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Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Security Policy

Abstract: The subject of research, the results of which are presented in this article, was nuclear weapons and the policy of their use by Russia. The research aimed to determine the role of nuclear weapons in the security policy of the Russian Federation. The study was based on a chronological and problematic approach. The article's content focuses on answering the following research questions: 1) What is the origin of nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union? 2) What was the evolution of nuclear policy and strategy of the Soviet Union expressed in? 3) What was the nuclear policy and strategy of the Russian Federation until 2014? 4) What role do nuclear weapons currently play in the aggressive foreign policy of the Russian Federation? 5) What are the real intentions of the Russian authorities to use nuclear weapons? The article focuses on a synthetic presentation of the strategy of using nuclear weapons to achieve the Russian Federation's foreign policy objectives, poorly explored in Polish literature. Based on research, it has been established that Russia's ambitions to use its nuclear potential to achieve political goals are a serious source of threats to international security and increase the risk of global conflict.

Keywords: security policy, nuclear strategy, deterrence, foreign policy, United States, Europe, Russian Federation.

Broń nuklearna w polityce bezpieczeństwa Rosji

Abstrakt: Przedmiotem badań, których rezultaty przedstawiono w niniejszym artykule, była broń nuklearna i polityka jej wykorzystania przez Rosję. Celem badań było określenie roli, jaką broń nuklearna odgrywa w polityce bezpieczeństwa Federacji Rosyjskiej. W badaniach zastosowano podejście chronologiczno-problemowe. Treści artykułu koncentrują się na odpowiedziach na następujące pytania badawcze: 1) Jaka jest geneza powstania broni jądrowej w Związku Radzieckim? 2) W czym wyrażała się ewolucja polityki i strategii nuklearnej Związku Radzieckiego? 3) Czym charakteryzowała się polityka i strategia nuklearna Federacji Rosyjskiej do 2014 roku? 4) Jaką rolę obecnie odgrywa broń nuklearna w agresywnej polityce zagranicznej Federacji Rosyjskiej? 5) Jakie są rzeczywiste zamiary wykorzystania przez władze Rosji broni nuklearnej? Artykuł koncentruje się na syntetycznym przedstawieniu słabo eksplorowanej w polskiej literaturze strategii wykorzystania broni nuklearnej dla osiągnięcia celów polityki zagranicznej

Federacji Rosyjskiej. Na podstawie badań ustalono, że ambicje Rosji dotyczące wykorzystania posiadanego potencjału nuklearnego do osiągnięcia celów politycznych są poważnym źródłem zagrożeń dla bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego oraz podnoszą ryzyko konfliktu globalnego.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka bezpieczeństwa, strategia nuklearna, odstraszenie, polityka zagraniczna, Stany Zjednoczone, Europa, Federacja Rosyjska.

Introduction

After the dramatic reduction of the nuclear arsenal made after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the degradation of combat equipment leading to a steady decline in operational capabilities, the Russian Federation in the first decades of the new state's existence played a key role in ensuring national security with its nuclear weapons, which were first upgraded. Since then, nuclear weapons have been at the heart of Russia's ever-evolving concept of strategic deterrence and are an important tool for achieving Russia's geopolitical goals. Russian thinking about the role and place of nuclear weapons in maintaining national security is reflected in the military policy, structure, and position of the country's armed forces, the military exercises, and the armed operations. Russian political and military leaders not only recognise the role of nuclear weapons in foreign policy, but also continue to acquire new military capabilities that can credibly threaten international security. Vladimir Putin's statements on the possibility of using the nuclear arsenal during the Crimean operation, as well as his speech to the Federal Assembly in March 2018 (Chawryło, 2018) on the acquisition of new systems of strategic nuclear weapons which will guarantee Russia the possibility of destroying any potential opponent, can be read as an announcement of a new international arms race.

It is estimated that the Russian leadership is convinced that modernised offensive capabilities must bring certain political benefits. These signals also show that Russia is ready to accept high risks in achieving its own strategic goals in confrontation with the West. It also seems that the nuclear policy currently being pursued not only aims to guarantee security against external threats but is also part of an experiment to strategically materialise the concept of a new generation of war and hybrid power projection. The nuclear component can be used on its own or integrated with other instruments of strategic impact, i.e. weapons of precise destruction, impact in cyberspace, space, or the radioelectronic sphere. Equally well used for deterrence and strategic intimidation, it can be part of a campaign of non-kinetic impact, synchronized with other civil instruments.

On the basis of the assessment of normative documents and observations of the nuclear weapons exercises carried out, it can be concluded that the Russian Federation (RF) is the first to perform a limited nuclear strike called by some experts a strategy for transition from escalation to de-escalation. In the United States of America (U.S.), however, the abandonment of nuclear conflict and a rapid transition to de-escalation under favourable conditions for Russia is questionable (Nuclear, 2018, p. 9).

The problematic situation identified in this way leads to the formulation of the main research problem: What role do nuclear weapons play in Russia's security policy? To solve the main research problem, it was defragmented, and as a result, the following specific problems were formulated: 1) What is the origin of nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union? 2) What was the evolution of Soviet nuclear policy and strategy? 3) What was the nuclear policy and strategy of the Russian Federation until 2014? 4) What role do nuclear weapons currently play in the aggressive foreign policy of the Russian Federation? 5) What are the real intentions of the authorities to use nuclear weapons?

The aim of the research, the results of which are presented in this article, was to determine the role played by nuclear weapons in Russia's security policy. A chronological and problematic research approach was used in the research process. The dominant methods were induction and deduction, as well as analysis and criticism of literature and passive non-participatory observation.

The origins of nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union

Initial research on nuclear fission was conducted by the Soviet Union in the 1930s. It was based mainly on intelligence information obtained from the United States and Germany. Modest research efforts were made in small Soviet laboratories. Research carried out before World War II by people such as Yulij Khariton and Yakov Zeldovich did not gain much publicity outside the borders of the Soviet Union and did not enjoy significant government support (Cochran, 1995, p.16). It was only in July 1940 that Soviet scientists drew the government's attention to the possible military use of nuclear fission (Bethe, 1994, p. 281). Nuclear research continued in the early 1940s, but less so than in the West. In 1941 and 1942, scientists sought isotopic separation, focusing on gaseous diffusion and spinning methods (Bethe, 1994, p. 281). However, after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Soviet scientists shifted their focus to the application of

research results in conventional weapons. The urgency with which they carried out this task resulted in an almost complete halt in nuclear research. Intelligence linked to the Maud report on the progress of the nuclear project in Britain and fears that Nazi Germany already had nuclear weapons eventually led to the restoration of Soviet nuclear research in early 1943 (Cochran, 1995, p.16). In March 1943, Igor Kurchatov was appointed scientific director of the nuclear project, but at that stage, the programme remained a safeguard against future doubts, and the government was sceptical about the fact that the bomb could be developed quickly enough to influence the results of the war. However, a new laboratory was set up (Cochran, 1995, p. 20), and I. Kurchatov started to form a team that was focused on designing a nuclear bomb (Schwart, 1996, p. 104). Initially, the Soviet nuclear weapons programme was based on intelligence. Some American scientists like Klaus Fuchs provided the Soviets with valuable information necessary for the success of Soviet efforts. They allowed Soviet scientists to skip the laborious phases of problem-solving and shortened the construction time of new weapons by about 4-5 years (Bethe, 1994, p. 282). In the second half of 1945, the Soviet Union was able to carry out isotopic separation by electromagnetic, thermal, and gaseous diffusion methods (Cochran 1995, p. 141). The first successful tests with nuclear weapons, thanks to copying the American program of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, were carried out on 29th September 1949 at the Semipalatinsk training ground. It was a clear political signal to the world about the emergence of the Soviet Union on the nuclear scene (Bethe, 1994, p. 282).

Evolution of Soviet nuclear policy and strategy

Until the end of the 1940s, Soviet defence strategy focused on using huge conventional armour forces to gain three to six times the advantage of the enemy forces and defeat them with fast, decisive offensive operations on the ground. The air and naval forces were modernized, but played only an auxiliary role (Battilega, 2014, p. 153). A number of measures have also been taken to ensure the defence of the Soviet Union against the atomic bomb by creating a strategic anti-aircraft defence. A key role was to be played by ground-to-air missiles, which were also intended to be used as a means of delivery for future nuclear weapons (Rojszczak, 2001).

In the early 1950s, when the Soviet Union already had nuclear weapons, there was no clear concept of how to use them on the battlefield. The Soviet Army rejected reliance on nuclear strategy. It was considered that bombing the enemy's

war potential, attacking the industry, and lowering the state's economic capacity was not the most effective means to achieve victory (Pennie, 1990, p. 144). However, Russian theorists quickly concluded that the importance of armoured forces would diminish in the future, which is why nuclear missiles were considered the central strategic weapon since 1955. Like tanks in the previous decade, nuclear weapons quickly achieved a strategic breakthrough on the battlefield and created the conditions for using powerful, mobile conventional forces. At that time, however, there were no strategic plans to use nuclear weapons in either defensive or offensive activities (Battilega, 2014, p. 153). Nuclear strikes were treated as a tool to implement the classical military strategy (Pennie, 1990, p. 145). The essence of the first nuclear strategy developed during Nikita Khrushchev's time, aimed at confronting the West, was to conduct anticipatory strikes on key facilities located in the theatre of operations. The strategy assumed massive intercontinental strikes on the United States, followed by selective strikes on key civilian facilities located in Europe. In the second phase, nuclear strikes were carried out on key military and civilian facilities, which were decisive for the armed forces' capabilities and were to be followed by a massive offensive by the ground forces. It was assumed that a retaliatory strike by the United States was unlikely (Battilega, 2014, p. 154), but it couldn't really be ruled out.

The political and military leadership of the Soviet Union quickly came to the conclusion that the usefulness of nuclear weapons was overestimated and that conducting only classical military operations was not seen as a real possibility. The search for a more holistic approach to warfare with all types of weapons, including conventional weapons, was therefore undertaken (Battilega, 2014, p. 154). In the years 1970–1975, the concept of conducting the so-called controlled nuclear war is being developed. It was based on the following assumptions. First of all, the anticipatory strike was no longer dominant. However, the need to make nuclear strikes on enemy ballistic missiles in the flight phase and retaliatory strikes was taken into account. Secondly, it was planned to use nuclear weapons in both global and local conflicts. Thirdly, it was intended to wage war in several stages. The first stage, considered to be the most important, involved the conduct of non-nuclear war and was to last from several hours to 7–8 days. The second stage was to conduct a nuclear war, the third was to follow a nuclear strike, and the fourth was to end the war. At the same time, strategic intercontinental operations were to be conducted (Battilega, 2014, p. 155).

Three major changes were made to Soviet nuclear doctrine in the 1980s. First, the thesis about the possibility of limited nuclear war was officially rejected. It was recognised that conventional war could be conducted in a conventional manner from beginning to end. In 1980–1985, the concept of using nuclear weapons was reinstated, presenting several options for its use to policymakers. It was assumed that limited use of nuclear weapons could only take place on the battlefield, only against military objects, could take the form of a limited strategic strike or a proportional retaliatory strike with nuclear escalation or de-escalation. Gradually, it was also assumed that its use would be extended from several hours to several days. At the end of the 1980s, it was realised that a nuclear war could not be won. Thus, it was ruled out that preventive and pre-emptive strikes could be made while retaining the right to make a retaliatory strike. The role of nuclear weapons was practically limited to strategic deterrence and war prevention (Battilega, 2014, p. 155).

Nuclear weapons in the security policy of the Russian Federation

In the evolution of Russian deterrent thinking after the Cold War, several stages can be distinguished. The first stage was related to the concerns about the technological revolution that took place in the United States and the ability to be precise in the Gulf War of 1991. Based on these experiences, the Russians believed that a massive first strike with precision weapons of destruction could effectively neutralize their strategic deterrence capabilities (Long, 2018, p. 5). The answer to these challenges, at least as Western scientists observed, was the emergence in the late 1990s of the theory of de-escalation, the essence of which was to make the most effective use of nuclear potential against conventionally attacking opposing forces (Ven Bruusgaard, 2016, p. 9).

The concept of strategic deterrence became common in the second stage of the evolution of Russian deterrent thinking. It has also been considered how to integrate nuclear potential with conventional potential in order to achieve the best possible strategic results (Ven Bruusgaard, 2016, p. 9). Secondly, Russia felt threatened by NATO's expansion and the possible bringing of nuclear weapons to their borders. Russia reserved the right to use all forces and means at its disposal, including nuclear weapons, in the event of armed aggression that would threaten the Russian Federation's existence as an independent sovereign state (Blank, 2011, p. 199). Doubts about nuclear deterrence have contributed to

a more comprehensive concept aimed at offering Russia more than just nuclear options for conflict prevention and conflict shaping. In the third stage, starting around 2010, the thinking about strategic deterrence was extended to include non-nuclear and non-military components. The limited effectiveness of nuclear weapons in deterring conventional and non-traditional threats has led Russian theorists to change their current strategy. As a result, a comprehensive and multi-faceted concept of conflict prevention and resolution was developed (Ven Bruusgaard, 2016, p. 10), taking into account the defence of its own interests and strengthening its presence in the world, claiming to be a superpower.

Nuclear weapons play a special role not only in the political and military sphere of the RF but also in ideological and religious. The Russian worldview is based on the consolidation of society against external threats and confrontation with the West. The acquisition of new nuclear capabilities is officially supported by the Russian Orthodox Church. The Patriarch of Moscow and all of Russia, Cyril I, has publicly stated that nuclear weapons guarantee Russian sovereignty (Gundyayev, 2009). Some even see clear correlations between religion and nuclear power. Starting from the assumption that war also boils down to rivalry in the mental and spiritual sphere, Yegor Holmogorov believed that Russia would be Orthodox if it had nuclear weapons. Therefore, in addition to traditional military defence, the Russian state should be conceptually prepared to defend itself against threats in the mental sphere (Holmogorov, 2007).

The role of nuclear weapons in the aggressive foreign policy of the Russian Federation

Nuclear weapons play a crucial role in Putin's foreign policy. The reason may be that Russia, together with the U.S., owns more than 90% of the world's nuclear arsenal (Arbatov, 2018). The struggle for a position in the world and global spheres of influence, as well as competition in the means of nuclear weapon delivery, is also continuing. The U.S. and NATO are perceived as threats to Russia's global interests, which is why, according to Putin's guidelines, since Siergiej Szojgu became Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, Russian military thought has focused on victory in a hypothetical future confrontation with NATO. At present, Moscow is striving, which may seem paradoxical, to achieve its strategic goals without any direct military confrontation. The main efforts are focused on finding the best ways of conducting international competition in the so-called

grey zone, that is, between the two borders of war and peace (Banasik, 2016, p. 183–189).

Today, nuclear weapons are a critical strategic asset for Russia, used to deter NATO and China from nuclear or conventional attack. In this respect, it has many potential opportunities to use such weapons on the battlefield at the tactical and operational level and in the geostrategic dimension to control escalation or achieve certain military effects. The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to nuclear or conventional aggression in order to protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Strategia, 2015).

It seems that Western theorists misinterpret Russian strategic thinking by limiting it to the concept of waging war from escalation to de-escalation. Of course, it is important to understand how Russia thinks and plans for nuclear escalation, de-escalation, and ending the war, but strategic thinking and planning cannot be reduced to this simple label (Johnson, 2018, p. 13). Moscow hopes to achieve its political goals quickly and to win with NATO with conventional forces. This is to be helped by having a credible ability to manage the risk of escalating the conflict with the use of nuclear weapons by the Alliance. Russia has prepared options for responding to the use of nuclear weapons by the U.S. and NATO. These include conducting various activities to discourage the West from escalating the conflict. They consist, among other things, in making precision weapon strikes on objects located outside the zone of direct hybrid combat and strategic nuclear and non-nuclear strikes, both kinetic and non-kinetic (Davis, 2019, p. 27). In this aspect, it should be understood that a deterrence strategy is not limited to nuclear weapons but is a broader concept involving various measures to limit nuclear escalation and a strategy for conventional combat. Understanding its essence is particularly important in terms of establishing a threshold for the use of nuclear weapons by the RF and the role of non-strategic nuclear weapons and precision weapons of destruction.

Russia's relatively high potential for non-strategic nuclear weapons and dual-use systems, combined with the experience of the conflict in Ukraine reminding others of the strength of Russian nuclear deterrence, may lead to the belief that nuclear weapons have a greater role in the military strategy of the RF than previously thought (Woolf, 2020, p. 5). Russian experience, combined with military exercises that seemed to simulate the use of nuclear weapons against NATO members, leads us to believe that Russia may threaten to use its non-strategic nuclear weapons

to extort certain behaviour or intimidate political opponents. Such a nuclear threat may arise before or during a conflict if Russia believes it can induce its rivals to give up their hostile intentions. Also, in view of the likelihood of failure in a military conflict with NATO, Russia may threaten to use nuclear weapons to force NATO members to withdraw from the battlefield (Woolf, 2020, p. 6). According to Austin Long, such a scenario is very likely. He argues that Russia's ability to precisely strike is limited, and the impact in cyberspace and space may not produce the intended results (Long, 2018, p. 6). In a situation where NATO is taking the initiative and occupying Russian territory, the commanders will certainly recommend the use of nuclear weapons. It is just not known whether Russian politicians would accept such a recommendation. Despite the defensive nature of Russian strategic intentions, it is possible that a nuclear crisis may occur or that nuclear weapons may be used to a limited extent (Long, 2018, p. 6). Some suggest that Russian leaders signal their willingness to use nuclear weapons before the opponent retaliates against the Russian conventional attack again. Using the threat, Russia may use nuclear weapons selectively and restrictively in order to avoid opposition to potential aggression. It follows that Russia is likely to use nuclear weapons to surprise and intimidate its opponent, who will not be prepared for defence (Miller, 2015).

Assessment of actual intentions to use nuclear weapons

Russia's real intentions with regard to the use of nuclear weapons can be demonstrated by official statements of the political and military leadership and persons holding important state functions. In the midst of the crisis situation in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has repeatedly spoken out, suggesting not to interfere in Russian affairs and not to enter into conflict with a country that is the world's largest nuclear power. This power intends to develop both its nuclear and conventional capabilities in the future (*Seliger 2014 National...*, 2014). In October 2014, in response to the introduction of sanctions, he warned that attempts to blackmail Russia could lead to dissonances between nuclear powers, which could have dramatic consequences for international security's strategic stability (Parfitty, 2014). In an official interview, he admitted that Russia was ready to put nuclear forces on standby so that the annexation of Crimea could proceed without external interference (Reuters, 2015). While V. Putin did not explicitly threaten to use nuclear weapons, he was probably aware that the statement in

terms of political friction with the United States would be read in the context of Russia's nuclear power. A year later, he softened his rhetoric a little and rejected suggestions that Russia considered using nuclear weapons. He stated that nuclear weapons have a deterrent effect and that their role comes down to ensuring world peace and security. Nor should it be treated as a means of aggression, as it could mean the end of our civilization (Putin, 2015). Nevertheless, Russia reserves the right to deploy nuclear weapons in the Crimea (Loiko, 2014). In January 2015, he warned against improving its nuclear arsenals in the United States. He said that Russia was ready to respond to this challenge, but without dragging it into an expensive arms race (Putin, 2015). Strictly speaking, it should be understood that the widely advertised Russian strategic programme cannot be read as an arms race because no nation can claim to be a nuclear hegemon. On the other hand, the statement can be read as a justification for the high costs involved in acquiring Russia's new nuclear capabilities.

In response to the U.S. Administration's published position on the U.S. use of nuclear weapons (Nuclear, 2018, p. 8) in V. Putin's presidential address to the Federal Assembly in March 2018, underlined the need to develop nuclear weapons and delivery systems in response to improvements in U.S. missile defence, ammunition quality and availability of launch sites (Putin, 2018a). In addition, V. Putin outlined the progress that has been made in acquiring new nuclear capabilities and precision destruction systems. He accused the U.S. of lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons and strongly reiterated that Russia would respond to any use of nuclear weapons with its entire arsenal of strategic forces (*Rossiya i SSHA...*, 2019). It may seem that W. Putin is trying to buy time to catch up with the U.S. in developing technologies conducive to nuclear transfers. Still, this argument is not consistent with the increased emphasis on developing the potential of conventional forces. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Moscow is also concerned about a significant change of approach in the use of U.S. nuclear weapons in the context of the updated nuclear strategy, which provides for an increase in the role of nuclear weapons by acquiring more low-power warheads (*Rossiya i SSHA...*, 2019).

In October 2018, V. Putin stressed that the Russian nuclear strategy does not anticipate a pre-emptive strike. It is based on a controlled impact on each other. This means that Russia is prepared to use nuclear weapons against it and will only use them if it turns out without the slightest doubt that a potential aggressor

has attacked Russian territory (Putin, 2018b). He also informed that Russia has a system that allows monitoring the globe and warn about the launch of any strategic missile and to identify the area from which it was launched. Secondly, the system makes it possible to track the trajectory of the missile's flight and locate the area of nuclear warhead discharge (Putin, 2018b). It is estimated that speech W. Putin's speech on the use of nuclear weapons is assessed to be in line with the military strategy published in 2010. It may seem that Russia may be pursuing a policy of not using nuclear weapons for an advance strike. In fact, it may be limited to a narrative and understood as V. Putin's response to D. Trump's statements about Russia lowering the threshold for using nuclear weapons. Since Putin commented that Russia would use nuclear weapons only in retaliation for threats, it seems that D. Trump's administration may have misread Russia's nuclear strategy as a doctrine of using nuclear weapons.

Conclusions

The Soviet nuclear strategy had its basis in the political-ideological confrontation with the West and was subordinated to military strategy. Its contents were largely determined by Soviet military officers, who were strongly influenced by traditional concepts of using the armed forces and adapted it to the nuclear era. The nuclear strategy was strongly influenced by Russia's strategic culture, which was based on the paradigm of power. For the Soviet strategic elite, greater military power, including nuclear weapons, led to greater security, respect, and influence globally, which was more important than deterrence. Once the Soviet Union achieved a nuclear balance and gained the ability to attack the U.S., the preventive strategy was based on a pre-emptive strike. Conventional forces continued to play a significant role, which, together with the nuclear component, made it possible to achieve Moscow's political goals. Aiming to achieve military advantage, in competition with the U.S. having a technological advantage, due to economic inefficiency, the declaratory policy of refraining Russia from intentions to use nuclear weapons for the first time was replaced by total destruction and deterrence. An analysis of Soviet nuclear strategy until the late 1980s showed that it is characterized by ideologically motivated offensive intentions and the search for strategic advantage opportunities. Although Western analysts viewed nuclear strategy in terms of deterring aggression by the United States, it appears that the Soviet Union intended to achieve broader political benefits through intimidation

and coercion, which was wrongly interpreted as deterrence. It is also characteristic that the Soviet Union has never given up having huge conventional forces and preparing them to carry out classical military operations in a regional and global dimension.

Since the beginning of the decade, the Russian leadership has been modernising all components of the strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces. They strive for maximum return on these investments in the political dimension, treating nuclear potential as a useful instrument for achieving strategic objectives in the international dimension. Following the path of confrontation with the West, strategic deterrence provides security guarantees against external threats and freedom to experiment with various conventional and hybrid means of force projection. In order to meet the expectations of politicians, the military leaders have brought about some innovations in the way of thinking about the role of nuclear weapons in Russian military strategy. In addition to its deterrent function, nuclear weapons have many functions in the space of international rivalry and spheres of influence. It also reminds other countries about Russia's military power, puts a nuclear shadow on the global security environment, undermines NATO's role in the international security architecture, weakens transatlantic link, and allows for coercion of strategic rivals. In summary, Russia's military thought and nuclear strategy have evolved in a deliberate way to redefine revised geostrategic prospects and facilitate new political goals for Russian leaders.

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