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Issue No. 521

May 2, 2022

Russian Use of Nuclear Coercion against NATO and Ukraine

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From the start of the Putin era, nuclear coercion has been a basic part of Russian foreign and defense policy. Russian nuclear doctrine allowing for nuclear first use was developed by Vladimir Putin when he was Secretary of the Russian National Security Council and he signed it into law while he was Acting President in 2000. He signed the latest version (which contained a lower threshold of nuclear weapons use) into law in 2020. Putin is dedicated to restoring Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union is his role model. Since Russia does not have the economic strength and conventional military capability to be a superpower, nuclear firepower is his substitute. In 2015, the Obama Administration pointed out the dangers of Russia's nuclear "escalate to deescalate" strategy which it said "seeks to deescalate a conventional conflict through coercive threats, including limited nuclear use."¹ Others warned about this two decades before and vainly urged changes to our nuclear deterrence policies to deal with this problem.

As pointed out by Keith Payne in the "Great American Gamble" (2008),² risky nuclear weapons policies have allowed a large disparity to develop in strategic nuclear modernization (currently 89% for Russia vs zero for the U.S.) and in the number of available nuclear weapons. The total Russian advantage may be two-to-four-to-one in the overall number of nuclear weapons and



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at least a 10-to-1 advantage in non-strategic or tactical nuclear weapons. What we fear today is not the Russian Army but Russian nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. The pursuit of arms control agreements without Russian compliance has given them a monopoly in the two latter types of weapons. The Minimum Deterrence world view with its belief that the nuclear balance is irrelevant and that “global norms” will prevent WMD use has been proven dangerously wrong in Ukraine. Only the U.S./NATO deterrence power is providing that protection.

When Putin’s nuclear doctrine was made public in 1999, then-Commander of the Strategic Missile Forces Colonel General Vladimir Yakovlev stated that the intent behind it was to allow Russia to impact “even local military conflicts” by strategic nuclear deterrence (i.e., threat of nuclear first use).³ Even a Russian “moderate” like Aleksey Arbatov when he was Deputy Chairman of the Duma Defense Committee and Duma Deputy Petr Romashkin suggested that tactical nuclear first use would be relevant to situations like NATO’s military action in Kosovo.

Russian Nuclear Threats

Senior Russian leaders have been making nuclear threats since 2007 because they believe this policy increases Russia’s political clout. The threats began when the Commander of the Strategic Missile Forces threatened to target Russia’s nuclear ICBMs against U.S. missile defense sites in Europe. The U.S. protested without effect. In face-to-face meetings with President George W. Bush and the President of Poland, President Putin threatened to target his missiles on missile defense sites. Taking their lead from President Putin, the nuclear missile targeting threat has been voiced by every commander of the Strategic Missiles Forces and many senior generals and officials. In 2007, then-Chief of the General Staff General of the Army Yury Baluyevskiy declared, “If we see that these facilities pose a threat to Russia, these targets will be included in the lists of our planners—strategic, nuclear or others. The latter is a technicality.”⁴ In 2015, the Russian Ambassador to Denmark said that if Denmark hosted U.S. missile defense, “...Danish warships will be targets for Russian nuclear missiles.”⁵

When the U.S. withdrew from the INF Treaty in 2019 in response to multiple Russian violations, Russian leaders, including President Putin, made a record number of targeting threats concerning non-existent U.S. missile deployments in NATO Europe. (In late 2021, non-existent U.S. missile deployments in Ukraine were part of Putin’s rationale for his ultimatum to NATO and his invasion of Ukraine.) Putin has made more nuclear missile targeting threats than any other official in Russia.

In 2007, Putin announced a policy of provocative nuclear-capable bomber flights and he made it sound as threatening as he could, stating, “...14 strategic bombers took to the air from seven airfields across the country, along with support and refueling aircraft ... From today such patrols will be carried out on a regular basis.”⁶



In the 2014 Ukraine crisis, there was an enormous upsurge in provocative bomber patrols. There also have been many threats involving the forward deployment of nuclear-capable Iskander missiles and occasionally explicitly nuclear weapons.

Russian nuclear threats were used in the 2014 Russian attacks on Ukraine.⁷ In March 2015, Putin famously stated he would have put Russia's nuclear forces on alert if it had been necessary during his Crimea seizure. (At the start of his current invasion of Ukraine, he actually announced a nuclear "special combat duty alert."⁸) In July 2014, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made an implied nuclear threat relating to Crimea by referencing Russia's nuclear doctrine.⁹ In September 2014 then-Ukrainian Minister of Defense Colonel General Valeriy Heletey wrote that Russia through non-official channels threatened to use tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine.¹⁰

Russia has used theater exercises to make nuclear threats since the Zapad[West]-1999 exercise. The involvement of nuclear weapons is usually leaked to the press. In 2016, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg confirmed some of these reports, stating that the recent large Russian exercises involved "simulated nuclear attacks on NATO Allies (e.g., ZAPAD) and on partners (e.g., March 7 2013 simulated attacks on Sweden)...."¹¹

Nuclear Intimidation in the Current Ukraine Crisis

The current Ukraine crisis is really the byproduct of Putin's demands for "security guarantees" which would drastically alter the post-Cold War order in Europe, in effect recreating the Soviet empire with Russian imperial dominance over the former Soviet and Warsaw Pact states. On December 2, 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threatened "military confrontation" in Europe in response to NATO expansion.¹² A war against Ukraine, a much lower risk than an invasion of a NATO state, was a way of threatening NATO with the expectation of demonstrating Russian military prowess.

Russian war and nuclear threats directed against NATO in the months prior to the invasion of Ukraine were more frequent and severe than previous Russian threats and they were backed by large troop deployments around Ukraine. According to Stoltenberg, "they [Russians] have stepped up the nuclear rhetoric threatening both NATO allies and Ukraine."¹³ There was actually no threat of Ukraine joining NATO because Germany was preventing it and there was no possibility of a U.S. missile deployment in Ukraine. These were just pretexts for threatening war and nuclear strikes. In November 2021, President Putin threatened the deployment of a new naval hypersonic missile which "would also need just five minutes to reach those who issue orders."¹⁴ This threat was implicitly nuclear.



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In mid-December 2021, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said Russia could be forced to deploy nuclear missiles in Europe in response to NATO's intentions to make similar deployments. Ryabkov also threatened to deploy tactical nuclear weapons if NATO did not agree to Russian demands concerning NATO's eastward expansion and military deployment. Ryabkov also warned about a Ukrainian conflict becoming a new Cuban missile crisis. In effect, Ryabkov was threatening a major nuclear war if Putin's demands were not agreed to.

On December 21, 2021, at a meeting at the Russian Defense Ministry, President Putin attacked NATO's presence in Eastern Europe and threatened "military-technical reciprocal measures" and a "tough response" if he did not get his way.¹⁵

In mid-December 2021, Russian nuclear-capable bombers "patrolled" over Belarus.¹⁶ There was no purpose for this other than nuclear intimidation. The pro Russia President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko began to augment Putin's nuclear threats against NATO.

On December 24, 2021, President Putin announced a salvo launch of the nuclear-capable Tsirkon (Zircon) hypersonic missile. The Tsirkon was also launched in the February 19th large strategic nuclear exercise which was conducted just prior to the start of the Russian invasion.

Russian state television was mobilized in support of the nuclear threat offensive. Dmitry Kiselyov, a Russian media mogul, threatened on state TV to "put a gun to America's head" if NATO forces were stationed in Ukraine and warned the alliance to back off or "everyone will be turned into radioactive ash."¹⁷ He indicated that Russia was prepared to accept the consequences of such actions to get what it wants.¹⁸ Russian military expert Colonel Konstantin Sivkov, in an interview with *Russia Today TV*, threatened to turn Germany into a "nuclear wasteland" (emphasis in the original) and threatened nuclear strikes on U.S. territory.¹⁹ *RT* (formerly called *Russia Today*) described a war between the U.S. and Russia as involving "apocalyptic nuclear explosions, millions of deaths and indescribable suffering."²⁰

On February 8th, President Putin personally raised the specter of nuclear war if Ukraine joined NATO. On the day Putin launched his full-scale invasion, he threatened NATO with a response "never seen in history," a clear reference to nuclear weapons. The situation was so bad that France's Foreign Minister reminded Putin that "...the Atlantic alliance is a nuclear alliance."²¹

The February 19th Russian strategic nuclear exercise was a big nuclear firepower demonstration showcasing the new nuclear superweapons which included the hypersonic Tsirkon and the Kinzhal missiles in order to generate fear of nuclear escalation and deter a NATO response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The focus of the exercise was more on simulated nuclear attacks on NATO Europe than strategic strikes although there was a launch of a nuclear ICBM and SLBM obviously against the U.S. The tension level was very high because of its clear connection to the impending Russian invasion of Ukraine and the threats of nuclear war made by senior



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Russian officials in the months prior to the exercise. Noted Russian journalist Alexander Golts observed that the intent was to make it clear that use of nuclear weapons “is no longer taboo.”²²

In March, when asked whether Russia would rule out the use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine, the Kremlin refused, saying that Russia could use nuclear weapons against Ukraine if it faced an “existential threat.”²³ This is a repudiation of Russia’s “negative assurances” in which Russia declared it would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states under the NPT. The meaning of “existential threat” was redefined from a response to aggression against Russia to support of Russian aggression. Moreover, the answer was clearly disingenuous because unless Ukraine was ruled by the ghost of Alexander the Great, it could not possibly pose an existential threat to Russia.

Conclusion

President Biden has repeatedly stated that alternatives to his policies (of sanctions and limited military assistance – no tanks, planes or long-range missiles – implemented too late to deter) would lead to World War III. This reinforces the Russian nuclear war message. The Biden Administration did little to deter the Russian invasion of Ukraine, limit the damage Russia is inflicting or to deter potential Russian chemical, biological or nuclear escalation. While the White House has warned about Russia’s potential chemical and biological weapons use, it has refused to call this a red-line despite the potential of infectious biological weapons to cause a global pandemic. About a week after President Biden’s statement about his willingness to fight World War III for NATO, *The New York Times* reported the Biden Administration reportedly was debating whether nuclear fallout or chemical effects in NATO nations from Russian attacks against Ukraine “would be considered an ‘attack’ on NATO under its charter, which might require a joint military response.”²⁴ If the answer is “no,” the Russians would be free to dump lethal fallout and chemical agents into Poland, Romania and Slovenia by attacks on Western Ukraine.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Christopher Bort observes, “Putin also knows that in the back of his opponents’ minds lurks a fear of escalation to nuclear conflict, which limits their willingness to challenge him militarily.”²⁵ In fact, Putin has used the fear of nuclear escalation quite successfully to limit military assistance to Ukraine. The veto of the provision of Polish Mig-29s to Poland was reportedly because they were deemed to be “escalatory.”²⁶ At this point we do not know if Putin will use his chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, but the lack of any obvious efforts to deter such attacks and the President’s statement that Putin can’t stay in power after the war dramatically increases this likelihood. Putin is exploiting the post-Cold War elimination of nearly all types of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons as critics of Minimum Deterrence have long predicted would happen. The Biden Administration is concerned about Russian chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, but it seems unaware its own policies are creating a tempting weakness. Additionally, it may even further cut the U.S. nuclear deterrent



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and/or modernization programs. If the Biden Administration pursues such policies, it will have learned nothing from the current crisis and, perhaps, it will have sown the seeds for a future conflict if Putin or someone like him stays in power and continues the pursuit of Russian imperial domination.

¹ Robert Work and James Winnefeld, Testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, June 25, 2015, available at <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20150625/103669/HHRG-114-AS00-Wstate-WorkR-20150625.pdf>.

² Keith Payne, *The Great American Gamble – Deterrence Theory and Practices From the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008).

³ Quoted in Mark B. Schneider, *The Nuclear Forces and Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2006), p. 21, available at <http://www.nipp.org/Publication/Downloads/Publication%20Archive%20PDF/Russian%20nuclear%20doctrine%20--%20NSF%20for%20print.pdf>.

⁴ Quoted in Mark Schneider, "The Future of the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 27, No. 4. (October 31, 2008), p. 349, available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01495930802358539>.

⁵ Julian Isherwood, "Russia warns Denmark its warships could become nuclear targets," *Telegraph.com*, March 21, 2015, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/denmark/11487509/Russiawarns-Denmark-its-warships>.

⁶ "Russia restores bomber patrols," *CNN*, August 17, 2007, available <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/europe/08/17/russia.airforce.reut/index.html>.

⁷ Maksym Bugriy, "Nuclear Deterrence in the Context of the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 11 Issue: 135, July 24, 2014, available at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=42664&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=7#.VRL4be](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=42664&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7#.VRL4be).

⁸ "Senior Defense Official Holds an Off-Camera Press Briefing," Department of Defense, February 28, 2022, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2948793/senior-defense-official-holds-an-off-camera-press-briefing/>.

⁹ Zachary Keck, "Russia Threatens Nuclear Strikes Over Crimea," *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2014, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/russia-threatens-nuclear-strikes-over-crimea/>.

¹⁰ Damien Sharkov, "Russia Has Threatened Nuclear Attack, Says Ukraine Defence Minister," *Newsweek*, September 1, 2014, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-has-threatened-nuclear-attack-says-ukraine-defence-minister-267842> Putin Reportedly Dangles Nuclear War Threat.

¹¹ *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2015* (Brussels: NATO, January 2016), p. 18, available at http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_01/20160128_SG_Annual_Report_2015_en.pdf.

¹² "Russia Ukraine: Lavrov warns of return to military confrontation nightmare," *BBC*, December 2, 2021, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59503762>.

¹³ "NATO secretary-general says no need to change nuclear alert level," *CNN*, March 1, 2022, available at <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/nato-secretary-general-says-no-need-to-change-nuclear-alert-level>.

¹⁴ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Putin warns West: Moscow has 'red line' about Ukraine, NATO," *APNEWS.COM*, November 20, 2021, available at <https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-ukraine-vladimir-putin-moscow-cd558699728e9ae935eaadf940efeb18>.

¹⁵ "Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board," *Kremlin.ru*, December 21, 2021, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67402>.



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¹⁷ James Lee, “Putin issues terrifying war warning – Russia ready to turn 'everyone to radioactive ash',” *The Express*, December 21, 2022, available <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1539313/Russia-war-fears-Vladimir-Putin-latest-Ukraine-world-war-3-news-radioactive-nuclear-alert>.

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¹⁹ “Russian Military Expert Konstantin Sivkov: A Russian Nuclear Counterstrike Would Turn Germany Into A Nuclear Wasteland And Would Target The U.S. As Well; If Israel Uses Nuclear Weapons Against Iran – Russia, And China Might Retaliate,” *MEMRI*, December 13, 2021, available at <https://www.memri.org/reports/russian-military-expert-konstantin-sivkov-russian-nuclear-counterstrike-would-turn-germany>.

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²¹ “France says Putin needs to understand NATO has nuclear weapons,” *Reuters*, February 24, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-says-putin-needs-understand-nato-has-nuclear-weapons-2022-02-24/>.

²² “Russian press focuses on Ukraine crisis,” *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union* February 21, 2022, available at https://dialog.proquest.com/professional/professionalnewsstand/docview/2630696553/fulltext/17E839C85674459746/1?accountid=155509&accountid=155509&site=professionalnewsstand&t:ac=17E839C85674459746/1&t:c:p=maintain/resultcitationblocksbrief&t:zoneid=transactionalZone_9147cb4074209e.

²³ Luke McGee, “Putin spokesman refuses to rule out use of nuclear weapons if Russia faced an ‘existential threat’,” *CNN*, March 22, 2022, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/22/europe/amanpour-peskov-interview-ukraine-intl/index.html>.

²⁴ David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt, Helene Cooper and Julian E. Barnes, “U.S. Makes Contingency Plans in Case Russia Uses Its Most Powerful Weapons,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2022, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/23/us/politics/biden-russia-nuclear-weapons.html>.

²⁵ Christopher Bort, “Putin the Gambler - Why the Kremlin Rolled the Dice on Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 10, 2022, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-03-10/putin-gambler>.

²⁶ Veronica Stracqualursi, “Why the US rejected Poland’s plan to send fighter jets to Ukraine,” *CNN*, March 9, 2022, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/09/politics/ukraine-russia-poland-fighter-jets/index.html>.

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