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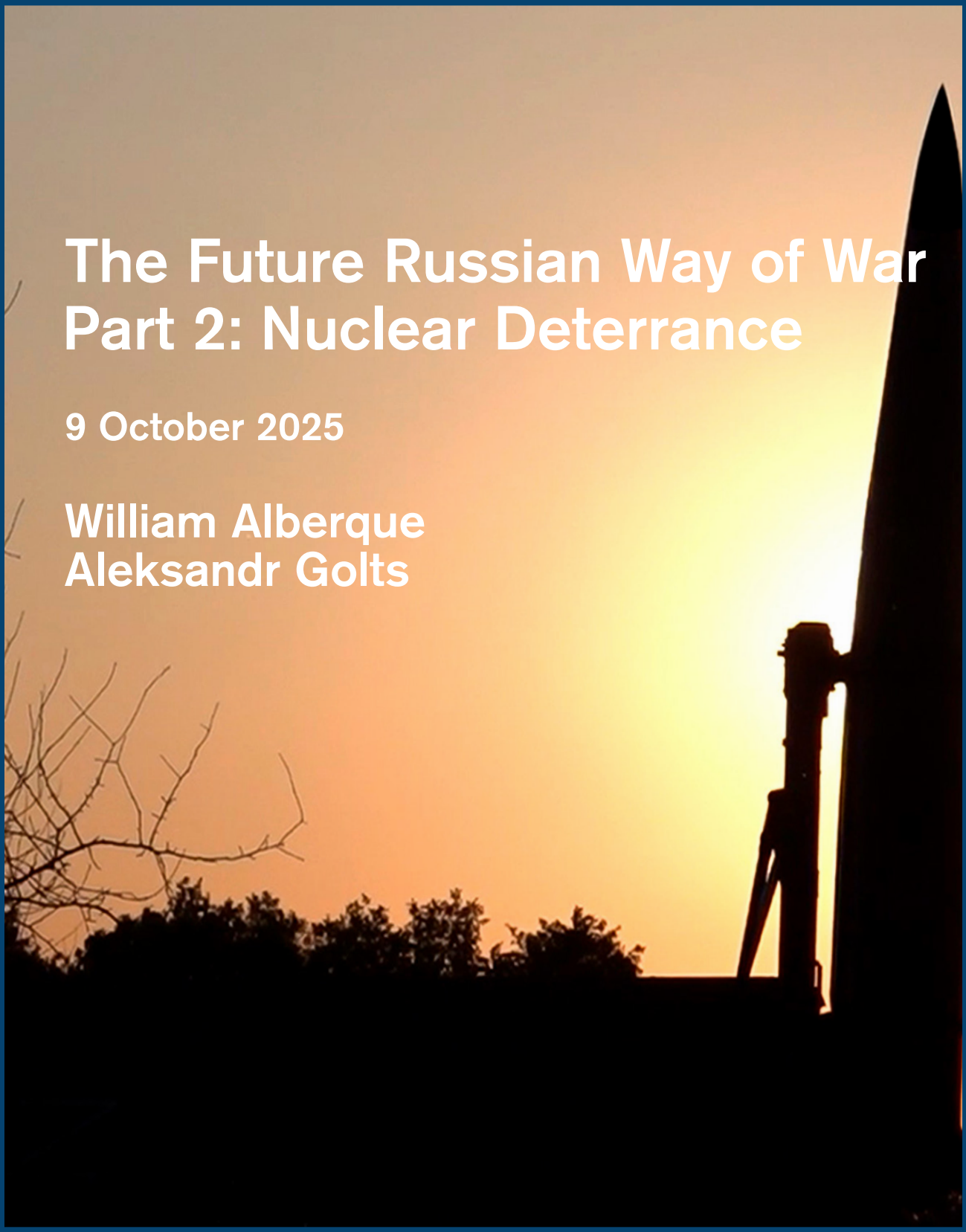

The Future Russian Way of War Part 2: Nuclear Deterrance

9 October 2025

William Alberque
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Introduction

In May 2025, the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs gathered a group of leading specialists and researchers focusing on various dimensions of Russian security and military affairs. The conference, "The Future Russian Way of War", was organized around four broad themes: 1) state mobilisation; 2) nuclear deterrence; 3) military reform; and 4) hybrid tools.

Part 2: Nuclear deterrence

This is the second installment to be published from the conference, centered around its second theme, nuclear deterrence. It contains two papers.

The first paper, by William Alberque, a Senior Adjunct Fellow at the Pacific Forum, deals with Russian nuclear doctrine, with a particular emphasis on non-strategic nuclear weapons – that is, weapons designed for strikes at the tactical (battlefield) and operational (theater) ranges.

The second paper, by Aleksandr Golts, an analyst at the Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies at the Swedish Institute for International Affairs, discusses the concept of 'extended deterrence'. In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, he argues, Russia's political leadership has come to interpret nuclear deterrence more broadly. Nuclear weapons are now used more proactively, to help Russia resolve any international conflicts on its own terms.

Change and Continuity in Russian Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons Doctrine

William Alberque

There have been many studies of Russian nuclear doctrine, but almost all of them focus on strategic weapons; that is, Russia's policy of deterring war against its own perception of a peer competitor. Few, if any, explore Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) doctrine in detail. Understanding Russian NSNW doctrine could improve understanding how to enhance deterrence against future Russian threats to NATO.

Defining NSNW

The simplest definition of NSNW comes from the Cold War, when the US and USSR were trying to differentiate between strategic nuclear weapons – which were to be limited by arms control – and non-strategic nuclear weapons. The definition that the two sides arrived upon is that strategic nuclear weapons are those designed to deliver nuclear warheads from the continental United States to the Soviet Union and vice versa. NSNW, therefore, were defined as all nuclear weapons excluded from that definition, that is, nuclear weapons not designed to deliver nuclear payloads between the heartlands of the two countries. For US-USSR arms control, then, strategic weapons included nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles, sub-launched ballistic missiles, and air-launched cruise missiles launched from long-range bombers. NSNW are those weapons designed for strikes at the tactical (battlefield) and operational (theater) ranges.

A NATO-Russia dialogue in 2007 provided two Russian definitions of strategic, tactical and operational nuclear weapons, one political, which mirrors the definition given above, and one military.

- Political Definition for NSNW: All nuclear weapons that do not fall into the class of strategic nuclear weapons, that is, weapons with less than 5500 km ranges to include Tactical and Operational nuclear weapons.
- Military Definition: Tactical nuclear weapons are designed to engage objects in the tactical depth of enemy deployment (up to 300 km) to accomplish a tactical mission. Under certain conditions, tactical nuclear weapons can be involved in operational and strategic missions.
- Operational nuclear weapons are designed to engage objects in the operational depth of enemy deployment (up to 500 km) with the purpose of accomplishing an operational mission. Under certain conditions, operational nuclear weapons might be involved in the accomplishment of strategic missions; in exceptional cases, they might be involved in the accomplishment of tactical missions.[1]

Soviet strategy

Soviet military doctrine evolved throughout the Cold War but consistently held on to three main tasks: 'defence of the homeland, defeat of military adversaries, and seizure of vital connecting territory'.[2] Soviet nuclear doctrine and thought evolved more radically throughout the same period, starting off from a posture of disadvantage compared to the early development of the US nuclear arsenal, then attempting to catch up and largely mirroring US nuclear doctrine.

The Soviet Union had a conventional force advantage facing Europe of more than 3:1 in 1948 and maintained an advantage of more than 1.5:1 through to the end of the Cold War.[3] The US homeland was safe from Soviet troops, protected by two oceans, but Europe remained vulnerable to conventional attack. Some European NATO member states doubted that the United States would risk a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union over a land war in Europe. Rather than build a force necessary to win at the conventional level, NATO planners instead relied on large numbers of battlefield nuclear weapons to stop a potential Soviet invasion, resulting in 7,100 NATO nuclear warheads by 1971.[4]

THE BALANCE OF GROUND FORCES ON THE CENTRAL FRONT ACCORDING TO PESSIMISTIC AND OPTIMISTIC ASSESSMENTS

Assessments	Size of Warsaw Pact Threat After 30 Days Mobilization	Warsaw Pact/NATO Force Ratio a/ M-Day b/	M+14 b/	M+30 b/
Pessimistic c/	128 Divisions	1.5	2.4	2.4
Optimistic d/	85 Divisions	1.4	1.6	1.4

SOURCES: Derived from Lucas Fischer, Defending the Central Front: The Balance of Forces (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper No. 127, Autumn 1976), pp. 8, 11, 23. For alternative assumptions and data, see John M. Collins, "American and Soviet Military Strength, Contemporary Trends Compared, 1970-76," in Congressional Record (August 5, 1977), pp. S14096-99.

a/ Refers to strength of combat units; assumes NATO begins mobilizing one week after Pact starts.

b/ M-Day is the first day of mobilization. M+14 is two weeks after the start of mobilization; M+30 is one month after mobilization.

Table 6

FORCE RATIOS, WARSAW PACT/NATO

Force	1948	1953	1956	1959
Manpower	3.6	1.7	1.8	1.9
Division-equivalents	5.6	3.5	3.9	4.0
Tanks	8.0	4.4	6.2	5.0
Armored vehicles	4.5	2.7	3.1	2.6
Antitank weapons	3.6	1.4	1.3	2.0
Artillery	6.5	3.3	3.1	3.3
Aircraft	3.0	1.5	1.6	1.7

SOURCE: Author's estimate. Warsaw Pact force levels are taken from Wolfe, *Soviet Power and Europe, 1945-1970*, and Karber, "The Central European Arms Race, 1948-1980."

Figure 1 Force Ratios between Warsaw Pact and NATO forces from 1948-1959 (left) and in 1979 (right).

Source: Richard L. Kugler, Laying the Foundations: The Evolution of NATO in the 1950s, A Rand Note, N-3105-FF/RC, June 1990, (left), and Assessing the NATO/Warsaw Military Balance, Budget Issue Paper for Fiscal Year 1979, Congressional Budget Office, Congress of the United States, December 1977 (right)

The Soviet Union, in contrast to the United States, did not have a buffer from potentially hostile neighbours. It therefore sought to create a buffer zone by controlling bordering states and maintaining overwhelming land force capability to defend the heartland.[5] In a conflict, the Soviet Union sought to prevent escalation to nuclear weapons so it could prevail at the conventional level – the opposite of the NATO strategy.

After its first nuclear test in 1949, the Soviet Union quickly incorporated nuclear weapons into its battle plans to balance the advantage held by the United States and NATO. Its army took the lead, adapting nuclear weapons to battlefield tasks and amplifying the capability of the artillery. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev believed that nuclear forces could replace massive standing armies, threaten the US homeland and nullify US advantage in strategic air forces while cutting the number of deployed troops.

The Sputnik launch signalled Soviet advantage in rocket forces, allowing the military to shift its attention from nuclear war on the battlefront to nuclear strikes in the rear to defeat NATO reinforcement and win.[6] Nonetheless, the Soviet Union still built and forward deployed several thousands short-range missiles, rockets, artillery, landmines, torpedoes and anti-aircraft missiles to match NATO capabilities.

One significant change to Soviet NSNW posture during the Cold War was nuclear sharing. The Soviet Union began to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of its Warsaw Pact allies, notably Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria.[7] It also established nuclear-sharing arrangements similar to NATO's with Poland[8] and Hungary,[9] as well as East Germany in the 1960s. Soviet warheads were withdrawn from the territory of Warsaw Pact member states in 1989 and 1990.[10]

The Soviet Union did not intend to devastate all of Western Europe with nuclear strikes, seeking instead to occupy and draw on its resources in a post-war environment. Thus, it sought to target critical military targets such as significant seaports and airports in Europe, while seeking to devastate superior US industrial capacity.[11] The Soviet Union knew that NATO forces would escalate to nuclear weapons first in an attempt to reclaim their position on the battlefield. The Soviet Union would reply with massed strikes to open holes in the NATO lines, push manoeuvre units into rear areas and destroy any remaining NATO nuclear weapons in the tactical and operational areas, while striking critical infrastructure with intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs).[12] The Soviet Union would thus deliver a knock-out blow to NATO forces while preventing reinforcement at critical sea and airports,[13] in the belief that sclerotic NATO decision making would prevent further escalation.[14] This theory of active defence would allow the Soviet Union to prevail by using its conventional superiority combined with surprise and speed, using counter-force NSNW attacks in Europe to destroy massed NATO forces and critical targets. However, the Soviet Union understood the risks of a theatre war turning into a strategic nuclear exchange and prepared to survive a strategic exchange if necessary.[15]

This belief in the ability of the Soviet Army to prevail against NATO and to fight and win a nuclear war ended with the premiership of Mikhail Gorbachev, who was unwilling to risk a nuclear war with the United States.[16] The competing technological trends for increasing missile accuracy and the possibility of missile defence also began to shift Soviet thinking[17] away from the tactical and theatre battlefields and the primacy of the army.[18] Instead, Gorbachev prioritised stabilising the relationship with the United States, embarking on comprehensive arms control talks that resulted in the Reykjavik Summit in 1986 and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987, which eliminated all US and Soviet ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of more than 500 km.

Russian strategy

At the end of the Cold War, the United States hoped that the threat of global nuclear war had ended. The break-up of the Soviet Union presented an unprecedented opportunity for both the United States and the Soviet Union to radically reduce their nuclear arsenals. Strategic arms control between the sides, in the form of the INF Treaty, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNI), vastly reduced the two sides' nuclear arsenals. The PNIs included unilateral pledges to destroy all nuclear-artillery rounds, mines and warheads for short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and to remove all NSNWs from ships, general-purpose submarines and naval aircraft, surface-to-air missiles and tactical aircraft. A substantial proportion of the removed warheads would be destroyed; the rest were to be placed in central storage.

While the INF and START treaties were successfully implemented, however, full Russian implementation of the PNIs in the 1990s is more doubtful.[19] In addition, the first Gulf War forced a rethink of the role of NSNW in Russia's defence.[20] In November 1993, Russia's military doctrine eliminated the Soviet no-first-use pledge,[21] as doubts increased about the reliability of its strategic nuclear forces due to a lack of funds and increased corruption.[22] US and NATO use of long-range, precision-guided weapons against Yugoslavia in 1999, which forced regime change, sent shockwaves through Russia, resulting in a revision of Russian nuclear doctrine, a root-and-branch reinvestment in its nuclear enterprise and restoration of its NSNW capabilities.[23] The new classified doctrine, some details of which were leaked,[24] made it clear that Russia would rely on theatre nuclear weapons to deter and defeat the United States and NATO in the event of an attack.[25] At the same time, public debate on the need for Russia to withdraw from the INF Treaty gained traction.[26]

As a result of these changes, in the face of NATO's superior conventional forces, Russia's Zapad-1999 military exercise was redesigned to demonstrate its ability to defeat NATO using theatre nuclear weapons.[27].[28] While such a strategy has been hotly debated under the phrase 'escalate to de-escalate',[29] it has always been the strategy of both sides to deter conflict by demonstrating the will and capability to inflict enough damage to make the initiation of hostilities not worth any potential benefit. Zapad-1999 made it clear that Russia had fully reintegrated conventional and nuclear war fighting.[30] Russia's 2000 Military Doctrine set out the need for nuclear deterrence to prevent regime change in Russia.[31] President Vladimir Putin therefore began a priority reinvestment in and reinvention of Russia's nuclear[32] and conventional forces.[33] This decision was vindicated following US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, and improved use of conventional precision-strike to prevail in the Second Gulf War, thus driving an increased Russian reliance on NSNW.[34]

Russia's financial position improved in the mid-2000s as rising oil prices provided Putin with the funds needed for nuclear and conventional force modernisation. In 2007, Putin declared open conflict with the West and privately sought to annul the INF Treaty.[35] Development of Russia's new Iskander nuclear-capable ground-launched short-range ballistic and cruise missiles designed to defeat NATO missile defences had also been completed.

Russia began to increase the size and scope of its annual high-end exercises (starting with Zapad-2013, then Kavkaz, Tsentr and Vostok), usually against an 'alliance of nations', and to combine these with nuclear exercises. Russia also began development of the 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile with a range of more than 2,000 km in 2011.[36] It also began to field other new dual-capable/NSNW systems, such as air- and sea-launched cruise missiles interchangeable among multiple delivery platforms.

Russian nuclear doctrine

Russia's annexation of Crimea on 21 March 2014 brought Russian nuclear threats into sharper focus. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that Russia might resort to nuclear weapons if Ukraine tried to retake Crimea, making specific reference to doctrine.[37] Putin claimed the same in 2015.[38] Russia also threatened nuclear strikes against Denmark in March 2015 over missile defence.[39]

Russia's nuclear threats are consistent with an effort to deter the United States and NATO from engaging in direct combat. This has been very successful to date. Less successful have been efforts to coerce them into not providing certain equipment and capabilities for Ukraine.[40] The public debate on nuclear weapons in Russia now focuses on two factors: the inevitability of deeper conflict with the United States;[41] and the role of nuclear versus non-nuclear deterrence in the inevitable conflict.

This debate illustrates the currents that have resulted in Russia revising its official public policy statements on the potential use of nuclear weapons in a move away from limiting factors in potential nuclear use and a lowering of the threshold for use. The 2020 nuclear doctrine focused on strategic threats to Russia, including use of nuclear weapons against Russia or the use of conventional precision strike to destroy Russian nuclear weapons, as the rationale for Russian deterrence.[42] The 2024 policy allows for a much wider set of conditions for nuclear use, including any conditions Putin deems sufficient for their use.[43]

One fundamental misunderstanding that appears in western analysis of Russian thought focuses on an either or: that once Russia has more confidence in its theatre non-nuclear capabilities, it will reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons.[44] However, Russia relies on a mixture of nuclear threats and conventional capabilities to achieve its aims.[45] The continued development and fielding of new types of dual-capable high-precision missiles on land, sea and air platforms, rather than maintaining separate dedicated conventional and nuclear missiles, speaks to this.[46] Russia sees the threat of escalation – and western fear of Russia's ability to out-escalate the West – as key to its chances of victory.[47] This includes the threat of nuclear use to prevent escalation of a localised conflict to a regional conflict, or a regional conflict to the level of direct conflict with the United States.[48] In the event of a conflict with NATO, Russia would rely on its conventional forces to win, with the possibility of limited, measured NSNW strikes to defeat NATO forces, while relying on its strategic arsenal to persuade the United States to limit its response.[49] Knowing that the West is comparatively casualty and risk averse, Russia could escalate to a limited use of NSNW to inflict sufficient damage to force NATO to negotiate on Russian terms. The United States is likely to remain unwilling to risk a strategic nuclear exchange.[50]

Now that Finland and Sweden has joined NATO, and with Russian conventional forces depleted in Ukraine, Russia is likely to rely more heavily on dual-capable NSNW to deter NATO in the Nordic-Baltic region in the short to medium term. It is also possible that Russia will redeploy its high-readiness, high-mobility forces away from the region, as they are more likely to be needed near Ukraine, the Caucasus or Central Asia in the longer term. This assumption derives from the belief that Russian forces were originally located in the Baltic region to exploit a significant advantage against the relatively small NATO forces there. Finnish membership of NATO erases this advantage.[51] At the same time, Russia probably does not believe that NATO would initiate a conflict in the region, allowing Russia to rely on increased NSNW deployments for deterrence.

Nuclear Belarus

On 25 June 2022, President Putin told President of Belarus Alyaksandr Lukashenko that Russia would provide Belarus with nuclear-capable Iskander missiles, upgrade Belarusian Su-25s Frogfoot aircraft to make them capable of delivering nuclear bombs and train Belarusian aircrews to deliver them.[52] Russia delivered the Iskanders in December 2022 and began training pilots in April 2023, while increasing the pace of upgrades at several potential storage sites throughout 2023.[53] These arrangements are similar to current NATO and former-Soviet nuclear sharing arrangements.

However, while there is no confirmation of the permanent storage of Russian NSNW in Belarus, these changes would seem to confirm that Russia is not seeking to incorporate nuclear artillery into its frontline forces. In interviews, Lukashenko has claimed that he asked Putin for nuclear-armed artillery (the Polonez multiple rocket launcher system, designed for close battlefield targets) but was refused.[54] This refusal seems to indicate that Russia will continue to rely on NSNW for theatre-range targets, and not the close battlefield, as it did during the Cold War.

In June 2024, Russia and Belarus launched a series of nuclear exercises involving NSNW, which included loading nuclear weapons on surface vessels and deploying Iskanders and Su-25s, and in September 2025, Belarus claimed that it exercised joint nuclear weapons use with Russia during the ZAPAD exercise.[55] While Russia has reduced its direct nuclear threats since the election of US President Donald J. Trump, President Lukashenko announced that Russian Oreshnik medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) would be deployed in Belarus by the end of 2025, further demonstrating Russia's continued reliance on and willingness to use NSNW in a theatre conflict with NATO.[56]

More questions for further research

A number of unknowns continue to evade specific answers.

- What is the role of NSNW in the Asian theatre of operations?
- What are the specific use scenarios in the light of the lessons from Russia's war on Ukraine, specifically on the utility of missile defences?
- What is the total number of Russian NSNW, given that public-facing estimates have relied on assumptions that have been proved wrong (e.g., counting based on available launcher systems needs recalibration considering Russia's massive use of long-retired systems on the battlefield)?
- How many 9M729 Screwdrivers has Russia built and where are they deployed?
- Will the Oreshnik MRBM be deployed in large numbers or will it remain a niche capability?

This examination of continuity and discontinuity in Russian NSNW doctrine and military thought starkly illustrates the need for greater study of the topic. Deterrence, in the meantime, will remain the 'threat that leaves something to chance'.[57]

Extended deterrence: path for nuclear escalation

Aleksandr Golts

From the very beginning of the war against Ukraine, Putin has pursued a policy that Russia calls "extended deterrence". This policy is very different from "classical" deterrence. Through long negotiations during the Cold War, Moscow and Washington came to a common understanding of the essence of nuclear deterrence. At its core is the calculation that a potential aggressor can be deterred from a nuclear attack by ensuring the potential for a retaliatory strike that, no matter the circumstances, will cause unacceptable damage. In Putin's Russia, however, the concept of nuclear deterrence has come to be interpreted more and more broadly. From the Kremlin's perspective, the ability to destroy the planet allows it to resolve any international conflicts on its own terms. It is no coincidence that immediately after the aggression against Ukraine started, Putin began to threaten western countries with nuclear weapons.

Three days after the invasion began, the Russian leader ordered the minister of defence and chief of the general staff to "put the Russian army's [nuclear] deterrent forces on a special regime of combat readiness" in response to the fact that senior officials of leading NATO countries had made what Putin considered aggressive statements towards Russia. Six months later, Russian diplomats explained that Putin meant "moving to shifts at command centres of strategic forces with strengthened personnel".

In the past three years, the Kremlin has repeatedly resorted to similar intimidation tactics. Whenever western leaders begin to discuss measures that could have a significant impact on the course of the conflict, such as supplying Ukraine with long-range artillery, modern tanks, air defence systems or tactical missiles, the Kremlin immediately announces that such actions would be perceived as crossing the "red lines" it has set, while hinting that such a transgression could be considered cause to use nuclear weapons. This tactic has turned out to be only partially effective. Following further Russian threats, western countries began lengthy consultations. The necessary equipment and weapons were supplied to Ukraine, albeit with a significant delay which meant that these weapons did not deliver the expected results. From the Kremlin's perspective, however, extended deterrence did not work, as the West did eventually cross the red lines and Putin's verbal threats could not prevent this.

The Kremlin therefore began to experiment with ways to back up its threats. The first victim of extended deterrence was the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), concluded in 2010. In February 2023, Putin suspended Russia's participation in the treaty on the pretext that western representatives had been involved in preparing Ukraine's attacks on Russian strategic facilities. Admittedly, this obscurantist approach has its own logic.

In December, at the year-end meeting of the Defence Ministry Board, Putin claimed that 91% of Russia's strategic nuclear forces had been modernized. This is wholly incongruous with the data available precisely thanks to the information that Moscow and Washington were regularly obliged to exchange under New START. That data indicates that Russia has 700 deployed delivery vehicles (land-based missiles, sea-based missiles and strategic bombers) with 1,550 nuclear warheads. Of these, 34 missiles are the well-known Satan "heavy" missiles (R-36M2/SS-18), produced in the late 1980s, that have long passed their designated service life. They are equipped with a total of 340 warheads.

Five of Russia's 12 strategic nuclear submarines are of the Dolphin class. They were also built in the 1980s or 1990s and were supposed to be decommissioned by 2025. They carry another 320 warheads. Finally, the more than 50 strategic bombers that make up the air component of Russia's nuclear triad were built 30–40 years ago. Thus, about half of all Russian warheads are deployed on delivery vehicles that are either past their service life or are approaching it.

Meanwhile, replacing old delivery vehicles with new ones has been a challenge for Moscow. The main problem is the new Sarmat heavy missile, which was supposed to replace the Satan SS-18. The Sarmat was said to be "almost ready" back in 2016 and military leaders promised to start deploying them in 2020. Each year, their deployment has been pushed back, however, and it was not until 2022 that the first and only successful test of the missile was conducted. Contrary to previous practice (usually up to 10 successful tests are required), this was enough for the Sarmat to be approved for combat duty. Since then, however, nothing has been reported on the number of deployed missiles. If New START had remained in effect, the US would have demanded an inspection within six months of these statements to find out exactly how many missiles had been deployed. Now, no one knows for sure what missiles Russia possesses or how many. According to deterrence theory, the weaker side should be interested in maximum opacity. Thus, it is plausible that the Kremlin ditched New START to conceal a gradual reduction in Russia's nuclear potential.

There was a new attempt at nuclear blackmail in the spring/summer of 2024 when the leaders of the US, France, the UK and Germany began to discuss the possibility of allowing Ukraine to use western weapons to strike targets on Russian territory. Moscow was even more alarmed by the rhetoric of President of France Emmanuel Macron, when he refused to rule out sending troops to Ukraine. In response, the Russian authorities announced exercises of nonstrategic nuclear forces in the Southern Military District, in close proximity to the combat zone. The armed forces of Belarus, troops from the Leningrad Military District and naval forces later joined these exercises.

Nonetheless, the organizers of the exercises faced a dilemma in how to make the nuclear threat to the West tangible. The fact is that carriers of nonstrategic nuclear weapons – tactical missiles and fighter aircraft – can also be carriers of conventional weapons. As such, they are already widely used in the war against Ukraine, meaning that manoeuvres with these carriers are a purely trivial matter and the intimidation might not work. The real nuclear component of these exercises lies in removing a nuclear weapon from a storage base and "mating" it with a specific carrier, complying with all the specific procedures to the letter. To fully carry out such a move is extremely risky. Any activity around the storage bases would be picked up by US reconnaissance satellites and would necessitate nuclear preparations by the US. That would bring the danger of a nuclear conflict closer. In the end, the organizers of the Russian exercises did not risk using nuclear weapons, limiting themselves to mock-ups painted red. Naturally, this did not cause a big reaction from the West, despite widespread coverage of the exercises by Russian propaganda.

The "extended deterrence" policy was raised to a higher level in November 2024. On 19 November, Putin amended the "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence", informing the outside world of a significant reduction in the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. The Kremlin proclaimed its right to strike nuclear states that, even if they themselves had not attacked Russia, were aiding a non-nuclear state's aggression against Russia. The fact is that the decision to use nuclear weapons must be made according to procedures laid out in top-secret documents. There is no information on whether Putin intends to change the substance of these important documents. Just two days later, a Russian medium-range missile hit the Yuzhmash plant in Dnipro, Ukraine.

Hours later, a jubilant Vladimir Putin made a televised address in which he announced that in response to attacks by Ukrainian troops with long-range missiles provided by the US and UK, "in field conditions, we also carried out tests of one of Russia's latest medium-range missile systems – in this case, carrying a non-nuclear hypersonic ballistic missile that our engineers named Oreshnik. In the following weeks, he repeatedly returned to the topic of Oreshnik. According to Putin, Russian scientists developed a fundamentally new missile system after Washington terminated the INF Treaty in 2019. (The president's words imply that the Kremlin had previously strictly observed provisions prohibiting the development of such missiles and that the Oreshnik missile was developed in record time, which seems doubtful.)

This weapon, Putin explained, is capable of striking any point on the European continent. There is no need to place any explosives on the multiple warheads. (It soon became clear that Yuzhmash was hit by empty shells.) They fall at hypersonic speeds of about 3 kilometres per second so, as Putin explained, the collision of several warheads with the ground inflicts damage comparable to a nuclear explosion. Putin's statements about the Oreshnik, however, are only somewhat true. The tactical and technical characteristics of this new weapon, according to Pentagon experts, were strikingly reminiscent of the well-known Rubezh (RS-26) intermediate-range ballistic missile, which had long been the subject of fierce disputes between Moscow and Washington. The US suspected (not without reason) that Putin was seeking to circumvent the INF Treaty with this missile. This dispute lasted for several years. At some point, the Kremlin decided not to give the US president any excuse to break the INF Treaty, which was important to Russia. In 2018, the Rubezh project mysteriously disappeared from the armament programme without explanation. This missile was raised when the Kremlin wanted to demonstrate the seriousness of changes in its nuclear doctrine. By using a nuclear weapon delivery vehicle capable of reaching any point on the European continent, the Kremlin demonstrated this extended deterrence.

It is likely that the decision to strike Ukraine with the Oreshnik was calculated to have a psychological, intimidating effect, first and foremost on western states. In that regard, the attack failed to achieve the desired result. Representatives of these states directly stated that Russia's use of the Oreshnik would not affect their plans to support Ukraine. In addition, even after the attack on Yuzhmash, the Ukrainian armed forces have continued to use long-range missiles against Russia.

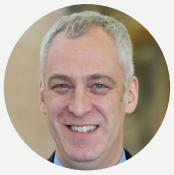
The previous US administration preferred to ignore Russia's nuclear threats in the public sphere. When they became especially unhinged, as during Russia's performative tactical nuclear exercises, a Pentagon spokesperson would respond calmly, stating that despite the rhetoric, no changes had been observed in the deployment of Russia's nuclear forces. In other words, the US did not intend to take any action.

Only once did Washington respond with concrete steps. In the autumn of 2022, after a series of major setbacks, the Kremlin appeared to seriously contemplate the use of nuclear weapons on the battlefield. US President Joe Biden publicly acknowledged this: "for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis, we have a direct threat of the use of nuclear weapons, if in fact things continue down the path they have been going". Soon afterwards, a White House spokesperson confirmed that CIA Director William Burns had personally warned Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, about the consequences of using nuclear weapons, noting: "he is conveying a message on the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons by Russia, and the risks of escalation to strategic stability". The Kremlin's nuclear threats subsided for a few months but resumed later.

The approach of President Trump's administration to nuclear threats from the Kremlin looks rather contradictory. On the one hand, the US president regularly states that Russia has gigantic nuclear potential, hinting that Ukraine should have yielded to the aggressor's demands. On the other hand, he has reacted extremely harshly to the now customary irresponsible nuclear rhetoric of former-president Dmitry Medvedev on social media. In response to threats to use the Soviet automatic ballistic missile launch system, Trump announced that he had "ordered two nuclear submarines to be positioned in the appropriate regions, just in case these foolish and inflammatory statements are more than just that". Two days later, he clarified that he had ordered the submarines moved "closer to Russia".

The Kremlin for its part, in pursuing its strategy of threats against western countries, in my view finds itself just a few steps away from setting off nuclear escalation. This would be followed by an announcement that, according to Russian information, the US intends to conduct nuclear tests, and that Russia should also carry them out as a preventive measure. Such an escalation would inevitably lead to a direct nuclear showdown. Unfortunately, to prevent such a scenario there is no other way but NATO, and mainly the US, bringing back traditional "hard" nuclear deterrence; that is, to consistently create threats similar to those advanced by Russia. At the same time, however, this increases the danger of such nuclear escalation. Something similar happened on the eve of World War I. European leaders did not intend to fight but in trying to get each other to back down, they set in motion mass mobilization and began to move troops. They quickly discovered that the conflict was escalating and they were incapable of stopping it.

Let us suppose that to humanity's misfortune, that at a time when US-Russia tensions have worsened to the point of a nuclear standoff, one side's early-warning system suddenly fails. There have been multiple instances of such failures. On 9 November 1979, for example, the NORAD command centre received satellite data suggesting a massive Soviet missile launch against the US. The data corresponded closely with assumed Soviet launch scenarios. Roughly 1,000 Minuteman ICBM crews were ordered to put their missiles on standby as 10 interceptor jets were scrambled to confirm the Soviet strike. Six minutes later, the alarm was declared to have been false. Perhaps the best-known incident occurred on 26 September 1983. Sunlight reflecting off clouds had triggered sensors in the Soviet Oko early-warning satellite to report the launch of a US ICBM. Only the calm actions of a single officer, duty shift commander Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov, prevented catastrophe. In such a situation, the leaders of Russia and the US would have, at best, 20 minutes to assess the threat. A global catastrophe could now take place because of words on social media. Thus, Russia's extended deterrence has become a path for nuclear escalation.



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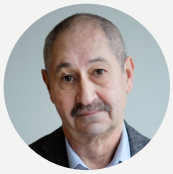

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