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Russian Nuclear Strategy in the Ukraine War: An Interim Report

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Introduction

Russian nuclear threats preceded the Ukraine war but have not abated.¹ These threats influence Western responses to the war since they build upon earlier threats and exercises showing that Russia will use nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict to force acceptance of its terms. Pervasive anxiety about Russian nuclear use has inhibited Western relief efforts, e.g., the campaign for a no-fly zone or for sending Ukraine aircraft. Western restraint has encouraged repeated and unrestrained Russian threats of nuclear use that are taken as inherently credible ones, even as Western deterrence is not seen as credible. This trend destabilizes the balance of deterrence.²

Previously, “Russian military planners pursued a broad range of upgraded and new versions of nuclear weapons suggesting that Russia’s real doctrine goes beyond basic deterrence and toward regional warfighting strategies or even terror-causing weapons.”³ Therefore, this paper argues that Russian nuclear weapons strategy, as manifested in Ukraine, aims at the following interrelated goals: intimidating and deterring any NATO reaction to Russian warfighting; obtaining and retaining escalation dominance and thus the strategic initiative and freedom of action throughout all stages of a crisis; and the creation in theory, if not also operationally, of a seamless web of threats to Russian enemies from both conventional and nuclear weapons to



retain that escalation control. Finally, Russian exercises and rhetoric also display Russia's concept of strategic deterrence in action.

Russia's Nuclear Threats

Russia's nuclear arsenal has enabled this war not least because Putin's nuclear threats are implicitly credible. This fact also confirms that, "The nuclear component is an inseparable part of Russian operational art that cannot be analyzed as a stand-alone issue," because nuclear threats abet Russian conventional threats and aggression by deterring adversaries' counteraction to that aggression.⁴

As Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs, Celeste Wallander, testified,

[Russia's] nuclear arsenal backs a military doctrine that emphasizes the coercive military value of nuclear weapons, including limited nuclear first use in conventional regional conflict, at multiple levels of the conflict spectrum.... Russia routinely threatens nuclear use irresponsibly and often casually, causing alarm with its nuclear saber-rattling, including in conjunction with its renewed invasion of Ukraine.⁵

Russia may also be stationing nuclear weapons in Belarus to threaten Europe with more nuclear contingencies and thus deter Western replies to the aggression against Ukraine.⁶

The inherent credibility of Russian threats appears incontestable. NATO leaders in 2012-16 reached this conclusion.⁷ Similarly Christopher Chivvis, director of the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment, recounted that when he was a U.S. intelligence official for Europe, scores of allied war games projected that Vladimir Putin would launch a single nuclear strike if he faced limited fighting with NATO or major setbacks in Ukraine that could be blamed on the West.⁸ This credibility derives from Russian leaders' published statements, doctrine, rhetoric, and exercises.⁹

Russian doctrinal guidance indicates Moscow's inclination to use nuclear weapons first. Russia's 2017 naval doctrine states that Russia could conduct a "demonstration of readiness and determination to employ nonstrategic nuclear weapons (also known as tactical nuclear weapons-TNW)."¹⁰ Supposedly this strike would capture foreign attention and function as a "de-escalating" factor presumably engendering a negotiation on Moscow's terms.¹¹ It explicitly invoked the navy's use of nuclear weapons as a legitimate global maritime deterrent, stating that "development and maintenance of the naval capability to strike ground targets of a potential enemy with conventional as well as nuclear weapons" is a priority of the Russian Navy.¹² Moscow's 2020 guidelines for nuclear use likewise clearly delineate a fist-strike posture and a lowered or broadened threshold for first-strike nuclear use, e.g. against



conventional strikes that endanger governmental stability.¹³ Therefore we have good reason for taking Putin's threats of first nuclear use under a lowered threshold seriously.

Moreover, a nuclear strike against Ukraine or NATO harmonizes with Russian nuclear doctrine, exercises, and rhetoric. Already in 2014, while seizing Crimea, Putin mulled the possibility of a nuclear alert despite the absence of any threat.¹⁴ The current war against Ukraine represents a wager on his regime's survival. Because Russia "reserves the right to use nuclear weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat," this war operationalizes that condition, rendering the claim of Russian bluffing insupportable.¹⁵ Thus, making ambiguous and vague threats is intrinsic to Russian strategy that aims at escalation dominance. Russia therefore must deploy the threat to use, if not actually use, these weapons as an informational-psychological weapon in its own right.

Putin also uses information operations, including nuclear threats that seem credible but may be unlikely, to exacerbate fears of nuclear war. This fully validates *The Economist's* assertion that Putin's modus operandi is escalation, not cutting his losses.¹⁶ This aspect of nuclear strategy appears in the growing consensus that a protracted war becomes more dangerous because escalation resulting from Russian failures and Putin's inability to retreat then becomes more likely.¹⁷ This perception enhances the utility of Moscow's nuclear threats, allowing Russia to engage in brutal regional aggression and escape the most severe penalties thanks to its nuclear arsenal. Lastly, this war hardens proliferators' belief that without nuclear weapons they will be overrun and justifies their pursuit of that option. Thus, Russia's aggression not only deranges European security but also the overall nuclear global order.¹⁸

Rhetoric and Exercises

Pre-war and wartime exercises and rhetoric firmly established Russia's credible potential for escalation. Since Putin retains both escalation dominance and the operational-strategic initiative, he has no reason to refrain from either or both rhetorical or operational escalation, e.g., chemical weapons use, or bombing areas near Poland to intimidate NATO. Furthermore, because he cannot afford to lose, escalation has become his default option.¹⁹

In December, 2021, senior Russian officials warned that NATO enlargement to the East would trigger Russian deployments of TNW.²⁰ A rhetorical propensity to escalate also appeared in Putin's speeches on February 21 and 23, 2022 announcing the war.²¹ Finally, on February 27, Putin invoked supposed Western threats to raise the alert status of Russian nuclear weapons.²² Subsequent threats from Putin and others continue, suggesting the possibility of nuclear escalation in the event of an "existential crisis" to Russia emerging from the war in Ukraine.²³ These threats inevitably regenerate foreign apprehension about nuclear use and inhibit allied responses to Russia's aggression, thereby allowing Russia to retain the initiative despite its poor military performance.



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Russia's military exercises aim to intimidate enemies. They augment and confirm the information conveyed in official rhetoric. Indeed, consistent with official Russian military doctrine, major exercises through 2022 contained limited nuclear strike contingencies despite Russia's stated emphasis on developing its non-nuclear deterrence capabilities. A huge nuclear exercise, operation Grom (Thunder)-2022, clearly intended to intimidate the West, preceded the war. Moscow simulated nuclear strikes in the Arctic, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Moscow deployed its Yars mobile ICBM and also reportedly deployed some of its missile and attack submarines to sea. Earlier exercises simulated nuclear attacks on Poland, Sweden, and the UK, and included regular submarine and aerial probes of Europe and the United States, diplomatic threats against Denmark, as well as aerial probes against Japan and South Korea. Most dangerously, Russian planes reportedly carrying nuclear weapons—SU-24 bombers escorted by Su-27 fighters—purposefully violated European Union and Swedish airspace.²⁴

Similarly, the Grom-2019 exercise was unprecedented in size and complexity and highlighted the idea that the “Russian leadership not only accepts the possibility of but also seeks to prevail in a large-scale nuclear war involving multiple exchanges of various strikes.”²⁵ It also went far beyond the “escalate to de-escalate” idea by integrating employment of strategic and nonstrategic capabilities that is a hallmark of Russian military doctrine. Arguably, there is a seamless web leading from conventional scenarios to supposedly limited nuclear war scenarios using low-yield TNW, to which the West as yet has found no response.²⁶

Although Russia's most recent military doctrine suggests a move towards greater reliance on non-nuclear or conventional deterrence, its procurement programs and exercises demonstrate a habitual recourse to nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons use. They also suggest a nuclear priority and a lowered threshold for nuclear escalation. Yet, controversy remains over the role of nuclear weapons in Russian strategy and whether or not Russia has a high or low threshold for nuclear use.²⁷

Other exercises just before the war in Ukraine had comparable intentions and purposes. In January 2022, the Northern Fleet surged into the Irish Sea, astride the main sea lines of communication between North America and Canada. This was merely part of a larger exercise, involving 140 combat and supply ships from all four fleets, from the Pacific to the North Atlantic.²⁸ As another assessment of these exercises commented,

A series of training maneuvers of the Northern Fleet in the Barents Sea began in January. During the exercises, the participating forces practiced maritime communications protection, including in crisis situations. A few days before the war, about 20 Russian ships entered the Barents Sea to search for foreign submarines and to establish control over navigation in this body as well as the airspace above. It is now possible to conclude that those activities were to prepare the ground for potential Russian nuclear ballistic



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missile submarine (SSBM) operations. During the attack on Ukraine, the Project 1144 cruiser *Peter the Great* notably remained in the Barents Sea to protect the Russian SSBM in case NATO were to attempt to enter the conflict.²⁹

In February, Russia issued the largest exercise warning ever given involving Norway's part of the Barents Sea. This NOTAM (Notice to Airmen of Russian missile activity in this zone) stretched about 1,000 km. from Kolguchev Island in the Eastern Barents Sea to Bear Gap; half this distance is inside Norway's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in international waters.³⁰ Once Putin reportedly raised the nuclear alert level, the Northern Fleet launched a new exercise around the Kola Peninsula, the home base of its nuclear Northern Fleet, ostensibly to "train maneuvering in stormy conditions."³¹

Moreover, the cable at Svalbard operated by Space Norway at the SvalSat park was cut by "human activity." This cable serves over 100 satellite antennas and can provide all-orbit support to operators of Polar-orbiting satellites, making this site a key intelligence and communications node.³² This disruption and effort to interdict the North Atlantic smacks of Russian sabotage operations to blind allied intelligence and satellite communications in the initial period of war. These activities represent operations the Northern Fleet would conduct during the period leading up to war and/or the initial period of the war. Since Russian surface vessels and submarines are increasingly armed with dual-capable missiles capable of attacking both Europe and the United States, these nuclear threats are clear. Other exercises and deployments around the Black Sea and the Mediterranean aim not only to deter NATO but to isolate Ukraine from external maritime support.

In addition, in May 2021 three Tu 22-M Backfire bombers landed at Russia's air base in Khmeimin, Syria. Previously, they flew from Russia to Syria, dropped their bombs and returned home. Now based in Syria, they can range the entire Levant and Middle East. Since these are among Moscow's most potent anti-ship strike platforms, the threat to the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and Persian Gulf is readily discernible. The new and improved version of the TU-22M3 Backfire bomber has a range of 1,850 miles. Therefore, it could deliver nuclear or conventional missiles not only to Middle Eastern targets but also to Europe or the Indian Ocean. Recent Russian videos show the loading of long-range nuclear-capable Kh-101 or Kh-102 ALCMs on the Backfire. Moreover, Moscow also sent Mig-31 fighters with Kinzhal missiles to Syria for training.³³ These deployments signify Moscow's intention to concentrate meaningful air power throughout the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East, including potentially the Indian Ocean and Sahel. But they also could threaten escalatory strikes against any NATO ships seeking entry into the Eastern Mediterranean or the Black Sea.

Moreover, in February 2022, Defense Minister Shoigu witnessed exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean that showcased Russia's global naval ambitions.³⁴ In these exercises the ships of the Mediterranean Eskadra (Squadron) performed "measures to search for foreign



submarines, [and to] establish control over navigation in the Mediterranean Sea and the flight of aircraft....”³⁵ These Eastern Mediterranean bases offer Moscow strategic benefits regarding possible scenarios in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. In these exercises, the nuclear dimension was distinctly visible.

Information Warfare and Reflexive Control

Intimidating nuclear exercises and rhetoric can be useful tools to deter and manipulate foreign strategic behavior. Since intimidation relies on a psychological relationship between the parties involved, the prominent display of nuclear weapons conveys a powerful informational-psychological effect that fully comports with Russian strategic thinking. These threats aim to intimidate NATO into not intervening and to impede efforts to enhance NATO cohesion, inhibit weapons supplies, and thus isolate Ukraine so Russia retains the strategic initiative and escalation dominance. These are basic objectives of Russian military strategy and have a deep-rooted basis in Soviet practice. Consequently, invocation of seemingly credible, Russian, nuclear threats represents Russia’s understanding that nuclear weapons are potent information weapons that can manipulate an enemies’ psychology and decision-making.

The integrity and resilience of societal and political institutions today represent a center of gravity for all belligerents in the Ukraine war. Russian leaders and theoreticians rightly emphasize the information-psychological aspect of war as the most critical element, even more than actual combat operations. They even see information warfare (IW) as an intrinsic first-strike capability and as something that can and should be waged continuously even in peacetime.³⁶ Russian writers, increasingly delineate IW and the manipulation of adversaries’ psychological states as the most crucial element in modern war.³⁷ Consequently, efforts at intimidation continue, to include regular probes, across Europe that serve, inter alia, to decouple the United States from its NATO allies. Russia’s armed forces employ and integrate informational tasks to support non-military actions during a conflict, making this part of Russia’s overall strategy.³⁸

These tactics highlight the fact that the Russian state’s psychology and character are essentially those of an intimidation culture. Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan observe, “The Putin system is all about intimidation, more often than actual coercion, as an instrument of control.”³⁹ Accordingly the emphasis on nuclear weapons relates to this system or culture of intimidation and fully comports with the long-standing element of Russian political culture that relies on the external projection of fear to augment the regime’s domestic support and attenuate the enemy’s base of support and will to resist. Moreover, while the West devalues nuclear weapons in rhetoric and policy, Russia must elevate their utility because it lacks other means of credible intimidating threats.



Nuclear weapons also function as instruments of Russian reflexive control operations. “Reflexive control is defined as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action.”⁴⁰ Reflexive control connects directly to information warfare. Moscow has long exploited the associated techniques of reflexive control and information warfare to frighten Western leaders and societies into making decisions that redound to its benefit. The doctrinal, rhetorical examples and the evidence of exercises confirms the ongoing resort to tactics of reflexive control and information warfare in a nuclear context to prevent Western decision-makers from even considering any type of intervention or escalation in the Ukraine conflict to challenge Russia while it enjoys escalation dominance.

But while first nuclear use to salvage a losing conventional war and force NATO to de-escalate may be part of the strategy, that threat arguably serves a much broader purpose that relies heavily upon the psychological, intimidating, and/or informational component of nuclear weapons. Thus, Russia’s broader nuclear strategy aims to control the entire process of escalation throughout all stages of a crisis. If the crisis becomes kinetic, then escalating to de-escalate may well become a possibility because nuclear weapons are also to be used for war-fighting missions and operations. Sir Richard Shirreff, who was NATO’s Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Europe from 2011-2014, stated that “Russia hardwires nuclear thinking and capability to every aspect of their defense capability.”⁴¹

Russia has gradually developed both a capability and a strategy involving nuclear weapons that Western elites either cannot or will not understand. And it far transcends what the catch phrase “escalate to de-escalate” implies.⁴² That formulation, unfortunately, exemplifies the U.S. tendency to mirror image Russia. Moscow’s deployment of nuclear and conventional weapons indicates that it believes the former deters nuclear and conventional attacks. This belief directly rebuts the complacent and groundless notion that nuclear weapons only deter other nuclear weapons. Russian defense policy emphasizes medium to large-scale conventional and even nuclear warfighting at the expense of insurgency, counter-insurgency, stability operations, etc. Consequently, nuclear weapons are at the core of Russian efforts to forestall the application of NATO’s conventional superiority.

In this sense, nuclear weapons make the world safe for conventional war on the nuclear powers’ terms, or so Russia may believe. Thus, Russia’s “nuclear behavior” is sufficient grounds for real anxiety. Although there is no sign that Russia will use a nuclear weapon to defeat NATO in limited nuclear scenarios, as Colin Gray observed, Moscow talks as if it can achieve this outcome. Thus, he wrote,

In a manner that is ominously reminiscent of Adolf Hitler, Putin and others have chosen to introduce explicitly ruthless threats, including nuclear threats, into Russian reasoning about acute international crises. They hypothesize about the high political value that



would accrue as a result of nuclear use on a limited scale. The hope, apparently, is that the NATO enemy, certainly the less robust members, at least, would be out-gunned either by the actuality, or more likely only by the credible threat of nuclear use (especially in a first-strike mode).⁴³

Not surprisingly, and in conformity with the argument above, the inescapable conclusion for Gray was that Russia seeks escalation dominance.⁴⁴

While no such nuclear use scenario has yet occurred, nor is it immediately likely, the war in Ukraine does show not just Moscow's brazenness but equally, if not more importantly, just how nuclear scenarios are intertwined with conventional wars. And when one looks at Russian nuclear procurement in the present and as intended through at least 2025, then the inextricability of nuclear weapons with Russia's war strategy becomes even clearer.

Strategic Deterrence

Finally, Russian nuclear weapons also serve the critical mission of physically as well as psychologically deterring either Western conventional or nuclear attacks. Strategic deterrence ("Strategicheskoye Sdzerzhivaniye") explicitly requires the state to use every instrument of power at its disposal to deter nuclear or conventional attacks. This concept of multi-domain coercion has been very much on display in Ukraine and bears only a tenuous connection to the U.S. concept of deterrence. For Russia, deterrence connotes much more than it does to the United States. "Sderzhivanie" means holding back, keeping out, restraining or even constraining, Russian operations. U.S. deterrence programs are characterized instead as being intimidating, even though Putin's Russia, if not its predecessors, betrays all the hallmarks of a classic intimidation culture, like that of the Mafia, to which Putin's rule has often been likened.⁴⁵

This term's correspondence with Russian strategic and general cultural traditions can be discerned from official definitions, e.g.:

A coordinated system of military and non-military (political, diplomatic, legal, economic, ideological, scientific-technical and others) measures taken consecutively or simultaneously ... with the goal of deterring military action entailing damage of a strategic character ... Strategic deterrence is directed at the stabilization of the military-political situation ... in order to influence an adversary within a predetermined framework, or for the de-escalation of military conflict ... The objects to be influenced through strategic deterrence may be the military-political leadership and the population of the potential adversary state (or coalition of states) ... Strategic-deterrent measures are carried out continuously, both in peacetime and in wartime.⁴⁶



Thus, the Russian government carries out (or is supposed to execute) all these measures in multiple domains simultaneously and continuously whether it is at peace or at war. And this requirement clearly includes the domain of information warfare. This concept also has several important attributes that must be constantly borne in mind. First, deterrence is continuous and assumes the unceasing existence of a condition approaching war at all times and aims explicitly at compelling or coercing the enemy to act within a framework controlled by Moscow, thereby linking it as well to reflexive control. Second, it aims to impose Moscow's control on the entire process of deterrence, which is supposed to operate in both pre-war and wartime if not post-war conditions as well. This concept also conforms to Harry Summers' observation that, "At least from the military perspective, it is well understood that conflict prevention depends on a credible capability for conflict control."⁴⁷ Third, not only does this concept subsume the cross-domain coercion we have seen across all of Russian security policy, it also presupposes constant tensions that could at any time explode into actual hostilities. Fourth, it clearly has the objective of using Moscow's entire arsenal for purposes of constant escalation control. The strategy transcends what Western observers have called "escalate to de-escalate" strategy, though that is hardly incompatible with a broader strategy of escalation control.

Moreover, it represents a conscious ambition or aspiration to erase the demarcation between offense and defense and between deterrence and coercion. Western scholars have reached very similar conclusions on this point.⁴⁸ Dmitry Adamsky reaches the same conclusion that this concept follows the Leninist and Soviet practice of erasing those distinctions between offense and defense and between compellence (and coercion) and deterrence, all of which could easily yield the perception of a classic security dilemma and misperception.⁴⁹ Thus, the challenge to the adversary who cannot fully understand the logic behind Moscow's actions is to devise a strategy that holds the line and does not misread Russia's intentions and actions.

Conclusion

Russia has repeatedly invoked nuclear threats as part of its overall strategy, before its invasion of Ukraine and since. This recourse to nuclear threats is critical to Russia's strategy and supports the priority given to nuclear weapons in Russian procurement. Furthermore, this strategy has been successful in inhibiting NATO from creating a no-fly zone and limiting for some time the types of weapons that it is providing to Ukraine. Thus, even if Russia will not use nuclear weapons, Russia arguably has obtained a certain leverage over allied decision-making.⁵⁰ The ongoing refusal to admit Ukraine to NATO also suggests as much.⁵¹ Second, despite widespread military malfeasance on its part, Russia still clearly retains the strategic initiative and escalation dominance as the continuing flood of Western articles arguing for a compromise with Russia or a cease-fire and a rapidly negotiated settlement shows.⁵² Invariably they invoke the specter of escalation seemingly mindless of the fact that the Russian armed forces are even less able to take on NATO than was assumed to be the case previously. They also forget that Putin has never posed a direct challenge to NATO and has retreated previously



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when Washington or Brussels subtly communicated their resolve, e.g., in preventing forcible regime change in Georgia in 2008.⁵³ As of this writing in early May 2022, and despite numerous threats to attack Western weapons shipments, Moscow has not yet done so. This example and Moscow's failure to implement its threats to strike foreign weapons supply lines for Ukraine validates the Western decision to send Ukraine the weapons it has been requesting.

Meanwhile Russia will continue to use its remaining nuclear trump card and other kinetic and non-kinetic instruments to undermine Ukraine. Paradoxically, for NATO to dispel the belief that nuclear threats offer Russia strategic success, it must move faster and more broadly at the conventional level to undermine Russia's belief in the efficacy of this threat. Otherwise, Russia may continue to delude itself into believing that it has actually salvaged something from the debacle it has unleashed upon Ukraine and Russia itself.

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⁷ Max Fisher, "Thoughts Turn To the Unthinkable: A Spiral Into Nuclear War," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2022, p. A12.

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¹⁰ Fisher, op. cit.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Stephen Blank, "Reflections On Russian Nuclear Strategy," Adam B. Lowther, Ed., *Guide To Nuclear Deterrence In the Age Of Great Power Competition*, Bossier City, La. Louisiana Tech Research Institute, 2020, pp. 229-243, available at <https://atloa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Guide-to-Nuclear-Deterrence-in-the-Age-of-Great-Power-Competition-Lowther.pdf>.

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