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Thursday, July 27, 2000

Reforming Nukes

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Special to The Moscow Times*

Debate on ways to reform the strategic nuclear forces has recently intensified, and is widely discussed in Russian and foreign media. Unfortunately, often the commentaries are of a scandalous character. The form of debate concerning strategic nuclear forces reform is absolutely unacceptable. One can only agree with President Vladimir Putin's statement: Such complicated issues of military policy cannot be solved under pressure from the media and public opinion.

Analysis of foreign media coverage, and also active contacts with Western, above all U.S., experts on disarmament issues, prove that the scandalous character of the debate about strategic nuclear forces reform is weakening Russia's positions in bilateral dialogue with the United States concerning the ABM Treaty and within the START III framework.

At the same time, reform for the strategic nuclear forces is urgent, and one can only welcome that it has been raised in so timely a fashion.

Russia inherited its nuclear status. The nuclear arsenal was built up in the Soviet Union to accomplish specific combat missions to suit a particular world order, which was characterized by the confrontation (including nuclear rivalry) between the two global superpowers. The new model of international relations is different. The world has changed, Russia's position in it has changed, too, and moreover, Russia's perception of its own security and of relations with the rest of the globe has significantly transformed. As a result the question emerges: How useful is this Russian nuclear legacy in these new conditions?

There may be different answers, but any response should be based only on comprehensive analysis of the current role of nuclear weapons, on trends in the development of the nuclear world, and on the characteristics and peculiarities of existing and potential security threats.

It is useful to bear in mind one more factor: Russia's ability to transform its nuclear arsenal, to develop new-generation nuclear weapons and to provide for serial production of such new arms is limited for objective economic reasons. Hence,

the state's requirements of its nuclear policy are ever-more demanding, since that policy has to take into account existing financial and military-technical constraints.

The term "nuclear policy" itself, which is widely used by Russian and foreign experts, is not mentioned in any official government documents. The only exception was "The Basic Provisions of the RF Military Doctrine" (1993), which spoke about "Russia's policy in the area of nuclear weapons." However, that document did not define the term. The 1997 and the 2000 Concepts of National Security and the 2000 Military Doctrine do not contain the term either. In March 1999, President Boris Yeltsin approved "The Basic Guidelines for the Russian Policy in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence." This document was not published and the meaning of the term "policy in the area of nuclear deterrence" was also never clarified.

In 2000, Russia has adopted three documents of the National Security Concept, the Military Doctrine and the Foreign Policy Concept of that are directly connected with Russian nuclear policy. These documents should serve as a basis for any reforms of the strategic nuclear forces and should determine the country's positions concerning nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation issues. Any military reform plans should follow the approved concepts. Russian foreign policy efforts will succeed only if the policy is consistent, coherent and realistic.

The federal law on START II ratification says that the president "shall approve the Federal Program of Development of the Strategic Nuclear Forces of the Russian Federation and present it to [parliament] no later than two months after entry into force" of the law. The law on START II ratification entered into force on May 6, 2000. According to our sources, no such document is yet to be approved or submitted to the legislature.

Well-grounded proposals on strategic nuclear forces reform will take into account specific characteristics of nuclear munitions of chiefly, the necessary strict requirements to ensure safety and security of a nuclear arsenal during the whole of its service life.

For the foreseeable future, nuclear weapons will remain the key element for providing national security and maintaining international stability. Obviously, reform of the strategic nuclear forces can be carried out only in accordance with Russian nuclear policy.

The Security Council, as a body that "works out proposals to ensure Russian national security" (according to the National Security Concept), should summarize the proposals of the

defense minister and the General Staff and submit them to the president, since the latter "determines guidelines of military policy" (according to the federal law "On Defense," Article 4, paragraph 1) and directs "construction, training and use of the state's military organization and activities" (the Military Doctrine, paragraph 18, approved on April 21, 2000).

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