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## Annexed Crimea and Russia's Nuclear Saber-Rattling

*The Russian Federation makes an attempt to testify new nuclear strategy in the occupied Crimea. This strategy consists of a combination of steadily changing intimidation technique applying against Western countries, and traditional hybrid approaches to strengthen current Moscow's position towards justifying illegal annexation of the part of Ukrainian territory.*

Since the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia has begun more openly threaten the U.S. and EU with possibility to use nuclear weapons in case of attempting to stop by force its aggressive actions in Ukraine. The RF continues a dangerous play with tactical weapons in Crimea being prepared to use them for securing its hybrid success in extending the "living space" of empire. It might be considered as a source of legitimizing the annexation by using the deployment of nuclear weapons on the peninsula. Recently mentioned by the NATO Secretary General Russia's "nuclear saber-rattling" relates not only and not so much to modernizing its Strategic Nuclear Forces (SNF), possible violating the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and unwilling to reduce tactical nukes, but also to the deep change in the Moscow's nuclear strategy.

Russia recently has managed to saturate the peninsula with state-of-the-art arms systems, being actively used by Moscow as additional political leverage in confronting with Alliance through direct threatening to all its Southern members. All these developments have become possible due to creation on the peninsula a gray zone not duly covered by existing arms control regimes and nuclear nonproliferation measures.

Technically, neither the U.S. nor Russia can move strategic nuclear forces without verifying the deployment with the other country due to the Treaty between the U.S. and

the RF on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START Treaty), which set a timeline for mutual cuts to the countries' nuclear stockpiles. Any Russian movement of strategic nuclear weapons into Crimea (long-range, high-yield weapons, as opposed to tactical or battlefield nuclear warheads) without prior notification to the U.S. would result in Russia violating the New START Treaty. To meet the Treaty's central limits, the U.S. by February 2018 should reduce or transfer into non-deployed status 85 strategic systems. Russia before that date may increase their number of strategic nuclear systems (intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments) to 185 pieces, so that Moscow now is trying to reach this limit within the framework of its current military programs that could be partially extended to the occupied Crimea.

As far as Russian illegal annexation of Crimea is concerned, the main problem could be encountered with the deployment of tactical or battlefield nuclear warheads and means of their delivery being practically uncontrolled. They are the following: air bombs, short-range striking aircraft missiles, ground-based operational-tactical missiles, naval cruise missile, as well as such exotic weapons from today's view as nuclear artillery shells, and mines. Never minding voluntary obligations not to deploy naval and ground based tactical nuclear weapons

undertaken by the U.S. and the RF since the early nineties, the technical possibility for reversing usage of these armaments still exists, as it has been repeatedly proven by latest Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine. In general, Russia has more such nukes in its depots than with the U.S.

As for the aviation nuclear weapons, they are not under any prohibition. Various types of tactical bombers and attack aircraft have been modified for conducting tactical nuclear missions. In addition, the presence in Europe of the U.S. tactical aviation nuclear bombs B-61 is a constant irritating factor in relations between Russia and the West not contributing to limit the Russian appetite towards the annexed Crimea.

Hence, the issue of nuclear nonproliferation has become recently the most vital and sensitive one, especially after the latest statements by Russian president with regard to possible increasing of Russia's nuclear arsenal on more than 40 additional pieces of ICBMs. Therefore, possible future stationing of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems in the occupied Crimea would seriously destabilize current delicate balance of nuclear forces in the region. Nevertheless, Russia repeatedly emphasizes that it retains the right to deploy nuclear weapons anywhere on its territory, including in the annexed Crimea. In doing so, Moscow has tried to frame any possible deployment of nuclear weapons in Crimea as less provocative than the U.S. forward deploying nuclear weapons in other European countries.

Special attention should be paid to tactical nuclear weapons and means of their delivery to be illegally deployed on Crimean peninsula. The RF conducts regular work on building-up its offensive nuclear capacities on the temporarily occupied Crimea through the deployment of respective land, naval and airborne-based components. It is practically impossible to verify now all delivery systems being relocated to the peninsula because of their tactical dual-use capability to deliver both ordinary and nuclear munitions that could be included in ammunition's allowance. That is the particular case with the following types of weapons disclosed in Crimea, namely tactical ballistic missile systems "Iskander-K" and "Iskander-M", 152-mm self-propelled howitzers 2S19 "MSTA-S" and 2C3 "Akatsiya" as well as coastal missile systems "Ball".

Additional alarming fact, which could prove above consideration, is the beginning of restoration works on former Soviet nuclear storage facility in the village Kiziltash (modern name - Krasnokamenka) near Sudak town, where different types of missiles are being delivered now.

As far as airborne-based nuclear weapons delivery component is concerned, Russia starts to revive airbases for deploying strategic long-range aviation. First of all, we are talking about the airfield in the village Ostryakovo (Guardeyskoe), just north of Simferopol city. This airfield was used extensively during the Soviet era, and now is going to host a regiment of long-distance strategic supersonic missile carriers TU-22M3 (with total number of around 30 such aircraft). The effective range of these aircraft is about 2,400 km, and they usually are armed with cruise missiles X-22 type that have firing range at 500 km. But the Russians are going to re-equip them with new X-32 type cruise missiles capable of hitting the target at a distance of 1,000 km with minimal deviation. All these types of cruise missiles can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads. According to Moscow's official notice, above strategic missile carriers TU-22M3 were transferred to Crimea in the course of a surprise combat readiness inspection held in March this year.

The threat posed by deploying tactical nuclear weapons could not be considered separately from spreading out other types of nuclear weapons and armaments. If Russia violates its commitments in curbing tactical nukes, the whole system of confidence in international nuclear nonproliferation measures will be threatened, starting from the very Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The issue is not merely about Russia's military posture but also goes to the heart of the international legal status of Crimea. In 1994, Ukraine agreed to give up all the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviet Union, and pledged to remain a non-nuclear weapon state. By deploying nuclear weapons in the annexed Crimea, Moscow would be reinforcing that the territory is now part of Russia, which - as a nuclear weapon state - retains the right to deploy nuclear weapons on its territory.

The RF makes an attempt to testify its new nuclear strategy in the occupied Crimea. This strategy consists of a combination of steadily changing intimidation technique applying against Western countries, and traditional hybrid approaches to strengthen current Moscow's position towards justifying its illegal annexation of the part of Ukrainian territory.

Apparently, Russia is not going to use the SNF for preventive nuclear strike but rather to deter the West from active countermeasures curbing Moscow's aggressive behavior. This is the core idea of the concept being more clearly defined by the Russia's strategists, namely to have an opportunity to inflict "deescalating" nuclear strikes. This idea is based on the perception that if Russia being deprived the winner's status in currently unleashed hybrid war, the preventive Russian low-power nuclear

strike will force the opponent to concede defeat, even if the latter has nuclear weapons as well.

Of course, Russia is aware of its weakness and understands the limited situations, where such a blackmail would be effective. Therefore, there is subjective perception of the other party's determination weakening the Russia's blackmailing positions.

Unpunished annexation of Crimea coupled with the approbation of the new nuclear strategy could definitely

strengthen the Moscow's confidence being able to shift the existing balance of forces and commit further hybrid actions to expand the living space of empire. All this, to some extent, could complicate further actions to return the Russian Federation in the mainstream of generally accepted rules of behavior in maintaining international security without using the coercive measures, reinforcing a sense of Moscow's "discomfort" on the background of continuing aggression in Ukraine.

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