

Out with the old nukes, in with the new

By J. Michael Waller

Russia's hard-line military leaders must have cheered when Senate allies of the Clinton administration killed a bill that would have required deployment of a national defense system against incoming nuclear missiles.

For the revanchists who earned their generals' stars in the Red Army, the Cold War is far from over. As command and control of Russia's nuclear arsenal deteriorates in the

veterans of old Communist Party think tanks became alarmed. "A first strike strategy" reform-minded military analyst Aleksei G. Arbatov commented at the time in *Novaya Gazeta*, "presupposes the unleashing of nuclear war."

All this happened when Russian-American relations were at their best. In 1994, the Russian navy began retrofitting its Typhoons to house the new SS-N-24/26 ballistic missile. In early 1995, it tested a submarine-launched ballistic mis-

strated."

Neither is U.S. "Cooperative Threat Reduction" aid a motivator. Three years ago, well before any such assistance went through the pipeline, Gen. Sergeev told Russian journalists that while certain ICBMs would be scrapped, "the combat readiness of strategic missiles will not decline in any way. The obsolete systems will be replaced with up-to-date ones." One of the replacements is the TOPOL-M, a three-stage variant of the SS-25. On Sept. 5, just hours before the U.S. Senate voted to build a national ballistic missile defense system by 2003, the military test-launched a TOPOL-M prototype at the Plesefsk cosmodrome 600 miles north of Moscow.

Announcing the launch, Military Space Forces spokesman Igor Safronov told TASS that 90 of the 154 SS-18 silos on Russian territory will be converted to house the TOPOL-M. The missiles will also be based on eight-axeled mobile launchers to conceal them from detection. Mr. Safronov echoed the rest of the military, "Russia hopes to replace all its outdated missiles in the coming years."

As stopgap measure until aviation upgrading is possible, Russia is purchasing a fleet of Soviet-era strategic bombers and hundreds of air-launched cruise missiles (plus nearly three dozen ICBMs) from Ukraine. With no apparent concern from Washington and various incentives from Moscow, Kiev agreed to the sale after two years of negotiations. According to Gen. Sergeev, the deal, now in its final stages, will transfer to Russia 25 Tu-95M "Bear-H" strategic bombers, 19 supersonic Tu-160 "Blackjack" strategic bomber, and several hundred cruise missiles (in addition to 32 ICBMs). Gen. Sergeev said the weapons will help Russia "maintain its nuclear potential at an appropriate level until 2009," presumably in time for the country to rebuild its economy and military industry.

The General Staff briefed the Duma that a new-generation of air-launched cruise missile is in production. The next-generation multirole strategic "stealth" bomber, the Sukhoi-T60S, is reportedly under development.

Advanced nuclear warheads are also in the works, according to Atomic Energy Minister Viktor Mikhailov, who disclosed continuing weapons programs a year ago. Tests may have begun. In January, as this newspaper revealed and Defense Secretary William Perry confirmed, the Pentagon detected seismic activity consistent with a low-yield nuclear blast at the underground arctic nuclear test center at Novaya Zemlya, even though Moscow had pledged in 1992 to stop such detonation.

The public still doesn't know the truth about the alleged test. The administration has been dismissive of serious reports of across-the-board Russian arms-control violations as it has been silent about Russian strategic modernization. We have come to expect such behavior from the Clinton administration. The mystery is why so few of its opponents in Congress have made it an issue.

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country's prolonged crisis, military leaders state that their top priority is to modernize their nuclear forces.

The White House has swept under the rug what top Russian officers admit freely: Strategic nuclear missiles directed at the United States remain on alert and the obsolete systems being dismantled (some with U.S. aid) will be replaced by more high-tech weapons.

Why is Russia channeling its scarce resources into strategic modernization if the Cold War is over and the country can't maintain the forces it has? Strategic Rocket Forces Commander in Chief Igor Sergeev provided the answer in a briefing to the Duma last July. "Strategic offensive arms," he explained in remarks summarized by a Russian government publication, "are the main component of Russia's defense might. They include at most 10 percent of the entire army personnel and take up only 5 to 6 percent of the country's defense budget. They are not only the most reliable but also the cheapest component of our defense might. And they have a high level of combat readiness and combat capability."

Since Bill Clinton has been president, the Russian military has conducted several major strategic weapons exercises, at least one of which included a mock nuclear attack on the United States, in 1993, on June 22, 1994, and from October 4-10, 1995. The White House has said nothing.

Deep spending cuts and the deteriorated state of its conventional forces have caused Moscow to increase political and military reliance on strategic weapons. President Yeltsin signed a military doctrine in 1993 that reverses the "Gorbachev doctrine" of civilian pre-eminence over the military and renounces the Andropov-era "no first use" nuclear pledge, propagandistic as it may have been. Even

silence, concealing the technical characteristics in violation of an arms agreement with the United States. U.S. Navy intelligence estimates that Russia spent as much as \$7.2 billion on submarine construction and modernization in 1994, and \$9 billion in 1995. Shipyards are building hard-to-detect nuclear attack subs, including the Akula II and the completely new Severodvinsk class, according to Russian military leaders.

In open hearings last July, the general staff informed the Duma of development of a new ballistic missile submarine class to succeed the Typhoon, with capabilities superior to the American Ohio-class (Trident) subs; the keels have already been laid, but lack of funds has stalled the projects. Covering the hearings, *Kommersant Daily* reported that with economic recovery, construction will resume: "Russia plans for more than one day ahead despite the unprecedented cuts for military R&D."

Why such subs when the rest of the navy is rusting away? "Our strategic forces are the most important part of the fleet," explained Russian First Deputy Navy Commander Igor Kasatonov at a London naval conference in April. "We are now trying to improve our logistics so we can supply them properly." Asked about the next decade's procurement priorities, Adm. Kasatonov was unequivocal: "Our priority is the new generation of more accurate strategic nuclear missiles of the kind which can be launched from submarines."

The West has looked on hopefully as Russia decommissions part of its ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) fleet. But reform and arms control have little to do with reductions. According to First Deputy Chief of Staff Vladimir Zhurbenko, the missiles, with aging electronic and highly corrosive fuel, "are at the end of their useful life." The defense ministry newspaper *Red Star* — the name hasn't changed — argues that the giant, 10-warhead SS-18s need to be dismantled "because of their age, irrespective of the [START]

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