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MULTILATERAL STRATEGIC DIALOGUE: DILEMMAS AND OBSTACLES

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Abstract. In the foreign policy section of the President V. Putin's Address to the Federal Assembly on February 21, 2023, a new subject was the most remarkable – the suspension of Russia's participation in the New START Treaty. Among the reasons provided as justification of this decision was the absence of limitations on the nuclear forces of the two U.S. NATO allies – the Great Britain and France. Most probably, the main reason for the decision of the Russian leadership on the New START was political in nature – countering the policy of the U.S. and its allies, aimed at the defeat of Russia in the military conflict in Ukraine. At the same time, the suspension of the New START is prone with the break of the treaty-based strategic relationship of the two nuclear superpowers and the collapse of the whole regime of nuclear arms control. Still, provided improvement of the international politics: peaceful settlement of the military conflict in Ukraine, moving of the West and Russia away from the overwhelming confrontation – the resumption of the strategic limitation dialogue between the U.S. and Russia is possible. However, the subject of involving the Great Britain and France in arms control will stay on the agenda. Thirty years ago, the sum of their forces was about 4% of the strategic forces of each of the two superpowers, whereas now it is close to 35% due to the reductions of the U.S. and Russian strategic arms since 1991. Resolving this problem would require innovative application of legal norms and the use of the experience and precedents elaborated during half a century of strategic negotiations.

Keywords: nuclear deterrence, strategic concepts, disarming strike, launch-on-warning strike, arms control negotiations, the New START Treaty, reconstitution potential, third states' nuclear forces, sea-based missiles, the Interim SALT I Agreement.

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МНОГОСТОРОННИЙ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИЙ ДИАЛОГ: ДИЛЕММЫ И ПРЕПЯТСТВИЯ

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Аннотация. Во внешнеполитической части ежегодного Послания Президента Российской Федерации В.В. Путина Федеральному Собранию от 21 февраля 2023 г. наиболее выпукло прозвучала новая тема: приостановка участия России в Договоре о мерах по дальнейшему сокращению и ограничению стратегических наступательных вооружений (ДСНВ). В пользу этого решения был выдвинут ряд доводов, включая отсутствие в Договоре ограничений на ядерные силы союзников США по НАТО – Великобритании и Франции. Судя по всему, главным мотивом решения российского руководства по ДСНВ было политическое противодействие политике США и их союзников, нацеленной на поражение России в вооруженном конфликте на Украине. Вместе с тем приостановка действия ДСНВ чревата полным разрывом договорно-правовых стратегических отношений двух ядерных сверхдержав и крахом всего режима контроля над ядерными вооружениями. Тем не менее при условии благоприятных перемен в международной политике – мирного урегулирования вооруженного конфликта на Украине, отхода Запада и России от всеобъемлющей конфронтации – возможно возобновление диалога по ограничению стратегических вооружений РФ и США. Но тема подключения к ограничению вооружений Великобритании и Франции останется в повестке дня. 30 лет назад совокупный ядерный потенциал

этих государств составлял примерно 4% от стратегических сил каждой из двух сверхдержав, а сейчас достигает примерно 35% ввиду сокращения стратегических сил России и США после 1991 г. Решение данного вопроса потребует инновационных договорно-правовых форм и применения опыта и прецедентов, наработанных за полвека стратегических переговоров.

Ключевые слова: ядерное сдерживание, стратегические концепции, обезоруживающий удар, ответно-встречный удар, переговоры по ограничению вооружений, Договор СНВ-3, возвратный потенциал, ядерные силы третьих держав, ракеты морского базирования, Временное соглашение ОСВ-1.

INTRODUCTION

Those interested in international politics could observe that the annual Address of Russian President Vladimir Putin to the Federal Assembly on 21 February 2023 specifically highlighted two issues. The first subject, undoubtedly being of foremost importance, was the armed conflict in and around Ukraine, which has become a watershed in global politics. The second issue was the suspension of Russia's participation in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START, also referred to in Russia as START-3).

Regarding the first issue, the Russian president offered many arguments in support of the idea that has become a cornerstone of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine: "...It is them who unleashed the war, while we had to use force and will use it to stop it" [source 1]. This of course is a subject of separate analysis; however, it turned out to be closely related to the START agenda.

SUSPENSION OF START – LEGAL ASPECT

As regards the second point, the president put forward three different types of arguments. The political arguments include a reference to the general anti-Russian campaign of the "collective West" in connection with the Ukrainian events, including mass supplies of armaments and military equipment to Ukraine and unprecedented economic and political sanctions against Russia. Regarding this, he said: "The USA and NATO explicitly state that their goal is to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia. And so, what? After that they are planning to visit our defence facilities, including the newest ones, as if nothing has happened? A week ago, for instance, I signed a decree on putting new ground-based strategic complexes on full combat duty. Are they going to stick their noses there too? And they think it is so easy – that we are going to let them in for no reason?" [source 1]. Indeed, this may cause

outrage in the current situation, although, in principle, such mutual measures of transparency and predictability have been developed over the past half-century as guarantees of arms reduction and strategic stability.

Among the technical arguments is the US providing intelligence data to Ukraine for the purpose of inflicting blows on the Russian bases of heavy bombers that are used for missile strikes against Ukraine and are at the same time subject to limitation under START-3. In addition, the head of the state pointed to the impediments bred against Russian inspectors in visiting United States' military bases (visa obstacles, restriction of transit aircraft corridors via third countries, blockage of financial transactions); also, it was mentioned that the US methods of withdrawal of a number of missile launchers and heavy bombers (up to 100 delivery vehicles) from the US strategic nuclear forces (SNF) were unacceptable and untrustworthy for Russia.

Most interesting, however, are the strategic arguments against START-3 referred to by Vladimir Putin. In addition to the US refusal to recognise the interaction between offensive and defensive strategic arms, he also pointed out that the Treaty did not limit the nuclear forces of the UK and France. Specifically, the President stated: "By issuing this collective statement, NATO has effectively applied to become a party to the Strategic Offensive Arms Treaty. We agree to this, no problem. Moreover, we believe that the case has been long overdue because, let me remind you, NATO includes not only one nuclear power, the United States, but also the UK and France, which as well have nuclear arsenals that are improving and developing and are also directed against Russia. The latest statements of their leaders only confirm this" [source 1].

To summarise the above, Putin announced Moscow's landmark step, the first in the history of bilateral strategic relations with the United States:

“In this regard, I have to announce today that Russia is suspending its participation in the Strategic Offensive Arms Treaty. I repeat, this means not withdrawing from the Treaty, but suspending our participation” [source 1].

The significance of this step is all the more important because Russia’s policy in this aspect differs from that of the United States, for which such actions are not extraordinary. As it is known, in 1979, it refused to ratify the SALT-2 Treaty (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty) signed after seven years of exhausting negotiations; since 1996, it has not ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT); in 2002, it denounced the ABM Treaty (Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty); in 2018, it withdrew from the multilateral Iranian Nuclear Arms Agreement (JCPOA); in 2019, it denounced the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty); in 2020, it undertook the same action regarding the Open Skies Treaty.

Typically, following its legal paradigm in such destructive acts, after lengthy open debate the USA denounces international treaties, as set out in their provisions, namely, the withdrawal right clauses included in them: if a party “decides that exceptional circumstances related to the content of this Treaty have jeopardised its supreme interests”, with advance notice to the other party (usually three or six months).

In accordance with its own legal tradition, Russia adheres to a different way. By adopting a due decision in a closed format, it did not formally denounce START under its Article XIV p. 3, but “suspended participation” in the Treaty, although no such provision is envisaged in its text. In a similar manner, in 2007, the Russian Federation suspended its participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty), and in 2015, it “fully” suspended its participation in it¹ [source 2]. Various explanations can be offered for this practice, but it is evident that the future

¹ After another eight years, this line was unexpectedly brought to its logical conclusion on 16 May 2023, when the State Duma (representative assembly) of the Russian Federation unanimously supported a bill on the denunciation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe introduced by the Russian president. This Treaty had already been considered invalid for many years, although it had not been denounced according to the formal rules of its Article 19. Possibly, the act of 2015 was intended as a “prologue” to the subsequent complete denunciation of the CFE Treaty.

of START is now uncertain, like the future of the entire arms control process and the regimes.

The content of the official statement of the Russian Foreign Ministry published just two weeks before the Presidential Address is a very intriguing point (if this term is admissible in such cardinal issues) [source 3]. This document, in addition to a number of arguments echoing the Address, states that the violation of inspection procedures by the American side “made us temporarily withdraw our strategic objects from the inspection regime under the Treaty, which is provided for by its relevant provisions” [source 3]. At the same time, this document did not mention the need for accounting for the nuclear forces of the US NATO allies. Moreover, it was emphasised that “the Russian side reaffirms its unwavering commitment to START as an important instrument for maintaining international security and stability” [source 3].

In contrast, the official Foreign Ministry Statement of 21 February 2023, issued immediately after President Putin’s Address, paid substantial attention to this subject: “...Of particular importance in the current circumstances is the factor of the cumulative nuclear arsenal of three nuclear powers – NATO members, namely, the USA, the United Kingdom and France, which can be turned against Russia. In this regard, it is quite symbolic that all the countries of the North Atlantic bloc, including the UK and France, have explicitly demonstrated their involvement in START problems by issuing a joint statement totally coherent with the American approach. This political act confirms the validity of the Russian position on the need to perceive the nuclear potential of the three Western nuclear-weapon states as an aggregate value and to take this factor into account in the process of limitation and reduction of nuclear weapons, as well as in consideration of the further fate of START” [source 4]. One can only wonder why such a serious amendment to the Russian policy regarding this Treaty was made so urgently.

Nevertheless, the Russian parliament asked no questions and adopted, immediately and unanimously, an extremely laconic law comprising three articles on this issue: “To suspend the Treaty” (Art. 1); “The decision on resumption of the Treaty by the Russian Federation shall be taken by the President of the Russian Federation” (Art. 2);

“This Federal Law shall enter into force from the day of its official publication” (Art. 3). This Law entered into effect on 28 February [source 5].

For its part, the US State Department reacted to the situation with START (which is referred to there as the New START Treaty) as follows: “Russia’s announced suspension of the New START Treaty is legally invalid. Therefore, Russia remains bound by its obligations under the Treaty. The United States remains committed to working constructively with the Russian Federation on the implementation of the Treaty” [source 6]. However, at the end of March, the USA formally notified the Russian Federation that it was halting the detailed exchange of data on strategic forces along with notifications on their activity “as the first action under the Treaty in response to Russia’s suspension thereof... Our goal is to incentivise Russia to return to compliance with the Treaty” [1]. It is likely that the first American step will be followed by others and will eventually lead to formal denunciation of START by Washington, repeating the sad experience of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

STRATEGIC ASPECT OF SUSPENSION

The legal conflict over START obscures a quite obvious strategic aspect of the issue. The Foreign Ministry statement as of 21 February voiced: “There are all grounds to state that the US policy is aimed at undermining Russia’s national security. In fact, we are facing a radical change in circumstances compared to those that existed at the time of the conclusion of START” [source 4]. Despite this, an important reservation was made: “In order to maintain a sufficient degree of predictability and stability in the nuclear missile sphere, Russia intends to adhere to a responsible approach and will continue to strictly comply with the quantitative limitations envisaged by START within the term of the Treaty. In addition, the Russian side will continue to participate in the exchange of notifications with the USA on the launches of ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) and SLBMs (submarine-launched ballistic missiles) on the basis of the respective agreement signed between the USSR and the United States in 1988” [source 4].

At the same time, the Parties’ mutual confidence in compliance with START limitations on the number of strategic weapons will degrade over time. In particular, the cessation of on-site inspections and notifications on strategic forces’ activities² complicates the control of compliance with one of the three most important provisions of the Treaty – Article II, paragraph *b* which limits the number of warheads on the deployed launchers to a ceiling of 1,550 for each party³. To varying degrees, on-site inspections are also needed to verify compliance with the ceiling on deployed and non-deployed⁴ launchers (800) and, to a lesser extent, with the limit on the number of deployed ballistic missiles and heavy bombers (700). In the latter case, monitoring, with the national technical means (such as reconnaissance satellites), is quite reliable, after a half-century of experience in verifying SALT/START agreements and treaties.

Among the reasons for Russia’s suspension of START, the stated technical controversies (methods for conversion of US delivery vehicles and access to strategic sites for Russian inspectors) could be resolved by the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) instituted for such purposes – if Moscow firmly put this as a condition of its continued participation in the Treaty.

As to the strategic issues, the interaction between offensive and defensive armaments has long been a point of dispute, being a cornerstone of

² The parties have reportedly exchanged 240 on-site inspections and 25,000 notifications during START term since 2011.

³ The fact is that most multiple warheads strategic ballistic missiles (i. e., MIRVs – multiple individually targeted re-entry vehicles) on both sides have fewer warheads than the maximum number once tested and counted. In addition, instead of some nuclear warheads, they are often equipped with decoys to penetrate ABM systems. Therefore, random on-site inspections are carried out to verify the compliance of the actual number of nuclear warheads with the figures declared by the parties during regular data exchange. During the inspection, the missile nose cone is removed, and inspectors from the other side visually count the number of warheads on the missile. Since the warheads themselves are shrouded for reasons of secrecy, special radiation measuring devices are used to distinguish nuclear warheads from decoys designed to overcome ABM.

⁴ Non-deployed launchers and associated ICBMs and SLBMs are those located at ICBM or SLBM loading sites, maintenance facilities, ICBM or SLBM repair and storage sites, ICBM or SLBM conversion or disposal sites, training sites, test sites, space launch and production sites and those en route. Non-deployed heavy bombers include those intended for testing or located in repair sites or at heavy bomber production facilities.

the strategic arms limitation since 1972. However, that did not prevent the parties from extending START for five years in February 2021, which Russia had insisted on in previous years despite the negative stance of the Donald Trump administration. Once in office, the government of John Biden not only agreed to the extension, but, for the first time since 2010, recognised the linkage of strategic offensive and defensive arms⁵, which theoretically paved the way for new agreements in this area. The progress could be facilitated by the Russian side putting forward a concrete project on limiting missile defence systems, which would take into account significant technical, military/strategic and geopolitical changes that have taken shape since the ABM Treaty of 1972. Naturally, such negotiations are only possible in the long term if control over offensive strategic arms is retained— the offensive-defensive nexus would now work both ways.

With regard to offensive weapons, Russia can hardly be suspected of intending to get rid of START-3 in order to achieve nuclear superiority. The reduction of strategic force warheads of the parties to the Treaty was carried out not only by dismantling missiles and aircraft but also by removing some nuclear warheads from ballistic multiple-warhead missiles and transferring them to centralised storage facilities. The nuclear bombs and heavy bomber missiles were also partially moved there, and the remaining ones were stored at airfields. This created a so-called reconstitution potential, i. e. the ability to rapidly increase the number of deployed SNF nuclear warheads by returning them from storage to delivery vehicles. Moreover, due to the technical peculiarities of the weapon systems, the USA has a significantly larger “reconstitution capability”.

According to some independent Russian experts, it enables the USA to enhance its potential by about 1,300 warheads⁶, i. e. to increase the SNF

to a total level of about 3,450 units (together with the full loading of heavy bombers). Such measures would take no more than one year and cost about \$100 million [3], which is insignificant by the standards of the US defense budget. The Russian “reconstitution potential” is about 500 warheads⁷, making it possible to reach a total of about 2,500 units (together with the maximum loading of bombers with cruise missiles). A number of American specialists have come to approximately the same estimate [source 8; 6, 7]. These calculations are known in the professional circles of both countries; therefore, the strategic implications of the Kremlin’s 21 February decision remains a mystery to the expert community.

The President emphasised in his Address: “...the level of Russia’s nuclear deterrent forces’ modernization with the up-to-date systems is above 91.0–91.3 per cent” [source 4]. This means that the current upgrade programme of the Russian SNF is nearing completion. In the near future, the hypersonic boost-glide Avangard vehicles will be deployed on the existing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and the heavy land-based RS-20 Voevoda ICBMs will be replaced by the new similar-class RS-28 Sarmat system; the remaining old-generation missile submarines will be replaced by Borei missile submarines with Bulava-30 missiles. These systems are to be counted and would fit under START caps. Less clear is the strategic effect of the newest Belgorod class submarines with autonomous long-range nuclear-powered deep-sea Poseidon torpedoes, as well as the intercontinental nuclear-powered Burevestnik cruise missiles. However, in any case, they are a subject to hypothetical negotiations on the next START agreement, but not the current Treaty which, if cancelled, will have no effect on the deployment of these weapons.

For its part, the United States is just proceeding to another major cycle of replacing its strategic triad with the latest weapon systems that is planned for two next decades with the funding of about \$1.7 trillion [8] (first, it will deploy new *B-21* Raider bombers, followed by Sentinel land-based ballistic missiles, and then – Columbia class

⁵ The ABM 2022 Review states: “As part of the integrated approach to deterrence, the United States recognises the interrelation between strategic offensive weapons and strategic defensive arms” [source 7, p. 72].

⁶ This average estimate assumes that it is possible to add two warheads to each of 200 Minuteman-3 ICBMs and three to four warheads to 240 Trident-2 SLBMs. However, some higher estimates foresee reinforcing the US SNF to 7,130 warheads by returning 50 Minuteman-3 ICBMs and 48 Trident-2 SLBMs to their launchers, equipping them with the maximum number of warheads (four to eight) and returning *B-1B* bombers to the

SNF, equipping all the aircraft with the maximum number of air-launched cruise missiles and bombs [2].

⁷ The assessment assumes maximum warheads uploading of RSM-54 Sineva and RSM-56 Bulava SLBMs, as well as RS-24 Yars ICBMs [4, 5].

nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines). This programme was originally designed to fit the START-3 framework and a possible follow-on agreement with similar parameters. However, the new uncertainty associated with START may prompt Washington to expand its planned strategic programmes in case of absence of any constraints on global-class nuclear forces.

So far, there is no evidence that the USA is planning to realise the above-mentioned measures in order to exploit its “reconstitution capability” advantage. However, this line can change if the USA launches a campaign accusing Russia of violating the warhead ceiling in the absence of credible verification measures (on-site inspections) or in case of unforeseen difficulties and delays in American long-term SNF modernisation programme. This is all the more likely if a Republican Party candidate wins the 2024 presidential election due to its traditional predisposition to the build up of nuclear weapons.

This course has many supporters in the United States, and their number may increase significantly in the future. For instance, John Bolton, a former national security adviser to the president, a traditional supporter of increasing nuclear forces and principled opponent of arms control, writes: “Russian President Vladimir Putin’s recent decision to suspend Russia’s participation in the New START nuclear arms pact may turn out to be a bonus... In view of the strengthened Russian-Chinese Entente and Chinese extension of the Cold War-inspired programmes to ramp up nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, US-Russian arms limitation agreements are not only undesirable but dangerous” [9].

It is probably no coincidence that the Foreign Ministry’s statement of 21 February included a significant passage: “We urge the United States to refrain from taking steps that could prevent the resumption of START if the necessary conditions for this arise. We are convinced that the potential of the Treaty in terms of its contribution to strengthening international security and strategic stability is far from being exhausted” [source 4].

However, Moscow subsequently took a tougher stance on this issue. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov clarified in this regard: “We have suspended our participation in this treaty completely. Our readiness to maintain the strategic offensive arms

ceiling established in the treaty is nothing more than a goodwill gesture. In the situation where the USA is pursuing such a policy, I do not see any changes that might take place except those within the US establishment and the ‘collective West’” [source 9]. The strange linguistic combination “suspended completely” can mean that we are not going to comply with the Treaty but can return to it under certain conditions. However, since the West also expects similar changes from Russia, the prospects for maintaining START are not encouraging.

INVOLVEMENT OF THIRD-PARTY NUCLEAR POWERS

Theoretically, some of the above Russian arguments in favour of the suspension of START can be taken into account and addressed in a bilateral negotiation format. The path to this is outlined in the Foreign Ministry’s statement of 21 February: “The decision to suspend START may be reversed. For this to happen, Washington should demonstrate political will and take good-faith efforts towards general de-escalation and creation of due conditions for the resumption of the Treaty in a full-fledged and functioning form and, accordingly, for its comprehensive viability” [source 4].

However, taking account of the nuclear forces of Great Britain and France, as a condition for Russia’s return to START in its full format, poses challenges of a different nature. This is all the more so since this issue has a long history. It was raised in the early 1970s in the context of strategic negotiations, during the talks on the limitation of missile defence systems and offensive strategic weapons. At that time, the USA proposed, as part of a 5-year interim agreement on offensive missiles under discussion, to limit the USSR’s sea-based forces to a ceiling of 950 ballistic missiles and 62 submarines on condition of withdrawal of a corresponding number of obsolete sea-based missiles and land-based ICBMs from service.

In response, the USSR demanded to limit the naval strategic forces of the USA, Britain and France to a total ceiling of 50 submarines and 800 SLBMs (at that time, the USA had 41 nuclear missile submarines, while Britain had 4 and France had 2 submarines in service, with 3 more

under construction). Washington and its NATO allies did not agree; as a result of the contentious diplomacy, the Soviet ceiling remained the same under the SALT I Provisional Agreement signed simultaneously with the ABM Treaty in 1972, while the American ceiling envisaged 44 submarines and 710 missiles on condition of withdrawal of the obsolete "Titan-2" ICBMs from service [10, pp. 180-190]. Britain and France were not included under any restrictions.

Subsequently, the issue of limiting the nuclear forces of NATO's American allies was raised regularly during the negotiations between the USSR and the USA in the second half of the 1970s in the context of the Vladivostok agreement of 1976; in 1981–1983, at the negotiations on the limitation of nuclear weapons in Europe [11]; on intermediate-range missiles within the framework of Nuclear and Space Arms Talks (NST) [12, pp. 22-59] in 1985–1987. It should be noted that the Soviet position had solid grounds from the strategic point of view. For instance, by the end of the 1980s, Britain's nuclear forces comprised 128 warheads deployed on 64 SLBMs (4 submarines) and 225 bombs on the aircraft (Tornado, Buccaneer, and Sea Harrier types). France had 256 nuclear warheads on 96 SLBMs (6 submarines), 62 warheads on land-based medium-range ballistic missiles and 129 aircraft bombs (Mirage-S/1U/2000 and Jaguar). The entire nuclear potential of the two nations (including medium-range and tactical-class weapons) totalled about 800 nuclear warheads [source 10, pp. 17-29].

Peculiarly, then, in response to the calls from Moscow and the peace-loving Western public to proceed to nuclear arms limitation, the official London stated that if the strategic forces of the USSR and the USA were reduced by more than 50 per cent "we would agree to consider how we can contribute to arms limitation in the light of the reduced threat" [source 10, p. 29].

Since then, more than three decades have passed facing the times of unprecedented détente and co-operation between Russia and the West in all areas; a dozen nuclear and conventional arms reduction agreements have been signed. Then, for a number of reasons repeatedly described by President Putin in recent years, the world returned to the Cold War, the collapse of the arms control system, and found itself on the threshold of an inten-

sive arms race. Respectively, according to the *déjà vu* logic, Moscow has once again raised the issue of accounting for the American NATO allies' nuclear forces.

SPECIFICS OF BRITISH AND FRENCH NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Currently, the nuclear forces of these countries are quite different from what they were 30 years ago. At first glance, they appear to be an example of restraint at the level of minimal sufficiency, i. e. the potential for the purpose of nuclear deterrence of a likely adversary by way of threatening to inflict minimal damage (e. g., destruction of the capital city) by retaliatory strike.

In a sense, this is true, but with a number of significant reservations. Both states declare their nuclear forces to be the most important asset of their national security fulfilling independent military and political functions. At the same time, these nuclear forces exist under the canopy of the United States' enormous nuclear potential and have some military and political weight largely as a "superstructure" over the American nuclear arsenal.

On the one hand, the two smaller states are quite comfortable under the US nuclear umbrella, that is, under the protection of the American commitment to use nuclear weapons to repel a possible attack on Britain and France or other allies in Europe and Asia. In addition, Britain's nuclear assets are heavily dependent on the USA in technical terms, while the French nuclear deterrence capability probably benefits from American information resources⁸. On the other hand, the independence of their nuclear forces is regularly emphasised: they are not subordinated to the US or NATO's command structures and, moreover, allegedly provide security guarantees to other countries of the alliance and the European Union (although the latter do not ask for this, relying on Americans)⁹.

On the one hand, the two European nuclear powers, as members of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), have an ob-

⁸ Including, apparently, communications and ballistic missile attack early warning systems (BMEWS).

⁹ Of the 27 EU countries, 20 are simultaneously NATO members.

ligation under its Article VI: "...to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures towards cessation of nuclear arms race in the near future, and towards nuclear disarmament..." [13, p. 447]. On the other hand, they have been refusing for many years to accept any treaty-enshrined restrictions on their nuclear forces and programmes, pointing to their lagging behind the Soviet/Russian forces even after the latter's significant reduction since the early 1990s.

At the same time, by refusing to reduce their forces under the Treaty, the two European countries are the only ones among the nine nuclear-weapon states, apart from the two superpowers, that have significantly reduced their nuclear arsenals over the past 30 years (and structurally, France has moved from a triad to a dyad, and Britain – from a dyad to a monocomponent), while all the others (Israel, India, DPRK, Pakistan) have been steadily increasing them¹⁰. Besides, both countries, being democratic states, are quite open in terms of available nuclear forces, their modernization programmes and funding.

The British nuclear deterrent potential [source 11, pp. 369-375] comprises four¹¹ strategic ballistic nuclear submarines (SSBNs) of the *Vanguard* class. Each of them is capable of carrying 16 strategic-class SLBMs (submarine-launched ballistic missiles) of the US-origin *Trident-2* type (*UGM-133 Trident IID5*); each missile can deliver up to 8 nuclear individually targeted warheads. Thus, the country's maximum arsenal could conceivably constitute 512 warheads, each with a yield of about 100 kt (i. e. 7 times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb). This seems to be an impressive nuclear potential, surpassing any other nuclear-armed state besides the Russian Federation and the United States.

However, Britain has taken a number of self-limiting steps, proceeding both from budgetary considerations and the need for optimisation of nuclear potential as a deterrent. First, at any given time, one British SSBN is on combat patrol at sea, while the second and third SSBNs are

¹⁰ This conclusion does not take into account South Africa which was the only nuclear-weapon state in history to completely abandon its nuclear weapons in 1992 and become a non-nuclear member of the NPT.

¹¹ Russia has 11 such submarines, and the USA has 14, with about two non-deployed any time due to overhaul. In 2022, Britain drastically cut back on information about its nuclear forces.

stationed at bases, but can put out to sea relatively quickly (in a few hours or days), and the fourth boat is undergoing overhaul. Second, in order to save money, Britain, unlike Russia and the USA, has an SLBM set intended for three boats only – 48 instead of 64 units. Third, the only submarine on duty goes out to sea not with 16, but with 8 missiles on board, each being equipped with 5 warheads instead of 8 on average. Therefore, the total British actual combat-ready deterrent capability is not 512, but about 40 warheads. Fourth, according to some information, the submarine missiles on sea duty are de-targeted (i. e. the target flight programme is to be loaded into the missile guidance system immediately before launch) and are kept at lowered launch state¹².

The number of operationally deployed nuclear warheads on the three boats with 48 SLBMs has been reduced to 120 units. The total number of nuclear warheads (including reserve warheads placed in storage) is 225, but it was announced in 2021, with quite vague explanations, that the maximum number of warheads would be raised to 260 by the mid-2020s [source 12, p. 11]. Technically, this can imply loading 16 SLBMs rather than 8 on three submarines, as designed, while keeping 5 warheads on each missile.

The specifics of this country's nuclear forces are that Britain does not have the property right to its sea-based ballistic missiles, but leases them from a joint reserve with the US Navy, comprising 58 Trident-2 SLBMs located at Kings Bay Naval Base depot (Georgia). This situation has been in place since the early 1960s, when Britain decided not to produce its own naval strategic missiles but to buy them from the USA. It builds its own submarines and manufactures nuclear warheads, although it borrows some American parts and components for the latter which are not directly related to thermonuclear explosives. Before the 1996 Treaty ban on all nuclear testing (which was ratified by Britain, the same as by France and Russia, unlike the USA), British nuclear warheads were tested at the USA Nevada Test Site.

The French nuclear forces [source 11, pp. 375-379] comprise about 300 warheads to

¹² Under the agreement, Russian and US missiles are kept in a similar state (with zero flight programs or aimed at the ocean) in peacetime, although this agreement provides for no verification measures and therefore is more of a symbolic value.

equip 48 SLBMs and 50 ALCMs (air-launched cruise missiles) on land- and carrier-based aircraft. France thus possesses both strategic and operational-tactical nuclear potential¹³.

The maritime component of the nuclear deterrent, *Force Océanique Stratégique (FOST)*, consists of four nuclear strategic ballistic missile *Triumphant-type* submarines, each capable of carrying 16 submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Like Britain, France has a complement of missiles for three submarines only, as the fourth one is usually undergoing overhaul. Each missile is equipped with multiple individually targeted warheads with platforms for six warheads but actually carries no more than five units to increase the missile range. The submarines were commissioned for the Navy, starting in 1997, replacing six obsolete SSBNs. Like in Britain, one submarine is always on patrol. France continues the modernisation of SLBMs and their warheads. In July 2018, the Navy completed the modernisation of its boats for the new SLBM *M51* model which replaced the former SLBM *M45*.

The air component of the nuclear forces includes land-based and sea-based aircraft. The land-based squadrons currently include only *Rafale BF3* fighter bombers that replaced the *Mirage 2000N* aircraft, starting in 2018. There is also a squadron of 10 similar aircraft based on the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier. The aircraft are equipped with *ASMP-A (Air-Sol Moyenne Portee-Ameliorée)* cruise missiles having a range of about 500 km, totalling 50 units with warheads of the yield up to 300 kt.

Thus, having the technical capability to equip its nuclear forces with 374 nuclear warheads (considering the full load of SLBMs with warheads and the purchase of a set of missiles for the fourth submarine), France actually has 290 warheads, maintaining 120 warheads combat-ready (kept on one SSBN at sea and on the aircraft at the airfield).

The Presidential Address of 21 February 2023, in connection with Russia's suspension of participation in START, declared: "...Before returning to

¹³ The classification of French airborne forces is based on the range of their nuclear air-launched cruise missiles. If it exceeds 600 kilometres, they are classified as strategic by the definition of the START-1 Treaty and must be counted as 50 carriers and 50 warheads according to the START-3 Treaty.

the discussion on this issue, we must understand the nature of claims of such North Atlantic Alliance countries as France and Great Britain, and decide how we should evaluate their strategic arsenal, i. e. the total strike potential of the alliance. They have essentially expressed willingness to participate in this process by their statement. Well, go ahead, we have no objections" [source 4].

WHAT THEY CLAIM TO

As to the "willingness to participate", both mentioned powers would hardly agree to this wording (like, in fact, China, India and other countries supporting START "from the outside"). However, their available nuclear forces, claims and plans are quite open and widely known, in particular, through official doctrinal documents.

After a heated debate about whether the country needs the nuclear potential for the future at all, the House of Commons in 2016 supported the governmental commitments under a programme to replace the current Vanguard-type SSBNs with four new submarines of comparable capability. The new class of submarines called *Dreadnought* will be armed with the next generation of Trident-2 SLBMs, *Trident IID5LE*, having extended service life and new high-precision warhead parts (to hit hardened underground facilities) and equipped with *W93*-type warheads that are being developed in parallel with a similar US programme. The submarines' missile compartment will be designed for 12 launchers, as opposed to 16 on the current SSBNs. The new British submarines were originally intended to enter service in 2028, but are now expected to be delivered to the fleet in the 2030s [source 11, pp. 369-375].

France is working on the design of a new *M51.3* SLBM with improved accuracy, to enter service after 2025. In addition, France has begun preliminary design work on the third-generation SSBN entitled *SNLE3G* which will be armed with *M51.3* missiles and will be deployed starting in 2035 to replace the Triumphant submarines [source 11, pp. 369-375]. In 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron confirmed the plans for the long-term modernisation of France's sea- and air-based nuclear deterrent forces.

The nuclear doctrines of the two powers are quite similar. The relatively modest size of their

nuclear forces is compensated for by refined and wordy strategic formulations. For instance, the official British publications on nuclear deterrence stated: “Defence and security start with deterrence which has long been at the heart of the UK’s national security policy. Deterrence supposes that any potential aggressors know that any benefits they might hope to gain by attacking Britain would be outweighed by the consequences for themselves... We are committed to maintaining some minimum destructive power necessary to deter any aggressor” [source 13]. While proclaiming the principle of minimal deterrence, London claims at the same time that its potential provides protection not only for Britain but also for its allies. On leaving the European Union in 2019, it stated, “Britain will leave the European Union, but it is not reducing its commitment to European security and is not turning its back on Europe as well as on the rest of the world. Our continuing commitment to NATO is a clear demonstration thereof” [source 14].

The French nuclear doctrine is somewhat more detailed, but not less vague. This is how the official documents interpret the subject: “Nuclear weapons must not be designed as instruments of intimidation, coercion and destabilisation. They should remain the instruments of deterrence aiming at preventing war” [source 15]. The grounds for using nuclear weapons are described in a peculiar way: “If there is any misunderstanding regarding France’s determination to defend its vital interests, the aggressor state will be sent a unique and single nuclear warning to demonstrate that the nature of the conflict has changed and that deterrence should be restored” [source 15].

Having no internal disagreement, unlike Britain, over the need for the national nuclear potential, France emphasises its contribution to disarmament processes (with much exaggeration): “France has an unrivalled record of compliance with its responsibilities and interests: it has irreversibly dismantled its land-based nuclear component, the nuclear test site, its nuclear fissile production facilities for military use, and reduced the size of its arsenal which now numbers fewer than 300 nuclear weapons. These decisions are consistent with our country’s arms race renunciation programme and our adherence to the nuclear

deterrence format at the level of strict sufficiency” [source 15].

Thirty years ago, the aggregate nuclear potential of the two powers totalled 389 nuclear warheads (according to the counting rules of the START-1 Treaty of 1991), which corresponded to about 4% of the strategic forces of each of the two superpowers. Today, the French and British forces have a combined total of 410 warheads (and in the near future, with the announced increase in the British arsenal, it can reach the level of 530 warheads). This is equal to about 35 per cent of the SNF of either Russia or the USA (under the counting rules of the START-3 Treaty). Although the nuclear forces of the two countries have not increased significantly, the numbers of strategic armaments of both superpowers have reduced by almost 3 times in terms of delivery vehicles and by 7 times in terms of warheads in line with the START/SORT treaties (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty/Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty) concluded after 1990. Stated differently, this is a markedly greater reduction figure than the 50 per cent officially declared by Britain 30 years ago as a condition for its involvement in strategic arms control [source 10, p. 29]. It is quite relevant to remind all those concerned about such important commitments if London has forgotten about them.

In France, the order to launch nuclear missiles is given only by the President, and in Britain – by the Prime Minister, which embodies the principle of political control over nuclear weapons. Ironically, this once led to an international mishap at the end of 2022 referred to subsequently by President Putin several times: “Ms Liz Truss, recent British Prime Minister, stated bluntly in a talk with a press representative: ‘Yes, Britain is a nuclear power. It is the Prime Minister’s responsibility to make possible use of it, and I will do that.’ It is not verbatim, but close to the text: ‘I am prepared to do it’. As you could see, nobody reacted in any way. Let us say she blurted it out – the lady is a little off her trolley. How can one say such things in public? She did” [source 16].

Indeed, the British Prime Minister responded rather unintelligently to the journalist’s question: “I think it [the use of nuclear weapons] is the Prime Minister’s important responsibility. I am ready to

do that”¹⁴. However, most likely, this can be explained by the practice when the leaders of Western powers almost never go into details of nuclear doctrines, leaving this to defence ministers and military commanders. That is why Liz Truss’s statement caused such a strong reaction in Moscow.

In contrast, the Russian president tends to comment systematically and in great detail on this issue for a variety of audiences, sometimes verbally making adjustments to official doctrinal documents. For instance, at the meeting with soldiers’ mothers in December 2022, he said: “As concerns the statement that Russia will under no circumstances use the nuclear weapons first, it should be remembered that if it is not the first one to use these weapons regardless of the circumstances, then it will not be the second one to apply them either, because the possibilities of use them in the event of a nuclear attack on our territory are much limited” [source 17]. A few days later, already in Kyrgyzstan, he developed this theme: “If we are talking about this disarming strike, then maybe we should think about adopting the position of our American partners and their ideas for ensuring the country’s security... The USA has a relevant theory and even due practice; it has spelt it out in its Strategy, in its documents – a preventive strike. We do not have this provision. But our Strategy envisages a retaliatory strike – this is no secret. What is a retaliatory strike? It means a response. It is when our missile attack warning system detects missile launches aimed at the territory of the Russian Federation. In so far it has detected the fact of launch it entails the response” [source 18].

HOW TO ENGAGE BRITAIN AND FRANCE?

The appropriateness of involving the two European nuclear powers in the strategic arms limitation process raises no doubt. This is justified both politically and strategically. In the first case, this is because these states, like Russia and the USA, have obligations under the above-mentioned article of the fundamental multilateral treaty on nuclear disarmament – Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

¹⁴ Truss has announced readiness to use nuclear weapons to defend the country. *RBC*, 24.08.2022. Available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/631279359a7947ed9cd9d05a> (accessed 28.12.2022).

[13, pp. 515-516]. In strategic terms, the issue of limiting British and French nuclear armaments has gathered head, since the drastic reduction of strategic arms (including medium-range and tactical-class systems) by the Russian Federation and the United States over the past 30+ years has dramatically (more than by 8 times) increased the proportion of nuclear capabilities of the European “twin” in the balance of mutual nuclear deterrence between Russia and NATO. However, it is politically easier to set such a task than to propose a treaty-based legal way to implement it.

The half-century experience of the USSR/Russia and the United States in strategic arms reduction and limitation shows that such agreements are possible if the parties are in a relationship of mutual nuclear deterrence, which creates a stimulus to accept military limitations in exchange for similar measures of the other party. In addition, the parties should be in a state of approximate equality (parity) of strategic forces. This is not in fact necessary for ensuring security – in reality, the strategic balance has many asymmetries and even quantitative disproportions¹⁵. However, the legally enshrined equality in arms ceilings and limitations is very important for the prestige of states and makes it possible to balance their mutual concessions. In the absence of parity, the inferior power will not agree to legalise its lag in a treaty, and the superior party will hardly agree to cede its advantage for the sake of formal agreement.

It is evident that according to the above criteria, any negotiations between the USA, UK and France make no sense: they are not in the relations of mutual nuclear deterrence and they are NATO allies. It is also undeniable that there is a mutual nuclear deterrence relationship between the two European states and Russia, which sets the stage for a dialogue on mutual arms limitation. However, the Russian nuclear forces are many times superior to the British and French potential, both individually and in sum. The two European powers will not agree to de jure reaffirm Russian nuclear superiority, while Moscow will not agree to reduce its SNF to the level of the UK and France since it is committed to the principle of parity with Washington.

¹⁵ According to the latest data exchange on START, in November 2022, Russia had 540 deployed carriers with 1,549 warheads on them, while the United States had 659 deployed carriers with 1,420 warheads [14].

One can assume that Russia would not mind returning to its 1972 position at the negotiations on the SALT I Provisional Agreement: to fix the equality of the Russian strategic forces with the sum of SNF of the three NATO states, which would be justified by the logic of mutual nuclear deterrence. In this case, for instance, the United States, under the ceiling envisaged by START-3, would have to reduce its SNF by 96 delivery vehicles and 480 warheads (under the START counting rules), that is, to the level of 604 deployed delivery vehicles and 1,070 warheads.

However, the two European powers are unlikely to agree to put their missiles under a ceiling envisaged for the United States, since they consider their potential to be an independent national deterrent capability and because this step would legally consolidate Russian superiority over Britain and France. As to the USA, such an option, in their view, would legally assert Russia's 14 per cent advantage in deployed delivery vehicles and 30 per cent in warheads. Washington is unlikely to accept this option – both in principle and due to the increasing military power of China as a new object of American nuclear deterrence.

In July 2021, some data were published on the construction of three bases and hundreds of silo launchers for ICBMs in central regions of China [15, 16]; and subsequently, this information was confirmed by the Pentagon [source 19, p. 48]. In addition to land-based ICBMs, Beijing is actively developing sea- and air-based strategic weapon systems. Unlike Russia and NATO states, China keeps the lid on its available nuclear forces and plans for their development, but according to foreign sources', China's strategic forces may grow from the current 340 to 1,500 warheads by 2035 [17], i. e. up to the Russian and American START levels and possibly, even higher [18]. In view of the expected changes in the nuclear global order, the US military doctrine is already being redesigned towards simultaneous nuclear deterrence of Russia and China [source 7, pp. 4-7].

It is likely that if START negotiations between Russia and the USA are resumed in the future, Washington will be more persistent on taking the Chinese nuclear potential into account. This is all the more so if Russia raises the issue of a common ceiling on nuclear forces of the three NATO

powers. Actually, Moscow and Beijing officially claim that their relations do not represent a "military-political alliance similar to those formed during the Cold War period..." [source 20]. However, the USA takes much seriously the Russian president's assurance that "Russian-Chinese relations have reached the highest point throughout their history and are growing stronger, surpassing the military-political alliances of the Cold War in terms of cohesion" [source 19], as exemplified by the alliance of the United States, Britain and France within NATO.

It would be unacceptable for the Russian Federation to have its SNF counted under a common ceiling with China. Having the same level of 1,550 warheads envisaged by START, the projected increase in China's strategic potential by 2035 would lead virtually to the nullification of Russia's strategic forces. At the same time, it would be extremely difficult for Moscow to persuade Beijing to constrain the growth of its SNF under a common ceiling, since the latter apparently intends to acquire a full-fledged nuclear deterrent capability against the United States (as well as India), and cannot rely on Russian nuclear security guarantees, unlike Britain and France enjoying such commitments from the United States.

All this implies that involving the UK and France will require innovative legal forms. For instance, it is theoretically possible to consider the option of setting an equal ceiling for some particular component of strategic forces and applying the regional/geographical principle to it. There is a precedent under the first approach: according to the SALT I Provisional Agreement of 1972, asymmetric limits were established not for all strategic forces of the USSR and the USA, but only for their land- and sea-based missiles, whilst heavy bombers, in which the USA had a great advantage, remained outside the agreement [20]. As to the regional principle, there is a precedent related to it as well; these were the 1981–1983 negotiations on the limitation of nuclear weapons in Europe, as well as the Russia's 26 October 2019 proposals on banning the deployment of land-based intermediate-range missiles in Europe (including the European territory of the Russian Federation). This particular initiative did not result in a treaty but was perceived by Washington positively, as demonstrated in its re-

sponse to a package of proposals from Moscow as of 16 December 2021¹⁶.

Proceeding from this model, it would be possible to agree on limiting the number of SLBMs in the Arctic and North Atlantic to an equal ceiling in terms of delivery vehicles and warheads for Russia, on the one part, and for Britain and France in sum, on the other. It should be recalled that the precedent for limiting the number of SLBMs was also set in the SALT I Provisional Agreement¹⁷. Depending on the pace of construction of Russian new-generation submarines and the duration of a hypothetical agreement, this ceiling might have a global rather than regional scope. If the next START treaty between Russia and the United States is concluded in parallel, this ceiling could be included in it as an “embedded” sublevel for both superpowers¹⁸.

It is understandable that Britain and France will not voluntarily join the process of nuclear arms limitation in the coming years. It is only the political pressure from the United States and other NATO countries that could induce the two European powers to take this decision. In this regard, a new Russian-American treaty could serve as an additional incentive for them – the one banning intermediate-range missiles on the European continent and limiting operational and tactical nuclear weapons in this region, which might be a subject of a separate negotiations or part of a new agreement on intermediate-range nuclear forces.

Involving China in strategic and other arms limitation is a separate issue [18]. However, it is likely that mechanistic joining of the US-RF negotiations (if and when they are resumed) will not be possible. The United States will have to develop a format and a subject of separate negotiations with China that would be considered equitable

¹⁶ A. Arbatov's interview to A. Lipsky: What can we agree on with the West? *Novaya Gazeta*, 07.02.2022. (The media recognised as a foreign agent in Russia.)

¹⁷ The USA was allowed to have up to 44 submarines and 710 submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and the USSR – up to 62 submarines and 950 SLBMs. At present, naturally, much smaller numbers for the region's four nuclear powers can be discussed.

¹⁸ Such sublevels and limitations on the maximum number of warheads placed on ballistic missiles and heavy bombers were widely used in the SALT-2 (1979) and START-1 (1991) treaties, but subsequently, they ceased to be included in the START-2 (1993), SORT (2002) and START-3 (2010) pacts.

and beneficial by the latter from the point of view of Chinese national security.

CONCLUSIONS

It appears that the main motive for the decision of the Russian government to suspend START was based not on technical or strategic, but on political considerations. Mutual limitation of strategic arms, transparency and predictability measures in this area are now the main (and practically the only) factor of Washington's interest in relations with Moscow. Apparently, Russia's move with regard to START was intended to oppose the policy of the USA and its allies aimed at its defeat in the armed conflict in Ukraine. If this fails, the collapse of START is supposed to cause NATO's tangible military and political damage, apart from the option of direct use of military force against the alliance. Russia is likely to incur even greater costs regarding strategic stability as a result thereof, but they are apparently considered less significant than the opportunity to demonstrate the unacceptability of the American policy aimed at the strategic defeat of Russia.

At the same time, the suspension of START not only calls into question the fate of this Treaty, but threatens a complete disintegration of the half-century-long exclusive treaty-based strategic relations of the two nuclear superpowers. Such a split would add to the overall global confrontation between Russia and the West and return the world to the paradigm of the worst times of the Cold War and the unlimited arms race marked by the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. Objectively, Russia has fewer resources for such military-political rivalry. However, the USA will henceforth have to compete at the same time with China; therefore, the dynamics of this confrontation are unpredictable in the long term, even if the USA is supported by NATO, Japan, Australia and South Korea.

The resumption of a dialogue on strategic arms limitation between the Russian Federation and the United States is possible in case of favourable changes in the international situation. The Russian Federation voices its aspiration to achieve this, as proclaimed in its new Foreign Policy Concept [source 21] focused, in particular, on the peaceful settlement of the armed conflict in Ukraine

and the disengagement of the West and Russia from comprehensive confrontation. If the situation gets more favourable, Moscow's current arguments against its participation in START would be largely removed. However, the issue of involving the UK and France in the arms limitation process will remain.

The above-mentioned proposed options for resolving the outlined problem are, of course, controversial and, for the most part, illustrative. However, another thing is indisputable – this issue cannot be resolved within the framework of returning to START until its expiration in 2026. It is also obvious that this problem will be impossible to address without recovering this Treaty or without starting negotiations between Russia and the

USA on a new strategic arms treaty for the period after 2026.

Both European states could significantly increase their military and political “weight” in the multipolar world if they put aside their ephemeral political ambitions and agreed to treat their nuclear weapons as a component of strategic autonomy of united Europe – as a new global centre of power alongside the United States, Russia and China. Moreover, relying on this potential, they could become equal participants in nuclear arms limitation agreements along with the USA, Russia and China, which over the past half-century has become and will remain an attribute of a power defining the global security order.

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