



# IFSH

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## **Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Posture, Politics and Arms Control**

## Executive Summary

1. The ratification of New START and its subsequent entry into force have raised expectations that the momentum generated would be maintained and result in even deeper cuts in nuclear arsenals than anticipated by the treaty itself. It also raised hopes that next steps towards nuclear disarmament would entail limitations and reductions of tactical (non-strategic or sub-strategic) nuclear weapons (TNW).

This prospect should not be taken for granted, however. The resolutions and statements that accompanied the ratification point rather in different directions. While the US Senate committed the President to seek an agreement on TNW in order to address the disparity in favour of Russia, the State Duma, the lower chamber of the Russian Parliament, reiterated the demand that the US withdraws all TNW to its national territory and eliminates the infrastructure for their forward deployment in Europe.

While the US government has expressed its intention to include TNW on the agenda of follow-on talks, and while NATO called upon Russia, in November 2010, to relocate nuclear weapons away from the territory of the Alliance's member states, Moscow remains hesitant to commit itself to any immediate subsequent measures.

2. The US and Russia maintain a legally binding commitment to nuclear disarmament. They subscribed to this ultimate goal in the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and have repeatedly reconfirmed their obligation. They did so most recently at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. This commitment covers TNW no less than any other nuclear weapons, although it does so in a general way without specifying when and how these weapons should be reduced and eliminated.

The concept of TNW encompasses all nuclear weapons not covered by US-Russian nuclear arms control treaties – those governing reductions of strategic offensive arms (START) and the elimination of intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles (INF).

Although TNW are not covered by existing treaties, the US and Russia have significantly reduced their stockpiles over the past twenty years on the basis of parallel unilateral measures announced in 1991 and 1992. The remaining weapons are no longer operatively deployed and are stored separately from delivery systems. After those reductions, Russia still maintains a more sizeable and diverse arsenal of TNW than the US does. It is expected to be reduced further, however, with or without an agreement.

The concept of TNW thus includes non-deployed nuclear munitions (warheads) in nuclear storage facilities. It does not include TNW delivery systems (platforms) that are also assigned for conventional missions.

3. Notwithstanding the fact that TNW are no longer operatively deployed, concerns about them have continuously been raised, particularly with regard to nuclear munitions stored in the proximity of their delivery vehicles, which would thus be available for early deployment. Such concerns were largely fed by the lack of transparency with regard to the actual numbers of remaining TNW, their storage locations and deployment status.

TNW are also considered to be more vulnerable to theft or the risk of unauthorized use than strategic nuclear weapons.

The evolution of the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation discourse since the late 1990s, and particularly more recently in the context of the Global Zero debate, has largely contributed to elevating the TNW issue to the top of the nuclear disarmament agenda.

4. Moscow has a long record of championing the extension of arms control measures to TNW. Over the past decade and a half, however, it became increasingly hesitant to engage in talks addressing this

category of weapons. Russia's reluctance has two main reasons – its increasing reliance on nuclear weapons in its defence posture against the background of the evolving strategic landscape, and the challenging complexity and sensitivity of verifiably monitoring non-deployed nuclear munitions.

5. Confronted with a declining conventional defence capability and a growing gap in advanced military capabilities, since the end of the Cold War, Russia has tended to rely increasingly on nuclear arms to offset its inferiority vis-à-vis more advanced military powers, particularly the US. In this context, TNW are seen as a means of deterring, terminating or even defeating not only a nuclear attack but also a conventional attack that exceeds Russia's conventional capability.

Russian defence analysts anticipate that the continued introduction of advanced conventional and non-conventional weapons technologies by major military powers will result in further increasing the role of nuclear weapons in the Russian defence posture. Although the reliance on TNW is considered to be of a temporary nature – until Russia has matched the advanced military powers or until the latter have agreed to limit their advanced military capabilities via arms control instruments – this general trend is expected to have a long-term effect on Russia's defence posture.

This is one reason why, under current circumstances, most Russian experts, and particularly the defence and the nuclear defence industrial establishments, are proceeding on the presumption that including TNW in arms control measures is not in the interest of Russia. Furthermore, there are virtually no significant Russian constituencies with a vested interest in reducing or limiting TNW.

This does not mean that Russia's existing TNW stockpile will not be reduced further. However, any reductions of this kind are more likely to happen unilaterally rather than on the basis of an international agreement.

6. This is also due to the fact that any internationally verifiable reductions of TNW represent an extremely challenging task. Such measures would require parties to open their nuclear depots for intrusive inspections of stored warheads. Since this is considered to be a very sensitive issue of national security, the introduction of the relevant measures requires an unprecedented level of mutual trust, which can hardly be presumed given the current state of Russo-US and Russo-Western relations.

It is worth noting that the most advanced cooperation between the US and Russia in exploring means for reliably monitoring the elimination of nuclear warheads and the disposal of fissile material, as well as information exchange with NATO concerning TNW reductions were terminated in the late 1990s after becoming hostage to mounting tensions in relations between Russia and the West.

7. Although Moscow has strong reservations, it is not entirely impossible that it will consent to talk about TNW. However, this challenging and time-consuming endeavour would require progress in other areas of arms control and is unlikely to yield tangible results any time soon. Its success would largely depend on whether Russian concerns that have been raised over the past decade are heard and acted upon.

Moscow no longer concentrates only on nuclear balance with the US or third nuclear powers. Apart from the conventional disparities that emerged in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastward extension of NATO, it includes in its strategic calculation advanced military capabilities, such as precision-guided munitions (PGMs), ballistic missile defence, long range conventionally armed weapons that can be assigned strategic goals, and the possibility of the weaponization of outer space.

Responding to the West's argument based on the disparity in TNW, Moscow points to asymmetries in other areas and finds it difficult to single out one specific asymmetry without addressing others in a comprehensive manner.

The Russian defence establishment anticipates that uncertainties in the evolution of Russia's strategic environment shaped by the development of advanced military capabilities, risks of nuclear proliferation in the proximity of Russia's borders and local and regional conflicts are unlikely to

vanish in the next ten years during the lifetime of the New START treaty. It proceeds on the basis that the treaty is well designed to govern the US-Russian strategic relationship during this period but, being confronted with diverse scenarios regarding the future evolution of the strategic landscape, prefers to keep all options for the maintenance and the development of Russian nuclear capabilities open.

8. Should the US and Russia still decide to address TNW in their talks or consultations, they are most likely to do so on a bilateral basis, without involving, at least not at this early stage, any third parties.

The political constraints and challenging nature of TNW arms control make a gradualist approach more plausible than anticipating a comprehensive treaty providing for verifiable reductions to be negotiated in the near future. A gradualist approach would depart from making stockpiles, deployment status and, probably, storage locations of TNW more transparent by means of information exchange, while keeping the door open for step-by-step progress in introducing appropriate arms control measures.

- The US and Russia can begin by disclosing the quantity of deployable TNW (and strategic weapons) in their reserves and exchanging information on the number of strategic weapons and TNW destroyed since the early 1990s. They could also resume and expand the exchange of information on the implementation of the unilateral measures of 1991 and 1992.
- The NATO-Russia Council may provide a platform for multilateral consultations and reassuring information exchange, the discussion of nuclear postures, for updating Russia on the status of the intra-NATO consultations concerning the future of US nuclear assets in Europe and for the development of cooperative confidence-building measures.
- Measures based on geography, such as the introduction of “exclusion zones” adjacent to NATO-Russia or EU-Russia borders in which TNW should be neither deployed nor stored, appear impractical.

It is not clear how far Moscow is supposed to move its weapons in order to keep them away, in a reassuring manner, from the territory of NATO and EU member states. TNW delivery systems have different ranges with some of them being able to reach EU/NATO territory from well beyond the Urals. Most TNW delivery systems are mobile and can be forward deployed regardless of where they are usually deployed and where the relevant munitions are stored.

All or most Russian TNW are reportedly kept together with strategic weapons in central storage facilities, i.e. in depots controlled by the Ministry of Defence rather than at air or naval bases. Many of those facilities are reportedly located in the proximity of Russia’s borders with EU/NATO countries. This makes the introduction of “exclusion zones” unverifiable unless all Russian nuclear storage facilities are moved to the Far Eastern part of Russia.

Needless to say that a demand that all Russian TNW be moved sufficiently far from EU/NATO borders that does not even touch on the issue of US and other NATO countries’ TNW in Europe is unlikely to be appreciated in Moscow.

- Consolidating all TNW in central storage facilities regardless of their geographic location, however, could provide for a reasonable alternative to establishing geographic “exclusion zones” by prohibiting the storage of TNW at air and naval bases, i.e. close to their delivery systems, which would also provide additional remedies to prevent the theft or unauthorized use of TNW.
- In the longer term, seeking verifiable reductions of TNW and non-deployed strategic weapons, as currently envisaged by the US government, could build upon the experiences jointly gathered by the US and Russian nuclear scientists in the late 1990s who, in what became known as a “lab-to-lab” dialogue, explored practical methods allowing the verification of the dismantlement, storage, transportation and disassembly of nuclear warheads as well as the disposal of fissile material in a non-intrusive but reassuring way.