

Letter of April 1999. RUSSIAN NUCLEAR REACTION TO THE KOSOVO CRISIS

PIR ARMS CONTROL LETTERS

LETTER OF APRIL 1999

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Since the very beginning of NATO strikes in Kosovo Moscow has been trying to use its nuclear might as a political instrument to make NATO position more flexible and open to Russian proposals on resolution of the conflict. However, the West left these attempts without any attention, provoking Russian decision-makers, more precisely President Yeltsin in person, to further harsh statements.

The day the strikes were initiated the president address the nation on TV in evidently emotional and tough wording. Nevertheless, the possible resort to nuclear component was not stated as straightforwardly as the rest of the address, but in a slightly vague manner. The president seemed to hint on the nuclear factor, being unwilling even to pronounce the words "nuclear weapons". He put it in the following way: 'Of course, we do our best, but there are things that we can't do. It means we can, but it will run counter to our conscience.'

Next day some Russian generals from the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff made statements (although anonymously) that were widely covered in the Russian press. They said that Russia was elaborating proposals to deploy tactical nuclear weapons on the Byelorussian territory 'if the situation develops unfavorably for the Russian Federation'.

The Byelorussian MOD refused to comment on the information of nuclear weapons deployment in this country for the reason that it was beyond its competence. The Byelorussian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was even more reluctant to clarify the situation, mentioning only that the issues under discussion were no more than a hypothetical variant. Nonetheless, the Byelorussian sources didn't deny that the Russian side was not ruling out the possibility of starting negotiations on nuclear weapons re-deployment in Belarus.

Several days later President Lukashenko made a very tough statement. He pointed out that Belarus was a sovereign state, and its president, i.e. Mr. Lukashenko, but not the Russian president or the prime minister, would decide whether to deploy nuclear forces in his country or not. At the same time, he stressed that withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Byelorussia was a great mistake. Although he didn't dwell on this topic, most of the experts understood his words as a wish to deploy Russian nuclear weapons in

Belarus. That's why even his tough remarks on who was to decide the matter did not stop the speculations about nuclear weapons redeployment in Belarus.

This uncertainty was aggravated by difference in comments of various Byelorussian agencies. For example, while Lukashenko spokesman insisted that there was no chance for deployment of nuclear weapons in his country, anonymous sources in the Security Council of Belarus didn't rule out such opportunity.

Byelorussian military circles were quite honest and argued (anonymously as usual) that 'technically it was not difficult to re-deploy nuclear weapons, and following the political will of the Russian and Byelorussian leadership they would do that.'

All these statements on tactical nuclear weapons left some questions. It was not clear how all this corresponded with the unilateral initiatives of the Soviet Union and Russia dating back to 1991 and 1992.

According to these initiatives, the Russian Federation committed

- to destroy all short-range surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, all atomic demolition munitions, all artillery-fired atomic projectiles, 50% of anti-missiles, one third of sea-based tactical nuclear weapons, a part of tactical nuclear weapons assigned to Naval Air Force units, 50% of nuclear bombs of the Air Force;
- to store (mostly at central bases) the rest of tactical nuclear weapons with only one exception – Air Force tactical nuclear arms.

In 1994 the Russian Federation unveiled the schedule of implementing those obligations:

- to destroy all atomic demolition munitions by 1998, all artillery-fired atomic projectiles by 2000, all warheads attributed to short-range surface-to-surface missiles by 2000, 50% of anti-missiles by 1996, one third of sea-based tactical nuclear weapons by 1995, 50% of nuclear bombs by 1996.

Later on Russian officials reaffirmed their commitment to this schedule: in 1996 it was the MFA official spokesman and in 1997 it was reiterated by Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev.

However, the progress in carrying out the unilateral initiatives is not that evident. So far there has been only one official statement on successful fulfillment of these obligations. In September 1997 the chief of the 12th GUMO (the MOD Main Directorate in charge of all nuclear warheads and central bases where a substantial part of tactical nuclear weapons are to be stored in compliance with above-mentioned initiatives) maintained, 'all missiles have been taken from the Army, withdrawn from deployment sites and stored under guaranteed control.'

It means that at present Russia possesses tactical nuclear weapons that may be deployed in Belarus – short-range surface-to-surface missiles with nuclear warheads (the Army) and air-based tactical nuclear weapons (Air Force).

However, one should keep in mind that the Byelorussian military has no tactical nuclear weapons at their disposal for nearly a decade. This is quite a long period and it implies that they may need additional training to guarantee high level of positive and negative control over these weapons. Thus, even from the technical point of view redeployment of these arms in Byelorussia is not that easy as some military tried to present it. Let alone political considerations – the Russian ruling elite doesn't trust President Lukashenko, who proved to be an independent political actor going all the time beyond the limits the Kremlin strategists impose on him. He tends to blackmail the Kremlin elite. In such circumstances the chances for Moscow support of nuclear weapons redeployment in Belarus are very slim.

It seems that President Lukashenko realized declaratory character of statements of the Russian military. During his trip about the country he said once, 'some forces are trying to use us for nuclear blackmail with the West, but this won't work, we won't agree.' Moreover, he persistently reaffirmed country's nuclear-weapon-free status under the constitution. By the way, the latter factor was absolutely ignored by those who discussed possibilities of nuclear weapons redeployment in Belarus.

After the fuss with tactical nuclear weapons deployment in Belarus the nuclear factor was left aside for a while. However, on April 9, 1999 Speaker of the State Duma Gennady Seleznyov argued that President Yeltsin had ordered to re-target the strategic nuclear forces at countries participating in the military campaign against Yugoslavia. Experts were bewildered since nearly at the same time the media disseminated Yeltsin's statement reiterating that Russia would not be military involved in the conflict.

That morning Seleznyov met President Yeltsin in the Kremlin and, according to the speaker, in the course of the meeting Boris Yeltsin informed him about the order to re-target missiles, which he then didn't hesitate to convey to the mass media.

However, all corresponding governmental structures, including all Armed Services disposing of strategic nuclear weapons, didn't confirm Seleznyov's allegations. They assured the public that they had not received such orders. Moreover, the President's Press Service gave a brief and clear comment, '*there is no such information available*'.

Then the speaker rushed to call Yeltsin to inquire why the statement of the latter had not been broadcast yet. According to Gennady Seleznyov, the statement was made in front of cameramen and it must become public. The Kremlin Press Service neither

denied nor confirmed that the videotape existed. But later on the President's Press Service disseminated information that the president had made no additional order concerning status and state of the Russian strategic nuclear forces.

By Friday night (April 9) the discussion abated. Officially it is supposed that the speaker had made a mistake. However, such interpretation of events seems dubious for a number of reasons. Seleznyov is normally very careful in his speech. On the contrary, the president is known for some of his unexpected statements on nuclear weapons – in 1997 in Paris and Stockholm. It's common knowledge that in both cases his initiatives were a surprise for the Russian ministers of defense and foreign affairs, and even for his closest staff.

Moreover, there is no surprise that the videotape, if any, didn't leave the Kremlin. Cameramen and journalists working in the Kremlin are under tight supervision of the security and the Kremlin Press Service. There have been examples when the pressmen were asked not to reveal some of Yeltsin's *improvisations* on domestic and international issues.

So, all the mess may be regarded as just a president's careless or spontaneous wording.

Nonetheless, there is an interesting detail that may imply for a different treatment of the situation. It was not Seleznyov's initiative to touch upon the re-targeting issue: he was merely answering the questions. The question was: *'Is it true that the president in the presence of mass media said that our missiles were targeted at NATO member states?'* Seleznyov answered, *'Yes, at the countries fighting against Yugoslavia...'* Question: *'The president said that there had been made an order?'* Answer: *'Yes'*.

Why this question was posed to the speaker? It doesn't look like a mere coincidence. Hence, there is a possibility that the speaker was used to check the reaction of the Russian and international academic, political and military community to such a step.

Thus, during the military phase of the Kosovo crisis nuclear factor was used three times in this or that manner. As a result, there are reasons to say that three times it was done not by chance, but on purpose.

Our conclusion is that the ruling elite was trying to review the role of nuclear factor in its foreign policy for it's the last source of might Russia has as a Great Power. These attempts were ugly and it proves that the Russian Federation has no models of transforming its nuclear potential into political dividends. The West turned out to be insensitive to Russian nuclear bids and on the one hand, it demonstrates the failure of Russian nuclear policy. On the other hand, it is extremely dangerous since it may

provoke Russia to increase nuclear bids and result in the attempts to enhance and show the credibility of Russian nuclear policy.