

Russia announces expansion of nuclear capabilities, sanctions pre-emptive nuclear strikes

By Andrea Peters
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In late December, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev announced that his government intended to develop a new generation of nuclear weapons. Medvedev's statement came in the midst of ongoing and thus far unsuccessful negotiations with the US over the signing of a new treaty that would replace the recently expired START-I agreement on nuclear weapons.

Speaking on television on Christmas Eve, the Russian president presented the Kremlin's plans to build new missiles as part of its effort to protect the country's "national interests." According to press reports, the main point of disagreement between Russia and the US in the nuclear talks is Washington's continuing plans to build a missile defense system in Europe.

In September of last year, the Obama administration stated that it was scrapping plans originated under President George W. Bush to station an anti-missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. However, the administration has never completely abandoned the idea of developing some sort of alternative elsewhere on the European landmass, a prospect to which the Kremlin is equally opposed.

On December 29, in response to a reporter's question regarding the stalled START-I talks, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin explained, "What is the problem? The problem is that our American partners are building an anti-missile shield and we are not building one. ... If one is not to develop missile defense systems, then a threat appears, because having created such an umbrella, our partners may feel completely protected and will do what they want."

While Medvedev claims that the new weapons Russia is planning to develop will be in accord with whatever arms control agreement is ultimately reached with the US, the Kremlin's announcement makes it clear that it has no intention of taking the threat of nuclear war off the table.

Indeed, the Russian president's announcement comes on the heels of a revision of the country's military doctrine to

allow for pre-emptive nuclear strikes. As reported in *Russian Today*, the Kremlin-sponsored English-language news agency, in mid-December the Russian Security Council approved the draft of a new policy that will permit not only nuclear attacks to "prevent any military threat," but also the "use of nukes in small-scale conflicts."

This change to the country's nuclear policy, which is similar to revisions made by the US to its military doctrine under the Bush administration, is part of a broader effort by Russia to both strengthen its armed forces and increase their profile in the international arena.

Also in December, the upper house of the Russian Duma, the Federation Council, passed a resolution giving the president broad powers to authorize the use of force outside the country's borders without recourse to parliament. According to a December 10 article in the Jamestown Foundation's *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, President Medvedev can now "send troops into action abroad anywhere, anytime; decide on the size of force, specify the enemy, with no legal restraints or limitations, 'to defend the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens.'"

This move is widely seen as providing the Kremlin with the legal basis to pursue military action akin to that which it took in August 2008 during its war with Georgia over the contested region of South Ossetia. At that time, taking advantage of the opportunity given to it by provocations orchestrated from Tbilisi, Russia entered Georgian territory, routing Georgian forces.

In the aftermath of the war, questions arose within the Russian political establishment about the constitutionality of the Kremlin's actions and the necessity for creating a clear basis within Russian law for similar measures in the future. The fact that the recently-passed legislation gives the president explicit power to take action to defend Russian citizens abroad is significant, as large ethnic Russian populations, portions of which have or can claim Russian citizenship, reside in countries throughout the former Soviet

sphere.

Over the course of the past year, Russia has been involved in a reform of its military, which has been in a state of general decline on all fronts since the collapse of the USSR. The overhaul is aimed at modernizing the armed forces both organizationally and technologically.

Roger McDermott of the Jamestown Foundation notes that the reforms are driven by the Russian military's efforts to draw the lessons of the 2008 war with Georgia, which demonstrated, despite Russia's success, that the country's armed forces were poorly equipped for rapid-deployment, small-scale operations.

"The extent of the changes under way," wrote McDermott in August 2009, "is unparalleled in the history of the Russian armed forces since the end of World War II, perhaps even earlier."

"While any comment on the policy implications is premature," he added, "it is likely that the Russian conventional armed forces will emerge in the next five years as an unrivaled dominant force within the former Soviet space, capable of sudden, decisive intervention."

The recent changes made in Russia's military doctrine and structure are a reflection of the ruling elite's nervousness about ongoing challenges to Moscow's geopolitical position in areas traditionally within its sphere of influence. These also seem to be interspersed with concerns about the future inviolability of Russia itself.

On December 17, Interfax quoted the commander of Russia's strategic missile forces, Andrei Shvaichenko. Commenting on the changes to the country's nuclear strike policy, he stated: "(Today) one must take into account the geopolitical and geostrategic changes that are not in Russia's favor. In the future, it cannot be ruled out that Russia, being a nation with unlimited natural reserves and resources, could become a target of a large-scale military aggression."

On Russia's western flank the country confronts NATO's ongoing efforts to expand eastward. Both Georgia and Ukraine underwent US-backed "color revolutions" during the 2000s, the immediate consequences of which were the installation of regimes with close ties to Washington. The two countries are of strategic significance to Moscow because of, among other things, the role they play as transit points for energy resources bound for European markets.

At the same time, Russia is facing an expanding American intervention in Central Asia in the form of the escalation of the war in Afghanistan. While in the short term the Kremlin may view the possibility of a US defeat in Afghanistan with wariness, as this could stoke up pro-Islamist sentiments in the region and undermine its own agenda, the expansion of US military action is also a major cause for concern for the

Kremlin. It understands that the Obama administration's intensifying focus on Afghanistan is driven by an agenda that has its sights on control of the energy resources and pipeline routes of Central Asia, where Russia has longstanding economic and geostrategic interests.

Russia's anxieties about the challenge to its geopolitical position in these regions have been worsened by its economic crisis. In 2009, the country's gross domestic product fell by 8.8 percent. It was, according to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, "the deepest slump in 15 years." The intensity and speed of the collapse took the Kremlin by surprise. Over the course of the year, it had to continually revise its economic projections downwards.

Among the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), Russia distinguished itself by the size of its contraction relative to the others in the group, with Brazil's GDP declining by 0.25 percent and India and China's growth continuing, albeit at a slower pace. Russia's poor performance compared to other BRIC nations even led some experts to question whether it should continue to be considered among the world's leading developing economic powerhouses.

The economic crisis exposed the depth and intensity of Russia's dependence on energy resources to sustain its economy. To the degree that the hemorrhaging of the Russian economy has stopped over the course of the past two months, it is largely because oil prices have rebounded somewhat.

While elements within the political establishment have responded by advocating a change in Russia's economy away from its, as Medvedev observed, "humiliating dependence" on energy resources, a whole series of factors will prevent the ruling elite from pursuing, much less finding, an alternative source of political power and wealth.

The experience of the economic crisis of the past year, alongside the intensification of American military action under the Obama administration, has heightened the determination of the Russian ruling elite to prepare to militarily defend its oil wealth and its control over energy transit routes through Central Asia and the Caucasus.

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