

The new arms race: blurring the line between conventional and nuclear war

The stand-off between Russia and the West has prompted fears of a new Cold War. Amidst this climate of confrontation, nuclear weapons seem to have regained relevance for both sides. Unlike during the bipolar struggle of the past century, however, nuclear rhetoric and muscle-flexing have got to new and menacing levels, especially on the part of Moscow. Against this background, the nuclear arsenals of both the US and Russian are undergoing important and costly modernisation programmes –president Obama’s plan, at the moment, stands at one trillion dollars to be spent over three decades. Talk of a new arms race is widespread. The aim of this short piece is to characterise this new arms race and analyse its impact on European security.

This arms race is taking place at the qualitative, not at the quantitative level. Both the US and Russia continue the implementation of the 2010 New START, with the aim of cutting the number of deployed warheads to 1,550 on both sides by 2018. After this year, it is very likely that these limits continue to be respected and that Washington and Moscow start negotiating a successor treaty. Therefore, the number of deployed strategic warheads is not being expanded, and is very unlikely that new warheads are being introduced to the stockpiles –which are sizeable in themselves. Certain elements of the modernisation plans, like successor programmes for ICBM fleets and ballistic missile submarines, are not about boosting numerically the nuclear force, but replacing ageing platforms and delivery systems.

The most worrying development is taking place at the qualitative level and with certain systems. It leads many to consider that the risk of a nuclear exchange is at the highest point since the end of the Cold War, perhaps even higher than then –former US secretary of defence William J. Perry is a prominent voice in this regard. Qualitative enhancements to nuclear forces are being driven by nuclear doctrines which blur the line between conventional and nuclear war. Mirroring NATO’s strategy during the Cold War, Russia compensates its conventional inferiority relative to the West by increasing its reliance on nuclear weapons. In this framework, Russian strategists conceive the early use of a few low-yield nuclear weapons to end a conventional conflict on terms favourable to the Kremlin. The logic is that NATO allies would be deterred by the prospect of heavy losses to a Russian limited nuclear attack or, if not deterred, would not dare to escalate the conflict after such an attack. It is being reported that, in order to

be able to sustain this 'escalate to de-escalate' doctrine, Russia is modernising its numerically large and varied non-strategic systems, not accountable under START limits and shrouded in secrecy. Old warheads might be getting their service lives extended or replaced by new models with lower-yields.

While NATO is still trying to decide how to respond to this, some strategists suggest that to deter Russia from launching a limited nuclear strike the Alliance should be able to respond in kind. Hedging against this possibility, the US is modernising its free-fall B61 bomb, which is forward-deployed in bases in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey. The existing models of this bomb are being rolled into one single model, the B61-12, which will have variable yield, allowing for small nuclear detonations, increased accuracy and earth-penetrating capabilities. Therefore, while not new warheads are being introduced (the physics package comes from previous bombs), the B61-12 will be able to hold a wider range of targets at risk at lower yields, creating the impression that collateral damage would be limited. This will make the bomb appear more usable. Indeed, the B61-12 will have enhanced capabilities: it will be essentially a new weapon able to fulfill more types of missions.

Together with the B61-12, the planned replacement for the old US air-launched cruise missile (AGM-86B) also deserves consideration. The nuclear-capable Long-Range Standoff weapon (LRSO) is presented by its advocates as the only way for the US to retain a functional bomber-leg of its second-strike capability in the face of increasingly sophisticated Russian air-defence systems; in an all-out nuclear war, the LRSO should be able to overcome Russian defences to strike targets deeper within the country. However, beyond the strategic stability argument, some consider that the LRSO, thanks to its variable-yield nuclear warhead, could also be used to destroy those air-defence systems and other anti-access/area denial capabilities in a limited conventional war. That would amount to a first use of nuclear weapons by the US and nuclearize the conflict. To be sure, Russia has recently deployed nuclear-capable cruise missiles, like the Kalibr sea-launched cruise missile and the air-launched Kh-101 (both used with conventional payloads against targets in Syria), so the LRSO might also be justified as a way to prevent a capability-gap vis-à-vis Russia.

Russia and the US are playing a very dangerous game. They are engaged in an arms race towards ensuring options at the lower-end of a nuclear conflict. They are setting the

bar for nuclear use lower, self-deluded by the idea that increasingly accurate delivery systems coupled with variable-yield warheads allow for escalation control. At a time when the humanitarian discourse about nuclear weapons is on the rise, they seem to believe there might be ‘humane’ and ‘responsible’ ways of using nuclear weapons. Leaving aside that an expansion of the role of nuclear weapons in military doctrines runs contrary to their disarmament obligations, this dynamic puts European security at a great risk. While only a change in the political situation might break the pattern of mutual distrust and uncertainty that fosters this arms race, as military build-ups continue in Eastern and Central Europe, we should immediately start working on confidence-building and transparency measures to prevent a crisis from breaking out by accident or miscalculation. NATO’s summit in Warsaw next July is an exceptional opportunity to do so. Russia and the West should understand the fundamental necessity of a modicum of military dialogue, since a crisis could be lethal.