

June 8, 2020

Russia's New State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence: Implications for North American Defence

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Transparency of a state's intentions and consistency in actions provide the foundations of strategic stability. The 2 June 2020 release of the Presidential decree *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence*¹ provides a slightly more transparent description of the role of nuclear weapons in Russia's national security policy while remaining consistent with the 2014, 2010, and 2000 policies.² The 2020 document has since received widespread attention and discussion among strategic analysts and nuclear deterrence scholars, from social media discourse to research institute perspectives. This quick impact report addresses the document within the current context of declining arms control and redefinition of deterrence.

Stable nuclear deterrence is based on mutual vulnerability and credible retaliatory capabilities to dissuade an adversary from using its nuclear weapons.³ This is the traditional deterrence logic that underlay Cold War Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Of course, such retaliatory policy and capabilities can and have been applied to deter threats posed by other weapons of mass destruction or large-scale conventional conflict that threatens a state's existence. In its most basic form, nuclear deterrence is the use of the threat of nuclear use to deter a state from using its nuclear weapons; but the threat of nuclear weapons, and more recently conventional-strike capabilities, have been applied as part of more flexible options to deter adversaries through means of denial. These approaches give rise to developing offensive weapons systems with stealthier, speedier, and more maneuverable capabilities, to threaten to disarm and eliminate first and second-strike platforms, and C2 systems.

Through the release of its nuclear deterrence document, Russia intends to clarify its nuclear policy. Nikolai Sokov correctly affirms that "greater clarity also helps strengthen deterrence," whereas vagueness "risks provoking the opponent." However, some ambiguity can contribute to deterrence by keeping an adversary uncertain about the potential response to certain actions, particularly under a lunch-on-warning doctrine. Thus, as transparent as this policy purports to be, it retains some limited ambiguity – perhaps intentionally to induce greater caution in its adversary.

Russia's nuclear policy was released less than two weeks after the US announced its intention to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty (21 May 2020), within what can be understood as a post-INF Treaty / pre-New START-expiration context. In this context, this brief document may have been hastily written to clarify Russia's policy on the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy. Analysts suggest that this "new" policy does not provide much new material compared to previous 2014, 2010, and 2000 versions; instead, it clarifies some items that had been vague,⁴ while others remain ambiguous.

The policy is divided into four sections: I. General Provisions; II. Essence of Nuclear Deterrence; III. Conditions for the transition of the Russian Federation to the use of nuclear weapons; and IV. Tasks and functions of federal government authorities, other government bodies and organizations for implementing state policy on nuclear deterrence. The first paragraph outlines the purpose of the policy statement:

These Basic Principles represent a strategic planning document in the area of ensuring defence and reflect the official view on the essence of nuclear deterrence, identify military risks and threats to be neutralized by implementation of nuclear deterrence, the principles of nuclear deterrence, as well as the conditions for the Russian Federation to proceed to the use of nuclear weapons.

Paragraph 2 states that "The guaranteed deterrence of a potential adversary from aggression against the Russian Federation and/or its allies is one of the highest state priorities." The "State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence" is "a set of political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, information and other measures, coordinated and united by a common design, implemented through reliance on forces and means of nuclear deterrence to prevent aggression against the Russian Federation and/or its allies."⁵

The document explicitly states (paragraph 4) that Russia's nuclear policy is "defensive" in nature, aimed at:

- maintaining nuclear forces at a sufficient level to ensure nuclear deterrence
- guaranteeing the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity
- deterring a potential adversary from aggression against Russia and/or its allies
- preventing escalation military actions and their termination on conditions acceptable to Russia.

The policy states that nuclear weapons are "exclusively for deterrence" (paragraph 5) to reduce the nuclear threat and to prevent military conflicts. Nuclear deterrence is ensured through "combat-ready forces and means that are capable" to inflict "guaranteed unacceptable damage" through employment of nuclear weapons in any circumstances" (paragraph 10), as well as "readiness and resolve" to use such weapons.

This report agrees with other analyses that this statement conveys deterrence by punishment rather than denial, with its emphasis on retaliation. Paragraph 12 of the document outlines military risks and threats that are "neutralized by implementation of nuclear deterrence":

- a) buildup of military forces that have nuclear capabilities near Russia's borders and adjacent waters;
- b) deployment of missile defence systems, medium and short-range cruise and ballistic missiles, non-nuclear high precision and hypersonic weapons; UAVs, and directed energy weapons;
- c) development and deployment of missile defence assets and strike systems in outer space;

- d) possession of nuclear weapons or other WMD that can be used against Russia;
- e) uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear weapons, delivery means, and technology;
- f) deployment of nuclear weapons and their delivery means in non-nuclear weapon states.

NATO is clearly the subject of several paragraphs of this policy. Paragraph 13 states that “the Russian Federation implements its nuclear deterrence with regard to individual states and military coalitions (blocs, alliances) that consider the Russian Federation as a potential adversary.” Sections a, b, and f of paragraph 12 appear to call out US/NATO military activities in Eastern Europe, with the deployment in NATO non-nuclear weapon states of US nuclear forces, deployment of US nuclear and conventional strike capabilities, Aegis at sea and ashore missile defences, and UAVs. Section f is complimented by paragraph 15 which describes Russia’s concern with the deployment of these “offensive” capabilities in “the territories of other countries.” Arms control scholars have been critical of NATO’s nuclear sharing which involves the deployment of US nuclear forces in non-nuclear weapon states, arguing that it violates the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.⁶

The Russian policy has various implications for North American and Arctic defence and security. Paragraph 13, sections b, c, d, and e outline Russia’s concerns about the deployment of missile defence systems, non-nuclear high-precision and hypersonic weapons, strike systems in outer space, and uncontrolled proliferation. Although some of these apply to the European theatre, they also address US strategic developments in North America and the Arctic region. These include new deterrence concepts for North American defence with an emphasis on deterrence by denial, involving the reconceptualization of missile defence and advocacy for all-domain awareness (with a focus on closing gaps in the Arctic). Ironically, these are responses to Russia’s deployment of offensive systems in the Arctic, primarily from the Kola Peninsula. Such systems include long-range standoff cruise missiles, advanced air-launched cruise and air-launched ballistic missiles, hypersonic glide vehicles, and stealth underwater vehicles. Of note, the US is focusing on deterrence by denial, whereas Russia’s policy communicates deterrence by punishment and its actions indicate reliance on offensive systems.

Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence mentions Russia’s deterrence of aggression against the state and/or its allies [и (или) ее Союзников], however, it does not specify which states constitute allies. The policy does not define “the adversary” or “opponent” as the US or NATO, but they are assumed. Likewise, its allies can be assumed to be comprised of states its near abroad, including Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and other ‘Stans. In addition, states with which Russia currently provides military assistance or has other military or economic partnerships may include Syria, Iran, China, and North Korea. The interest in considering which nations constitute Russia’s allies concerns that country’s intent to use nuclear weapons to deter nuclear or conventional aggression. This is important because it calls into question the credibility of whether Russia would use nuclear weapons in order to defend its allies (and which allies, based on priorities), analogous to the credibility of US extended deterrence for NATO allies in Europe and allies in the Asia Pacific.

The policy also speaks to Russian prioritization of arms control. In paragraph 6, it states that “the regulatory framework of these Principles is constituted by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, generally recognized principles and norms of international law, international treaties of the Russian Federation in the field of defence and arms control.” Paragraph 15 outlines 7 principles of nuclear deterrence, including compliance with international arms control commitments. These statements are consistent with Russia’s calls for a return to

arms control dialogue with the US in light of the coming expiration of New START.⁷ However, Russia's violation of the INF Treaty with the deployment of its 9M729 system suggest a contradiction.

The strategic debate on whether Russia has an Escalate-to-De-escalate doctrine (E2D) must also be addressed. Critics argue that this is a Western interpretation of statements and actions that suggest that Russia would use a tactical nuclear weapon in a crisis against a conventionally-superior aggressor in order to de-escalate a conflict on Russia's terms.⁸ However, interpretations may vary, particularly regarding the statement in paragraph 17 that "the Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy." One might question whether statements such as this expand the scope of Russia's application of nuclear deterrence. Paragraph 19 outlines "the conditions specifying the possibility of nuclear weapons use by the Russian Federation" as: a) warning data of ballistic missile launch against Russia and/or its allies; b) use of nuclear weapons against Russia and/or its allies; c) attack against critical Russian government infrastructure that could undermine Russia's ability to launch a nuclear response; and d) conventional aggression against Russia that threatens its very existence. There is no explicit statement of an E2D doctrine in this policy, thus leaving ambiguity about Russia's statement that it might use nuclear weapons if conventional aggression posed an existential threat to the Russian state. This ambiguity serves to maintain a degree of uncertainty in the minds of Western decision-makers on the consequences of conventional and non-conventional military action that Russia might deem provocative.

This policy document suggests Russia's urgent need to re-establish arms control in light of increasingly offensive strike capabilities and denial systems (such as missile defence) (paragraph 12). The ambiguity remains to keep options open for responding to the contingency of threats, much like US nuclear policy. It provides a warning to NATO about activities and the deployment of systems in Europe and North America that threaten Russia. This policy not only has implications for Western nations involved in defence activities in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, but also in the Arctic where Russia deploys standoff capabilities from its Northern bases in an attempt to re-establish parity with the US and defend its national interests in its near abroad. Nevertheless, although this document provides transparency in Russia's intentions to convey "defensive" deterrence or deterrence by punishment, its deployments of offensive systems continue to communicate potentially aggressive intentions if Russia's strategic interests are challenged.

Notes

¹ Указ Президента Российской Федерации, "Об Основы государственной политики Российской Федерации в области ядерного сдерживания," Президент Российской Федерации В. Путин, Москва, Кремль, 2 июня 2020 года, No. 355. Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," President of the Russian Federation V. Putin, 2 June 2020, No. 355. Released in English 8 June 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/-/asset_publisher/rp0fiUBmANaH/content/id/4152094.

Staying close to the literal translation of the title, Olga Olikier refers to the Doctrine under the title “Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence.” Olga Olikier, “New Document Consolidates Russia’s Nuclear Policy in One Place,” *Russia Matters*, 4 June 2020, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/new-document-consolidates-russias-nuclear-policy-one-place>.

² Sokov analyzes the new document relative to previous policies, especially the 2014 Military Doctrine, acknowledging that the 2020 decree “does not clarify all relevant questions” and “introduces a host of new uncertainties.” Nikolai Sokov, “Russia Clarifies Its Nuclear Deterrence Policy,” Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, 3 June 2020, <https://vcdnp.org/russia-clarifies-its-nuclear-deterrence-policy/>.

³ For more discussion on deterrence and various forms of nuclear coercion, see S. Thomas Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) and *Arms and Influence* (New York: Yale University Press, 1966).

⁴ Sokov, “Russia Clarifies.”

⁵ Olikier refers to Russia’s approach to deterrence as a “whole of government effort.” Olikier, “New Document.”

⁶ According to the NPT, Art. I. “Each nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly.” And Art. II. “Each non-nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to receive the transfer from any transferor whatsoever of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or of control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly.” United Nations, “Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT),” UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>. The Treaty was opened for signature in 1968, entered into force in 1970, and was extended indefinitely on 11 May 1995.

NATO non-nuclear weapon states that host US nuclear weapons are: Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Turkey. These states are also parties to the NPT, as is the United States and Russia (ratified as the Soviet Union).

⁷ For discussion on the impact of the US withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty see Troy Bouffard and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “The U.S. Withdrawal from Open Skies: Implications for the Arctic,” NAADSN Quick Impact, 23 May 2020, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/20-may-23-US-Withdrawal-from-Open-Skies-TB-PWL.pdf>.

⁸ Olikier affirms that “escalate to de-escalate as defined by Western analysts and the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review is almost certainly still not a Russian policy.” Olikier, “New Document.”