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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL &
SECURITY STUDIES AT MARYLAND

Contrasting Russian Perspectives on Coercion and Restraint in Russia's Security Relations with the West

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CISSM Working Paper

December 2017

This paper was made possible with the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Abstract

This discussion paper analyzes a sample of 2014-2016 Russian-language publications focused on Russia's security relations with the United States. It characterizes the Russian expert debate at that time as dichotomous in nature, where security policy analysts proposed either coercive or restrained policy approaches in dealing with perceived threats. It assesses similarities and differences of these two perspectives with regard to the nature of Russia's political-military relationship with the West, as well as past challenges and then-future opportunities in nuclear arms control and strategic stability.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, U.S./NATO-Russian relations have been in a tailspin. Russia's annexation of Crimea, its support of pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, and numerous coercive actions aimed against NATO allies have contributed to a breakdown of political-military relations. The United States and European Union members have imposed political and economic sanctions on Russia, and NATO allies have cut substantive military cooperation. These actions, however, have not induced desired changes in Russian policy. Russia's own responses and sanctions, in turn, did not induce its desired changes in Western policies. Moscow's alleged intervention into electoral processes in the United States and in Europe has destabilized political relations even further, dashing already slim hopes for constructive engagement on critical issues affecting mutual security interests.

Across the Euro-Atlantic region, conventional, nuclear, and air/missile defense postures have continued to adapt to changing threat perceptions. U.S. and Russian militaries' close proximity in the European theater as well as in Syria has highlighted the importance of even limited military-to-military coordination aimed at minimizing the risks of unintended conflict. As the United States and Russia—as well as other countries, most notably, China—continue to pursue capabilities that challenge established bilateral notions of strategic stability, managing perceptions and escalation dangers is bound to remain a difficult task for the foreseeable future. In this newly dangerous security environment, discussions about “strategic stability” have proven difficult. The sides are yet to embrace any of the cooperative proposals developed in the few Track II forums that have continued to meet since the Ukraine crisis began, and even proposals for risk reduction have been viewed with great suspicion. Instead, they have engaged in a “war of words,” with media coverage amplifying respective concerns and speculations about the other side's capabilities and intentions.

In the United States, the broader analytical community has largely struggled to understand the drivers of Russian political-military behavior. For example, there is an active debate about whether the Ukraine conflict offers evidence of offensive or defensive intentions on Russia's part. This debate contributes to ongoing concerns about the potential vulnerability of U.S. allies in the Baltic states to Russian “hybrid warfare.” Some further argue that Russia's use of coercive signaling and nuclear language around the Ukraine conflict may suggest Russia's potential willingness to invade these states and engage in limited use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons to end the conflict on its terms.

Given the seemingly important role of the Russian military in driving Russian political-military engagement with the United States and NATO, some Western analysts have suggested that the concept of “strategic deterrence” (стратегическое сдерживание) could offer an important lens through which to analyze key aspects of Russian behavior toward the West. Thus, with an eye toward exploring this possibility, this discussion paper examined select Russian-language military and security policy publications to answer the following questions:

- How do Russian military and security analysts view the most serious threats to their country?

- How do they think Russia should respond, particularly on issues affecting political and military relations with the United States and NATO?
- What do these views suggest about the future evolution of Russian policy and strategy with regard to conventional and nuclear arms control issues?²

This paper argues that far from being monolithic, the Russian security policy community could be viewed as having two dominant perspectives. Military and conservative analysts, writing in journals such as *Military Thought* and outlets like *Russia in Global Affairs*, focus primarily on Russia's improvement of its strategic deterrence capabilities and how Russia could use nuclear, conventional, and non-military threats to coerce the West. By contrast, security policy analysts from Russia's leading international affairs universities such as IMEMO, ISKRAN, and others argue for a modicum of restraint, noting that some Russian policies have been based on an exaggerated threat from the West.

Highlighting the differences and similarities between these two perspectives is a simplistic approach from an analytical standpoint, but it could still offer some valuable insights. For example, even though one of them views risk manipulation as an important tool that could be used against the West, both perspectives are generally defensive in nature. In addition, the two perspectives generally agree that cooperation with the West could help address some of the other security challenges Russia faces, including reduction of nuclear risks and strategic stability in a format that potentially includes China.

The section that follows lays out the two perspectives. The paper then offers an overview of the policy issues, moving from political-military issues in U.S./NATO-Russian relations to functional topics. It concludes with a summary and a table.

The Two Perspectives

Russia's Military Doctrine and its Foreign Policy Concept offer a baseline of Moscow's assessment of its external environment and threat perception. Both documents discuss perceived dangers from U.S./NATO's readiness to use military force and inability to terminate conflicts. They also address internal instability and terrorism that could challenge Russia's sovereignty, as well as local conflicts on the country's vast borders that could escalate, including potentially to the use of nuclear weapons. Other concerns include military-technological developments, including U.S. and allied missile defense, prompt global strike systems and concepts, information technologies, and dangers posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction technologies to state and non-state actors.¹

In the sample of 2014-2016 publications assessed for this paper, there were two dominant perspectives about how Moscow should prioritize and respond to these perceived threats. Some analysts viewed Russia's relations with the United States and NATO from a prism of a long-term struggle that originated from perceived Western efforts to diminish Russia's role in the region and the world. Others saw the West not as Russia's enduring competitor, but as a potential

² This paper does not include substantive discussions of information security, nonproliferation, or counterterrorism issues.

cooperative partner. They emphasized the importance of restraint and positive leadership that could help to induce positive changes in Russia's security environment.

Russia Needs to Deter and Coerce the West

Some Russian analysts viewed their country as the underdog in a struggle against the West. In journals such as *Military Thought*, they discussed the West's war against Russia, which it has continued to wage since the end of the Cold War primarily through globalization and information war activities. "The West will only rest at a point where our country and our people will be reduced to a state in which they will be laughed at and despised," S.A. Bogdanov and S.G. Chekinov proclaimed.²

Russia's response to this challenge from the West was described by analysts as its own "strategic deterrence." This approach was based on the premise of Russia's asymmetry vis-a-vis the West. Due to budget constraints, Russia could not match Western conventional capabilities, but this did not preclude the pursuit or demonstration of stronger conventional capabilities or nuclear modernization. Its deterrence efforts needed to be asymmetric and draw on psychological effects.³ Russia's Chief of the General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov and others have focused analytical thinking on the changing nature of conflict, arguing that the West uses non-military means (including cyber and information war) to destabilize countries, and Russia thus should, too. Authoritative political analysts such as Sergey Karaganov and Fyodor Lukyanov (of *Russia in Global Affairs*) also argued that Russia's coercive efforts and stronger conventional and nuclear capabilities are key to its ability to secure its interests and counter the West.

Some military analysts from research institutes of the Russian Ministry of Defense described strategic deterrence as primarily a defensive strategy that sought to prevent conflict and control escalation if a conflict broke out. It aimed to "induce fear" in opponents and has elements of deterrence, containment, and compellence.⁴ Other authoritative writers and practitioners focused on the importance of tailoring non-military means, and the direct and indirect uses of military force, to achieve desired effects.⁵ However, Russia's ability to tailor these tools precisely to their Western counterparts' understanding has been unclear.

The use of nuclear language around the Ukraine crisis illustrates the potential for tailoring errors or miscommunication. As a 2016 Swedish Defense Agency report noted, "the Russian Ambassador to Denmark threatened Denmark with Russian nuclear missiles should Denmark join NATO's missile defence, and at a meeting with the so-called Elbe Group in March 2015, the Russian envoys allegedly said that Russia would use its nuclear weapons if NATO moved more forces into Lithuania, Latvia, or Estonia."⁶ To be sure, such threats could have reflected an entrepreneurial *esprit de corps* among Russian appointees and formers. However, they were treated by some Western analysts as official Russian policy, especially when interpreted in concert with Russia's coercive demonstration of its conventional and nuclear capabilities.

Some Russian analysts posit that discussions of Russia as a nuclear danger is Western propaganda.⁷ Others are dismissive of the now-infamous remark by a highly-rated Russian journalist about Russia's ability to turn its adversaries into "radioactive ash" as a "provocation." However, they also note that Russian threats and activities make Western policymakers think twice about the dangers of great power conflict and escalation, especially in Syria.⁸

Russia's President Vladimir Putin himself said, during an October 2016 meeting with Western analysts and journalists, that "brandishing nuclear weapons is the last thing to do. This is harmful rhetoric, and I do not welcome it."⁹ It wasn't clear, however, whether this statement represented a policy change.

Russia Should Exercise Restraint, Positive Leadership

Political analysts at Russia's international affairs institutions rarely, if ever, used the term "strategic deterrence" in their work. They instead advocated a lesser emphasis on coercive approaches, even ones that draw on indirect uses of military force. Scholars such as Andrei Zagorski, Sergei Oznobishchev, and Sergey Rogov focused more on past Western and Russian actions that have contributed to the current state of affairs as well as institutional challenges of bilateral and regional relations. Alexey Arbatov, Vladimir Dvorkin, and Viktor Yesin assessed the negative consequences of some of Russia's anti-Western policies and raised concerns about potential costs of an arms race. Pavel Zolotarev has further urged the Russian government to "be patient with experts who argue against current policies, are not influenced by propaganda, and can critically analyze the government's actions."¹⁰

Some proponents of restraint posited that the most serious threats to Russia originated not from the United States and NATO per se, but from organic instability on Russian borders, changes in technology, transnational terrorism, and nuclear proliferation. From this perspective, cooperation with the West, especially on arms control and strategic stability, remained critically important to Russia's security. Others pointed out that official Russian denials of engagement in certain aspects of conflict in Ukraine have also contributed to Russia's current inability to reassure the West about its lack of hostile intentions toward the Baltic states.¹¹

Once again, the example of the use of nuclear language around the Ukraine conflict is instructive. Some have argued that the use of nuclear rhetoric by low-level officials and journalists should have been expeditiously curbed by the Russian leadership because it fed a Western narrative about Russia being dangerous.¹² Others have warned of the need to halt the "nuclear psychosis" and the media feeding frenzy on nuclear issues in both Russia and the West.¹³ Most importantly, however, some have argued that, especially in an environment where U.S. leadership is uncertain, Russia needs to exercise constructive leadership internationally on nuclear arms control and emerging strategic stability issues.¹⁴

Nature of Russia's Relationships with the West

As this section notes, the two perspectives differed in regard to the origins and conduct of the Ukraine conflict. However, they express similar views about the West's general attitude toward Russia and the importance of regional security institutions.

The Ukraine Conflict

For proponents of strategic deterrence, Ukraine has been a test case of the new Cold War in Russia's relations with the West. For example, some analysts posited that the "Western-initiated process of globalization and Western efforts to control and guide the evolution of human

society” have been deliberately anti-Russian. They maintained that, much like the Arab Spring and other efforts at promotion of Western democracy and values, Ukraine was a Western-created “hybrid” conflict.¹⁵ They argued that Russia would continue to oppose the West in such efforts, especially across the post-Soviet space. Syria was viewed by some Russian military officials as another example of a Western-induced “hybrid” conflict that the Russian intervention helped to stabilize.¹⁶

Proponents of restraint, by contrast, suggested that Russia shared some of the blame for the regional security situation. Some have argued that Russia’s actions in Ukraine were an overreaction to the prospect of that country’s NATO membership.¹⁷ Others have posited that Russia made errors in relations with its neighbors, especially with Ukraine, and “couldn’t find proper tools and balance its historical responsibilities with the importance of maintaining stability in its neighboring states.”¹⁸ Still others argued that, moving forward, “Russian policies need to stop being reactive and need to have a vision for a peaceful process in Ukraine and the world as a whole.”¹⁹

Russia’s Place and Role

Russia’s place and role in the Euro-Atlantic region is an issue that received a substantial degree of attention and frustration. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has publically stated that it is impossible to “unite Europe without a role for Russia,” and that “efforts to do this have ended with conflict throughout history.” He has pointed out that new NATO members and other countries allied with the United States are not necessarily accepting of Western values (i.e. democracy, transparency, responsibility to protect), yet the West does not single them out for punishment.²⁰

This narrative of a Western double standard for Russia is pervasive, especially in the writings of strategic deterrence proponents. Some of them argued that “the West did not want to include Russia in the development of an alternative European system from Vancouver to Vladivostok, and is now pushing to make Russia the enemy and recreate the old system of confrontation.”²¹ They are generally of the opinion that, when Russia develops strong conventional and nuclear capabilities, it will no longer be pushed around by the West.

Even proponents of restraint posited that U.S./NATO-Russian relations broke down in part because of the lack of Western respect for Russian interests. In this regard, one analyst has argued that a Russian policy change toward the West was “not for the purpose of confrontation per se, but because [Russia] decided to no longer put up with the prevailing model of interaction with the West, which was not taking into consideration Russian positions and was not developing with it equal relations.”²²

Across the analytical spectrum, there is a prevailing opinion that the U.S. policy change in 2014 toward Russia was triggered not by Russia’s annexation of Crimea per se, but was instead due to Russia being treated as an unequal partner by the West. In addition, the narrative that the West views a stronger Russia as a danger to its interests persists.²³

Institutional Frameworks

There is considerable debate about how Russia should use existing frameworks for engagement with the West to discuss general questions, like deficiencies of the regional security architecture, and specific problems, like the conflict over Ukraine. These debates focus primarily on the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). Both frameworks have significant deficiencies, according to most Russian analysts. Some Russian officials bluntly note that the “West preferred NATO to OSCE, [and] used OSCE only to criticize Russia on human rights.” They point out that “it is the only institution where Russia and West discuss European security, but it is really hard to build consensus” inside of it.²⁴

Echoing official sentiments, one analyst that generally aligns with the strategic deterrence perspective has argued for strengthening the military components of the OSCE because that organization’s military basket is the only useful one since the “economic basket makes no sense and its human rights basket is used to stimulate confrontation.”²⁵ He has also called for more “Eurasian security dialogue” that includes China.²⁶ Some proponents of restraint have instead argued for the need to “make the OSCE into European [United Nations] and consider returning to Russia’s proposal in 2008 for European security treaty.”²⁷ While likely impractical, these proposals are emblematic of frustration with the form and function of Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Even though the NRC was suspended rather than used as an “all-weather” crisis mechanism during the Ukraine conflict, both camps viewed the NRC and the NATO-Russia Founding Act (NRFA) as important.²⁸ Some noted that discussions in the NRC should focus on countering military escalation and avoiding incidents involving military forces.²⁹ Others argued for the importance of discussing hazardous activities and clarifying the NRFA wording with regard to permanent stationing of “substantial combat forces.”³⁰

Looking Back: Substantive Challenges in the Relationship

The two perspectives differed on the nature of U.S./NATO-Russian engagement on arms control going back to the 1980s. Proponents of strategic deterrence viewed the agreements reached by USSR General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, especially the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), as being fundamentally damaging to Russian interests.³¹ Proponents of restraint saw them as mutually beneficial. For example, they countered that it didn’t matter that under the INF treaty, the Soviet Union eliminated twice as many intermediate-range and other missiles as the United States did because the treaty eliminated the U.S. Pershing-II missile, which Russia considered particularly threatening.³² Many of these debates came to a head after the failure to agree on missile defense cooperation or follow-on agreement to New START.

Missile Defense

To some analysts, the failure to impose restrictions or agree on missile defense cooperation was one of the key reasons for Russia’s perception of pervasive insecurity toward the West. Echoing Putin, some strategic deterrence proponents have questioned why the Iran nuclear deal didn’t lead to a change in U.S. and NATO missile defense policies.³³ They have argued that U.S./NATO missile defense coupled with changes in NATO conventional posture in Europe were intended to provoke Russia.³⁴ They also remained convinced that significant Russian

investments into air/missile (aerospace) defense capabilities are essential to, inter alia, deter a Western aerospace attack on Russia.

Some proponents of restraint asserted that Russian officials overplayed the threat of current Western missile defense capabilities to Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal. One analyst has noted that the United States cancelled the European Phased Adaptive Approach's SM-3 Block 2B interceptors that were of particular concern to Russia.³⁵ However, the rejection by the United States and NATO of Russia's proposed "sectoral approach" coupled with the absence of policymaker buy-in for the ideas of the Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative have helped shape this group's perception that Russia's need for inclusion and assurance was not heard or understood. Another analyst has written that, "largely because of the Western position, a substantive dialogue on the issue did not take place. The unwillingness of the U.S. to alleviate Moscow's concerns, i.e. provide technical, administrative or legal obligations to guarantee that the system was not directed against Russia, led the negotiations to a deadlock."³⁶

Nuclear Arms Control

The failed attempts to negotiate further nuclear cuts following New START are another point of contention. The Russian government set a list of preconditions that comprised of inclusion of third countries in the negotiations, as well as restrictions on prompt global strike, missile defense, and weaponization of space.³⁷ In turn, Russian experts on both sides have consistently argued that reductions in nonstrategic nuclear weapons were going to be difficult to negotiate.

For example, a 2011 study by one proponent of restraint enumerated various reasons for this difficulty, including the continued weakness of Russia's general purpose forces and other conventional capabilities, the absence of natural champions for nonstrategic nuclear arms control in the Russian military bureaucracy, and difficulties with verification.³⁸ U.S. development of missile defense and prompt global strike capabilities led some proponents of strategic deterrence to view President Obama's focus on pursuing a "nuclear-free world" as a ploy by the United States to achieve conventional military superiority.³⁹ Some of these analysts viewed negotiations on tactical nuclear weapons as extremely premature, given the weakness of Russia's general purpose forces.⁴⁰ Others have argued that Russia was wise to not enter into negotiations on further nuclear reductions, especially of tactical nuclear weapons, as "these would have even further militarized European security."⁴¹

Some proponents of restraint argued that Russia should have extended New START, as U.S. President Barack Obama had proposed. Their interpretations of Russian policy at the time, however, have differed. One analyst has posited that Russia responded negatively to U.S. offers in 2013 and 2016 because it decided that it could get a better deal. He noted that, coupled with lack of progress in resolving INF compliance issues during the Obama administration, this negative response was a missed opportunity on Russia's part.⁴² Another analyst has written, though, that Russia became more open to the New START extension in 2014 when Putin stated that Russia was ready to seriously discuss the issue. He argued that this statement indicated that Russia had dropped its past preconditions, but the Ukraine crisis closed the window of opportunity because the West was no longer willing to engage on arms control.⁴³

Looking Forward: Potential Areas of Cooperation

As Russia has continued to modernize its conventional and nuclear capabilities and work out relevant concepts of operations, there were important disagreements among security analysts about threats, needs, and wants. There was some agreement, however, that Russia and the West have areas in which limited cooperation was desirable.⁴⁴ These included, inter alia, managing the risks to regional and strategic stability, reducing the danger of escalation from limited clashes in areas where military forces operate in close proximity to each other, cooperating on counterterrorism, and preventing nuclear proliferation.

Conventional Postures

Russia's current force posture points to a preoccupation with local contingencies on its borders with non-NATO neighbors, rather than a desire to engage in a large-scale conflict with U.S./NATO forces.⁴⁵ Russian concerns include a potential Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the absence of a political settlement around Crimea, vulnerability of Kaliningrad, and instability in post-Soviet "frozen conflict" areas.⁴⁶ Analyst Ruslan Pukhov has argued that "Russia at present is not threatening NATO and not modernizing or positioning forces in ways that threatens the Baltics (even though they are actively getting ready to defend against a putative Russian invasion). At the same time, NATO is reacting and pretending that its 'defensive' efforts are not directed to also pressure Russia on the Ukraine issue."⁴⁷ That said, Russia is exercising for a variety of possible contingencies and developing mobile capabilities that could allow a quick response to the theater. Russia is also using its military forces to coerce and demonstrate strength, just as strategic deterrence proponents have argued.⁴⁸ However, some of these analysts also argue that any U.S. posture changes in Europe are inherently provocative.

Across the spectrum of opinion, there has been a discussion of the dangers that could arise from routine military activities. One analyst has argued that the "proximity of Russian and Western military infrastructures and equipment has the potential to undermine strategic stability," while suggesting that "imitating attacks is unacceptable" for both sides.⁴⁹ Another has noted the danger of "increased conflict potential due to U.S.-Russian disagreements over Ukraine and Syria (Western efforts to impose no fly zones, Russian actions against terrorists located on territory of a U.S. ally, and conflict between Russia and a NATO ally)."⁵⁰

Proponents of restraint wanted Russia to signal its willingness to re-engage the West by accepting proposals on conventional arms control and transparency, including potentially agreeing to lower the notification thresholds in the Vienna Document. Some have noted that Russia's 2016 proposal on military aircraft transponders was constructive, even though NATO was not ready to respond positively.⁵¹ Others have called for the creation of a "force free zone" in the common border area and noted the importance of the Incidents at Sea Agreement and the Preventing Dangerous Military Activities Agreement.⁵² Still others have highlighted the "need to develop a new conventional arms control concept, which would have lower ceilings for systems controlled under [the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty], development of categories for new weapons systems, and more complex measures for accounting various potentials of the sides, and transparency."⁵³

So far, Russian officials have pushed back on Western Vienna Document proposals. They have argued that conventional arms control will become possible when both sides feel the need for it. And, they noted that, Russia will pursue it when force modernization allows it to “discuss arms control from a position of strength.”⁵⁴ How Russian government plans to implement defense budget cuts will affect its position on conventional arms control remains unclear.

Nuclear Arms Control and Missile Defense

Proponents of restraint posited that it is important to extend New START’s limits and verification and transparency provisions, especially because the United States is on the cusp of initiating nuclear modernization.⁵⁵ Some have also argued that further nuclear reductions to 1,000 warheads and 500 deployed launchers could be acceptable to Russia.⁵⁶ Others considered the absence of an arms control process to be detrimental to both sides, especially since arms control shaped Soviet learning about U.S. doctrine in the past.⁵⁷

Proponents of strategic deterrence did not argue against strategic nuclear arms control per se, but asserted that further nuclear cuts are not in Russia’s interest. On nonstrategic nuclear weapons, they focused on the importance of including Great Britain and France in any future negotiations.⁵⁸ One analyst also posited that, instead of arms control, engagement needs to focus “on transparency, trust building, and reduction of potential for accidents using nuclear weapons.” And, instead of militarizing the bilateral relationship even further, there was a need to refocus on multilateral discussion about strategic stability.⁵⁹

Some proponents of restraint have written about the need for high-level political statements to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict. One analyst suggested reaffirming that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”⁶⁰ Another championed agreement to curb reliance on early warning systems for second strike, noting that, while such an agreement could not be verified, it could be important for strategic stability and the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review (NPT).⁶¹ Another proposal for cooperation included further improvement in nuclear transparency among the P5, where Great Britain and France could lead and share data analogous to Russia and the United States and also encourage China to participate.⁶²

Aspects of the ongoing Russian debate about the INF Treaty are related to NATO missile defense. Many proponents of strategic deterrence view the treaty as no longer being in Russia’s interests for a variety of reasons. Some posit that the European Phased Adaptive Approach infrastructure could be used for offensive strike purposes.⁶³ Others remain concerned that a combination of U.S. conventional cruise missiles, prompt global strike capabilities, and missile defense threatens Russian second-strike capabilities.⁶⁴

Proponents of restraint generally countered some of these assertions by arguing that the United States “cannot just ‘reprogram’ missile launchers and interceptors, but concede that there is no transparency and Russia wouldn’t know whether a Tomahawk is put into it or not.”⁶⁵ Some analysts argued that the U.S. would not seek to destroy Russian command and control because that would mean loss of centralized control over Russian strategic and nonstrategic nuclear weapons, and would also not prevent Russia’s launch of a second strike.⁶⁶ There was a general consensus across this group that on-site access could be used to resolve INF treaty compliance concerns for both sides. In this approach, the United States could gain access to Russian bases to

assess Iskander missile ranges in exchange for Russian access to verify Mk-41 launchers. They also viewed continued efforts at missile defense cooperation, along the lines of those proposed by the EASI initiative, as very important in U.S./NATO-Russian relations moving forward.⁶⁷

Another heated topic for discussion was whether Russia was involved in an arms race. To be sure, Russia's President Putin has publicly denied that this is the case. Proponents of strategic deterrence often focused on the need for asymmetric capabilities rather than direct competition with the West. However, supporters of Russian restraint argued that Russian strategic procurement was not necessarily driven solely by the threat environment. One analyst questioned the wisdom of procuring seven different types of intercontinental ballistic missiles.⁶⁸ Another noted that there may be different arms race strands, including Russian strategic nuclear weapons and dual-use systems versus U.S. missile defense; long-range precision, hypersonic, and boost glide systems; and Russia's own development of air/missile defense. He argued that these are all expensive, especially given Russia's critical need to strengthen general purpose forces.⁶⁹

Given Russia's development and demonstration of a long-range precision strike capability, many strategic deterrence proponents have explored potential concepts of operations involving these systems. Some have argued that Russian doctrine needs to clearly allow for preventive strikes with conventional precision strike systems.⁷⁰ On the restraint side, some analysts have called for thinking about how these systems fit into the bilateral notions of strategic stability and developing relevant trust-building measures and notification regimes.⁷¹

Other Strategic Stability Challenges

Across the Russian spectrum of opinion, there was substantial consensus about dangers from nuclear proliferation, nuclear terrorism, and cyber weapons, and strategic stability issues, including the potential for dialogue with China. One proponent of strategic deterrence expressed concerns that nuclear weapons could be used by a third country (e.g. North Korea) in a limited way, thus destroying the post-World War II consensus about nuclear deterrence.⁷² Similarly, he noted the dangers of non-state actors acquiring cyber weapons.⁷³ Proponents of restraint also posited that "nuclear terrorism remains a threat to strategic stability" as does continued proliferation of nuclear weapons.⁷⁴ Others argued of the presence of new threats at the "nexus of terrorism, WMD, and cyberattacks."⁷⁵

On nonproliferation and the nuclear architecture more broadly, even Russian analysts in favor of restraint note their continued frustration with the inability of the United States to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.⁷⁶ There were further concerns about the potential collapse of the NPT and fears that the United States will seek to destabilize the nuclear deal with Iran.⁷⁷

Another emerging issue for Russian security experts was the importance of initiating dialogue with China. Some proponents of strategic deterrence argued that Russia needs to prioritize strategic stability discussions with China.⁷⁸ Among proponents of restraint, some analysts had concerns about the emergence of a threat to Russia from China's nuclear and missile programs.⁷⁹ Still others posited the importance of initiating trilateral discussions involving Russia, the United States, and China, on hypersonic systems and their impact on strategic stability.⁸⁰ To be sure, while trilateral "strategic stability" talks appeared politically impractical as of this writing, Russian analysts clearly viewed this as an important avenue of dialogue for the future.

Conclusion

This paper began with the premise that in the United States, the broader analytical community has largely struggled to understand the drivers of Russia's recent political-military behavior. The paper's goal was to outline two differing perspectives on U.S./NATO-Russian relations from across the Russian political-military community's writings in 2014-2016. This concluding section summarizes findings and offers a summary table.

Key Findings

- Russian analysts differ on the reasons behind the current chasm between Russia and the West. Some focus on the role of the Ukraine crisis, analyzing it through the prism of concerns about Western activities aimed at creating political instability and engagement in military conflicts that have resulted in regime change. Others note that Russia's actions as well as those of the West contributed to the current security situation.
- Many analysts discuss the missed opportunities to transform the deterrence relationship during the Obama administration. These are chiefly centered on strategic arms control and missile defense. One point of consensus is that the West's unwillingness to take into consideration Russian interests and concerns was a key contributing factor to the current state of play.
- Moving forward, Russia will be faced with the question of whether to define its role in the region and on the world stage in positive or negative terms. There is agreement that Russia and the West have some areas and forums in which limited cooperation is both prudent and desirable.
- As Russia continues to pursue modernized conventional and nuclear capabilities and work out concepts of operations, there are disagreements about threats, needs, and wants. Some analysts and officials still see benefits in transparency and risk reduction frameworks for conventional weapons. In the areas of bilateral and regional nuclear arms control and missile defense, the future is much less certain, given the political obstacles on both sides. An even greater challenge lies in determining whether Russia is engaged in an arms race with the West in certain types of technologies, and what is required to facilitate a dialogue that focuses on multilateral strategic stability.

Summary Table

The following table summarizes the key arguments discussed above.

	Strategic Deterrence	Restraint
Nature of the Relationship	-West views stronger Russia as a danger and seeks to keep it isolated and weak	-West did not take into account Russia’s interests as it should have with an equal partner
-Ukraine conflict	-Ukraine is a West-induced “hybrid” conflict	-Russia overreacted to prospect of Ukraine’s membership in NATO
-Russia’s role in region	-Russia has a key role in Europe, and needs to develop strong military capabilities so that it is no longer pushed around by West and to use them as leverage	-Russia needs to show restraint exercise positive leadership in region
-Frameworks for dialogue	-Limited use for NRC as a military-to-military communication and risk reduction tool	
Substantive Challenges	-Russia has a key role in Europe, and there needs to be some cooperation, especially to reduce risks of inadvertent escalation	
-Missile defense	-Missile defense, especially in Europe, is threatening to Russia and is a provocation -Iran nuclear deal should have led to a Western policy change on missile defense	-There is no current threat from U.S./NATO missile defense (U.S. also cancelled SM-3 Block 2B) -West was unwilling to alleviate Russia’s political-military concerns on missile defense
-Nuclear arms control	-Negotiations on nonstrategic nuclear weapons were not in Russia’s interests	-Western position on missile defense led to inability to move forward on nuclear arms control
Cooperative Steps Forward	-This may not be the time for new arms control, but preserving existing arrangements and discussing ways to reduce risks may be beneficial	
-Conventional postures	-Western posture changes are a provocation -No need for conventional transparency on Russia’s part or arms control until Russia can discuss from a position of strength	-Russia needs to signal by engaging on conventional arms control and transparency (VDOC, sub-regional arms control, others)
-Nuclear arms control and missile defense	-Russia’s past preconditions on arms control remain in place -Further strategic nuclear arms not wise, instead focus on trust building and reduction of potential accidents with nuclear weapons -INF Treaty may not be in Russia’s interests	-Further strategic nuclear reductions are possible; discussions need to take place -INF Treaty needs to be preserved - Russia’s nuclear modernization efforts are driven in part by action-reaction dynamics and/or internal acquisition pressures
-Other strategic stability issues	-Reducing nuclear dangers from third parties; threats at nexus of terrorism, WMD, and cyber -There are possibilities for trilateral strategic stability discussions (US-Russia-China), including on hypersonic systems	

Balancing Coercion and Restraint

To date, Russian officials have expressed very limited expectations of breakthroughs in U.S.-Russian relations in the near term. After the U.S. election, they anticipated more continuity than change from the Trump administration in U.S. efforts to develop missile defense, modernize nuclear weapons, as well as a “continuity with regard to NATO summit statements at Wales and Warsaw.”⁸¹ And, unless relations take a turn for the absolute worst, Russian approaches will seek to build primarily on the strategic deterrence perspective while also seeking opportunities where Russia’s security could be enhanced through some aspects of restraint.

A pure strategic deterrence strategy on the part of Russia would essentially consist of faster progress on the downward trajectory that has characterized recent relations with the West. This would emphasize continued coercive demonstrations of military forces and non-military approaches that, as some Russian analysts maintain, allow Russia to engage in future negotiations from a position of strength. Another key feature of this strategy could be a renewed active conflict in Ukraine. Russia could also abrogate existing nuclear arms control accords.

One of the key features of a strategy based on greater restraint would be positive progress on Russia’s part in Ukraine as well as signaling that Moscow is interested in engaging in discussions on conventional security issues with the West (including risk reduction and sub-regional risk reduction in the Baltics). Russia could also exercise positive leadership through proposals to reduce nuclear dangers and discuss the implications of emerging technologies for strategic stability.

Some say that Russia is not likely to move towards greater restraint without first receiving credible assurances from the West. But that is unlikely to happen so long as the United States and NATO see Russian aggression as the root cause of current security problems. In this regard, proponents of strategic deterrence have also argued that Russia has tried restraint in the past, and there were no indications that this strategy succeeded. To the contrary, they note that restraint made Russia look weak. Such a strategy would fundamentally also rely on U.S./NATO restraint in kind, and, as they continue to deter and counter Russian coercive efforts, U.S./NATO policymakers need to induce and publicly recognize Russian steps toward and signals of restraint, if any are present.

The first step on both sides could involve serious discussion about the difficulties of crisis management. A mutual commitment to reduce the dangers of unintended nuclear escalation also needs to be an important part of the strategic dialogue. Preserving existing New START limits as well as predictability and transparency arrangements will also be important as nuclear modernization proceeds in both Russia and the United States.

All that said, perverse incentives for the current course are now in place, thus making windows of opportunity for positive progress even smaller. The absence of resolution of numerous U.S./NATO-Russian agenda items, coupled with a general lack of trust and respect in the relationship, will continue to contribute to an increase in the risk of conflict. This makes restraint and positive leadership in key areas of regional and global security on Russia’s part all the more timely and important.

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