



The Tactical versus Strategic Distinction: It's A Big Deal, Right?

By
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While the wise old owl discovered it took three licks to get to the Tootsie Roll center of a Tootsie Roll Pop, students of national security might wonder about the arithmetic of nuclear deterrence. For example, how many tactical nuclear weapons does it takes to equal a strategic nuclear weapon?

An apples-to-apples comparison is fine if you're discussing apples, but nuclear weapons are but one part of the grand and cumulative smorgasbord of global security. So first, let's attempt to define exactly what a 'strategic' nuclear weapon is, which itself has been the subject of considerable debate. Yield, target, effect, and more have all been considered in the definition, but from a practical point of view, a strategic nuclear weapon is...well, it's one that's *delivered* strategically. That means delivered via ICBMs, SLBMs, or heavy bombers.

Tactical nuclear weapons, it follows, are those that are delivered using battlefield-type delivery systems over battlefield-type distances. However, since the size of a battlefield can vary greatly all we can really say is that they are *not* strategically-delivered. In locations such as Western Europe and the former Soviet satellite-states, the strategic-tactical issue might be considered a distinction without much of a difference. Therefore, just as ♀ is the symbol for the artist formerly known as Prince, I will henceforth describe those things until now categorized as "tactical nuclear weapons" with a somewhat more clear (and cumbersome) name: non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Although the U.S. and Russian Presidents have both signed off on the 'new' START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) which aims to draw down the number of strategic nuclear weapons and restrict their associated delivery vehicles, left unaddressed is the fact the Russians have (and are keeping) their ten-to-one advantage in non-strategic nuclear weapons. But does anyone *really* care about these weapons? Certainly. The Russians, for example, care very deeply.

Russia has staked out an intellectual position that asserts nuclear weapons must remain within a nation's borders. Following this logic, US provided non-strategic nuclear weapons, under NATO's control, are verboten. The strength of the Russian claim (for them) is that it's a win-win. If NATO rids itself of non-strategic nuclear weapons, Russia would consider its security enhanced by the elimination of these weapons. Similarly, if NATO wants to maintain these non-strategic nuclear weapons, the discussion becomes focused on the 'nation's borders' portion of the topic and tends to ignore Russia's ten-to-one weapons advantage.

Non-strategic nuclear weapons are important to Russia because their nuclear doctrine values these weapons in the extreme: that's just what happens when your conventional forces cannot compete with many of your neighbors (Georgia excluded), let alone the US. Similarly, with a gross domestic product trailing the US, China, Japan, India, Germany, and the United Kingdom and a population rapidly trending downward, the only way Russia can be considered a superpower is through the prism of nuclear weapons. Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons give it an asymmetric advantage with regard to China, NATO, and the US, just as they surely will for Iran if or when Iran should come to acquire the bomb. Oh, and for what it's worth, Iran is making significant progress with its own missile and 'space launch' programs.

From a non-proliferation point of view, the world should consider the fact that non-strategic nuclear weapons pose a much greater danger than their strategic counterparts. This is because they are more vulnerable to non-authorized use, including theft, than strategic weapons, which almost always have dedicated delivery vehicles, better physical security, and better-established and mature methods and procedures. Additionally, because non-strategic nuclear weapons *tend to* have lower yields and are inclined towards 'battlefield' use, it can be argued that their inherent nature makes their *authorized* use more probable.

Why would US negotiators agree to a new START that ignores non-strategic nuclear weapons? Largely because the new START limited itself to strategic weapons (hence the acronym) but even more so, because it is intended to portray a symbol of improved US-Russian relations and reductions in strategic nuclear weapons are considered, the low-hanging fruit--so to speak--at the security smorgasbord. Conventional forces, missile defenses, civil preparedness, and more are all part of national security as are non-strategic nuclear weapons, but the complexity of folding all these issues into a comprehensive agreement has been viewed as a bridge too far.

The Russians see the world as it is even as they endlessly advocate for how they want it to be. If the US were to assume a similar position, negotiations would be underway regarding Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons. One approach could be to link ratification of the new START with reductions in both Russian and US non-strategic weapons. A better but more difficult endeavor would be multi-lateral efforts (that include at minimum, China, and ideally, all the nuclear nations, declared or not) to reduce the 'non-strategic' nuclear weapons count. Of particular interest is any effort that lessens the possibility of nuclear terrorism. This is a case of carefully proceeding, and anything that does not weaken US *national* security will likely increase *global* security.

Just as dividing by zero in ordinary arithmetic yields no answer, there is no formula for the number of non-strategic nuclear weapons it takes to equal one strategic nuclear weapon. Even the question itself is not very useful because as Mr. Owl showed us, without clear definitions, the answer is always going to be "It depends."

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