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Russia's Doctrine on the Use of Nuclear Weapons

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Introduction

This paper attempts to outline some basic provisions of Russia's nuclear doctrine regarding the use of nuclear weapons. The latest Russian official doctrinal documents, including The National Security Concept and The Military Doctrine have been approved by the President Vladimir Putin in the first half of the 2000. Since then Russian foreign and security policies have changed dramatically; despite some serious disagreements with the USA and other NATO member-states the Kremlin's strategy is aimed at cooperation with the leading Western nations in security area. Yet the nuclear doctrine remains as it was formulated in the days when Russia's strategy has been overburdened by anti-Western attitudes and has exaggerated role of nuclear weapons in security policy. Few days ago only, a number of signals come from the Kremlin that some Russian strategic attitudes with respect to nuclear weapons may be changed have. President Putin has instructed his lieutenants to prepare a new version of the Russian national security concept with the main focus on international terrorism as principal threat to the security of the nation. If so, many believe, the current accent on nuclear deterrence may be replaced by preemptive actions against terrorist groups and regimes supporting them. Yet this is a kind of guesswork up to now; nobody can make certain forecasts when discussing formation of Russian security policy.

The Rise of Unpredictable World

The end of the political and ideological East-West conflict has changed the nature of strategic stability. Proliferation of WMD and their delivery systems, notably, missiles; local conflicts; and extremism resulting in terrorist attacks become more and more important security challenges making development of a stable and predictable global strategic situation far from completing. Growing tensions in the Islamic world from Indonesia to Algeria make developments in these regions hardly predictable.

The international strategic scene may undergo further dramatic changes, whatever improbable today they may look. In the mid-1980s no one regarded the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, or the unification of Germany, as more or less probable events. The global unpredictability implies that some scenarios, which threaten vital interests and the very existence of many states, cannot be ruled out. Hence, in the process of formulating the security policy, one has to base it on the worst-case scenarios and do not rule out the possibility of emergence of various military security threats.

During the Cold War the major mission of nuclear weapons was thought as deterring nuclear or massive conventional attacks of a hypothetical enemy from the other end of the East-West confrontation. However, the most probable conflicts of the future, if the current trends do not radically change, will hardly require such a mission of nuclear weapons of any kind. At the same time, the aforementioned unpredictability makes the nuclear powers to preserve some of their nuclear arsenals to ensure national security, if dramatic military-political changes occur. Meanwhile, the overestimation of the nuclear weapons and their treatment as the absolute security means diverts the attention and resources from the modernization of conventional armed forces, development of the protection means against terrorism and information warfare, which seem to be the most probable security challenges in the foreseeable future.

The Array of Nuclear Strategies

Western nuclear nations preserve their nuclear arsenals mainly as security assurances against the unpredictable challenges. Yet in the wake of the 21st century their strategy is targeted mainly against the challenges caused by local and regional conflicts. This requires enhancing conventional armed forces and introduction of the achievements of the information revolution to raise their combat efficiency and implement the Revolution in Military Affairs.

China, India, Pakistan, and presumably Israel have a different view on nuclear weapons. China modernizes its nuclear forces and develops three new types of strategic missiles, new intermediate-range missiles, and two new sub-strategic dual-use missile systems. Israel considers the nuclear weapons to be a reliable deterrent against WMD attacks on the part of Islamic states. India regards its missile and nuclear arsenal as the means to contain China in case of war with Pakistan and as the means to eliminate Pakistan's nuclear might. Pakistan resorts to nuclear weapons as a tool to deter India against conventional or nuclear attack.

Russia has yet to formulate a coherent nuclear policy, which would adequately meet economic capabilities and security challenges. The so called nuclear and missile lobby has proclaimed nuclear deterrence with strategic forces as nearly the only way to

maintain national security. Another group in the Russian military establishment wants to focus on the crisis of conventional forces, which may be employed in low-intensity conflicts on the Russian territory and in the neighboring states in the south of Russia.

Reductions of Russia's Nuclear Arsenal

In the 1990s, Russia's nuclear arsenal reduced in 4.5-5 times. There were several reasons for such reductions. Firstly, it was the drastic fall of Russian economy and industrial capabilities. Since 1991 Russia has no resources to maintain the previous nuclear force of about 10 thousand warheads on strategic delivery vehicles and about 20 thousand of sub-strategic nukes.

Another important factor was the downsizing in 3 times of the Russian Armed Forces in the 1990s. So, the nuclear weapons were also reduced, since their amount was related to the numerical strength and structure of the Armed Forces. Besides, like in the United States, the nuclear artillery projectiles and mines could be quite dangerous for Russia's own troops due to the quickly changing combat environment. No one wanted to risk the soldiers and expose them to radiation or nuclear strike by its own units.

The 1990-1992 reductions in the Soviet nuclear arsenal coincided with the process of nuclear weapons withdrawal to the Russian territory. The demise of the Warsaw Pact resulted in accelerated withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Central and Eastern Europe and the collapse of the ex-USSR fueled the removal of strategic and sub-strategic nuclear munitions from the former Soviet republics to Russia.

Despite the significant (4-5 times) reduction in nuclear weapons, Russia is the second, or if to add tactical nuclear warheads, the first nuclear power in the world. This coincides with the fact that nuclear weapons continue to play an important part in the Russian strategy. If so, Moscow has to elaborate and officially approve the coherent guidelines concerning the development and potential use of these weapons in armed conflicts under the current military-political circumstances. If there is no such concept, the maintenance of large nuclear arsenals may be accounted for by inertia of military construction and adherence to the Cold War legacy.

Russia's Official Views on Nuclear Weapons

Russia's official nuclear policy is stated in a number of official documents. Important concepts concerning practical approaches towards these weapons are reflected in the scenarios of military exercises. Finally, the official policy of the states in the area of defense is reflected in the state decisions on key matters of military development.

The most important directives - the National Security Concept and the Military Doctrine approved by Vladimir Putin in 2000 - establish the general framework of the Russian nuclear policy, but do not answer some key questions. These documents do not cover separately the issues pertaining to strategic and sub-strategic nuclear forces (with one exception) but normally speak about nuclear arms in general. This may imply that officially stated guidelines for nuclear weapons relate both to strategic and sub-strategic arms.

The aforementioned documents reiterate some basic principles formulated in the early 1990s. They name the countries, against which Russia will not use its nuclear weapons. These are non-nuclear weapon states parties to the NPT, which have no allied commitments to nuclear-weapon states and do not act together with them against Russia or its allies. Nuclear weapons are regarded as the means to deter both nuclear and large-scale conventional aggression against Russia and its allies. Russia's nuclear arsenal should be sufficient to inflict pre-set damage to any aggressor under any circumstances. For instance, the National Security Concept notes,

"The most important mission of the Russian Federation is to ensure deterrence in order to prevent the aggression of any scale, including nuclear, against Russia or its allies. The Russian Federation should possess nuclear forces capable of inflicting pre-set damage to any aggressor - a state or a coalition of states - under any circumstances." ¹

This formula is reiterated in the Military Doctrine. However, in a different section of the document (mission of the Armed Forces) the doctrine focuses on other issues. The strategic forces are charged with the mission of inflicting pre-set damage. Among key missions of the Armed Forces are

"maintenance of the structure, strength, combat and mobilization readiness and training of the strategic nuclear forces, forces and means that ensure their functioning and use and command and control systems at the level enough to inflict pre-set damage to an aggressor under any circumstances." ²

Thus, one may assume that the Russian sub-strategic nuclear forces are charged with a different mission, rather than with inflicting pre-set damage. However, these missions are not stated in any open source. At the same time, the 2000 National Security Concept and the Military Doctrine were stripped of some provisions present in the earlier versions. For instance, the Major Guidelines of the Military Doctrine of November 1993 maintained that

"any, even limited, use of nuclear weapons in warfare even by one of the parties may provoke a massive use of nuclear weapons and lead to devastating consequences." ³

This provision was left out in 2000 and this proves the assumption that Russian military thinking recognizes a possibility of limited nuclear strike, which will not automatically escalate to a large-scale nuclear war. It is not clear, however, if such strike should be made with sub-strategic weapons or it is a matter of limited use of strategic arms.

Russia's official documents approved in early 2000 do not clarify the issue of nuclear threshold. Meanwhile, the evolution of the appropriate provisions indicates that the Russian military elite thinks about limited use of nuclear weapons and even about first use of them. The 1997 National Security Concept spoke about the terms of nuclear weapons use,

"Russia keeps the right to use all means available to it, if the aggression against Russia threatens its very existence as an independent sovereign state." ⁴

Although the criteria for "existence as an independent sovereign state" were not mentioned in the 1997 National Security Concept, such provision provides for quite limited number of cases of nuclear weapons use. Besides, this provision must have spoken about strategic weapons. The threat to the existence of Russia may occur if the enemy intends to use nuclear weapons and, hence, there is a need for deterrence or pre-emptive strategic strike. However, the new National Security Concept gave different interpretation and argued that Russia might use

"all means available to it [Russia - Auth.], including nuclear weapons, if it is necessary to repel the armed aggression and if all other crisis management measures have been exhausted or turned out to be inefficient." ⁵

This formula, in fact, expanded the opportunities for using nuclear weapons in conflict. It did not define "crisis", "management", did not identify any criteria for efficiency or non-efficiency of crisis management measures, etc. The absence of such definitions enables Russia to regard the measures as exhausted or inefficient at any stage of the military confrontation. Such uncertainty makes us assume that Russia may resort to strategic and sub-strategic nuclear weapons.

The same conclusion can be made if one analyzes the 2000 Military Doctrine, which states,

"The Russian Federation keeps the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear weapons or other WMD against Russia or its allies, as well as in response to the large-scale conventional aggression in critical situations for the Russian national security." ⁶

This formula narrows the spectrum of conditions, when Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons. However, some questions arise:

- Firstly, there is no clear notion of the "critical situation for the national security" and this term may be interpreted differently.
- Secondly, it is not clear whether Russia is ready to use its nuclear weapons if one of its allies (like Belarus) is under WMD attack or suffers from a large-scale conventional aggression.
- Thirdly, it is not clear what the correlation between "the critical situation" and a large-scale aggression against the ally is.
- Fourthly, WMD include chemical and biological weapons and the aforementioned formula may imply that Russia is willing to use the nukes against a small-scale use of chemical weapons in local conflicts involving one of the Russian allies.
- Finally, the very fact that two documents approved nearly simultaneously have different provisions concerning the principal component of state military strategy seems strange. Meanwhile, Russia's willingness to use nuclear weapons against the large-scale conventional aggression replicates the logic of non-strategic nuclear deterrence typical of the Cold War.

Actually, these documents state that Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons first in armed conflicts (if Russia or its allies are involved in such conflicts) and there are some uncertain terms for the use of nuclear weapons. This might demonstrate Russia's desire to preserve the freedom of maneuver (including the choice of nuclear weapons) if the military-political situation exacerbates. Thus, Russian official documents confirm indirectly the possibility of limited nuclear war with the use of sub-strategic nuclear weapons, although they do not mention this issue directly.

Nuclear Exercises

Some different conclusions can be made after analyzing the results of the large-scale command and staff exercise "West-99". The exercise took place in June 1999 immediately after the NATO's operation against Yugoslavia and its scenario reflected some established views of the Russian military. According to it, NATO forces launched a massive air and missile non-nuclear strike against Belarus and Kaliningrad district. The Russian-Belarusian armed grouping cannot stop the escalation and repel the aggression. Under these circumstances, the Russian leadership decides to make a demonstrative nuclear strike against the targets in the deep rear of the enemy. The strategic bombers performed this task .⁷

The other deduction may be concluded from command and staff exercise took place in early Autumn 2002. Independent experts believed that during these exercises Russian strategic nuclear forces have performed not demonstrative yet massive nuclear strike.

Thus, military exercise normally reflecting the views of the military leadership indicates Russia's readiness to use strategic weapons for both demonstrative strike, which is a form of a limited nuclear war, and also massive strikes. At the same time, there was no information of using sub-strategic nuclear weapons in the course of the exercise.

Besides, according to some analysts, the April 1999 decisions of the Security Council did not only lead to a substantially growing role of nuclear weapons in Russia's military policy, but also indicated the desire for limited use of strategic nukes in armed conflicts (including local conflicts) within the concept of expanded nuclear deterrence. Vladimir Yakovlev, then Commander-in Chief of the Strategic Rocket Forces, gave the following definition to this term,

*"[...] Expanded nuclear deterrence [...] means that the interests of the SMF and strategic nuclear forces will not only include nuclear and large-scale conventional warfare, but regional and even local conflicts."*⁸

Such ideas, according to the Russian press, were typical also of Victor Mikhailov, former Minister of Atomic Energy, who tried to change the vision of nuclear weapons only as a WMD. Pavel Felgengauer, a Russian analyst, wrote in 1999,

*"Their logic is simple: nuclear weapons will again become an effective policy tool if the threat of nuclear strikes is more realistic. For this purpose they need the opportunity to make point low-yield nuclear strikes against the military facilities in any part of the world. It is presumed that such point strikes will not lead to an immediate nuclear war."*⁹

The decisions of the Russian leadership also indicate that strategic weapons have certain priority over sub-strategic arms. Practically all decisions concerning nuclear weapons dealt with strategic forces. In general, the set of decisions approved in Russia in 1998-1999 reflected the interests of the Strategic Rocket Forces. It resulted in a substantial shift in military construction in favor of strategic nuclear forces exacerbating the crisis of the general-purpose forces.

Nuclear Weapons as Compensation for Degrading Conventional Forces

The Russian military and civilian experts mostly agree that Russia's conventional forces are not able and will not be able in the foreseeable future to ensure reliable national security and, therefore, the role of nuclear weapons increases. This opinion was formed in the mid-1990s. In 1996, Andrei Kokoshin, then First Deputy Defense Minister emphasized that nuclear might, especially strategic forces, played an important part in ensuring Russia's status on the global arena. Moreover, he noted that nuclear forces, including sub-strategic weapons, could compensate for the weakness of conventional armed forces. In mid-1996, he pointed out that

"an important component of nuclear deterrence is not only strategic nuclear force, but operational-tactical and tactical nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Under the current circumstances, when there is no opportunity to build substantial general-purpose force at all azimuths, the nuclear shield becomes even more important to prevent the aggression." [10](#)

There is no doubt that degrading of Russia's general-purpose forces takes place. But it cannot be a sufficient explanation for the targets of Russia's nuclear policy - among potential enemies to be neutralized with nuclear deterrence are NATO and the United States, but not China. For instance, Gen. Victor Yesin, former Chief of the Directorate of Military Construction of the Security Council's staff, maintained,

"In the large-scale war Russia will never (and this is scientifically forecasted, whatever economic growth is) be able to resist such organizations, as NATO, with conventional weapons only. It will not be able to repel the massive conventional aggression on the part of this bloc. This accounts for our focus on using nuclear weapons to ensure Russia's security against external threats." [11](#)

What Are The Targets?

Up to the September 11, the large part of the Russian elite regards a new stage of confrontation with the West as an inevitable or, at least, a probable scenario. Many of them still believe that the current Putin's course towards cooperation with the West is either a wrong strategy, or a tactical ruse. On the one hand, this reflects the adherence to the intellectual and psychological legacy of the Soviet period. On the other hand, this meets the interests of some groups connected with the huge missile and nuclear complex formed in the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

The majority of the Russian expert community shares anti-Western views, but cannot agree on the role of different types of nuclear weapons in deterring against the potential threat from the West, on the terms and principles of their use. There are two major opinions concerning this issue.

The first one presumes that sub-strategic nuclear weapons have lost their significance, as a long limited nuclear war without use of strategic weapons is not probable anymore. Therefore, strategic forces should be responsible for deterrence and can prevent the conflict or ensure the de-escalation of hostilities. Sub-strategic weapons may only be regarded as some supplement to the strategic nuclear forces. Sergei Rogov, the Director of the Institute for US and Canadian Studies, argued that

"in case of war against the nuclear-weapon enemy enjoying military superiority, TNW may be regarded as the means to demonstrate Russia's readiness to nuclear escalation if the aggression continues. TNW by themselves cannot determine the result of the war between nuclear-weapon states or coalitions." [12](#)

The natural consequence of such approach is the idea of seeking new balance of strategic nuclear weapons with the United States. The establishment of a new parity is regarded as the major way to ensure strategic stability in its traditional sense of mutual nuclear deterrence.

The second view believes in the special role of sub-strategic nukes in deterring a large-scale aggression against Russia. It presumes that the greatest danger originates from the possible NATO actions replicating the operations against Yugoslavia or Iraq. Alexei Arbatov mentioned,

"The key strategic mission of the Russian Federation is to rule out the possibility of NATO's unpunished series of selective missile and air strikes of long duration. [...] It would be justified if Russia made a selective nuclear strike with the use of TNW against the facilities that serve for the aggression [...]. Then the other side will have to face a difficult dilemma: to stop the aggression and to accept the defeat, or to response with a nuclear strike, which will be followed by escalation up to the level of strategic nuclear exchange with devastating consequences for everybody. Since there is no better option, in the foreseeable future this will be an affordable and credible concept of expanded nuclear deterrence." [13](#)

According to Alexei Arbatov, to accomplish this mission, Russia needs several hundreds of air-launched and sea-launched tactical munitions and missiles (such as Iskander-type missiles) . [14](#)

The principal distinction between the two concepts is that the second group of experts recognizes the possibility of conducting limited nuclear war with sub-strategic weapons and achieve victory with a relatively massed use of such weapons. It is presumed that NATO will put up with large but acceptable casualties and will not escalate the conflict further in order to avoid the catastrophe. However, the

implementation of this stratagem may involve Russia in a quite risky situation. What if NATO decides to prevent the selective use of nuclear weapons by Russia?

Thus, the key point of discussion on the role of sub-strategic nuclear weapons is the issue of the possibility and prospects for limited nuclear warfare at the Western theater of war. The use of such weapons is regarded as a stage in escalating the conflict to a strategic level, or as an instrument of preventing the aggression, notably massive missile and bomb attacks. It is presumed that the potential enemy will not run the risk of escalation, which may result in his total destruction.

However, one should not forget about a fundamentally different approach, which is quite widespread in the Russian elite. Its supporters believe that the *absolutization* of nuclear weapons is counter-productive in terms of Russia's security, for its scarce resources are diverted from some really serious problems. According to *Kommersant-Vlast*,

"In the last ten years Russia has been trying to convince everybody in its peaceful intentions, but the military strategy has not changed a lot. The major mission of the armed forces is still the retaliation of the large-scale aggression with the help of nuclear weapons and inflicting devastating damage to the enemy. However, no one, including the generals, has ever believed in the possibility of large-scale aggression. It has always seemed unlikely that someone would ever dare to attack Russia protected with the nuclear umbrella. [...] Russia will not be able to focus on nuclear weapons. The major threat to the national security today are Chechen militants and Islamic fundamentalists, rather than NATO with its new members." ¹⁵

Such approach, perhaps, coincides with Putin's position. In April 2000, he emphasized that

"[...] major challenges to Russia, taking into account the global situation, today will originate from local conflicts. Russia will be pulled apart not with nuclear weapons or nuclear threat. We witness today the attempts of pulling Russia apart - local conflicts." ¹⁶

Nonetheless, the Russian military, military-economic and partly academic communities believe that nuclear weapons (strategic, or strategic and sub-strategic together) can ensure the national security under the current circumstances, compensate for the weakness of conventional forces and deter the aggressor.

What About China?

At present, there are no sources of direct military threat to Russia in the Far East. The border settlement with China, the agreement on confidence-building measures and conventional arms reduction in the regions adjacent to the former Soviet-Chinese border and general normalization of relations with China in the recent decade have stabilized the strategic situation in the region. There are no more sources of tension, which used to raise fair concerns of the Soviet Union. ¹⁷

China, on its part, is not interested in deteriorating relations with Russia, bearing in mind Beijing's differences with the United States and the potential exacerbation of the Taiwan problem. Russia also is a source of high military technologies for Russia. Under these circumstances, in the near future China will not be a source of military threats to Russia. The Chinese foreign policy will be balanced and Beijing will try to avoid needless tensions in relations with Russia and the West.

Yet, China's tangible economic success and demographic potential raise the issue of the nature and evolution of its activities beyond the Chinese borders in the distant future. The questions (without answer) are what the Chinese policy will be, whether Beijing will successfully complete the modernization of its economy and armed forces. In this light, China is often seen as a serious source of uncertainty in the global system. This uncertainty does not necessarily mean an automatic threat to Russia, but will make Moscow plan its security activities to prevent any negative scenarios.

This, and a lot of other analyses, proves that key security challenges to Russia are caused by local instability and conflicts. Russia's persistent emphasis on nuclear deterrence limits Russia's maneuver in local and regional wars (in the spectrum from low-intensity operations to nuclear warfare). Limited or demonstrative use of nuclear weapons in the armed conflict is unacceptable for the world public opinion. The threat or use of nuclear weapons, when there is no threat or use of such weapons against Russia, mean the breach of the limits of acceptable use of military force. The targets of such demonstrative strikes will do their best to prevent it with political and military means; this increases the danger of total nuclear war.

Conclusion

The major conclusion is that Russia's nuclear weapons cannot perform the mission of deterrence against the hypothetical aggression at the regional level. Such aggression on the part of NATO or China is hardly probable in the foreseeable future, whereas the major security challenges to Russia originate from the conflicts in the Caucasus and Central Asia. However, these are political calculations, which are not always convincing in the process of military planning, since the latter normally proceeds from the worst-case scenario. Nonetheless, if in the hypothetical conflict Russia demonstrates its readiness for the limited use of nuclear weapons, the potential enemy

will have all reasons for making a pre-emptive strike. And then the Russian leadership will have to face a difficult dilemma - to agree to a devastating escalation of a nuclear exchange or to recognize the defeat.

The only realistic option for deterring the new threats would be to cooperate with the West, when it is possible and necessary, notably to unite the efforts in combating extremist movements and regimes in the Third World. The implementation of confidence-building and transparency measures with respect to nuclear weapons would become an important element of the new stable and predictable military-political situation in Russia-American relationship. At the same time, the unpredictability of global development encourages Russia to keep its nuclear arsenal. And in this context, it would be useful to seek minimal nuclear deterrence with the help of strategic forces.

Footnotes

1. National Security Concept, January 10, 2000.
2. Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, April 22, 2000, p. 6.
3. Key Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (Summary). *Krasnaya Zvezda*, November 19, 1993, Appendix, p. 5.
4. National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, December 17, 1997.
5. National Security Concept, January 10, 2000.
6. Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, April 22, 2000, p. 5
7. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, June 24, 1999
8. Sergei Grigoryev, "The Military-Political Trump Card of Russia. Interview with Vladimir Yakovlev, Commander-in-Chief of the SRF". *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, No. 49, December 17-23, 1999, p. 1.
9. *Segodnya*, May 6, 1999.
10. *Segodnya*, July 7, 1996
11. *Yaderny Kontrol*, No. 2, Vol. 6, March-April 2000, p. 33
12. Sergei Rogov, "Russia and Nuclear Weapons". *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, No. 47, December 11, 1998, p. 4.
13. Alexei Arbatov, *Security: Russia's Choice*. M., 1999, pp. 370-371

14. Ibid. It is noteworthy that by speaking about the possibility of arming Iskander missiles with nuclear warheads, Arbatov calls for actual abrogation of the 1991-1992 TNW initiatives.
15. Nikolai Petrov, "War Against an Improbable Enemy". Kommersant-Vlast, July 25, 2000, pp. 18-19.
16. Kommersant, April 15, 2000
17. The area of application of the Agreement on Armed Forces Reduction contains the 100-km areas on both sides of the borders of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China. The agreement covers only the Army, the tactical aviation and the air defense aviation. The Frontier Guard units are not subject to reduction. The SMF, tactical nuclear weapons, the Navy, strategic aviation, air defense missile units, reconnaissance aircraft and electronic warfare aircraft are not subject to the reduction. The problem is that due to geographical reasons it is difficult for Russia to station the appropriate forces beyond 100 km, whereas China can concentrate large contingents at the distance of 100 km from the border with Russia.