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A Hybrid of France and China Is a Good Model

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The recent war of words between Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov and Yury Solomonov, chief designer of Russia's intercontinental ballistic missiles, over the strategic arsenal underscores the contradictions and anachronisms of the country's nuclear policy. Historically, nuclear weapons were perceived as a means to avoid nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, but today, this threat is negligible. Nonetheless, NATO remains a perceived threat for Russia.

This contradiction is also reflected in Russia's bipolar nuclear disarmament and procurement policies. Although Russia has already reduced its nuclear arsenal to below the limits set by New START, it is working to build new missile submarines, a strategic bomber and strategic cruise and ballistic missiles. In addition, it has announced the development of a new heavy, liquid-fueled, multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle ballistic missile capable of evading the planned U.S. missile defense in Europe. But many Russian military experts question the need for the missile, challenge the feasibility of a 2016 deployment and argue

that the existing nuclear arsenal is an adequate deterrent.

Russia’s nuclear policy is thus more about prestige than true military concerns. Institutionally, Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces wants to preserve its strategic relevance and needs a new missile to maintain its position as the dominant leg of Russia’s nuclear triad. Russia also views these nuclear weapon systems as a means to maintain political and security leverage. Indeed, the Kremlin has threatened an arms race if it believes U.S. missile defense undermines Russia’s nuclear deterrence.

Russia must accept the futility of maintaining and building a sizable nuclear force and recognize that its security would be better served if more resources were allocated for military reform and developing conventional weapons that are a more credible deterrent and repellant to potential conventional aggressions.

Notwithstanding a radical shift, international security conditions are conducive to further Russian nuclear disarmament. With time, Russia is likely to become something of a hybrid of China and France — a more predictable second-tier global power with a smaller nuclear arsenal that does not abide by foreign prerogatives.

Even if Russia has far fewer nuclear weapons in its arsenal, its nuclear deterrence will remain strong enough to prevent a nuclear strike from another country against it.

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