POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE SITUATION IN UKRAINE FOR RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR DEPLOYMENT IN NORTHEAST ASIA

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, Anastasia Barannikova argues that although the situation in Ukraine does not affect

Russia's nuclear posture/strategy in Northeast Asia directly, direct impacts of the situation in Ukraine on Russia's nuclear policies in this region cannot be ruled out. Examples of such indirect impacts include changes in nuclear weapons planning and deployment by the United States and China under the pretext or because of the Ukraine situation, a change in the nuclear weapons status of one or more of the non-nuclear states in the region, or the breaking out of a military conflict over Taiwan or on the Korean peninsula.

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This essay is a contribution to the "Reducing the Risk of Nuclear Weapons Use in Northeast Asia" (NU-NEA) project, a collaboration between the Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition, Nagasaki University, Nautilus Institute, and the Asia Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear non-proliferation and Disarmament, is to reduce and minimize the risk that nuclear weapons will be used in the region by developing better understandings of the processes that could lead to the first use of nuclear weapons and the potential outcomes of such nuclear weapons use. In the first year of this three-year project, the NU-NEA project team identified over 25 plausible nuclear weapons "use cases" that could start in Northeast Asia, sometimes leading to broader conflict beyond the region. These nuclear use cases are described in the report *Possible Nuclear Use Cases in Northeast Asia: Implications for Reducing Nuclear Risk.* [1] The project has commissioned five contributions to update the cases in light of the Ukraine conflict, of which this essay is the fourth. This report is published simultaneously by APLN here and by RECNA-Nagasaki University here

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Banner image: Nautilus Institute 2002 photo Khasan Border town looking south along Tuman River, DPRK is on other side of river in distance, China is middle-ground and to right (white observation post in middle is in China), Russia is foreground and to left/south and right/north)

II. NAPSNET POLICY FORUM ESSAY BY ANASTASIA BARANNIKOVA

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Impact of the Ukraine Situation on Russia's Nuclear Deployment, Posture, and Alert Status

Russia's nuclear deployment, posture, and/or alert status in Northeast Asia (NEA) can be affected only by an imminent threat to the balance of power in the region. Russia is not an active player in NEA with regard to regional security and will take steps to change its position only if it is required to do so by partnership commitments with China or if the Russian nuclear and conventional deterrents in the region are challenged.

Thus, only events such as redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, the emergence of new nuclear powers, a full-fledged conflict involving the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or preparations for a conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan may push Russia to revise its nuclear deployment and alert status. Russia's nuclear posture is unlikely to change. Priority task for Russian nuclear strategy in NEA and the Asia-Pacific Region (APR) in general is deterring the United States and its nuclear capabilities. The Chinese nuclear deterrent, despite its modernization, will not be perceived as a threat by Russia in the near future.

Comparing Russia's western versus eastern security theatres, the European theater is more important for Russia than the Asian theatre. Although Russia has a huge nuclear weapons arsenal, sufficient for several theatres of operation, NEA is less important to Russia from a political viewpoint. Russia has not yet worked out distinct strategic interests in NEA to be defended and advanced through its nuclear weapons posture in the region. NEA is viewed by Russia as being mostly China's sphere of influence, and it is China, which currently bears responsibility for the balance of power in NEA, whose positions and plans could be disrupted by the scenarios of nuclear weapons use in NEA that have been previously identified. But as nuclear weapons use (or threatened nuclear weapons use) in NEA would also threaten Russia's security--particularly if nuclear proliferation and/or an invasion of the DPRK by the United States and/or its allies were involved–Russia would be forced to take an active role in the conflict.

It should be noted that the withdrawal of the United States from Northeast Asia would also cause security problems for Russia. Although the United States is the primary target of Russia's nuclear deterrence, the United States is also a sine qua non of the current balance of nuclear power in NEA in that the United States exercises control over the potential nuclear weapons programs of its Asian allies. If the United States fails to maintain its nuclear umbrella in NEA, new nuclear powers will almost certainly emerge in the region. If Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK) or Taiwan develop nuclear weapons, Russia will be forced to revise its plans for the deployment of its own nuclear weapons as well as its deterrence goals.

When studying possible nuclear deployment and use it is important to analyze Russia's official nuclear doctrine rather than statements in the media and of often uninformed or incompetent officials from all of the countries involved in the Ukraine situation, even if those statements come from high-level officials. The *Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence* of June 2020 – a document reflecting the most up to date nuclear doctrine of the Russian Federation – lists the following factors that may affect Russian policy in the field of nuclear deterrence (and deployment):

- Build-ups of forces by potential adversaries, including nuclear weapons delivery systems, in territories adjacent to Russia;
- Deployment in NEA of anti-missile defense systems, cruise and ballistic missiles of medium and shorter range, or high-precision non-nuclear and hypersonic weapons; uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear weapons; and
- Deployment of nuclear weapons and their means of delivery on the territories of non-nuclear states.[2]

It is clear that, given the current situation, many of these factors are already present or are likely to be implemented in NEA, particularly on the Korean Peninsula.

Of course, the incompetence and poorly informed statements of individual officials and media that

result in inflating the threat of the use of nuclear weapons by Russia (currently with respect to the western theater) also poses a serious threat, as such statements may affect postures and deployment of nuclear weapons. Indeed, if one country deploys additional offensive weapon systems to protect itself from a non-existent and overblown threat, its opponent will perceive such deployment as already a real threat. As a result, both countries will have their security threatened.

Potential Impacts of the Ukraine Situation on Nuclear Weapons Use in NEA

As noted above, the priority goal of Russia's nuclear strategy in Asia is to deter the United States. Despite the current tensions, however, the likelihood of a military conflict between Russia and the United States remains extremely low. Both parties are interested in preventing such a conflict, primarily because the risk of such a conflict escalating into a nuclear war is high. Nevertheless, a number of scenarios are possible that could lead to the nuclear weapons use.

The first of these would be an outbreak of a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, initiated by or with the gradual involvement of the United States. Such a conflict implies not only the military intervention of US troops on the territory of the DPRK but also missile strikes on the nuclear facilities of the DPRK. Once launched, American ICBMs would fly over the territories or through the airspace of Russia. Due to current tensions these ICBMs would be regarded as a threat by Russia and, at best, would be shot down, and at worst, would provoke a retaliatory nuclear strike. There will be no time to figure out whether an ICBM detected in Russian airspace is in fact equipped with a nuclear or conventional warhead. The same would happen if the DPRK were the first to launch an ICBM attack against the United States. In this case North Korean ICBMs would fly above the territory of Russia, and the same be the case for American ground-based interceptors.[3] Due to the current poor state of United States-Russia cooperation and possible miscalculation the launch of multiple interceptors from the United States may be mistaken for attack by Russia and trigger a retaliatory strike.

The second scenario is an armed conflict around Taiwan. Due to the fact that NEA is considered by Russia to be China’s sphere of responsibility, Russia is unlikely to make a unilateral decision on nuclear weapon use in the region. Russia could conceivably use nuclear weapons in the event of a full-scale conflict between China and the United States, but would do so only if China requested that kind of support from Russia, and as a last resort.

The third scenario is the aggravation of territorial disputes, for example, the dispute with Japan over the Kuril Islands, accompanied by Japan’s remilitarization/nuclear weapons development/deployment and US involvement in the dispute.

Russia’s “Basic Principles…” provide for the use of nuclear weapons in response to an attack on Russia or its allies using nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction, or in the event of aggression using conventional weapons, if “the very existence of the state is endangered.” At the same time an updated document contains Article 4, which provides for Russia using nuclear deterrence “for prevention of an escalation of military actions and their termination on conditions that are acceptable for the Russian Federation and/or its allies”. Indeed, a United States invasion of the DPRK may not threaten the existence of Russia, but it would lead to deployment of the US military and US nuclear weapons on the Russian border, which Russia would find an unacceptable outcome. Existence of the state is closely connected with sovereignty and territorial integrity, so it can be suggested that nuclear weapons can be used to defend a territory considered Russian from seizure by a potential adversary.

Conclusion

To conclude, the intentional use of nuclear weapons by Russia is only possible in the case of a threat to its security and territorial integrity. Unintentional nuclear weapons use by Russia may, however, be caused by a miscalculation of the military threats from the United States, as in the case of dual-capable ICBMs flying over Russian territory. Russia has dual-capable systems as well, including missiles using “Iskander” tactical systems that are capable of reaching the territory of Japan. Such missiles can either be equipped with nuclear and conventional warheads. Their use in conventional equipment in the event of a conflict could in turn be misinterpreted by the United States and trigger an asymmetric nuclear response.

Although the situation in Ukraine does not affect Russia's nuclear posture/strategy in NEA directly, indirect impacts of the situation in Ukraine on Russia’s nuclear policies in NEA cannot be ruled out. Examples of such indirect impacts include changes in nuclear weapons planning and deployment by the United States and China under the pretext or because of the Ukraine situation. In any nuclear use case or military conflict in general, the countries that have a well-defined strategy in Asia will be the initiators of conflict. After the collapse of the USSR, Asia has been considered neither a sphere of interest nor a threat by Russia. Russia’s Asian strategy has not yet been fully determined, and thus may be influenced by a number of outside factors. This uncertainty cannot help but affect Russia’s nuclear strategy. Another consideration is that the Ukrainian situation is unlikely to be repeated in NEA. Unlike Europe, Asia prefers talks to war. In the distant future threats in NEA may appear (due to China’s growth and its influence and pressure on Russia) that could require revision of Russia’s nuclear strategy and deployment in the region. In the near term, however, Russia’s posture in the region will likely be limited to supporting China and reacting to the military activity of the United States.

III. ENDNOTES

[1] Available at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/possible-nuclear-use-ca-es-in-northeast-asia-implications-for-reducing-nuclear-risk/

[2] See http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/45562 (in Russian) for a description of Russian policy on this topic.

[3] Joshua Pollack (2017), “Nuclear Deterrence and the Revenge of Geography”, Arms Control Wonk, dated September 24, 2017, and available as https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1204122/nuclear-deterrence-the-revenge-of-geography/

IV. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSE

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