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IT'S THE NUKES, STUPID!

An Analysis of How
the Security Issues Discussed at the Summit Might Affect the
Bush-Gore Race for the Presidency

by

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Although White House officials are busy lowering expectations for this weekend's Clinton-Putin Summit , the meeting will highlight key security concerns which could become hotly contested campaign issues as candidates Bush and Gore pursue their quests for the U.S. Presidency.

When the Presidential campaign intensifies later this summer, hopefully the topic of national security policy will move to the center stage it deserves. Each candidate will then be afforded the opportunity to demonstrate his readiness to assume the office of "Commander in Chief" by providing a clear vision for dealing with continued threats to U.S. interests, such as those posed by weapons of mass destruction. In evaluating the candidates' qualifications for the job, voters should listen carefully to what each one says about complex issues – such as how nuclear arms reductions might be used as a means for balancing future risks against the limits of U.S. military power. All this may be a tall order – especially during an already emotionally charged election year in which political operatives, aided by a headline-driven media, have tended to confuse important societal stories, such as the plight of young Elian Gonzales, with issues of national security.

Indeed, if national security policy does become a hot topic during this election year, then the future of U.S. relations with the Russian Federation – in the context of the multi-national nuclear balance of power – should be raised as one of the leading issues.

Republican Presidential candidate George W. Bush, in an effort designed in part to forestall any Clinton Administration concessions on National Missile Defense (NMD), attempted to open the debate last week in a speech calling for an overall review of the Cold War doctrine of "nuclear deterrence," featuring the resurrection of the "Presidential Nuclear Initiative" process employed during his father's Presidency.

Vice-President Al Gore, in his address before the graduating class at West Point, countered Bush's jab at the Administration's record on nuclear issues by defending traditional U.S. approaches to arms control, which have tended to favor tortuously negotiated international agreements. Gore dubbed Bush's proposals as "nuclear unilateralism," which he said would undermine stability, particularly if coupled with Republican attempts to build a massive NMD system.

The issue of how the U.S. might go about reducing nuclear arsenals in a manner conducive to strategic stability may be nudged further into the spotlight during the Moscow Summit as President Clinton attempts to buttress his legacy on Russia – a mixed record shared by candidate Gore in his past capacity as "designated hitter" for dealing with a string of Prime Ministers under former Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

Appropriately concerned about the consequences of Russia becoming a "failed state," the Clinton Administration, throughout most of its tenure, has stayed the course with an unflinching (although at times naive) commitment to its activist approach in promoting democratic reforms by backing successive Yeltsin governments.

The Clinton Presidency, in fact, can claim for itself some modest success in facilitating the development of key institutions inside Russia, such as uncensored speech (not to be confused with the concept of an *independent press*) and routinely held, free and open elections (although many analysts have argued that Vladimir Putin's ascendancy to the presidency had been "pre-ordained" by virtue of the popularity of the war in Chechnya and the timing of Yeltsin's retirement).

For all its good intentions and modest success in promoting reforms, however, Clinton's policy of providing political and economic support to Yeltsin has come up short in the public relations sense. Having watched Western governments violate the "Prime Directive" (in Trekkie terms) in attempting to shape the evolution of post-Soviet institutions, a sizable portion of the Russian population incorrectly blames the U.S. and its allies for a number of things wrong with their country, ranging from Russia's weakness in international affairs to the excesses of the Oligarchs.

Dealing with other frustrating issues, including front-page stories, such as the atrocities in Chechnya and the Bank of New York scandal, U.S. officials for the past 18 months have exhibited signs of "Russia fatigue." However, the tempo in bilateral activity has increased now that Russia's new President has been formally inaugurated.

Putin correctly perceives that he was elected with a mandate to accomplish two central tasks: first, to resurrect the central authority of the State; and second, to rebuild Russia's stature as a leader of those nations concerned about "a dangerous trend toward a U.S.-centric, unipolar world." Over the last two months, the Kremlin has been extremely active in both areas. With respect to rebuilding Russia's external role as a "great power," foreign policy strategists in Moscow have focused on breaking Russia's isolation over issues, such as Chechnya and Kosovo, and by energetically probing for fissures in the Western alliance by preying on European arms control concerns.

Earlier this spring, in an attempt to block changes to the ABM Treaty, Putin managed to upstage Clinton on the eve of the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference by convincing a newly installed Duma to approve START II. He then sent Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov off to New York with the mission of chiding the U.S. Senate for not ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

To exploit European concerns about the potential U.S. abandonment of the ABM Treaty, Ivanov then proposed throwing Moscow's weight behind a diplomatic solution designed to constrain the North Korean ballistic missile program – the primary threat upon which the NMD program appears to be postulated. The Russians also proposed reducing the aggregate warhead levels under START III to substantially below the 2,000-2,500 framework previously agreed to by Yeltsin and Clinton at Helsinki.

Last week, while discussing other defense issues, Ivanov took advantage of the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council meeting in Florence to further hammer the U.S. over NMD, while Putin signed the Duma's CTBT ratification resolution into law in Moscow.

At the present, there appears to be an impasse on NMD, exacerbated by warnings from Senator Jesse Helms that any deal struck by a "lame-duck" President would be overturned by the U.S. Senate. Unless there are major breakthroughs over the next several days, the only developments expected to come out of the Clinton-Putin Summit regarding START III and ABM are possible Joint Statements which outline general terms of reference and timelines for follow-on negotiations.

This weekend's Summit will no doubt demonstrate that there is little left of the old Clinton-Yeltsin vision of building a *strategic partnership*. Nevertheless, there still remains several points of *strategic convergence* – particularly in areas overshadowed by the high-profile ABM and START III deliberations. The Moscow meeting may produce some progress in these important second-tier issues, such as the purchase of weapons-grade Plutonium and the establishment of a Data Exchange Center in Moscow for monitoring space and ballistic missile launches.

Further progress on these and other bilateral efforts conducted under the rubric of the Administration's "Threat Reduction" programs, which are managed by the Defense Department, the State Department, and the National Nuclear Security Administration, continues to be fostered by several important long-term developments.

First of all, Russian military thinking has evolved over the last several years to a point whereby it now recognizes a strategic dilemma; e.g., that both the status of Russia as a great power today – and the *potential* threats to the State's continued existence – stem from the technological capabilities developed by the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War.

Closely connected with this newfound paradox is the Russian military's growing self-knowledge that their conventional forces are a sham; and with a dismal but somewhat recovering economy about the size of Switzerland, the only significant strategic leverage remaining at Russia's disposal – as it attempts to prevent itself from being further marginalized on issues, such as Kosovo and NATO expansion – is the political clout provided by its diminishing nuclear forces.

As articulated in its revised "military doctrine," Russia's leaders realistically view their country as being in a significantly changed geostrategic position since the demise of

the Soviet Union, characterized by an alarming expansion of the "nuclear club," which now includes a number of nations spanning the Eurasian periphery.

Although policy elites in Moscow are reluctant to admit it publicly, they are slowly coming around to the notion that their ability to deal with potential threats from former protégées (including terrorist networks aided in the past by their Soviet predecessors) may depend to a large extent upon accommodation with the United States.

The second development which contributes to progress on the security agenda is the modest success enjoyed by military-to-military contact activities. Established by senior military and Defense Department civilians before the collapse of the Soviet Union, this annually negotiated plan of senior leadership visits, unit exchanges, and port calls has enabled military leaders on both sides to step out smartly ahead of the politicians – sometimes at risk to their own careers – to deal directly with their counterparts on operational matters, such as nuclear doctrine, peacekeeping operations, and the prevention of mishaps at sea.

The deepening of defense relations, however, is often held hostage by Cold War organizational and procedural constraints placed on the military diplomats charged with executing the events – and by larger political disputes, such as the Kosovo crisis (during which the Russian government cancelled virtually all scheduled events).

Like the NASDAQ, military engagement plans will remain volatile so long as they are subject to outside pressures. On the balance, however, the program of contacts between U.S. military officers (including DoD civilians) and their functional counterparts in Russia has served to establish an atmosphere of professional credibility and, at times, personal trust – especially between leaders responsible for nuclear forces. This, in turn, has helped keep alive a dialogue in critical areas – such as warhead security, Y2K cooperation, and ballistic missile early warning – even when major crises, such as U.S. military operations in Iraq and the Balkans, seemed to place other elements of the bilateral relationship in jeopardy.

The third positive development contributing to evolution of the defense relationship is the increasingly bipartisan support the U.S. Congress has shown toward financing the Administration's threat reduction programs (including military contacts).

First developed by retired Democratic Senator Sam Nunn and Republican Senator Richard Lugar toward the close of the Bush Administration, the notion of providing funds to facilitate treaty-mandated elimination of strategic delivery systems, and to effect the safe and secure disposition of warheads and fissile material, is viewed today as money well spent.

In its early years, U.S. threat reduction efforts (often referred to as the "Nunn-Lugar Program") experienced a number of growing pains, which resulted in the cancellation of several ill-conceived experiments, such as those involving defense conversion and the construction of officer housing. The program also had to overcome

criticism that U.S. assistance to Russia might free up funds for the military's research & development programs. Today, U.S. arms reduction efforts in Russia and the other former Soviet states are considered by the international community as one of the most successful commitments yet undertaken.

Given its overall positive track record, the Nunn-Lugar Program (and its derivatives) are expected to be sustained by either a Gore or a Bush administration – so long as U.S. officials responsible for implementing such efforts can ensure, through transparency arrangements and continued access by U.S. auditors, that the goods and services provided by the American taxpayer are used to reduce the threats posed by the Russian weapons complex, and do not inadvertently sustain military capability.

Ultimately, arguments such as "Who lost Russia?" or "Who can reduce nuclear forces quicker?" are specious. While the Clinton Administration's record is fair game for the Republicans, the American electorate would be better served in the months ahead if candidates Bush and Gore were to focus their efforts on expanding and sharpening their respective visions for a post-Cold War world – which would include, by necessity, the further evolution of the Russian Federation as one of its key variables.

Moreover, the foreign policy staffs of both candidates should pursue innovative approaches toward establishing long-term working relationships with the Putin Administration, and for building upon bipartisan efforts designed to deal with legitimate concerns about Moscow's potentially dangerous nuclear arsenal – a factor which will remain at the core of the U.S.-Russian relationship for sometime to come.

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