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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>UKRAINE IS READY TO CONTRIBUTE INTO EUROPEAN AND EUROATLANTIC SECURITY</b> .....	3
<i>Interview with Vice Prime Minister for European and Euroatlantic integration of Ukraine Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze for UA: Ukraine Analytica</i>	
<b>THE (POST) WARSAW NATO STRATEGY AND THE EASTERN FLANK: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE SOUTH</b> .....	7
<i>Ana Isabel Xavier</i>	
<b>NATO PROJECTING STABILITY BEYOND EASTERN FLANK — POPULATION CENTRIC OPERATIONS</b> .....	14
<i>Natalia Wojtowicz</i>	
<b>CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL TRENDS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION</b> .....	20
<i>Grigoriy Perepelytsia</i>	
<b>DYNAMICS OF RUSSIAN CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PRACTICAL STRATEGY</b> .....	29
<i>Sergey Minasyan</i>	
<b>THE BLACK SEA SECURITY ARCHITECTURE IN TIMES OF COLLAPSE: THE CASE OF ANNEXED CRIMEA AND MILITARY CHALLENGES FOR THE US, NATO, EU, TURKEY, AND UKRAINE</b> .....	36
<i>Sergii Glebov</i>	
<b>RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA IN THE LIGHT OF RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN AGREEMENTS ON THE BLACK SEA FLEET</b> .....	47
<i>Oleksandr Zadorozhnii</i>	
<b>WHAT IS THE FUTURE FOR NAVY COOPERATION IN THE BLACK SEA?</b> .....	56
<i>Hanna Shelest</i>	
<b>BELARUS IN THE CONTEXT OF A NEW COLD WAR: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS</b> .....	62
<i>Arseni Sivitski</i>	

# DYNAMICS OF RUSSIAN CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR PRACTICAL STRATEGY<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper analyses the evolution of post-Soviet Russian conceptual and doctrinal visions of conventional deterrence and its current status, prospects and impact on regional and global levels in the framework of Russian strategic military and political thinking. The paper argues that although neglected since the early post-Soviet period, Russian conventional (nonnuclear) deterrence has been revisited especially since 2014 when Russia's Military Doctrine gave it a new definition, soon applied in practice during the Syrian campaign. In its military strategy, conventional deterrence changed its standing over the last two decades from a subsidiary tactical/sub-strategic level warfighting tool to a separate military-political factor and a self-contained component of Russian strategic deterrence.*

*Against the backdrop of Ukrainian crisis, Syrian conflict and rising tension between Russia and NATO, Russian conventional deterrence fulfills the function of a regional and global military-political factor, while its application in warfighting is now happening on a new, more effective technological level based on new types of long-range precision-guided munitions (PGM).*

## **The Parameters of “Second Conventional Age”**

The development of greater accuracy, longer range and greater lethality of modern conventional weapons and, first of all, long-range precise ballistic and cruise missiles (in combination with advanced intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance systems) has contributed to the start of the new, so-

called “Second Conventional Age” (after two World Wars and the appearance of nuclear weapons) and the renaissance of conventional deterrence.<sup>2</sup> According to Russian military experts, at the current stage, the technological development of many countries “has made such a progress that the destruction of single elements of infrastructure, communication and control systems can lead to a catastrophe, able to

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the presentation originally presented by the author at the PONARS Eurasia 2016 Annual Conference on September 23-24, 2016 in Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> Christine M. Leah, “Deterrence and Arms Control in a Second Conventional Age”, *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 34, Issue 5, 2015, p.401-402.

throw a country back for many years in its development”<sup>3</sup>

The development of such military technologies creates the conditions when conventional weapons, even on a strategic level, do not only include classic strike platforms (ballistic and cruise missiles, artillery systems, other PGM munitions) or weapons based on new physical principles (hypersonic weapons, maneuvering reentry vehicles, anti-satellite and space weapons), but also assume the application of new types of nonnuclear weapons, based on non-kinetic or non-explosion damage (cyber, radio-electronic and electromagnetic weapons).

Conventional weapons have reached a complex combination of range, accuracy and lethality that allows even leading nuclear powers to more effectively rely on them for strategic deterrence. Even the most powerful conventional munitions (for example, Russian thermobaric warheads) do not have serious side effects (penetrating radiation, radioactive contamination) which accompany the use of every type of nuclear weapons, even so-called “mini-nukes”. The “conventionalization” of strategic deterrence by the key nuclear powers — the United States, Russia and China — has led to the partial substitution of the regional-level nuclear deterrence by the conventional one, based on the long-range PGM.

### **Dynamics of the Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Conceptual Approaches**

Given the closed nature of military-strategic studies in the Soviet Union, the issue of conventional deterrence never received public attention in Soviet military

and political theory. In contrast to the Western countries, where in the 1980s there was more interest in conventional deterrence, the Soviet Union devoted only limited attention to this issue. This absence of attention was mainly due to the fact that the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies enjoyed significant quantitative and even qualitative offensive superiority of conventional forces in Europe.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the neglected status of Russian conventional deterrence began to change, although only gradually. The main reason was the growing role of nuclear deterrence against the background of the decline of Russian conventional forces vis-à-vis opposite processes in the US and other leading NATO countries. Meanwhile, the interest of Russian academia to conventional deterrence was mainly focusing on the conventional arms control and the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty issues, with only very limited studies of the impact of the conventional PGM on strategic stability and nuclear deterrence, for example — considering issues of counterforce threats from the U.S. precision sea and air launch conventional cruise missiles (SLCM and ALCM) strikes against the Russian strategic nuclear silo-based and mobile ICBM forces.

Only since the beginning of the 2000s, has the role of conventional forces in Russian strategic deterrence been addressed and considered mainly as the initial element in early de-escalation of military conflicts, prior to the possible use of nuclear weapons. According to Russian military experts, one of the key advantages of the conventional (nonnuclear) deterrence was that it can increase the nuclear threshold: “conventional weapons are used to deter aggression beginning with the threat to

<sup>3</sup> Burenok V.M., Achasov O.B., “Nonnuclear Deterrence”, *Military Thought*, №12, 2007, p.12 (in Russian).

inflict sufficient damage to the adversary's forces and military and economic potential, and ending with the threat of nuclear escalation of the conflict to the extent of a massive nuclear exchange".<sup>4</sup>

From the very beginning, the post-Soviet Russian conceptual approaches to conventional deterrence did not consider it as much of a military-political tool. It was rather seen as a practical warfighting instrument, which was very relevant especially in low-scale local conflicts, in which nuclear weapons were useless to apply. Russian military theorists used to consider nonnuclear deterrence as a convenient military-political addition to tactical nuclear weapons. It is not accidental that since the 1990s, the Russian professional discourse has been applying the term nonnuclear (or "pre-nuclear") deterrence, but not just conventional deterrence (based on the conventional weapons).<sup>5</sup>

However, the development of further accuracy and lethality of conventional weapons and their delivery systems increased their role as an element of Russian strategic deterrence. The significance of conventional deterrence as a practical sub-strategic and operational-tactical level warfighting instrument also increased.

The development of Russian conceptual approaches to conventional deterrence in general advanced the development of its own technical capacities. Theoretical foundations of conventional deterrence have been developed in Russia since the late 1990s, while the practical testing and demonstration of its advanced technical



***It can even be argued that Russia has developed an approach to conventional deterrence, totally different from the U.S. "Conventional Prompt Global Strike" (CPGS) program. According to one prominent American expert, the U.S. concept is one of "a missile in a search of a mission"***

capacity has been conducted fairly recently. It refers especially to strategic level PGM, for example 3M54 "Kalibr" cruise missiles as well as weapons based on new physical principles (hypersonic and maneuvering reentry vehicles and warheads, for example the 3K22 "Zircon" project).

It can even be argued that Russia has developed an approach to conventional deterrence, totally different from the U.S. "Conventional Prompt Global Strike" (CPGS) program. According to one prominent American expert, the U.S. concept is one of "a missile in a search of a mission," meaning that the existence of detailed technical R&D products and perspective programs come before the strategic doctrine and the goals of missions that might be acquired CPGS while in the Russia's conventional deterrence approaches the opposite situation exists.<sup>6</sup>

The growing interest towards conventional deterrence in Russia was clearly reflected in the current Military Doctrine adopted in December 2014 that gives details on applying conventional PGM in strategic deterrence and has already been reflected in the views of Russian military specialists.

<sup>4</sup> See more: Chekinov S.G., Bogdanov S.A., "Strategic Deterrence and Russia's National Security Today", Military Thought, №3, 2012 (in Russian).

<sup>5</sup> See more: Kokoshin A.A., On System of Nonnuclear (Pre-nuclear) Deterrence in the Defense Policy of Russia, Moscow, 2012 (in Russian).

<sup>6</sup> James M. Acton, Silver Bullet? Asking the Right Questions About Conventional Prompt Global Strike, Washington: CEIP, 2013, p.9.

## Self-Contained Component of Russian Strategic Deterrence

According to Russian officials, in the strategic context, the technical and conceptual development of Russian nonnuclear deterrence is mainly aimed in response to the U.S. CPGS.<sup>7</sup> The assessment of the American long-range conventional PGM counterforce capacity (for example, Block IV Tomahawk SLCM) indicates that at the current stage there is no guarantee for success of such strikes against the Russian nuclear silo-based and mobile ground missile launchers. However, American non-nuclear PGM can already complement tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons and undermine the general balance between two nuclear superpowers. Russian experts argue that any further technological development of the CPGS (together with the enhancement of the American BMD and appearance of a new generation PGM based on new physical principles) will create existential threats for the Russian strategic deterrence capacity.<sup>8</sup> According to some estimates of the U.S. Strategic command (STRATCOM), conventional PGM can already destroy from 10% to 30% of the possible nuclear weapons targets.<sup>9</sup>

For quite a long time the role of nonnuclear weapons in the framework of Russian strategic deterrence on global level was rather limited, in contrast to their practical military importance. Accordingly, initially Russian conventional deterrence provided warfighting tools to implement deterrence by denial. However, the technological development of conventional deterrence gives it a possibility to implement also

deterrence by punishment and to play a growing political role in overall Russian strategic deterrence. Moreover, Russian nonnuclear deterrence can be considered as a significant strategic level military-political factor not only in the context of the so-called “central nuclear deterrence” between Russia and the US, but in the near future it can even reach a limited counterforce capacity towards China and other “second echelon” nuclear powers.

The further development of high-precision long-range strategic non-nuclear weapons (SNNW) will soon become a matter of arms control negotiations between Moscow and Washington, with mutual discussion on the development of ground-launch and sea-launch ballistic and cruise missiles, long-range attack UAVs, their compliance with the INF Treaty and other arms control agreements. If earlier the American side enjoyed an almost unilateral monopoly of “Tomahawk” SLCM and was not interested in discussing these topics during previous negotiations on the New START Treaty, now the situation has changed: the combat salvos of the Russian “Kalibrs” (even if there are some doubts on the sustainability of their domestic production) has significantly shifted the overall context of strategic arms control negotiations.

Despite active debate on concepts and prospects for technological development, many Russian experts argue that conventional deterrence is not capable to fully replace nuclear deterrence on both global and regional levels. However, the development of SNNW can make considerable changes in the overall concept

<sup>7</sup> See more: “Russia Forced to Develop Global Prompt Strike Weapons – Anatoly Antonov”, Security Index, №2 (105), Volume 19, 2013 (in Russian); James M. Acton. “Russia and Strategic Conventional Weapons: Concerns and Responses”, Nonproliferation Review, Vol.22, No2, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> See more: Non-nuclear Factors of Nuclear Disarmament (Ballistic Missiles Defense, High-Precision Conventional Weapons, Space Arms), Moscow: IMEMO, 2010.


<sup>9</sup> Dennis M. Gormley, “US Advanced Conventional Systems and Conventional Prompt Global Strike Ambitions: Assessing the Risks, Benefits, and Arms Control Implications”, Nonproliferation Review, Vol. 22, No2, 2015, p. 129.

of Russian strategic deterrence. The SNWW may be able to cope with conventional de-escalation in case of a conflict situation between the nuclear superpowers (in the framework of the famous Russian concept of “de-escalation through escalation”) as well as to deliver preventive strikes against nuclear and nonnuclear targets without relying on its own nuclear capacity. Meanwhile, there is a merging of functions and tasks between nuclear and nonnuclear weapons on strategic and even operational-tactic levels, which also increases the risk of accidental conflict between nuclear superpowers or between a nuclear superpower and regional nuclear powers.

In perspective, the Russian SNNW will not replace tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons but will turn into an important component of regional deterrence. The Ukrainian crisis has fostered this process while the Syrian campaign was the first time when Russia demonstrated its capacity to conduct regional nonnuclear deterrence by using SLCM and ALCM on the ground that followed with the deployment of “Iskander-M” tactical missiles during the peak of the escalation between Russia and Turkey.

For example, one should mention that while discussing the results of the first-time utilizing Russian “Kalibr” SLCM and Kh-101 ALCM in Syria with his minister of defense in November-December 2015, Vladimir Putin stated that these precision weapons “can be equipped with both conventional and special nuclear warheads.” However, Putin noted that “of course, this is not necessary when fighting against terrorism, and, I hope, will never be.”<sup>10</sup> Putin’s message was addressed mainly

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to possible rivals of Russia in the Middle East, rather than to radical Islamists. At first it was addressed to Turkey, which had quantitative superiority of conventional forces over Russia (as well as over the Syrian army and its allies) in Syria during the situation of growing tensions between Moscow and Ankara after shooting down the Russian Su-24 bomber on November 24, 2015.

In this respect, the possible limits on combination of Russian conventional deterrence capacity with the use of regional-level tactical nuclear weapons fit into the logic of Russia’s de-escalation doctrine stating that “if Moscow faces a large-scale conventional attack exceeding its capacity for defense, it may respond with a limited nuclear strike.”<sup>11</sup> Provisions of the main Russian conceptual documents restrained the first use of the nuclear weapons on the level of conventional war “when the existence of the state is under threat”. However, the ambiguity of Russian doctrinal and practical approaches to the regional nuclear deterrence execution presumes a probability of using tactical nuclear weapons during the conventional *force majeure*.<sup>12</sup> The further development of

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<sup>10</sup> Dave Majumdar, “Will Russia Nuke ISIS in Syria?” The National Interest, 10 December, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/will-russia-nuke-isis-syria-14577>

<sup>11</sup> Sokov, Nikolai, “Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike “De-escalation””, The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 13 March, 2014, <http://thebulletin.org/why-russia-calls-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation>

<sup>12</sup> Adamsky, Dmitry (Dima), “If War Comes Tomorrow: Russian Thinking About ‘Regional Nuclear Deterrence’”, Journal of Slavic Military Studies, Vol.27, Issue 1, 2014, p.166-169.



Russian conventional deterrence capacity and doctrinal elements allows Moscow to use it in regional conflicts on a more enhanced level and with better efficiency.

## Back to Practical Warfighting Mission?

Alongside its tasks in the framework of strategic deterrence, the Russian long-range PGM continue to develop in terms of their practical warfighting missions with close inter-services interaction of the Land Forces, Aerospace Forces and Navy. In particular, Russian nonnuclear deterrence is focusing on the measures of *anti access/area denial* (A2/AD) aimed to effectively deny possible adversaries access to strategic regions, coastal areas and domestic sea waters, especially in the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea as well as near the Northern and Pacific Fleets strategic nuclear submarines bases.<sup>13</sup> By analogy with the concept of the so-called “Northern bastion” (zonal defense system of the Russian Northern Fleet nuclear undersea forces deployment bases), which was introduced in the 1990s, Russia has fostered the formation of the Baltic (Kaliningrad) and the Black Sea (Crimea) “sea bastions”, equipping them with long-range A2/AD systems.<sup>14</sup> These joint inter-services measures are aimed to deny military access of rivals to the strategically important areas; the way they operate was recently illustrated in the Middle East during the Syrian campaign with building the Russian A2/AD “bubble” over Syria.

The counteraction against Russian and Chinese A2/AD systems serves as one of American professional community arguments for further development of the CGPS program. Therefore, it is clear that in order to counter the American conventional prompt strikes as well as to effectively implement its own A2/AD, Russian nonnuclear deterrence acquires a new meaning on operative-tactical and sub-strategic levels. For example, the development of an effective Russian A2/AD system can directly influence regional security issues in Europe. In this context, building a long-range conventional A2/AD capacity in Kaliningrad will create a new strategic reality in relations between Russia and NATO, especially towards the Baltic countries.<sup>15</sup>

After the Ukrainian crisis, some Western experts are keen to describe Russian conventional deterrence as part of a wider strategic approach (for instance, *cross-domain coercion*) and try to link it with “hybrid warfare” and other “new fangled” conceptions aimed to describe Russian policy on the post-Soviet space.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the professional discourse on whether NATO should be back to the implementation of its own conventional deterrence policy to react to the growing potential of Russian conventional forces and system of nonnuclear deterrence is also widely discussed. Some of them consider the probability of the Russian hybrid warfare and A2/AD conceptions combination that can reinforce each other

<sup>13</sup> See more: Polegaev V.I., Alferov V.V., “On Nonnuclear Deterrence, Its Role and Place in the System of Strategic Deterrence”, *Military Thought*, №9, 2015, (in Russian).

<sup>14</sup> The concept of so called “sea bastions”, aimed to provide defense of the Soviets nuclear submarines deployment bases in the conditions of the USA and NATO navies sea superiority was developed during the Cold War period and was actively discussing by the expert community in the framework of the nuclear and conventional deterrence logic. See more: James J. Wirtz, “Strategic Conventional Deterrence: Lessons from the Maritime Strategy”, *Security Studies*, Vol.3, Autumn, 1993, p.132-137.

<sup>15</sup> See more: Stephan Fruhling, Guillaume Lasconjarias, “NATO, A2/AD and Kaliningrad Challenge”, *Survival*, Vol.58, No3, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> See more: Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, “Cross-Domain Coercion. The Current Russian Art of Strategy”, *Proliferation Papers*, IFRI, No 54, November, 2015.

in the context of Russian strategy towards Eastern European countries, enabling to “create a sort of double deterrence to NATO intervention in a military crisis”.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, another area of Russian conventional deterrence application (especially traditional long-range PGM) can be the fight against terrorism, including targeted killing of their leadership<sup>18</sup>. Meanwhile, the fight against terrorism is also officially presented as one of the priorities of the American CPGS.

## Conclusion

Conventional (nonnuclear) deterrence has seriously evolved in Russian military and strategic thinking. Starting as a subsidiary tactical/sub-strategic level warfighting tool it has become a separate military-political factor and a self-contained component of Russian strategic deterrence. The capacity of conventional deterrence as a warfighting tool and its influence on post-Soviet political space has also expanded. As a result, the current system of Russian conventional deterrence can be described as a combination of the following functions:

1. A self-contained element (in combination with strategic nuclear weapons) of the Russian global level strategic deterrence system, which on the regional levels can also be applied in combination with tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons and provides more flexibility to the overall Russian strategic deterrence

conduction, especially in crisis situations when Moscow’s political goals are limited or do not have higher priority;

2. A practical warfighting military instrument, especially contributing to strengthening A2/AD capacity of Russian conventional forces, and including the application of PGM in regional, low-intensity and asymmetric conflicts and in fight against terrorism.
3. A military-political factor, in which the Russian conventional deterrence is aimed at maintaining regional balance and promoting Russian geopolitical interests in the post-Soviet space, as well as in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

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<sup>17</sup> Luis Simon, “The ‘Third’ US Offset Strategy and Europe’s ‘Anti-access’ Challenge”, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol.39, No.3, p.434.

<sup>18</sup> See more: Matthew A. Morehouse, “The Claws of the Bear: Russia’s Targeted Killing Program”, *Journal of the Slavic Military Studies*, Vol.28, 2015.