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A GREETING TO ARMS

An interview with the leading Russian arms control expert Alexei Arbatov

By Andrei Lipsky, [Novaya Gazeta](#), June 6, 2018

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Question. – Have we once again become involved in an arms race?

Answer. – In a nutshell, yes, we have. However, the popular concept of an “arms race” is a metaphor. The reality is far more complex than the sequence everyone is familiar with: start/race/finish. Modern strategic arms have a life cycle of several decades – from development, tests and combat deployment to withdrawal and disposal. These processes do not happen simultaneously when it comes to various arms systems, let alone in rival countries.

So we can only speak hypothetically about the stages of an arms race. In this sense, during the cold war, there were four rounds of an unprecedented arms race that followed one another without interruption. In the 1950s, we saw bombers and medium-range missiles; in the 1960s, they were succeeded by ground- and sea-launched strategic ballistic missiles; in the 1970s, there were strategic missiles with multiple warheads. In the 1980s, we saw long-range nuclear cruise missiles and

the replacement of ballistic missiles with high-accuracy and high-yield systems that had a superior “lethal effect.”

Until the late 1980s, there was an intensive quantitative buildup of nuclear weapons, along with the regular modernization of weapon systems initiated by the US, while the USSR tried to catch up. That is to say, the arms race was both quantitative and qualitative. We came into the 1990s with enormous nuclear capabilities that numbered over 50,000 warheads on all types of delivery systems, with a total megatonnage of about 55,000 megatons (which was equivalent to more than 3 million Hiroshima bombs!).

Then the cold war ended and drastic reductions began. First, we had the START I treaty, then START II, the START III framework agreement and then, in 2002, what was known as the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT). In 2010, the current Prague treaty was signed: We call it START III, and the Americans call it the New START treaty. At the same time, tactical nuclear weapons were drastically reduced. Over the next 30 years, starting with the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF) of 1987, the global nuclear arsenal was numerically reduced by approximately a factor of seven; and in terms of megatons, by a factor of 30. That was a major success of both arms reduction talks and unilateral disarmament measures.

Q. – Did that apply to all nuclear powers?

A. – No. For the most part, the reductions were made by the two superpowers. However, originally, they had incomparably more weapons. After all, 30 years ago, the aggregate forces of the other nuclear states (Britain, France, China, Israel and South Africa) accounted for just about 2% of nuclear warheads.

Q. – And at present?

A. – At present, this [portion] is closer to 20%, depending on how much China actually has [and] how much it is keeping secret, and expert opinion is seriously divided on that. At most, China is estimated to have 900 warheads, which means that Russia and the US account for 80% of nuclear stockpiles. At the very least, China has about 300 warheads, which means the two leading powers have about 90% of the global nuclear arsenal.

Q. – Did the arms race stop at the end of the cold war?

A. – Amid deep cuts, neither we nor the Americans carried out any large-scale programs during that period. Well, of course, there was some modernization (we put Topol mobile missiles into service, and [the Americans] replaced Trident I submarine-launched [ballistic] missiles

with Trident II missiles). The command, control and information support systems were upgraded. However, there was no intensive modernization, let alone a buildup of armaments in the 1990s. The sides lived quietly off the technical “capital” they had created in the 1980s.

Q. – That was because it was “the end of history,” right? There was no war looming on the horizon anymore?

A. – That’s right. Money began to be channeled to other, more important purposes. As for nuclear forces, they retained what would apparently be necessary for mutual deterrence, but at much lower levels than before. Compared to the cold war years, it could be said that almost nothing was being done.

At the same time, because of an economic crisis and the breakup of the USSR, our country’s strategic forces were physically falling apart. Submarines missed scheduled maintenance [and] had to be taken out of service; missiles were near the end of their service life and were taken off operational status without replacement. As for the Americans, everything was fine; they were building their systems “for the ages” and doing everything thoroughly and according to plan to maintain their capability. As a result, in the early 2000s, we ended up in a situation where everything was falling apart; if we had done nothing, we would be down to a few submarines and several dozen missiles today.

Q. – In other words, everything fell apart all by itself?

A. – Yes. Because technical systems require maintenance, servicing [and] upgrading. And this is why in 2011, Russia launched a wide-ranging program to modernize its strategic forces.

Q. – Presumably, the Americans did not like that?

A. – At first, the Americans took a calm view of that modernization. We were not doing very much: Topol M ground-based missiles, and then we began to introduce Yars [missiles] with multiple individually targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) capability. At sea, old submarines began to be replaced with new ones (such as the Yury Dolgoruky, the first strategic nuclear submarine) equipped with Bulava missiles. Well, that was it.

However, in 2012, the political situation began to deteriorate, and in 2014, a serious crisis in relations broke out with the US and NATO over Ukraine. Our program began to expand; it was no longer about replacing obsolete assets with new ones of approximately the same class; we began to develop something qualitatively new, which was what [Russian] President [Vladimir] Putin talked about so vividly in his March 1 Message to the Federal Assembly [see Vol. 70, No. 10 11, pp. 3 9]. All of

these programs will continue. What's more, we issued an open challenge to the Americans: We told them that we are ahead of them on these systems, and although they are sure to do something similar later, "our boys" will have thought up something else by that time.

The US is planning to replace the weapon systems of the strategic triad, which are nearing the end of their service life – in the middle of the next decade, anyway. It will first develop new aviation systems, followed by ground-based missiles and sea-launched missile systems. However, now, in response to our challenge, they will add quite a few new elements, and that will no longer be just a planned replacement but a real arms race. In addition, the US's military budget is 15 times bigger than ours.

Thus, we are on the threshold of a major spiral of the arms race, even though a substantial quantitative buildup of Russian and US armaments in the foreseeable future seems unlikely.

Q. – In other words, the existing agreements will not be violated?

A. – There is a treaty between Russia and the US (START III) that will be in force through 2021. If it is extended (which can be done once), it will run until 2026. So far, the [two] powers do not intend to move beyond the limits [outlined in it] unless one of the sides exits the treaty amid a lot of political hullabaloo. That would spur not only a qualitative but also a quantitative arms race, which would continually increase the threat of a nuclear war. At the same time, to reiterate, the Americans have a military budget 15 times bigger than ours, and they will try to wear us out economically, as they did with the USSR.

Q. – So then how does the present stage of the arms race differ from the cold war?

A. – During the cold war, we mainly sought to catch up with the Americans in analogous systems: They would start, and we would catch up with them approximately every five years in each of the aforementioned four rounds of the arms race. Now, however, we have openly challenged them: Catch us if you can! Another difference is that now, except for a few exceptions (such as long-range cruise missiles with conventional warheads, hypersonic gliding vehicles [and] nonnuclear missile defense systems), the race is no longer between analogous systems. Each side is developing its own weapon system in pursuit of its own tasks and goals. Another important difference is that back then [during the cold war], the main emphasis was on offensive nuclear weapons; neither [America] nor [Russia] was able to create a missile defense system. But now the arms race will proceed in several directions – i.e., not only offensive nuclear systems, but also offensive and defensive

nonnuclear precision-guided systems. Capabilities to strike space-based assets will also be developed. There are no weapons in outer space yet, but systems with conventional weapons that can shoot down satellites are already being made. In addition, we don't know what developments to expect from cyberwarfare and what impact that will have on all of these weapons, which depend on advanced command and control systems. The effect will mostly likely be destabilizing.

Lastly, back then [during the cold war], the arms race was mainly bilateral. Britain, France, China, Israel and South Africa were also working [to develop nuclear weapons], but that was small potatoes compared to the two superpowers. Today, however, a third nuclear power, China, is entering this race on practically an equal footing. By all indications, it currently has more nuclear weapons than all the other six countries (Britain, France, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea) combined. What's more, China is the only state that, if a relevant political decision were made, could catch up with the two leading nuclear powers within 10 to 15 years, relying on its colossal economic and technical potential. On certain systems, China is even now on a par with us and the Americans, or perhaps even ahead in some areas: for instance, hypersonic glide vehicles, ballistic missiles with precision-guided conventional warheads, [and] antisatellite systems.

Then there are India and Pakistan. Israel is not involved in the arms race, but if things get bad, it will start to boost its capabilities. At present, according to some estimates, it has between 60 and 200 warheads, and it can qualitatively improve its weapons.

Q. – What about North Korea and Iran?

A. – It is not clear what will happen with North Korea. And things are even less clear with Iran. Following the Americans' withdrawal from the 2015 multilateral nuclear deal [see Vol. 67, No. 30, pp. 3-6], Iran may fully resume its nuclear program, which was drastically limited by this agreement and placed under tough international oversight. And in a worst-case scenario, [it] could produce nuclear weapons. If this happens, Iran would certainly be followed by Saudi Arabia and very likely by Turkey. In the Far East – if no agreement is reached with North Korea and [it] resumes nuclear tests and builds up its missile capability – South Korea and Japan would eventually join the “nuclear club.” Japan could catch up with India and Pakistan in about three years, and then surge ahead and quickly overtake China. And the latter would rush to catch up with Russia and the US.

Q. – It is no secret that Russian politicians and many experts cite the US's withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and the creation of a European

missile defense system as one of the main reasons for the new arms race. Is this really so dangerous to Russia's strategic interests?

A. – The US's current missile defense system, which Russia calls global, does not pose any serious danger to our offensive nuclear deterrence forces.

Q. – In other words, it is penetrable?

A. – Yes, it certainly is. After all, it is designed to repel a limited intercontinental ballistic missile strike on US territory (there are 44 interceptors in Alaska and California), as well as to repel a limited strike with medium-range missiles against American allies in Europe and the Far East. That is what it is designed to do.

Q. – And what is happening with our missile defense system?

A. – We have been building a missile defense system for Moscow Province since the 1960s. At first, it was the A 35 [antiballistic missile system], which was put on combat alert in the mid-1970s and could intercept several warheads aimed at the capital. Then there was the A 135 [system], which was put into service in the mid-1990s. Currently, it is being replaced with the A 235 [system], which comprises new systems that will have the capability to intercept warheads not with a nuclear explosion, but with kinetic shrapnel. In addition, in terms of its technical specifications, our air defense system is also approaching missile defense characteristics. For instance, the S 500 [air and missile defense system] will be able to intercept medium-range missiles. We are not copying the Americans, but are going our own way. However, Washington is not worried about that; it is confident in the effectiveness of its offensive nuclear capability.

Q. – If, as you say, the American missile defense system is not an obstacle to Russia's offensive deterrence systems, why is the US so attached to it?

A. – Uninformed people who make policy decisions in the US at different levels believe it is still possible to create a missile defense system; it is something that president [Ronald] Reagan, who is loved and revered over there, dreamed about: Remember "Star Wars" – the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI? However, professionals know that [the US] cannot defend itself against Russia. But [it can defend itself against] other nuclear states, including North Korea, and in the future, Iran and even Pakistan, if the Taliban suddenly comes to power there. On the other hand, even if it intercepts 20 or 30 missiles from Russia, the US would still be destroyed by the rest [of the Russian missiles] that hit their targets. [The US] can repel a strike involving a certain number of missiles

from countries that have an incomparably smaller potential, thus significantly reducing damage [to itself]. [The US] does not want to limit the development of the missile defense system, because it is not sure how effective its present system would be against North Korea, Iran or Pakistan.

Q. – Why are our leaders so fixated on the European missile defense system?

A. – Whenever any hostile weapon system draws closer to one's border, that is always perceived as a threat. When it comes to offensive systems, the closer they are, the more dangerous they are. This also applies to defensive systems. In particular, [Russia] is afraid that American missile defense installations in Romania and Poland, as well as those aboard ships, will be able to intercept our ballistic missiles during the boost phase, along with their multiple reentry vehicles and missile defense penetration aids.

Q. – But that is not the case?

A. – No. Because the aforementioned missile defense interceptor systems do not have sufficient acceleration to catch up with our missiles at launch. That's my first point. Second, they do not have command and control systems capable of detecting and intercepting ballistic missiles within the several minutes they need to accelerate. And they lack the corresponding self-guided systems, since they are equipped with sensors for intercepting warheads on a collision course in cold space. Third, they are not adapted for interception during the boost phase and have never been tested in that way.

Q. – [Russian officials] also say they can be easily converted into offensive weapon systems near our borders.

A. – That is a different story. There will be 38 interceptor missile launchers deployed in Poland and Romania. Indeed, such launchers on board ships can be equipped with Tomahawk offensive cruise missiles that are not banned in their sea-launched version, either for us or [the Americans], but are banned in their ground-launched version by the INF Treaty. And if we cannot tell the two apart, then we have the right to lodge a complaint about an INF Treaty violation.

As for the claim that they can be quickly converted, that's not true, because these interceptor missile launchers have very different command and control systems, as well as different warheads. What are the SM 3 interceptors that are being deployed in Poland and Romania? They carry a kinetic warhead weighing less than 40 kilograms that is supposed to hit an opponent's nuclear warhead on a collision course (like

a bullet hitting a bullet) and destroy it. Both warheads fly at great speed – five to seven times faster than a bullet. And what can a 40 kg chunk of metal do against some ground-based targets? It cannot pierce or even hit a tank, let alone a protected, reinforced concrete target. Technologically, it is easier to deploy a new missile than to use an SM 3 interceptor, [which would mean] replacing its warhead, its guidance system and everything related to its command and control system. In theory, it is possible to bring these Tomahawks and put them into interceptor missile launchers under the cover of night, under prior agreement with the Romanians and Poles. But what for? Even 30 years ago, when medium-range missiles were banned under the INF Treaty, they were deployed on mobile ground launchers, since that increased their survivability. So why put them into silos now?

However, technically, we are right to lodge our complaint. There is a term in disarmament: “externally distinguishable functional differences.” Meaning that when you look at a launcher, you should be able to say that it’s technically impossible to arm it with a Tomahawk. If you can’t see that from the outside, then a complaint can be filed.

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