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Is Nuclear War Becoming Thinkable?

By Philip Giraldi
October 5, 2016

People who make their living thinking about defense policy and national security like everything to fit into a nice framework, preferably one that can be visualized on a PowerPoint slide. If you are unfortunate enough to be standing next to two officials speaking Pentagonese during a reception, you will note that their language is full of acronyms relating to projects and obscure government agencies—and that they refer regularly to strategic concepts and systems, including the venerable “triad” of nuclear deterrence.

The “triad” concept holds that when a country fields land-, air-, and submarine-based nuclear capabilities, it greatly increases its chances of being able to retaliate after an attack. In the case of the U.S. and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, for example, if either side would have launched a first strike and knocked out the other side’s land- or air-based systems, submarines would still have provided a devastating second-strike capability. Nuclear war was such an awful prospect that it long was described as intrinsically the ultimate universal deterrent, rendering an actual armed conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact that might escalate unthinkable.

The end of the Cold War in 1991 seemed to reduce the chance of nuclear war still further, even though the weapons had proliferated. But no one anticipated the level of hostility ^[1] toward Russia that is now evident, and talk in the Pentagon is again focused on what it would take to win a war against an apparently resurgent Moscow. And for his part, earlier this week,

Russian President Vladimir Putin withdrew from a nuclear security pact ^[2], citing “hostile actions” by the U.S.

To be sure, much of the Pentagon’s animosity regarding Moscow is budget-driven ^[3], with generals and admirals needing an enemy more formidable than “international terrorism” to justify an enhanced role for their respective branches of the service. Recent general-staff claims that the U.S. Army is “outranged and outgunned” by the Russian military are credible only if one counts tanks and does not consider the opposing air forces. Alarms raised by former general and current self-promoting politician Wesley Clark that Russia has built an “invulnerable” tank have been met with derision. Many of the claims regarding advanced Russian weaponry come from the Ukrainian government, which clearly has an agenda to support as it seeks sophisticated U.S. offensive arms and military aid.

The reality is that Russia, apart from its nuclear arsenal, is a bit of a mouse that roared. Its struggling economy generates a GNP that is on par with that of Italy, and it spends ^[3] one-seventh as much as the U.S. on the military. It has one aircraft carrier versus 10 in the American arsenal, one-sixth as many helicopters, one-third the number of fighter aircraft, and less than half as many active-duty military personnel. It has no effective military allies, while the U.S. has nearly all of Eastern and Western Europe in NATO.

Official U.S. policy is that NATO provides conventional deterrence at such a level that Russia would not be inclined to start a conflict with any alliance member lest it be defeated in short order. But Russia would have certain advantages if it were to attack without warning, relying on internal lines and deploying locally superior forces. And the reliability of a coordinated NATO response can be questioned, as the *raison d’etre* for NATO itself is wearing thin even as the alliance has expanded to include countries like Montenegro. One U.S. Army officer observed ^[3] to journalist Mark Perry, “How many British soldiers do you think want to die for Estonia?”

The problems involved in actually mounting a credible conventional defense in Europe are why there is a second level of deterrence: the nuclear umbrella maintained by the United States, Britain, and France. U.S. officialdom used to suggest that Washington and NATO would not be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict, but that was never an actual policy. Last month there were reports ^[4] that President Obama had considered committing to “no first use” but was overruled by his cabinet, with Secretary of Defense Ash Carter describing such a pledge as “a sign of weakness.” Two liberal congressmen have since introduced a bill that would prohibit U.S. first use of nuclear weapons, but it appears to have little support and is likely to die in committee.

Carter, who describes nuclear weapons as the “bedrock” and “guarantor” of U.S. security, recently spoke at several Minuteman missile bases in the United States. He stated that ^[5] the U.S. and its European allies are now “refreshing” U.S. strategy by integrating conventional and nuclear weapons in order to “deter Russia from thinking it can benefit from nuclear use in a conflict with NATO.” Carter explained that Moscow has little regard “for long-established accords of using nuclear weapons,” raising “serious questions” about “whether they respect the profound caution that Cold War-era leaders showed in respect to brandishing their nuclear weapons.”

Ash Carter also elaborated ^[6] that “if deterrence fails, you provide the president with options to achieve U.S. and allied objectives ... all to reduce the risk of nuclear weapons being used in the first place.” He emphasized “our will and ability to act.” Note that Carter did not suggest that the U.S. would not be the first to use nuclear weapons, and was clearly indicating that such weapons are in the mix of how to respond to what he obviously sees as an increasing Russian threat.

Carter is admittedly an anti-Russian hawk. He is also a physicist by training and is somewhat of an expert on policies relating to the use of nuclear weapons. Some of the changes he has made to our nuclear-deterrent policies were recently observable on CBS’s *60 Minutes*, which ran a series ^[7] on the state of the American nuclear arsenal. On board a nuclear-armed Ohio class submarine, officers spoke openly of the heightened state of alert—back up to a Cold War level—since “Russia invaded Crimea.” A relatively new tactical option was also discussed, referred to as “escalate to de-escalate,” which envisions defeating a conventional attack by means of a nuclear demonstration strike. The nuke would serve as a warning of more to come if the attack continued.

The concept of using a nuke as a warning is not exactly new. “Going nuclear” was considered a viable option during America’s two Iraq wars, if Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and was prepared to use them, and it has also been a part of the battle plan should the United States go to war with Iran. But what has changed the calculus is the sophistication of the weapons themselves.

New tactical nuclear weapons, like the latest versions of the U.S. B-61 ^[8], are small and portable. They can be launched from a bomber or as part of a cruise missile or even from a ground installation or vehicle. Further, their operators can “dial up a yield”—i.e., select the size of the explosion on the bomb itself. That means a demonstration nuclear strike can be effectively “nuclear” while also designed to have a relatively small footprint to reduce both civilian and military casualties. This selectivity makes such a bomb, in the minds of some generals and politicians, potentially an effective warning rather than an automatic escalation of the fighting—and as a result it is a weapon that is much “more usable.” ^[9]

The Russians, of course, have similar weapons, and by some accounts ^[10] their nuclear arsenal is more modern than that employed by the U.S. Moscow’s war doctrine was recently spelled out ^[5] by Putin. He said that Moscow “would reserve the right to use nuclear weapons if the existence of Russia is threatened.” This has been interpreted as Putin acknowledging that his conventional forces cannot go head-to-head with those of the U.S. in the long run—and warning that Russia might be forced to go nuclear first, relatively early on in the conflict, to defend itself.

So one should conclude that both sides confronting each other over Eastern Europe are now prepared to go nuclear under certain circumstances. No one is asking the Poles and Slovaks, whose land might well be the site for such a demonstration, what they think, but their governments are officially on board with NATO strategies designed to deter Russia. Germany has, however, expressed considerable nervousness ^[11] over the saber-rattling as memories of the Red Army are still somewhat fresh.

And there are frightening indications that some senior military officers might be eager to get things started in the belief that a war with Russia could actually be winnable. Certifiable loose cannons on deck include Wesley Clark, who reportedly tried ^[12] to engineer a confrontation with Russian peacekeepers in Kosovo in 1999. Crazier still, Gen. Philip Breedlove (who retired earlier this year) worked hard ^[13] during his time as supreme commander of NATO forces in Europe to get NATO and the U.S. involved in a proxy war over Ukraine. In leaked emails, an interlocutor suggested he and the U.N. secretary general might “fashion a NATO strategy to leverage, cajole, convince or coerce the U.S. to react” to the Russian “threat”; Breedlove found this “very promising.” Breedlove, who has regularly lied about the extent of the Russian presence in Ukraine, has hysterically described Moscow as a “long-term existential threat to the United States and to our European allies.” The general was also reportedly in contact with State Department Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland, who helped engineer the coup that overthrew the Ukrainian government in 2014.

Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton is calling Putin a new Hitler ^[14] while the *New York Times* editorializes against ^[15] “Vladimir Putin’s Outlaw State.” And the real danger is that the Russian people are watching this display ^[16] with concern and might soon believe themselves to be backed into a corner by an implacable enemy. Putin has several times warned that there is an increasing perception in Russia that the country is being surrounded and endangered by the continuous expansion of NATO as well as by threats relating to his country’s involvement in Syria. Opinion polls suggest that the average Russian now expects war ^[17] with the West.

The insistence on the part of the many in the West that Putin must be resisted by using *force majeure* if necessary is based on gross exaggeration of the actual threat coming from Moscow. That nuclear weapons are now apparently employable in the plans for deterrence on the part of NATO, as well as in the Russian plans for self-defense, should be a terrifying prospect for anyone who cares about what might come next.