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Tailored Deterrence and Nuclear First Use in Europe

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Introduction

The prolonged military stalemate in the war in Ukraine has produced more consideration of the possibility of nuclear first use in Europe. Although only Russia has issued explicit threats to this effect, NATO and U.S. decision making suggests a higher degree of preparedness for this possibility and a willingness to close the gap between Russian and NATO theater nuclear strike systems. The following discussion considers the implications of a two-sided competition in non-strategic or tactical nuclear capabilities for the stability of deterrence in Europe and generally. The issue of whether U.S. theater nuclear capabilities are sufficient for deterrence, or for war fighting should deterrence fail, also receives pertinent consideration. The goodness of fit between conditions of threat in Europe (or elsewhere) and tailored deterrence as a response is fundamental and of paramount importance.

The View from Russia

Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022, President Vladimir Putin and other high ranking Russian officials have warned that Russia may resort to nuclear first use under any one of a number of conditions of perceived threat. According to the official *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence* issued in 2020, Russia

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reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear or other types of weapons of mass destruction against it or its allies, as well as in the case of aggression with conventional weapons "when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy."[1] Further elaboration of conditions specifying the possible use of nuclear weapons by Russia are also listed in this document. They include:

- arrival of reliable data on a launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies;
- attack by adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russin Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions.[2]

The decision to use nuclear weapons, according to the 2020 Basic Principles document, is taken by the President of the Russian Federation.

The assumption by many observers has been that Putin is bluffing and using nuclear weapons to support coercive diplomacy against Ukraine and NATO. In addition, China, although a political and military ally of Russia, has reportedly told Russia as recently as July 2026, not to consider using any nuclear weapons against Ukraine.[3] China has sent this message to Russia on previous occasions as well.[4]

One expectation underlying both Chinese and Russian reluctance to go nuclear is that Russia will eventually achieve a favorable outcome in its conventional war against Ukraine. Despite unprecedented numbers of Russian soldiers killed or wounded in any conflict since World War II, Putin has remained steadfast in his demands relative to any peace agreement. For example, Russia insists on keeping a larger share of the Donbas than its forces held as of mid-July 2026 and considers its acquisition of Crimea irreversible. Other conditions include forbidding Ukraine to join NATO and a *droit de regard* with respect to the postwar composition of peacekeeping forces deployed between Ukrainian and Russian troops.

On the other hand, the ingenious and resilient Ukrainian armed forces, punching upward with respect to the use of drones and missiles against critical economic and military targets inside Russia, have created a stalemate that continues to frustrate Russian advances. Some experts even contend that the tide of war might be turning in Ukraine's favor. Ukraine's deep strike drone and missile attacks are materially harming the Russian economy, and Ukraine's medium range strike capabilities interdict Russia's ability to supply field forces. At the front, catastrophic casualty rates strain Russia's ability to meet manpower needs. One expert notes that "The sand's clearly running through the hourglass for the Russians," although shortages in Ukrainian air defense still permit Russian attacks against civilian targets.[5] Another expert cautions that "Time is not on Russia's side."[6] More impressive still is that Ukraine's battlefield steadfastness transcends its inevitable upheavals in domestic politics, including the untimely sacking of a defense minister in mid-July 2026 who was credited by many with improved battlefield performance.

Russian nuclear forbearance to this point is not necessarily a guarantee against a future favorable decision for nuclear first use. The inability to engineer a favorable political outcome for Russia with respect to Ukraine does not rest entirely in Russian hands. One question is

whether, and to what extent, U.S. President Donald Trump's continued dissatisfaction with NATO European partners continues as a subtheme in American geostrategic appraisals. One irony is that Trump's demand for greater contributions from European allies with respect to the war in Ukraine has been fulfilled to a large extent by Europeans' own reappraisal of Russia. The addition of Sweden and Finland to NATO enlarges and strengthens a bloc already energized by four years of war. European members of NATO have significantly increased the percentages of their gross domestic products devoted to national defense and military preparedness, including their armaments industries and civil defenses. NATO Europeans have also agreed to purchase weapons from the United States in order to pass them along to Ukraine. Some see themselves as imminently in the cross hairs of Russian aggression if Russia succeeds in Ukraine, including, for example, Poland and the Baltics. Russia is certainly capable of inflicting additional damage on Ukrainian military forces and civil society with conventional weapons, but its military doctrine and training exercises still showcase the option of nuclear first use.[7]

The View from NATO

The United States has discussed with its NATO allies the possibility of deploying tactical nuclear weapons to additional alliance member states.[8] Currently the United States reportedly deploys B61-12 nuclear gravity bombs to five host countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkiye, in support of NATO's dual capable aircraft (DCA) mission.[9] In addition, the UK, while maintaining its own fleet of strategic ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), might also have quietly rejoined the DCA program.[10] Among other states that might be interested in hosting American tactical nuclear weapons, Poland and the Baltic states are serious candidates. And Finland's parliament voted on June 17, 2026 to lift its ban on nuclear weapons, allowing that country to receive, transport and facilitate the movement of nuclear weapons on its territory as part of allied operations.[11] Recently revised French nuclear doctrine anticipates greater shared mission planning and readiness training with European allies.[12]

During the Cold War, it was accepted that the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies had conventional military superiority compared to NATO. Accordingly, the United States and NATO deployed a number of non-strategic or tactical nuclear weapons and delivery systems, beginning in the 1950s and continuing to the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union. The INF (Intermediate Nuclear Forces) Treaty of 1987, signed by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, called for the elimination of all of their ground launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges from 500 to 5,500 kilometers. This was an important step in reducing the danger of nuclear first use that was seemingly increasing in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As well, it symbolized the arrival of a political détente between the two powers that paved the way for the peaceful withdrawal of Soviet forces from their former Warsaw Pact satellites and for the reunification of Germany, prior to the end of the Soviet Union itself.



The situation with respect to the relative balance between post-Soviet Russian conventional and nuclear forces compared to NATO has changed markedly since the end of the Cold War. NATO's conventional forces, including those of its European and American members, are now judged to be militarily superior to those of Russia. On the other hand, the United States deploys some 100 or so tactical nuclear weapons in Europe in five countries, as noted above.[13] Russia has a much larger deployment of about 2,000 non-strategic nuclear weapons of various ranges and on land-based, sea-based and airborne platforms.[14]

Some U.S. experts have expressed concern that this disparity between the numbers and diversity of Russian compared to U.S./NATO tactical nuclear weapons weakens the strength of NATO deterrence. Putin's repeated nuclear threats, increasing in frequency since the beginning of the 2022 war against Ukraine, are apparently based on an "escalate to de-escalate" doctrine that implies a limited first use of nuclear weapons in order to get NATO to back down from any response considered unacceptable by Moscow.[15] As well, Russia regularly practices nuclear first use in its theater military exercises, including a major exercise in 2025 in conjunction with Belarus.[16] On the other hand, Dmitry Adamsky notes that Russian military doctrine also emphasizes the practice of reflexive control. Reflexive control is, like deterrence, concerned with perceptions management. But reflexive control implies that one is shaping the behavior of an adversary clandestinely, in a way that seems benign to the victim. In contrast, deterrence is more overtly and explicitly coercive.[17] From this standpoint, Russia projects to adversaries and others that their decision for first use would be a reluctant step with the object of terminating a war rather than expanding it.

Going Forward

For different reasons, are NATO and Russia both becoming more reliant on non-strategic nuclear weapons for deterrence and military persuasion in Europe? To some extent this is a reciprocal buzzsaw. Russia fears expansion of NATO's support for Ukraine will lead to increased attacks against the Russian homeland. NATO distrusts Russia's intentions with respect to observing limits on its ambitions in Europe beyond Ukraine. The gap between each side's assessment of the other's political intentions and military objectives invites additional reliance on a broader spectrum of military options, below the levels of all out conventional warfare between NATO and Russia, as well as avoidance of massive societal destruction caused by strategic nuclear war. For some political leaders and military planners, non-strategic nuclear weapons provide a more manageable and less risky means of coercive diplomacy compared to other options.

From another perspective, however, non-strategic or tactical nuclear weapons may be an open door to misperceptions of states' military strategies and their respective views of escalation control. Tactical nuclear weapons are two sided in terms of how they are perceived by combatants and by their respective governments. From one standpoint, they represent a firebreak between conventional and strategic nuclear warfare. Thus, some may consider them to be usable in a way that more destructive weapons of longer range and greater yield are not.

An opposite view of these shorter range and smaller yield weapons is equally compelling: they are potential detonators of a larger and mutually destructive holocaust. Who can guarantee that once a "small" nuclear war is in progress there is an obvious and agreeable stopping point short of Armageddon? It is precisely this risk that war can escape control and turn to apolitical madness that gives nuclear deterrence its proverbial bite. Thus, the assumption that a relative advantage in theater nuclear weapons for one side may impose expectations of coercive inferiority on the other is highly context dependent. Two nuclear policy experts have warned:

> The combination of F-35A fighter jets and B61-12 bombs gives NATO a stealth-enabled, precision counterforce tool designed to deter by denial by holding Russia nuclear and nuclear command and control assets at credible risk. In theory, they provide limited escalation-control options, such as pre-emptive or tit-for-tat strikes at tailored yield. These technological developments make Russian nuclear forces and command systems both more vulnerable in crisis and less certain for guaranteeing second strike capability.[18]

However, the assumption that tactical air strikes would threaten preemptive destruction of Russian theater nuclear weapons and control systems seems unduly pessimistic from Russia's standpoint. Employment of air delivered nuclear weapons will require prior consultation and coordination among NATO allies, even after having received credible warning of possible attack. As an alternative, the Trump Administration's decision to move forward with deployment of the SLCM-N sea based nuclear cruise missile provides a more survivable and versatile tailored delivery system for warheads of various yields against either seaborne or land-based targets.[19]

Tailored Deterrence and Europe

The concept of tailored deterrence recognizes that the geostrategic landscape of threats to American and allied national security has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War. Tailored deterrence emphasizes that U.S. deterrence requirements have to be adapted to new conditions of threat.[20] As former Biden Administration national security officials have noted: "The United States now faces a Category 5 hurricane of nuclear threats."[21] These threats include the ongoing rise of China into nuclear superpower status, the continuing growth of the North Korean nuclear arsenal, and the aforementioned plethora of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons compared to the numbers deployed in NATO Europe by the United States. According to one group of experts:

> Even the low estimate of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons would allow Russia to launch many types of attacks against U.S. allies – to which Washington may not be able to respond promptly or effectively with non-strategic systems. That reality poses a threat to deterrence, particularly extended deterrence, given the likely need for low-yield, regional U.S. nuclear options for credible deterrence in regional contingencies.



> In the Indo-Pacific, this deterrence credibility problem may be exacerbated by the problem of U.S. aircraft vulnerability in the face of thousands of Chinese missiles.[22]

In its 2023 report, the congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States recommended additional measures to enhance U.S. strategic and theater nuclear forces.[23] The report calls for theater nuclear capabilities that are prompt and "forward deployed or deployable"; are "survivable against preemptive attack without force generation day-to-day"; possess "a range of explosive yield options, including low yield"; and "are able to penetrate adversary IAMD (integrated air and missile defenses)".[24] The Commission also recommended that the United States should prepare to upload onto its strategic launch systems some or all of the nuclear warheads currently held in reserve as a hedge against technological or geopolitical risks. For example: now unconstrained by the expired New START Treaty, the Trident SLBM force could increase from 968 to 1,626 deployed warheads and the Minuteman ICBM force from 400 to 1,000 warheads.[25] In the case of Trident uploads, some of these warheads might be lower yield and assigned to limited war missions.

Also important in this context is the related issue of conventional military capabilities for U.S. and allied NATO forces faced with the possibility of Russian military ambitions that go beyond Ukraine, or U.S. forces faced with Chinese military aggression against American allies in the Pacific. Weakness in conventional forces invites aggression at least as much as perceived nuclear inferiority. As Dr. Robert Kadlec, Assistant Secretary of War (ND-CBD) stated to the House Armed Services Committee in March 2026:

> While the primary responsibility for the conventional defense of Europe must rest with our wealthy and capable European allies, the U.S. nuclear extended deterrence provides a critical backstop. This cannot, however, be the primary solution for European security. A credible deterrent in Europe requires a robust, in-theater conventional denial force, fielded overwhelmingly by the European themselves.[26]

Since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine beginning in February, 2022, NATO has been steadfast in its support for Ukraine and its European members have enhanced their commitments to increased defense expenditures and military preparedness. Nevertheless, Putin shows no signs of relenting in his long-range drone and missile attacks against Ukrainian civilian and military infrastructure, even as his ground forces pay heavy prices for marginal territorial gains. In Asia, Chinese military aggression against Taiwan is already the subject of regular Chinese military exercises and a plausible contingency for 2027. The possibility of simultaneous Russian and Chinese theater military aggression with conventional forces, supported by the implicit or explicit threat of nuclear first use, is a troubling scenario for U.S. Combatant Commanders and policy makers.



Conclusion

It would be an exaggeration to say that NATO has undertaken to run an arms race against Russia with respect to deployments of non-strategic or tactical nuclear forces in Europe. On the other hand, U.S. and allied European leaders are engaged in force and command system enhancement for the possibility of limited nuclear war, partly in order to signal to Russia a higher degree of shared commitment to deterrence among NATO members. Whether this increased preparedness and nuclear sharing will give Russia pause with respect to its nuclear coercive diplomacy is as yet unsettled. There is always the potential for misunderstanding~~, as~~ between or among wartime adversaries with respect to their deterrence thresholds. The priority of tailored deterrence in this milieu, as opposed to "one size fits all" assumptions, is imperative.

Consequently, U.S. and allied decision makers must seek to better understand the motivations of adversaries and what drives their thinking and behavior when it comes to the potential use of nuclear weapons. This will help shape the policies and programs necessary to strengthen deterrence in a world of increasingly dangerous and dynamic threats.

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[7] *Associated Press*, "Russia holds massive drills of its nuclear forces as Ukraine steps up its drone attacks," May 19, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/russia-nuclear-drills-putin-ukraine-war-aaf57bba4e61cc93a84f4245087f322b. On Russian perspectives with respect to nuclear deterrence, see: Dmitri (Dima) Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024); and Leon Aron, *Riding the Tiger: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the Uses of War* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 2023), esp. pp. 98-101 and pp. 120-122.

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