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RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION POLICY FROM 1991 TO 2011: TWENTY YEARS SINCE THE SOVIET UNION'S COLLAPSE, STILL SOVIET

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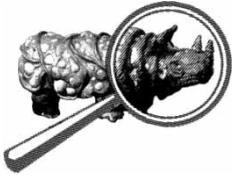
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Vladimir Orlov

RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION POLICY FROM 1991 TO 2011: TWENTY YEARS SINCE THE SOVIET UNION'S COLLAPSE, STILL SOVIET¹

On December 25, 1991 Mikhail Gorbachev handed over the “nuclear briefcase” to Boris Yeltsin. Eighteen months after the formal declaration of Russian state sovereignty and six months after his election as Russian president, Yeltsin found himself in possession of the symbolic key to the Russian nuclear arsenal.

THE ONLY TRUMP CARD

But it took Russia another painful six months finally to confirm its status as the legitimate successor of the Soviet Union in all areas related to nuclear weapons. The country then spent not months but long years trying to figure out what kind of inheritance it had received and what to do about it.

The choices facing Russia were stark. It could choose the path of a young nihilist, spitting on the grave of its forebears, renouncing the old ways and rejecting its inheritance as an unwanted burden. Alternatively, it could become the guardian of old traditions and put its inheritance into a savings account in the hope of earning handsome interest.

The drama of that choice was all the more poignant for the fact that the inheritor was also the lead actor on a limelight-flooded stage, facing the cold gazes of a critical audience. That audience was diverse. It included VIP members with keys to the “Nuclear Club.” There were important guests with no such keys, but with a lot to win depending on the outcome of the drama. There were also those who held a purely academic interest in nuclear matters—but who really wanted to know whether the inheritor would prove strong enough for his new role, or turn into merely a supporting actor. Finally, there were other inheritors—but they came after Russia in the line of succession, and therefore lacked VIP status.

Amid the hasty change of backdrop, with the sickle-and-hammer being replaced by a two-headed eagle, the actor-inheritor had just enough time for a quick improvisation. On top of that he also had to keep it straight in his head that his mission on the stage was two-fold. On the one hand, he had to do some proper acting for the benefit of the audience; some applause would be nice, but he would settle for simply not being booed off the stage. But on the other hand, he also had to do some things for real, for himself, based on his own interests, and not those of the audience.

Looking back from the vantage point of today's Russia at the events of 20 years ago, those improvisations look like a series of nave and sometimes outright dangerous U-turns and gyrations (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). There was perhaps a modicum of high-minded romanticism in those gyrations—but there was a lot more humiliating helplessness and indecision.

The *coming of age*, for lack of a better term, of the Russian nuclear nonproliferation policy has been an accurate reflection of Russia's evolving foreign and defense strategy—which is of course quite natural. That policy has gone through periods of excessive humility and unwarranted overconfidence—but it has always been full of “paper tigers” and empty posturing. In contrast,

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the Russian policy on nuclear nonproliferation has always been based on one solid and undeniable fact: Russia still remains the owner of a large nuclear arsenal, and that arsenal could well be its only real claim to being a great power. Indeed, in some periods nuclear weapons were Russia's last remaining trump card, its only real strength when all its other strengths were left only on paper.

Even during the most difficult periods for Russia's fledgling statehood that strength has always enabled Moscow to pursue a more solid, steady, and predictable policy on nuclear nonproliferation and arms control than the Russian foreign and defense policy as a whole.

Continuity has been the motto of Russia's nuclear nonproliferation policy since the very early days of the Yeltsin presidency. The country came under all sorts of external pressures, especially in the first five years after the break-up of the Soviet Union. But Russia's statements and especially its actions in the area of nuclear nonproliferation have always adhered to that principle of continuity—even though they certainly have not been completely unaffected by the aforementioned pressures. In other words, the Kremlin has stuck to the traditional Soviet course on nonproliferation. And when I say "traditional Soviet course," I definitely don't mean the policies of the late Gorbachev period. The grand ideas of achieving a nuclear zero by 2000 (or by some other arbitrary date) found very little traction in Moscow after Gorbachev's exit.

ASSETS AND LIABILITIES OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

President Yeltsin and his first administration quickly decided that Russia's nuclear arsenal was definitely a major asset and only a small liability in some respects. They never saw it as a burden. But how can that asset be used to earn dividends? This question quickly became a headache.

The full story of Russia acquiring real and complete control of its own nuclear weapons has yet to be told. That story is just as fascinating and just as ugly as any other Russian story of the early 1990s. The only difference is that the associated risks went far beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union.

Each of the 15 former Soviet republics conducted some nuclear activities or hosted nuclear weapons in Soviet times. Moscow was fully aware that if those weapons were to be left outside Russia for a long period, their security and safety would be very difficult to ensure. Tensions were fueled by reports in the US and Israeli media in early 1992, citing "reliable intelligence sources," that Kazakhstan had allegedly sold one or two nuclear warheads to Iran.² It was clear that the rumors were groundless and politically motivated—but Moscow knew that quick action was needed to make sure that something of the sort never happens in real life.³

I believe the most dramatic page in the whole saga was the removal to Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus of all tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) previously held in other Soviet republics. The move came when the Russian nuclear policy was still in its infancy. In fact, the Soviet generals made that clever pre-emptive step even before the break-up of the Soviet Union was finalized in official documents. Their foresight significantly reduced the threat of nuclear proliferation, which would have become inevitable soon after the collapse of the USSR. Speaking in military parlance, the removal of TNW "was effected in difficult operational circumstances caused by the increased activity of political groups," some of which appeared ready to use force in order to prevent that removal.⁴

LEAFING THROUGH THE OLD PAGES

VLADIMIR BELOUS: High-precision weapons (HPW) are extremely costly, and nuclear weapons have much higher "effectiveness – cost" indices. Russia cannot afford mass production of HPW, even the R&D in this area is facing serious obstacles. This makes many military specialists think that the most effective and the least expensive way for Russia to compensate for the imbalance in HPW is to preserve an arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons.

"Tactical Nuclear Weapons in the New Geopolitical Situation"
Yaderny Kontrol, 1996, No 1, P. 12.

To give just one example, the removal of TNW from Azerbaijan was prepared in absolute secrecy, and as a result the nuclear warheads were brought to a military airfield inside the republic without any incidents. But

the landing strip was blocked by a group of civilians from the nationalist People's Front; they tried to prevent the aircraft from taking off. The stand-off became so tense that the crews of several bomber aircraft carrying the nuclear weapons had to fire a few warning shots. Fortunately, those shots were enough to disperse the crowd; there were no casualties and the aircraft were able to take off.⁵

The main problem after the break-up of the Soviet Union was that apart from Russia itself, there were strategic nuclear weapons left in Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Suffice to say that the part of the Soviet nuclear arsenal stationed in Kazakhstan alone was bigger than the nuclear arsenals of Britain, France, and China put together.

At first, Russia did not seek to take control of all the Soviet strategic nuclear weapons—in any event, no declarations were made to that effect. On December 21, 1991, two weeks after the foundation of the CIS and on the day Kazakhstan joined the organization, the four countries signed the Alma-Ata agreement on joint nuclear weapons control measures. On December 30 in Minsk the countries also signed the Strategic Forces Agreement Between the CIS States, in which they recognized “the need for a united command of the Strategic Forces and for the preservation of unified control over nuclear weapons.” Article IV of the agreement reads that:

... until the full elimination of nuclear weapons, decisions regarding the use of nuclear weapons are made by the President of the Russian Federation, subject to approval by the heads of state of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, and after consultations with the other CIS members.⁶

In actual fact, however, the united strategic nuclear forces were left on paper. The very idea was probably a compromise which Russia had to accept at a difficult time immediately after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. To some extent the Kremlin was motivated by the desire to calm the Western capitals and make sure that the armed forces remain supportive or neutral during the dismantling of the Soviet Union; many generals were adamant that the nuclear arsenal should remain under a single command.

Nevertheless, a careful study of the Minsk agreements reveals how vague and flimsy they were. It was also quite obvious that Russia was the only former Soviet republic capable of maintaining the nuclear weapons in a combat-ready state, providing the necessary security and safety measures, retaining the highly skilled nuclear weapons specialists and paying them adequate wages. Besides, the idea of “joint control” of the former Soviet nuclear arsenal caused a lot of anxiety in the West, which wanted to know precisely who controlled the nuclear launch button.

On January 27, 1992 Yeltsin tried to seize the initiative and sent a detailed message to the secretary-general of the United Nations. He reiterated Russia's commitment to “ensuring reliable and unified control of nuclear weapons, prevention of nuclear proliferation, and measures to preserve the core of the united armed forces under a unified command.” For the first time Yeltsin confirmed that Russia would abide by the nuclear arms control treaties signed by the Soviet Union and that it would seek the elimination of nuclear weapons on the planet “gradually and on a parity basis.”⁷

The situation was compounded by the absence of a properly functioning Defense Ministry in the newly independent Russian Federation. In the period from August 19 to September 9, 1991 Russia had no Defense Ministry but had a defense minister, Gen. Konstantin Kobets. That office was later abolished. The new Russian Cabinet formed in October–November 1991 did not include a defense minister either. That was a tactical ploy by Yeltsin to persuade Gorbachev that he was not trying to dismantle the Soviet Union. The option of setting up a Russian defense ministry was seen at the time as a provocative step which would spell the end of the USSR. Only on March 16, 1992 did Yeltsin sign a decree setting up the Russian Ministry of Defense and appointing himself as acting defense minister. On May 18 he handed over the job to Gen. Pavel Grachev.

In the spring and summer of 1992 bitter rivalry broke out between Gen. Grachev and Marshal Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, the former Soviet defense minister who was later appointed commander of the United Armed Forces of the CIS, an amorphous and powerless body. The hollowness of Shaposhnikov's title became especially obvious as more and more powers were being transferred to Gen. Grachev and the Russian Defense Ministry. By the autumn of 1992 Gen. Grachev was given one of the two “nuclear briefcases.” Shaposhnikov lost the other one in the spring of 1993. As a result, Moscow continued to wield full control of the former Soviet Union's strategic nuclear weapons, without any involvement of Minsk, Kiev, or Alma-Ata.



On June 6, 1992 nine CIS states (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine) confirmed their support for Russia's participation in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a nuclear weapon state and declared they were ready to join the treaty as non-nuclear weapon states. That was the day when Russia officially became the legitimate successor of the former Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal.

But it took Russia another two years to remove to its own territory all the strategic nuclear weapons stationed in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.

There were no problems with Belarus, and by late 1996 all nuclear weapons had been removed from Belarusian territory.

Kazakhstan was a slightly more complex case. Technologically the country was no less capable of producing nuclear weapons on its own than Ukraine, and certainly more so than Belarus. There was a brief but heated discussion in Alma-Ata as to whether Kazakhstan should declare itself a nuclear weapon state. But President Nursultan Nazarbayev quickly and ruthlessly put an end to that debate. His strategy was to turn his country into a shining beacon of movement towards a world free of nuclear weapons. All nuclear weapons were removed from Kazakh territory by the autumn of 1996.

Ukraine, however, was a very different matter. "We must have a powerful deterrent against Russia's aggressive policies," prominent Ukrainian politician Serhiy Holovaty told me in May 1993. "Otherwise Ukraine will fare no better than Georgia, Moldova and Tajikistan, where Russia is using imperial methods in pursuit of its vital interests."⁸ At that point a Ukrainian MFA official, Kostyantyn Hryshchenko (who is now serving as the Ukrainian foreign minister), joined our conversation: "The obvious problem is that militarily, politically, and economically we cannot afford to keep nuclear weapons." These two opposing views informed the nuclear debate in Ukraine in 1992 and 1993.

Of course, the Ukrainian politicians who argued for keeping nuclear weapons were being more than a little disingenuous. Ukraine was bluffing; the true goal of its nuclear policy was to bolster its international standing as an independent state and, even more importantly, to secure generous economic aid from the West in return for surrendering the nuclear warheads stationed on Ukrainian territory to Russia.

In January 1994 the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and the United States signed a tripartite statement in which Ukraine finally confirmed its non-nuclear status and committed itself to the pullout of all nuclear weapons to Russia. Kiev had essentially achieved all its foreign policy goals, including a commitment by Russia, undertaken in the same statement, to "desist from economic coercion" and "respect the existing borders."

The story of Ukraine parting with its nuclear weapons became a difficult lesson for Russia. Initially Moscow was confident that, one way or another, the issue would be resolved in a "brotherly" fashion, and without any meddling by outsiders. In the end, however, the Kremlin was forced to admit its inability to solve the problem without the United States. What is more, Washington was not merely a symbolic mediator; its participation was crucially important and perhaps even decisive for the success of the whole endeavor.

Be that as it may, Russia managed to secure the removal of all nuclear weapons from the former Soviet republic to its own territory. It did so peacefully, non-aggressively, and without any losses. But Moscow failed to compensate for its nuclear pullout from the former Soviet republics by taking any steps aimed at cementing nuclear energy or nuclear security cooperation with the CIS states. At that time the Kremlin argued that it had its own problems to sort out, and the former Soviet republics' problems were their own concern. Essentially Russia made the same foreign policy mistake which it also made in many other areas in the 1990s. In 1994 it turned down Kazakhstan's request to remove tens of kilos of enriched uranium from the Ulba Enrichment Plant. In 1998 it refused to remove more than four kilos of enriched uranium from Georgia. As a result, what should have been Russia's natural role fell to the United States. Washington also launched strategic programs with nuclear research centers and specialists in the CIS states. Russia chose to stand aloof, and lost its positions in the process. It soon realized its mistake and did what it could to limit the damage, but it was too late.

CHALLENGES OF THE 1990s

There have been two distinct phases in Russian policy on nuclear nonproliferation and arms control. The first phase lasted until the turn of the century; the second is ongoing.

The most distinctive feature of the first phase is that Russia's nuclear policies were heavily influenced by its own domestic situation and problems. These policies were also being formed under colossal pressure from other international players.

There were two main domestic factors. First, Russia was in the throes of a deep economic and social crisis, compounded by domestic political instability and by the growing terrorist threat. Such pressures were too much for the Russian nuclear industry and the nuclear weapons complex to bear.

The nuclear industry had to be rescued by means of securing export contracts. Foreign customers were few and far between: the Iranians, the Pakistanis—and that is about it. Romantic expectations of future partnership with the *new friend*, the United States, were dashed swiftly and cruelly; suffice to recall the anti-dumping investigations against Russian uranium exports or the sanctions imposed on the Russian space agency for cooperating with India. As if bureaucratic hurdles in Russia itself were not bad enough, almost every single contract now also had to pass the vetting of the U.S. Senate.

The First Chechen Campaign (1994–1996) was another blow for the Russian nuclear industry. Russian nuclear facilities became potential targets for terrorists, and these facilities did not even have proper air cover. I once witnessed an emotional exchange on the issue between the nuclear energy minister, Viktor Mikhaylov, and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. In the 1990s there were at least 20 attempts at nuclear sabotage or nuclear terrorism in Russia. I remember feeling completely devastated as I was leaving the Prosecutor-General's Office in 1995, having learnt about the state of nuclear material security throughout Russia: gaping holes in the fence around one nuclear facility, a broken-down alarm system at the second, missing material at the third.

Now that the situation has been restored to normal I can safely assert this: it was just a blind bit of luck that Russia did not suffer a massive terrorist attack in the 1990s.

In the Russian armed forces the situation was little better. The Russian nuclear shield was still holding, but people in the know realized how decrepit it had become. In November 1996 Gen. Obarevich, head of the inspectorate overseeing the safety and security of the Russian nuclear arsenal, had this to say:

I just don't understand how the people... who work with nuclear weapons manage to survive. They have no money to buy even the bare necessities. One major collapsed from malnutrition just a day before he was due to perform maintenance on nuclear ammunition. How can he work with nuclear ammunition in such a state? Remember also that in order to keep that ammunition safe we need some expendables. We don't have the money to pay for those expendables, either. Things are so bad that we can't even afford to buy slippers for our officers to wear in the nuclear maintenance room, where they are not allowed to wear their own shoes. We've hit rock bottom.

The second domestic problem was the Byzantine politics of the Yeltsin administration. The decision-making process was a total mess, with endless reshuffles and a constant tug-of-war between the various government agencies.

The Soviet Union also saw its fair share of clashes between rival agencies, especially between the Foreign Ministry and the agencies running the Soviet defense industry. A major tussle broke out in the late 1970s over Libya after Colonel Gaddafi asked the Soviet Union to help develop the complete nuclear fuel cycle in his country. The colonel's shopping list included a heavy-water reactor working on natural uranium and a heavy-water production facility. Senior officials in the Soviet government and the nuclear ministry were inclined to accept the deal (Gaddafi was offering about 10 billion dollars). But, as Amb. Roland Timerbaev recollects, the Foreign Ministry was opposed, and in the end common sense prevailed.¹⁰ Apart from the supreme "collective intelligence," the Politburo, such issues also required the vetting of a special mechanism in the Soviet government, the Inter-Agency Commission for Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

In Russia, however, such a mechanism was never set up. That was a clear mistake, and Moscow had to sort out its consequences on more than one occasion during the Yeltsin administration. One notorious incident happened when the then nuclear energy minister, Viktor Mikhaylov, travelled to Tehran in January 1995. While the rest of the government in Moscow was away



celebrating the Orthodox Christmas, the minister signed a protocol of intention to build a gas centrifuge enrichment plant in Iran, thereby overstepping his authority and doing something that went completely against the Russian nonproliferation policy. The Kremlin learned about what had happened from the Americans.

We are already beginning to forget that there have been periods in recent Russian history when parliament played a very active and independent role in many areas, including foreign policy. Government agencies were learning the skill of justifying to the legislature the need to ratify this or that nonproliferation agreement or treaty, such as the START II treaty (which was eventually buried by the U.S. Senate) or the Russian–U.S. agreements under the Nunn-Lugar Program (Cooperative Threat Reduction). Those agreements provided hundreds of millions of dollars of extra financing for nuclear safety and security efforts in Russia. There have also been shameful episodes which damaged Russia’s international reputation; in one such episode Vice-President Rutskoy churned out reams of classified documents regarding so-called “red mercury” for everyone in the Russian parliament to see.

The gravity of these internal Russian problems should not be diminished—but it should also be recognized that the main pressures which put a huge strain on the Russian nonproliferation policy, often to dire effect, were coming from the outside.

Yeltsin had to learn on the hoof that there are no friends in international politics; there are only interests. Russia was finding it difficult to formulate its own foreign policy interests, and the country was weakened from the inside, so it often (and inevitably) found itself a target of American pressure and manipulation. That was especially obvious in the former Soviet republics and in the other parts of the world where attempts were made, often without any clear strategy, to bolster our presence and “keep our flag flying.” Iran and India have been the two most prominent examples.

After committing itself in 1992 to complete the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant (NPP) in Iran, Russia was gradually becoming entangled in the endless complexities of the situation. On the one hand, it desperately needed the money, and Bushehr was the first Russian nuclear contract in the Middle East. Moscow was hoping that the deal would attract more Middle Eastern customers, and not just in the nuclear industry but also in the oil and gas sector, the arms trade, etc. . . . The region was a promising market and potentially a valued partner. But on the other hand, in 1993 the Russian foreign intelligence service, the SVR, said that Iran was pursuing “a program of applied military nuclear research” (noting, however, that even if that program were allowed to progress unhindered, it would take Iran at least a decade to acquire nuclear weapons).¹¹ As a result, Russia was dragging its feet on the Bushehr project.¹² Its relations with Iran kept turning sour from time to time, and the level of bilateral trade and economic cooperation between the two countries remained unimpressive. Nevertheless, even such limited nuclear cooperation with Iran was drawing brickbats from America and Israel. Both lambasted Moscow regardless of the precise nature of its dealings with Tehran. The Russian–Iranian contracts, which were entirely in line with nuclear nonproliferation norms, attracted just as much criticism as some genuinely suspicious steps.

As recently as 1995 Russia argued that its cooperation with Iran should be viewed as:

... a kind of test bed to assess the modalities of a nuclear weapon state discharging its commitments under Article IV of the NPT, which says that the participants of the treaty should facilitate equal and non-discriminatory cooperation in the area of peaceful nuclear energy, without creating the preconditions for proliferation of nuclear weapons.¹³

But those Russian calls were left unheeded. Instead of welcoming this Russian “test bed of cooperation,” Washington prevailed upon Russia to curtail its military-technical cooperation with Iran, and forced Yeltsin to sign a Russian–U.S. document to that effect in 1995. Russian concessions to the Americans sent a signal to Iran and other countries that Moscow was bending over backwards to accommodate Washington’s wishes. It was becoming clear that Russia could no longer be viewed as a reliable and independent partner in nuclear cooperation—and possibly in other areas of cooperation as well.

American pressure on Russia over its ties with India was another painful lesson our country has had to learn. In 1992 Washington told Moscow in no uncertain terms that it must not supply cryogenic rocket engines to India, even though Russia was not a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) at the time and had not undertaken any such commitments.

The whole issue was raised by Al Gore as part of his presidential election campaign. Russia was forced to comply, for the most part.

Then in 2000 Russia agreed to supply 58 tonnes of uranium dioxide to India; the material was needed to ensure the safe operation of the nuclear power plant in Tarapur. The U.S. administration described the decision as “one of the most serious nonproliferation challenges.”¹⁴ Speaking on American television in February 2001, Donald Rumsfeld branded Russia as an “active proliferator” and said the country was part of the proliferation problem. “They are selling and assisting countries like Iran and North Korea and India and other countries with these technologies which are threatening other people including the United States and Western Europe and countries in the Middle East,” he went on to say.¹⁵ On that particular occasion, however, Russia refused to bend over backwards. The irony and the lesson of the situation is that only a few years later Washington initiated the lifting of all restrictions on nuclear trade with India imposed by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

FROM WASHINGTON TO BEIJING

Washington has been the main source of pressure on Russia in nuclear nonproliferation issues. Nevertheless, for two decades now America has remained Russia’s main dialogue partner on the entire range of nonproliferation and disarmament issues. It is with Washington that Moscow tries to stay on the same page. In some ways the attitude to nuclear nonproliferation remains the same as during the Cold War. Back then the Soviet Union and the United States refused to make the issue hostage to their differences in other areas, and continued consultations on nonproliferation even through the most difficult years (including the especially tense 1983). The world’s two largest nuclear powers, whose arsenals account for 95 percent of nuclear weapons on the planet, are well aware of their special responsibility for the future of the international nuclear nonproliferation regime. They built that regime in another era, back in the 1960s—but it remains more or less functional to this day.

On more than one occasion Russia has found it difficult to conceal how flattered it is to remain on a par with the Americans at least in some respects; Washington has used that Russian yearning very skillfully. On other occasions the Americans needed a Russian demonstration of pliability and flexibility for their own domestic political purposes; Russia was happy to oblige. For example, in 2009, when Barak Obama sensed an acute shortage of foreign policy achievements, he chose nuclear reductions as an area in which to score one such achievement. Moscow saw no reason not to play along. It gave a nod to President Obama’s “nuclear zero” aspiration (with a “not in our lifetime” qualification), and agreed to a new strategic arms reduction treaty, negotiated in a record-short time.

The culmination of Russian–U.S. cooperation in strengthening the nonproliferation regime came in May 1995, when the NPT was extended indefinitely. Both countries worked together very closely and very productively to achieve that outcome. An indefinite extension of the treaty was in their shared interests. Ensuring the efficacy of the nonproliferation regime was not their only consideration; that purpose would have been better served by extending the NPT every 25 years or so, and “taking its temperature” during the intervals to make sure that everyone complies with their commitments. But from the pragmatic point of view it was important for both the United States and Russia to forestall once and for all any remaining possibility of the NPT falling apart in the future. They achieved that goal, and did so very skillfully, through a unanimous decision, without a vote that would have split the NPT members into the larger group of supporters and the smaller group of skeptics. Quite predictably, however, interest in the NPT has waned since the treaty’s indefinite extension. Now it is mostly limited to empty gestures and declarations.

In recent years Russia and the United States have achieved a steady, mutually comfortable and generally agreeable climate in their dialogue on the entire range of nuclear nonproliferation, disarmament, and nuclear security issues. Even such shocks as the differences over Iran in the early 2000s have not really affected that situation.

But this comfortable relationship can soon be tested (and is already being tested in some ways) by three contentious issues: the Iranian nuclear program, missile defense, and overcoming the impasse in multilateral disarmament.¹⁶



Meanwhile, Russia's nuclear nonproliferation dialogue with another key international player, China, does not go back nearly as long as with America. But on the surface at least, it looks just as cozy and lacks any controversy. When I read official Chinese documents on nonproliferation it sometimes feels as though they were actually written in Moscow; even the wording looks the same. The authors of these documents are undoubtedly Chinese, of course—but at this point in time Russian and Chinese interests in the area of nonproliferation largely coincide.

There are, however, several differences; the most notable of them concern the two countries' approaches to the situation in South Asia. In addition, China has not ratified the CTBT, which is very unfortunate and also makes Beijing's position similar to that of Washington. But Russia and China are very close on Iran, on North Korea, and on the FMCT. On disarmament the situation is easier in some ways and more difficult in others. On the one hand, China's nuclear arsenal is quite small. There are suspicions that it can be ramped up very quickly, but for now there are no signs of that actually happening. In other words, any comparisons to Russia are not appropriate in this case. On the other hand, Russian and Chinese declarations are almost identical. Meanwhile, the number of areas on which Moscow and Beijing have shared views keeps rising. These include the two countries' opposition to strategic missile defense programs and their aspiration to prevent an arms race in outer space.

At some point Moscow will have to exit this comfortable *ménage à trois* and make a choice between Washington and Beijing. That choice will most likely be forced by the strategic missile defense problem. But it cannot be ruled out that all three countries still have some time to spend in a state of comfortable uncertainty and procrastination; for now, none of the three is ready to make the choice.

INITIATIVES AND INTERESTS

One might be excused for thinking that over the past 20 years Russia has failed to formulate an independent nuclear nonproliferation policy. It is true that Russian foreign policy (and its nonproliferation policy in particular) remains largely reactive rather than proactive. We react angrily to NATO's eastward expansion (then acquiesce); we react to America's aggression in Iraq (then forget about it); we announce the deployment of Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad to counter America's missile defense plans (then we make a U-turn; then we decide to go ahead with it after all ... may be ... at some point, but not now ...), and so on. But such a view would be a rather primitive and unfair oversimplification.

In the past two decades Russia has come forward with dozens of initiatives on nuclear nonproliferation. Having overcome the syndrome of an "international aid recipient" and an "eternal target of criticism," in recent years Russian diplomacy in this area has been very confident, independent-minded, and proactive.

I think the main problem of Russia's nonproliferation policy is that Moscow's initiatives are usually laudable and well thought out—but almost all of them die an unremarkable death in the archives. Russia has become very good at generating ideas which it believes would be productive, both for itself and for the international community. But it looks quite helpless when it comes to actually implementing those initiatives. Only a handful of them have achieved their stated goal.

Let me give you a few examples.

In April 1996 President Yeltsin hosted a G8 nuclear security summit in Moscow. The event was a great success. The G8 leaders put their signatures to the declarations drafted ahead of the summit, and gave Yeltsin a helping hand at a difficult moment for the Russian president. But one important Russian initiative was ignored. Moscow proposed that all nuclear weapon states undertake a commitment not to station their nuclear weapons outside their borders. In actual fact, at this time four of the five official nuclear weapon states (and eight of the nine countries which possess nuclear weapons in practice) abide by that rule. Stationing nuclear weapons outside national land borders is not banned by the NPT, but such a ban would go a long way towards strengthening the spirit of the treaty. The actual issue at stake is only about 200 American nuclear warheads, which remain in Europe. Russia has made a few timid attempts at resurrecting its 1996 initiative, but the proposal has not been reflected in the resolutions of the NPT review conferences or any other major international security forums.

In the mid-1990s there was a flurry of initiatives regarding nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZs). This regional mechanism has already demonstrated its efficacy at reducing the numbers and the geographic spread of nuclear weapons around the world. Suffice to say that the entire Southern Hemisphere is nuclear weapon free. But, for obvious reasons, Russia is more concerned with the situation in the Northern Hemisphere. There have been several initiatives in this regard, most notably the Belarusian proposal to create a NWFZ in Central and Eastern Europe. At the time Russia welcomed the idea with great enthusiasm; Poland rejected it out of hand. Right now Moscow had a lot more leverage to support the initiative proposed by one of its key allies in the region. But the idea of NWFZs has already gone out of fashion.

Yet another Russian initiative (which has actually been backed by Washington) was to make the bilateral U.S.–Russian Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) multilateral. Such a step would result in a notable reduction of the missile threat. But having come forward with that excellent initiative, Russia has been much less successful at promoting it. Specialists are well aware that this goal will be hugely difficult to achieve, especially since it touches upon the interests of key Russian partners such as India.

But faced with such passivity on the part of Russia, the international community is increasingly gaining the impression that Moscow is not really interested in seeing its own initiatives through. To outsiders it looks as though Russia views these initiatives as an end in itself, as mere declarations to be made at an appropriate moment and then quickly forgotten.

What is worse, it often looks as though Russia just does not know how to work with its natural allies and partners, even though it has learned to work very well with the United States and the G8. Russia is constantly missing opportunities to rally its CSTO allies around its initiatives. Cooperation with the CIS states is almost nonexistent; the only positive example I can recall is the joint Russian–Ukrainian efforts on proposals under Article X of the NPT. Moscow has so far failed to leverage the resources of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; BRICS has not made any contribution to nonproliferation either.¹⁷

I can think of only two bright spots in this generally dismal landscape, both of them fairly recent.

The first is the Russian initiative on multilateral approaches to the nuclear fuel cycle and the launch of the International Uranium Enrichment Center (IUEC) in Angarsk. The center is already up and running; Iran has yet to become a member (Moscow had hoped that Tehran would have joined by now), but three other countries have already joined, and others are welcome to follow suit. When our partners, especially in the developing world, see such commitment and persistence in achieving our objectives within the originally announced time frame, it immediately translates into greater respect for Russian policies.

The second bright spot has been Russia's proposal to convene an international conference that would discuss the future of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. Russia had done its homework on this issue, and its initiative was received very well at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Now it is important for Russia to remain a proactive and independent player during the preparations for the upcoming 2012 conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. Moscow must not be deterred by the difficulties of the painstaking and often thankless work behind the scenes which is necessary to bring the initiative to fruition and to make sure that it generates foreign policy dividends rather than losses for Russia itself.

This, however, is the main problem, compared with which all others pale into insignificance.

We have left our actor-inheritor in the middle of the stage. The background and props are all new; the urgency is no longer quite as pressing, and the fear of being booted off the stage is in the past. Instead of desperately improvising the actor is now playing a well-rehearsed role and follows the script word for word. The extras on the stage are playing along; their own lines are also strictly in accordance with the script. The audience might be excused for thinking that there is a heated debate going on, that the actors are genuinely arguing with each other and with the lead—but that is just an illusion. It is all part of the script; if there is a good cop, there needs to be a bad cop as well. The trick works very well, and many believe the charade.

But what if our actor has immersed himself too deeply in his own role, trying as he does to convince the audience? Does he even know any longer what his own interests are, rather than the interests of that guy in the first row?



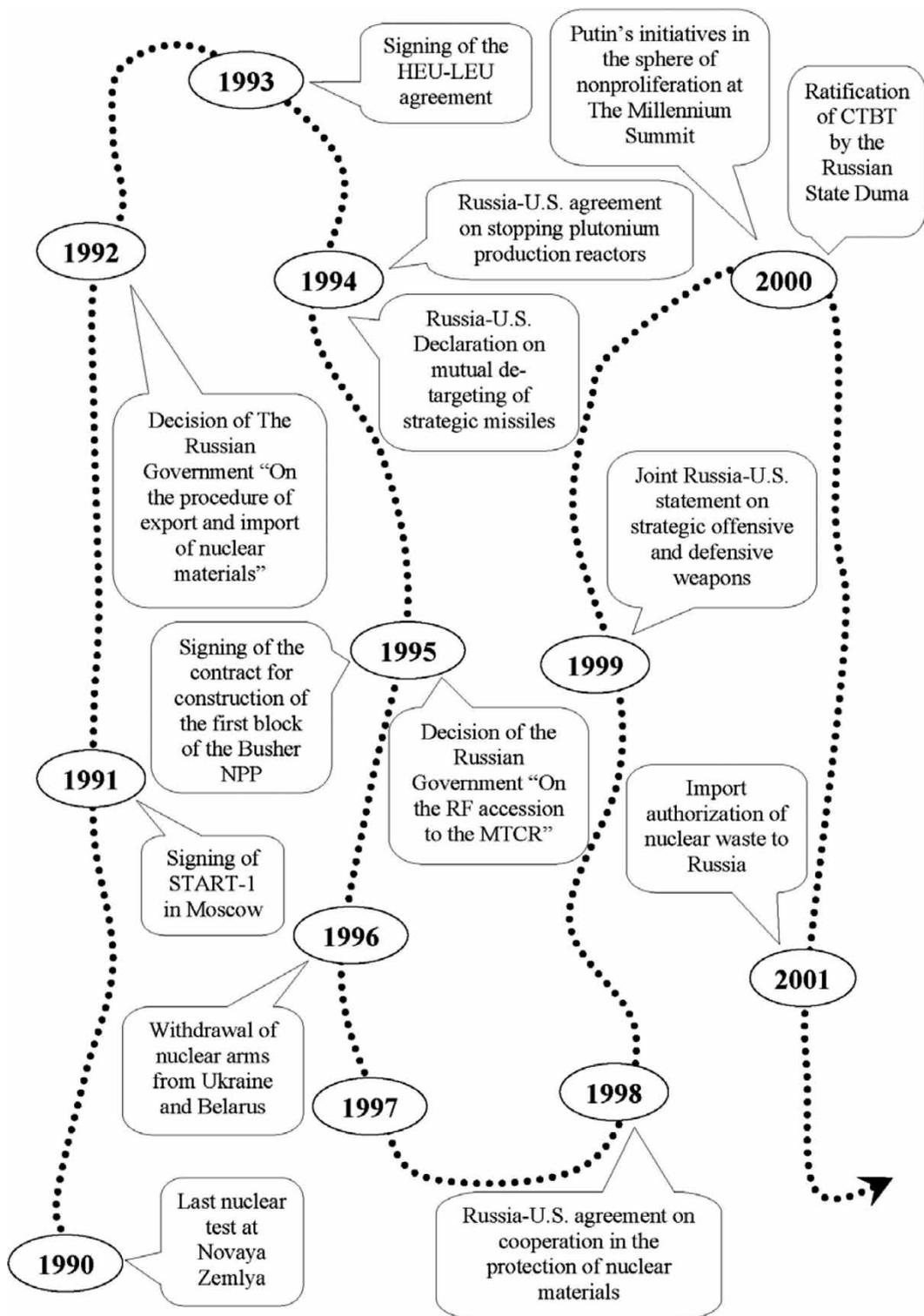
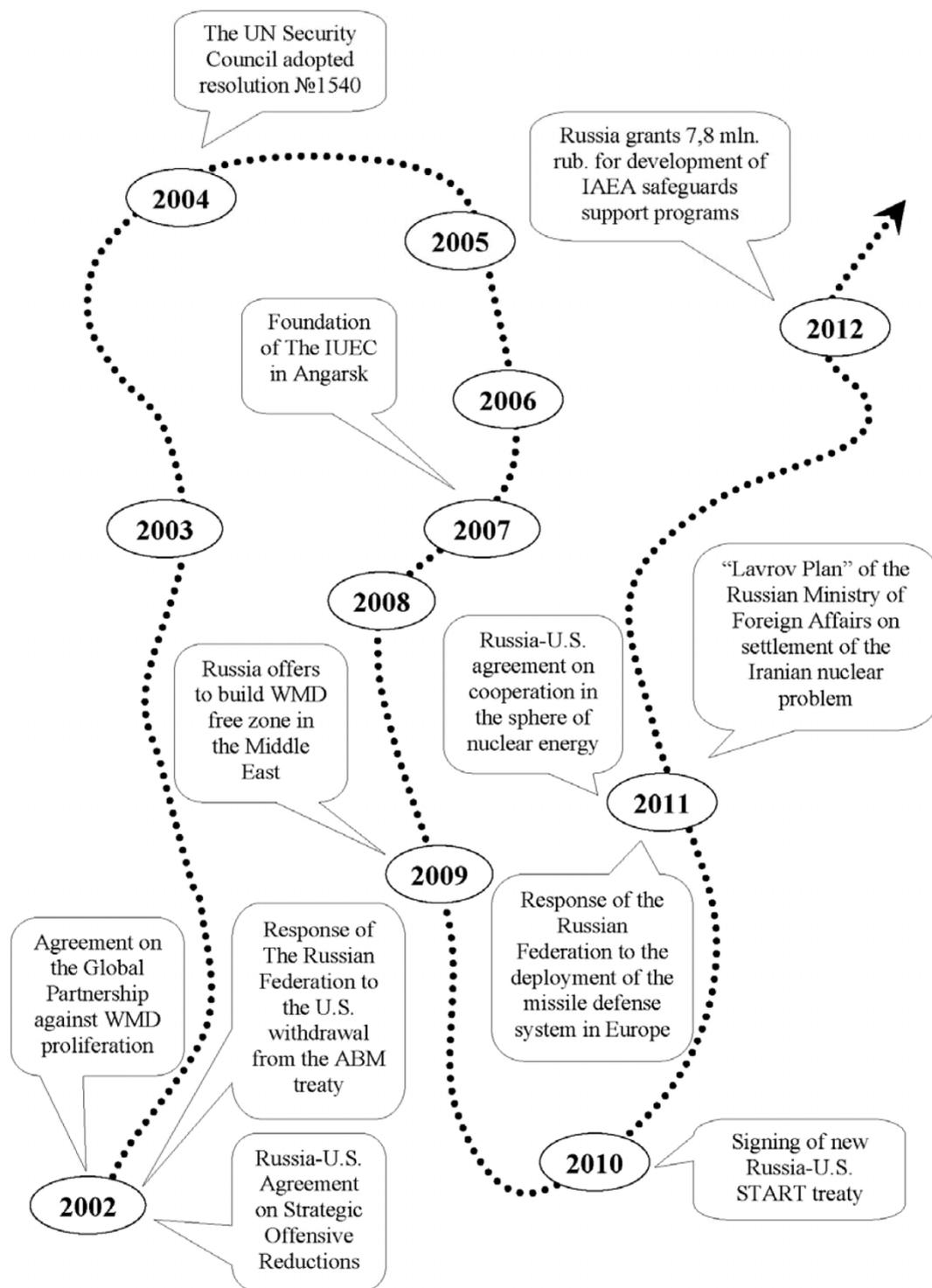


Figure 1. Key Steps of Russia's Nonproliferation Policy in 1990–2001

Source: PIR Center, 2012



A N A L Y S I S

Figure 2. Key Steps of Russia's Nonproliferation Policy in 2002–2012
Source: PIR Center, 2012

Twenty years on, having grown up and matured, what does Russia actually *want* from nuclear weapons and nuclear nonproliferation?

I cannot hear the answer to that question. Or maybe it is so soft and timid that I cannot even hear the words.

There are actually two schools of thought here.

The first school, the “Activists,” say “Yes, we want . . .” (new treaties, initiatives, joint projects, and so on). They genuinely believe that Russia should maintain its current leading role in the international nonproliferation regime. They think it gives Russia greater international standing, boosts its prestige, and enables it to take part in making key international decisions. They reckon that it is better to have an unlimited-access VIP card than not to have it. They think that the NPT is eternal, our nuclear weapons are strong, our tanks are fast, and we just need to take part in this Brownian motion called “nonproliferation”—we always need to be part of everything so as to “keep the momentum . . .” Did someone say our tanks are not all that fast? Well, we are not really talking about tanks. We are talking about nuclear weapons, and those are really fast.

The second school, the school of “Don’t care,” say “We’re not bothered either way and we don’t want anything.”

According to their logic, Russia already has a VIP card which can never be taken away and which will never expire. Why bother? Why exert ourselves? Who needs all these “action plans”? It is all just a show Russia must not undertake any new commitments which would limit its freedom of maneuver.

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npt.pircenter.org/eng

We still lack a deeper understanding of the true nature of Russia’s nuclear heritage, and of the role of nuclear weapons in our country’s future. We are not really sure whether those weapons will be needed at all in the decades to come. We do not really know how best to utilize the opportunities given to Russia by the nuclear nonproliferation regime. And we are still trying to understand how that regime should be modified to make it fit for the new century. We are only just beginning to discern the outlines of the answers to all these questions.

We have gone full circle in our search for these nuclear answers. Meanwhile, Russia is still coasting along the old Soviet track. 

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this article appeared in Russian under the title “Rossiyskiy Yaderny Krug” [Russian Nuclear Circle], *Russia in Global Affairs* 9, No. 6 (November–December 2011), pp. 59–71.

² Steve Rodan, “Iran Paid \$25m for Nuclear Weapons, Documents Show,” *Jerusalem Post*, April 10, 1998.

³ V. Orlov, R. Timerbaev, and A. Khlopkov, “Nuclear Nonproliferation in U.S.–Russian Relations: Challenges and Opportunities,” *PIR Library Series*, Moscow (2002), p. 23.

⁴ V. Orlov, and N. Sokov, eds., “Nuclear Nonproliferation,” Moscow, PIR Center (2000), p. 207.

⁵ V. Orlov, R. Timerbaev, and A. Khlopkov, “Nuclear Nonproliferation in U.S.–Russian Relations: Challenges and Opportunities,” *PIR Library Series*, Moscow (2002), p. 23.

⁶ “Nerasprostraneniye yadernogo oruzhiya: sbornik dicumentov [Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Collection of Documents], *International Relations*, Moscow (1993), p. 228.

⁷ Address by President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin to the UN Secretary General, UN, A/47/77–S/23486, January 27, 1992.

⁸ See: V. Orlov, “Yadernaya Ukraina: bolshoy blef ili bolshaya ugroza?” [Nuclear Ukraine: a Big Bluff or a Big Threat?], *Moscow News*, No. 45, November 7, 1993, p. A5.

⁹ V. Obarevich, Records of the State Duma Hearings, November 1996.

¹⁰ R. Timerbaev, “Tales from the Past. Memoirs on Nonproliferation and Disarmament Talks and Many Other Things” [in Russian] (Moscow: ROOPEN, 2007), pp. 28–30.

¹¹ Novyi vyzov posle kholodnoy voyny: rasprostraneniye oruzhiya massovogo unichtozheniya [The New Post-Cold War Challenge: Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction]. Russian Intelligence Service (SVR) Report, Moscow, 1993.

¹² The Bushehr NPP was launched in September 2011.

¹³ Dogovor o nerasprostraneni yadernogo oruzhiya: problemy prodleniya [NPT: Problems of Extension]. Russian Intelligence Service (SVR) Report, Moscow, 1995.

¹⁴ Richard Stratford, "Starting over Building a Nonproliferation Regime from Scratch", Report at the conference "How to Harmonize Peaceful Nuclear Energy Uses and Nonproliferation? Future of Nuclear Energy Development in Asia," March 8, 2001.

¹⁵ John Ballif, "Modulating U.S. Confrontation with Russia and Iran," National War College, 2001, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA441517>, last accessed January 26, 2012.

¹⁶ I mean, most importantly, the impending collapse of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, which has been unable for many years now to make any progress whatsoever on launching talks on the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT). Meanwhile, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) has yet to enter into force, and let us be honest, this is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. The total lack of progress on multilateral disarmament requires a surgical intervention. I am talking about a profound reform of the Conference on Disarmament or, failing that, its dissolution, with the subsequent formation of a new mechanism based on a new set of principles. Alternatively, the FMCT talks could be moved to some alternative forum. For now Russia does not seem to be ready for that, but the United States is preparing for just such a turn of events.

¹⁷ Clearly, the fact that India is not a member of the NPT makes the situation rather delicate. But I have no doubt that BRICS could make a valuable contribution to nuclear energy development in tandem with nuclear nonproliferation.

