competition and suspicion among great states, and contemporary U.S.-Russia relations reflect this harsh reality. Russian national goals are inimical to U.S. and NATO goals and openly hostile to the *status quo*; and Russia has made the strategic choice of using its nuclear arsenal as a coercive tool to advance its hegemonic ends. This decision by Moscow has shocked Western audiences that almost universally had very different expectations about the future. The United States can and should act to extinguish the apparent Russian notion of profitable nuclear first use threats. Prudence now dictates the United States modernize its nuclear Triad to support its priority national goals of deterrence, assurance, and damage limitation. The LRSO is very likely to be a critical tool in these missions and deserves the full support of U.S. leadership.

Recommended further reading: Williamson Murray, *America and the Future of War: the Past as Prologue* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institutions Press, 2017); and, Keith B. Payne and John S. Foster, Jr., et al., *A New Nuclear Review for a New Age* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press), 2017.

1. Herman Khan, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965).
2. For example see, Dianne Feinstein and Ellen O. Tauscher, “A Nuclear Weapon That America Doesn’t Need,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 2016, available at [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/18/opinion/a-nuclear-weapon-that-america-doesnt-need.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/18/opinion/a-nuclear-weapon-that-america-doesnt-need.html?_r=0); Kingston Reif, “Cruise Control: Why The U.S. Should Not Buy A New Nuclear Air-Launched Cruise Missile,” *War on the Rocks*, March 21, 2016, available at [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/18/opinion/a-nuclear-weapon-that-america-doesnt-need.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/18/opinion/a-nuclear-weapon-that-america-doesnt-need.html?_r=0).

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