



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 615

February 5, 2025

The Implications of Russia's New Nuclear Doctrine

Dr. Mark B. Schneider

Dr. Schneider is a Senior Analyst with the National Institute for Public Policy. Dr. Schneider previously served in DoD as Principal Director for Forces Policy, Principal Director for Strategic Defense, Space and Verification Policy, Director for Strategic Arms Control Policy and Representative of the Secretary of Defense to the Nuclear Arms Control Implementation Commission. He also served in the senior Foreign Service as a Member of the State Department Policy Planning Staff.

In 2024, Russia published a new version of its nuclear doctrine entitled “Basic Principles of State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence.” It was universally recognized that Russia had lowered its nuclear weapons use threshold.¹ This is very significant because even before this new doctrine was made public, Russia already had the lowest threshold for nuclear weapons use in the world.

Some (but not all) of the “new” elements of the 2024 doctrine probably are from the earlier classified versions. A full depiction of Russia’s nuclear doctrine has never been made public. Moreover, statements by Russian officials and generals frequently go beyond the published doctrine, particularly with respect to Russian plans for preemptive or preventive nuclear strikes. For example, in 2009, Lieutenant General Andrey Shvaychenko, then-Commander of the Strategic Missile Forces, outlined the role of the nuclear ICBM force in conventional war. He said, “In a conventional war, [the nuclear ICBMs] ensure that the opponent is forced to cease hostilities, on advantageous conditions for Russia, by means of single or multiple preventive strikes against the aggressors’ most important facilities.”² In 2014, General of the Army Yuriy Baluyevskiy, former Chief of the Russian General Staff and Deputy Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, stated that “...conditions for pre-emptive nuclear strikes...is contained in classified policy documents.”³ According to state-run TASS, there are



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 615 | February 5, 2025

“...completely new updates in the [2024] doctrine, which also has the confidential part where the situations for the use of nuclear weapons are described in detail.”⁴

The new provisions in the 2024 version seem to reflect the changes in Russian foreign and military policy resulting from its ill-conceived 2022 invasion of Ukraine and its subsequent military setbacks. Despite this, Putin has not given up. Russian nuclear doctrine is important because it shapes Russian military planning. It is also intended to be intimidating to the West because Putin believes that the use of nuclear threats enhances Russian political clout. Indeed, as far back as July 2014, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made a nuclear threat relating to Russia’s seizure of Crimea by referencing Russia’s nuclear doctrine.⁵ He was apparently speaking about the real version, not what had been publicly revealed. The version made public in 2024 is clearly more consistent with what Lavrov was saying. Former President Obama’s Ambassador to NATO has concluded that Russia’s nuclear threats have indeed effectively intimidated Washington.⁶

An important “new” element in the Russian 2024 nuclear doctrine is the asserted right to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state that is being assisted by a nuclear power.⁷ The provision reads, “Aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) its allies by any non-nuclear state with the participation or support of a nuclear state is considered as their joint attack.”⁸ Russian expatriate Pavel Podvig points out that this goes back to 1995.⁹ However, what is really new is that this is now being applied to non-nuclear states that have been *attacked by Russia* and are being assisted by the United States, the United Kingdom, France and other NATO nations that are providing weapons to resist *Russian aggression*. This constitutes a major *de facto expansion* of what started out as an exception to Russia’s policy of “negative assurances,” i.e., that it would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.¹⁰

The most explicit statement of Russia’s 2024 nuclear doctrine concerning nuclear weapons first use comes in paragraph 19, which goes significantly beyond the 2020 version. It states that:

19. The conditions that enable the possibility of nuclear weapons employment by the Russian Federation are as follows:
 - a) receipt of reliable data on the launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territories of the Russian Federation and (or) its allies;
 - b) employment of nuclear or other types of weapons of mass destruction by an adversary against the territories of the Russian Federation and (or) its allies, against facilities and (or) military formations of the Russian Federation located outside its territory;
 - c) actions by an adversary affecting elements of critically important state or military infrastructure of the Russian Federation, the disablement of which would disrupt response actions by nuclear forces;
 - d) aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) the Republic of Belarus as participants in the Union State with the employment of conventional



weapons, which creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity;

- e) receipt of reliable data on the massive launch (take-off) of air and space attack means (strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned, hypersonic and other aerial vehicles) and their crossing of the state border of the Russian Federation.¹¹

An important element of Russia's 2024 nuclear doctrine that has been largely ignored in Western commentary is the repeated assertion that nuclear weapons can be used first in response to "...aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) the Republic of Belarus as participants in the Union State with the employment of conventional weapons, which creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity;..."¹² The *overt* inclusion of Belarus (which is not threatened by anyone) is new. Linking nuclear weapons first use to sovereignty and territorial integrity is not new. In 2012, Putin declared, "The nuclear weapons remain the most important guarantee of Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and play a key role in maintaining the regional balance and stability."¹³ Linking Russian nuclear weapons first use to undefined threats to Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity first officially appeared in paragraph 4 of the 2020 version of Russia's nuclear doctrine.¹⁴ Prior to 2020, this had been reported in Russian state media as part of Russian nuclear doctrine and it was included in statements by Russian leaders making nuclear threats.¹⁵ It now appears in paragraphs 4, 18 and 19 of the new version.¹⁶ The increased emphasis is significant because the concept is potentially very permissive regarding nuclear weapons first use. Indeed, President Putin has characterized cyber espionage (not cyber-attack) as "a direct violation of the state's sovereignty...."¹⁷

In addition, prior to 2020, treatment of nuclear first use in Russia's military doctrine publications was very limited. The 2010 and 2014 versions of Russian military doctrine spoke about nuclear weapons first use in situations when the "very existence of the state is in jeopardy."¹⁸ This language was a deceptive effort to make Russian nuclear doctrine appear more benign than it actually was – perhaps in response to President Barack Obama's vocal advocacy of "nuclear zero."

Escalate-to-Deescalate

The critical, underlying concept that probably is elaborated in all of the classified versions of Russia's nuclear doctrine is the so-called "escalate-to-deescalate" strategy which is based on the notion that the United States would be paralyzed in the face of Moscow's first use threats and the dangerous belief that Russia would win a war if it initiated the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁹ A 2003 Russian Defense Ministry publication said, "Deescalation of aggression is forcing the enemy to halt military action by a threat to deliver or by actual delivery of strikes of varying intensity with reliance on conventional and (or) nuclear weapons."²⁰ In 2017, then-DIA Director Lieutenant General Vincent Stewart stated that Russia is "...the only country that



I know of that has this concept of escalate to terminate or escalate to deescalate but they do have that built into their operational concept, we've seen them exercise that idea and it's really kind of a dangerous idea..."²¹ According to Russia expert Dr. Stephen Blank, "...arguably [escalation dominance] is merely a part of a much broader nuclear strategy that relies heavily upon the psychological and intimidating component of nuclear weapons."²²

Nuclear Escalation in Russia's Theater War Exercises

The classified Russian documents discussed by the *Financial Times* in February 2024 (which it said dated from 2008 to 2014²³) indicate that in its theater war exercises Russia displayed "...a threshold for using tactical nuclear weapons that is lower than Russia has ever publicly admitted, according to experts who reviewed and verified the documents."²⁴ This included the use of tactical nuclear weapons for "fear inducement." Nuclear targeting even included Russian allies—China, North Korea, Iran, and Azerbaijan.²⁵ One of the documents indicated that nuclear weapons first use was permissible if there was "...an enemy landing on Russian territory" or "the defeat of units responsible for securing border areas..."²⁶ This clearly goes beyond the language in the 2020 edition and seems to imply a lower nuclear first use threshold than even the language in the 2024 version.

Using Nuclear Escalation Threats to Deter Conventional Retaliation Against Russia

The language in the 2024 Russian document provides further evidence that it is trying to establish a norm in which it can initiate a war, launch devastating conventional attacks on adversary infrastructure and expect no comparable retaliation because of the threat of Russian nuclear escalation. This is clearly the case in subparagraph 19(e) of Russia's 2024 nuclear doctrine (which is new language) which states that nuclear escalation could occur in response to the "...receipt of reliable data on the massive launch (take-off) of air and space attack means (strategic and tactical aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned, hypersonic and other aerial vehicles) and their crossing of the state border of the Russian Federation."²⁷ What is described is the manner in which modern "non-contact" conventional warfare is conducted. This is the way Russia initiated its war against Ukraine in 2022.

The publication of the 2024 Russian nuclear doctrine is part of an orchestrated effort to deter attacks on its territory with weapons provided to Ukraine from the United States and other NATO nations. The main objective of the doctrine relates to a war with NATO within a decade for which Russian leaders have recently stated Russia is preparing.²⁸ If Russia successfully imposes such a limitation on targeting, it virtually guarantees a Russian victory, and this will likely result in its initiating a major war against the West with possible nuclear escalation.

This is very important because of the gradual emergence of a fascist state in Russia, the process of which is being accelerated by Putin's war against Ukraine.²⁹ Right now, Putin's Russia is closer to Mussolini's version of fascism than Hitler's. Both versions embraced the right



of military expansion based upon supposed grievances and historical legitimacy. Lacking the utopian vision of Communism, the only rationale for Putin's expansion of the Russian empire is historical grievance and the ability to do so. Since Russia's conventional military power is limited, it uses nuclear coercion for that purpose, and may engage in nuclear escalation. Putin has recently said that Russia has the "largest arsenals of nuclear weapons."³⁰ Putin disguises his imperialism by advocating the creation of a "new world order" which seeks to protect the world from the evil West.³¹ However, this "new world order" is blatant imperialism.

Russian Nuclear Threats and Putin's Confrontation with the West

Putin's war against Ukraine is not isolated. It is part of a strategy of forcing the West to acquiesce to Russian imperial domination of the former Soviet and Warsaw Pact states. Putin's "splendid little war" against Ukraine was intended to demonstrate Russian military prowess in the hope that it would result in the rupture of the NATO alliance and, ultimately, Western capitulation. The West should not forget the ultimatums concerning "security guarantees" that Putin delivered to NATO and the United States just before his invasion of Ukraine.³² Associated with Putin's ultimatums were unprecedented threats of war and nuclear war.³³ Former CIA officer Rob Dannenberg has summed up the implications of the "security guarantees" demanded by Putin:

In the aggregate, if accepted, the Russian proposals would create a massive "buffer zone" or [Russian] "sphere of influence" from Finland in the north to Turkey in the south, in some ways replicating the 1945 Yalta Agreement.

The manner in which the Russian proposals have been presented and subsequent comments from senior Russian officials suggest the two draft treaties are not proposals subject to negotiation and discussion but rather demands. Per Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov: "If the West does not deliver a constructive answer [to Russia's demands] within a reasonable time frame...then Russia will be forced to use all necessary means to ensure the strategic balance and to eradicate threats to our security," adding that "Russia will not allow never-ending discussions" on its demands.³⁴

While Russia's military weakness and incompetence have demonstrated the opposite of what Putin intended, Russia has learned from its failures³⁵ and has gradually adopted a new strategy of winning through callous disregard for casualties.³⁶ (The United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence estimates that Russia has suffered 760,000 casualties in the Ukraine War.³⁷) One of the most dangerous aspects of this bloody conflict is that the Russian people have demonstrated a willingness to allow Putin to kill and maim a generation of Russians to achieve his goal of imperial expansion. Additionally, Russia has about doubled military spending at the expense of the well-being of the Russian people.³⁸ This increase in military spending may well continue in the post-Ukraine war period.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 615 | February 5, 2025

President Putin will likely eventually use nuclear weapons *unless he is deterred*. Putin may blunder into a war with NATO given his commitment to nuclear coercion and nuclear superiority. Or, he may launch nuclear first use intentionally. The temptation to use nuclear weapons may override the risks. Russia's new nuclear doctrine gives us more insight into Russia's planning, which is threatening and dangerous.

¹ "Putin lowers the threshold for using his nuclear arsenal after Biden's arms decision for Ukraine," *The Associated Press*, November 19, 2024, available at <https://apnews.com/article/russia-nuclear-doctrine-putin-91f20e0c9b0f9e5eaa3ed97c35789898>; Brad Dress, "Putin lowers threshold for Russian nuclear weapons use after Biden's Ukraine missile decision," *The Hill*, November 19, 2024, available at <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/4997495-vladimir-putin-russia-lowers-nuclear-weapons-threshold/>; Trevor Hunnicutt and Doina Chiacu, "US won't change nuclear posture after Russia lowers threshold, White House says," *Reuters*, November 19, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-wont-change-nuclear-posture-after-russia-doctrine-change-white-house-says-2024-11-19/>.

² "Russia may face large-scale military attack, says Strategic Missile Troops chief," *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*, December 16, 2009, available at https://dialog.proquest.com/professional/professionalnewsstand/docview/460433852/fulltext/173438170CB2F81FF58/1?accountid=155509&site=professionalnewsstand&t:ac=173438170CB2F81FF58/1&t:cp=maintain/resultcitationblocksbrief&t:zoneid=transactionalZone_173de004188.

³ "Russia Classifies Information on Pre-emptive Nuclear Strikes – Military," *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union/Interfax-AVN*, September 5, 2014, available at <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/documentview?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/15028002DA366B30>.

⁴ "Right to nuclear retaliation is no message to the West," *TASS*, September 27, 2024, available at <https://tass.com/defense/1848637>.

⁵ Zachary Keck, "Russia Threatens Nuclear Strikes Over Crimea," *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2014, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2014/07/russia-threatens-nuclear-strikes-over-crimea/>. This related to the much more restraining version of Russian nuclear doctrine which appeared in the 2010 and 2014 editions of Russian military doctrine.

⁶ Ivo Daalder, "There is no such thing as good nuclear proliferation," *Politico/Europe Online*, January 8, 2025, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/there-is-no-such-thing-as-good-nuclear-proliferation/>.

⁷ Juri Rescheto, "Russia expands criteria for a nuclear strike," *DW*, November 21, 2024, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-expands-criteria-for-a-nuclear-strike/a-70852876>.

⁸ "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, December 3, 2024, available at https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/.

⁹ Nicole Grajewski, "Russia's Updated Nuclear Doctrine Isn't a Blueprint for Weapons Use. Its Primary Value Is Manipulation," *Carnegie Endowment*, November 26, 2024, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2024/11/russia-nuclear-doctrine-update-weapons-use-sovereignty?lang=en>.

¹⁰ Francesca Giovannini, "Negative Security Assurances After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2022, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-07/features/negative-security-assurances-after-russias-invasion-ukraine>.

¹¹ "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," 2024, op. cit.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Putin pushes nuclear, space defense reform," *RT*, July 26, 2012, available at <https://www.rt.com/russia/rearmament-sets-defense-priority-100/>.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 615 | February 5, 2025

- ¹⁴ “Fundamentals of Russia’s Nuclear Deterrence State Policy,” *DFNC.ru*, September 6, 2020, available at <https://dfnc.ru/en/russia-news/fundamentals-of-russia-s-nuclear-deterrence-state-policy/>.
- ¹⁵ “Preemptive nuclear strike omitted from Russia’s new military doctrine – reports,” *RT*, December 10, 2014, available at <https://www.rt.com/russia/213111-russia-nuclear-preemptive-strike/>; “Russia says could use nuclear weapons,” *NBC News*, January 8, 2008, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna22743091>.
- ¹⁶ “Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,” 2024, op. cit.
- ¹⁷ “Putin: cyber espionage is direct violation of state’s sovereignty,” *Interfax*, July 11, 2014, available at <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/41982/>.
- ¹⁸ “THE MILITARY DOCTRINE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,” December 25, 2014, available at https://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/mildoc_rf_2014_eng.pdf; “Text of newly-approved Russian military doctrine,” December 5, 2010, available at <https://www.cndpindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Russia-Military-Doctrine-2010.pdf>.
- ¹⁹ Jacob W. Kipp, “Russia’s Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons,” *Military Review*, May-June 2001, available at <https://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p124201coll1/id/235/rec/6>.
- ²⁰ Ministry of Defense, Russian Federation, *The Priority Tasks of the Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation* (Moscow: Ministry of Defense, 2003), p. 70.
- ²¹ U.S. Senate, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on Worldwide Threats* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Armed Services, May 23, 2017), p. 38, available at https://www.armedservices.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/17-49_05-23-17.pdf.
- ²² Dr. Stephen Blank, *Moscow’s Competitive Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: American Foreign Policy Council, July 2018), p. 12, available at <https://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/7.25.18-Moscows-Competitive-Strategy.pdf>.
- ²³ “Russia planning nuclear strike to counter ‘Chinese invasion’? Report shares details of leaked military files,” *Mint*, February 28, 2024, available at <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/russia-planning-nuclear-strike-to-counter-chinese-invasion-report-shares-details-of-leaked-military-files-11709122881902.html>.
- ²⁴ Max Seddon and Chris Cook, “Leaked Russian Military Files Reveal Criteria for Nuclear Strike,” *Financial Times*, February 28, 2024, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/f18e6e1f-5c3d-4554-ae5-50a730b306b7>.
- ²⁵ “Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Navy’s Training for Nuclear Strikes, Including on Allies,” *Kyiv Post*, August 13, 2024, available at <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/37328/>.
- ²⁶ Seddon and Cook, “Leaked Russian Military Files Reveal Criteria for Nuclear Strike,” op. cit.
- ²⁷ “Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,” 2024, op. cit.
- ²⁸ Andrew Osborn and Dmitry Antonov, “Russia must be ready to fight NATO in Europe in next decade, minister says,” *Reuters*, December 16, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-accuses-west-pushing-russia-its-red-lines-forcing-it-respond-2024-12-16/>.
- ²⁹ Christo Atanasov Kostov, “Russian fascism: the six principles of Putin’s nationalist ideology,” *The Conversation.com*, December 7, 2023, available at <https://theconversation.com/russian-fascism-the-six-principles-of-putins-nationalist-ideology-218182>; Angela Stent, “Putin’s Next Term: More Repression in Russia, Aggression in Ukraine,” United States Institute of Peace, March 19, 2024, available at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/03/putins-next-term-more-repression-russia-aggression-ukraine>.
- ³⁰ “Meeting with Foreign Ministry senior officials,” *Kremlin.ru*, June 14, 2024, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74285>.
- ³¹ Sveta Yefimenko, “Debunking Putin’s New World Order,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, December 2, 2024, available at <https://fpif.org/debunking-putins-new-world-order/>.
- ³² “Russian delegation declares start of ‘countdown’ in wait for adoption of Russian proposals,” *TASS*, January 19, 2022, available at <https://tass.com/politics/1390505>; “Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 615 | February 5, 2025

Federation on security guarantees,” Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, December 17, 2024, available at https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en; “Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, December 17, 2021, available at https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en&clear_cache=Y.

³³ Mark B. Schneider, “Threats of War and Nuclear War: Putin’s Effort to Revive the Soviet Union,” *RealClearDefense*, January 18, 2022, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/01/18/threats_of_war_and_nuclear_war_putins_effort_to_revive_the_soviet_union_812521.html.

³⁴ Rob Dannenberg, “The Message Putin Needs to Hear,” *The Cipher Brief*, January 7, 2022, available at <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/opinion/the-message-putin-needs-to-hear>.

³⁵ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Michael Kofman, “Putin’s Point of No Return,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February, 2025, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/putins-point-no-return>.

³⁶ Alexey Kovalev, “The Russian meat grinder strategy is terribly effective, terribly wasteful, and boundlessly cruel,” *Foreign Policy*, November 25, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/25/russia-ukraine-war-casualties-deaths-losses-soldiers-killed-meatgrinder-attacks/>.

³⁷ Defence Ministry of the United Kingdom, “Intelligence Update,” Defense Ministry of the United Kingdom, December 30, 2024, available at <https://x.com/defencehq?lang=en&mx=2>.

³⁸ Kendall-Taylor and Kofman, “Putin’s Point of No Return,” *op. cit.*

The National Institute for Public Policy’s *Information Series* is a periodic publication focusing on contemporary strategic issues affecting U.S. foreign and defense policy. It is a forum for promoting critical thinking on the evolving international security environment and how the dynamic geostrategic landscape affects U.S. national security. Contributors are recognized experts in the field of national security. National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made this *Information Series* possible.

The views in this *Information Series* are those of the author(s) and should not be construed as official U.S. Government policy, the official policy of the National Institute for Public Policy, or any of its sponsors. For additional information about this publication or other publications by the National Institute Press, contact: Editor, National Institute Press, 9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750, Fairfax, VA 22031, (703) 293- 9181, www.nipp.org. For access to previous issues of the National Institute Press *Information Series*, please visit <http://www.nipp.org/national-institute/press/informationseries/>.

© National Institute Press, 2025