

# The Washington Times

## Russia's provocative nuclear strategy

*Putin's endorsement of a limited first-use policy requires an allied response*

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Russian President Putin has said that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. He views the West as the culprit and a threat to Moscow's vision of reestablishing Russian dominance over the former lands of the Soviet Union, by force if necessary. Russia's 2008 military operation against Georgia, 2014 occupation of Crimea and continuing military actions in Ukraine all reflect this vision. Russia apparently put its nuclear forces on alert during its military operations against Georgia, and President Putin considered doing so again in 2014.

Russia has been modernizing its conventional military forces for almost a decade and seeks to prevent any significant collective Western defensive opposition by threatening limited nuclear first-use in response. Russian military officials speak openly of the preemptive employment of nuclear weapons in a conventional war, and Moscow frequently makes direct nuclear threats to U.S. allies and partners.

Russian first-use nuclear threats essentially provide cover for Moscow's military actions that destroy the post-Cold War settlement and established European borders. Russia's coercive use of nuclear weapons is a new reality more dangerous than the Cold War. If Russian planning follows this declared nuclear first-use strategy, then U.S. and NATO deterrence policy already is failing in a fundamental way, and the consequences of that failure could be catastrophic.

Russia reportedly is pursuing specialized, low-yield nuclear weapons to make its first-use threats credible. In December 2002, then-director of Russia's Sarov nuclear weapons laboratory, Viktor Mikhailov, reported that considerable work was being done to develop a "nuclear scalpel" capable of "surgically" destroying local military targets. Very low-yield weapons, Mr. Mikhailov argued, can be used in the event of large-scale conventional conflict. Such capabilities are destabilizing when developed to support territorial expansion and a strategy of nuclear coercion.

Moscow's sophisticated propaganda complements this strategy. It vilifies the United States and NATO with what can only be described as a repetition of big lies. Russian defense expert Alexi Arbatov has observed that Russian defense and foreign policies are now based on consensus beliefs in Moscow, including the notion that the United States is using the pro-democracy opposition inside Russia to subvert the Putin regime, and that the U.S. with its allies may invade any time to seize Russia's natural riches. Noted Russian journalist Alexander Golts rightly calls such views dangerous and self-induced "paranoia."

Russia's grand strategy also includes across-the-board nuclear modernization programs and defensive preparations for nuclear war, most of which appear to predate the Obama administration's fledgling nuclear modernization programs. Again, such capabilities are destabilizing when developed to destroy the established international order via a strategy of nuclear coercion.

Nevertheless, U.S. perceptions remain divided regarding Russia and the appropriate Western policies at this point. Some claim that Russia poses no serious threat and that a robust U.S. response will serve only to provoke Russia. Senior U.S. civilian and military leaders, however, now have no doubt Russia is an "antagonist" that poses a "very, very, significant threat," and that the absence of a robust U.S. response will provoke further Russian aggression. The key question is, what should be that response?

First, we must recognize that the optimistic post-Cold War expectations about Russia do not reflect reality and adjust U.S. policies accordingly. The numerous confident claims that serious military crises and possible conflict with Russia were a thing of the past have proven to be false, as has the U.S. planning assumption that Russia would comply with arms control treaties.

Second, we must reinvest in intelligence capabilities to better understand contemporary Russia, including its nuclear developments. Gen. Philip Breedlove, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, said recently that after nearly two decades of treating Russia as a potential ally, the intelligence community needs to adjust because, "Now we see that, possibly, we didn't have the partner we thought we had." The U.S. intelligence community reportedly has largely divested itself of the capacity to understand Russian nuclear-weapons policy, programs and war-planning. This is a dangerous and even destabilizing deficiency. If we hope to deter effectively, the intellectual resources necessary to understand adversaries must be reconstituted.

Third, Western declaratory policies must be clear and coordinated to help ensure that Mr. Putin understands that any use of nuclear weapons against us or our allies always would be the worst of all Moscow's possible options.

Fourth, we need to re-establish the credibility of U.S. deterrence threats and red lines, particularly against Russian nuclear first use. U.S. and NATO nuclear capabilities must help to deny Moscow's apparent confidence that the West would be compelled to concede following Russian nuclear first use. That gap in U.S. deterrence capabilities must be closed. Modernizing the U.S. nuclear deterrent will likely help in this regard, which is why the Obama administration's announced programs to rebuild U.S. nuclear forces after decades of coasting and reductions are critical. Every Republican and Democratic administration for five decades ultimately has rejected the ever-smaller and narrower U.S. nuclear deterrent advocated by anti-nuclear activists in favor of a more credible U.S. deterrent with diverse capabilities.

Finally, to assure nervous allies, NATO's will and conventional capabilities must be sufficiently united and robust to deny Mr. Putin's claim that Russian troops could be in five NATO capitals within two days. That is a tall order, but given Moscow's revisionist foreign policy and nuclear

threats, perceptions of NATO disunity and conventional weaknesses are highly provocative and destabilizing.

We may not, metaphorically, be at 1938 again. But many current similarities to that perilous time are troubling. U.S. nuclear policies and NATO capabilities now must counter contemporary realities, particularly including Moscow's destabilizing nuclear strategy.

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