



ANALYSIS

RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR BEHAVIOR IN A TIME OF WAR

Stephen Blank

Russia has been at war with Europe for a generation. While this war has been largely non-kinetic, every NATO intelligence organization expects a Russian-launched conventional war backed by threats of nuclear escalation by 2029.¹ Russian military threats against Japan and South Korea are also mounting. Russia conducts ever more drone probes, missile strikes, underwater cable cutting, arson, assassinations, criminal activities, cyberstrikes, information and influence operations, and other attacks against civilian and military targets that are apparently becoming more professional as they multiply.²

Russian threats transcend Europe. The Sino-Russian entente, expressed in exercises and overflights around, in, and over Japanese, South Korean, and Arctic air space, along with Russian land, sea, and air deployments—including conventional and nuclear missiles—have alarmed Japanese and South Korean policymakers, leading them to solidify defense ties with Washington and revamp defense policy.³ Russia's formal alliance with North Korea enhances these threats as do Russian threats to Seoul to deter its support of Ukraine. Indeed, credible leaked reports from the FSB (Russian intelligence) show that Russia seriously contemplated attacking Japan and South Korea in 2021.⁴

Thus, Russia is a state whose *raison d'être* is preparation for war. This war could be kinetic as in Ukraine or non-kinetic as European operations show. These non-kinetic operations represent persistent, organized, multi-dimensional campaigns to exercise constant long-term pressure upon targeted states either to achieve permanent leverage or overturn them. Their continuing growth signifies both a deterrence failure and ongoing escalation and show Moscow's increased confidence about escalating without incurring serious risk.⁵ Russia's theory of victory integrates covert activities with preparations for

¹ Murray Brewster, "The 2029 Warning: NATO's Race to Rearm Ahead of Russia," *CBC*, June 12, 2026, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/russia-nato-arms-germany-war-canada-9.7232514>.

² Claudia Ciobanu, "Poland Warns Russia Is Moving From Low-Cost Recruits To Professional Sabotage Cells," *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2026, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2026/05/06/poland-russia-belarus-sabotage-espionage-hybrid-war/31e94fe4-4938-11f1-a119-857cd2bf4fd4_story.html; and, Emma Burrows and John Leicester, "Russia Is Ramping Up Its Attempts To Kill Its Opponents In Europe, Intelligence Officials Say," *Associated Press*, May 7, 2026, [https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-killing-assassination-intelligence-6e60452ecbe1a42a0ddc9adcd2f39f23.officials say](https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-killing-assassination-intelligence-6e60452ecbe1a42a0ddc9adcd2f39f23.officials%20say)

³ Daniil Zhukov, "A Tangled Ball: Russian Nuclear Policy, Relations and Risks in Northeast Asia," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2025), pp. 91–111, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/25751654.2025.2507510?needAccess=true>.

⁴ Ryder Blackthorne, "Russia Considered Attacking Japan Before Invading Ukraine – How Would That Have Turned Out?," *Medium*, April 20, 2025, <https://medium.com/@jayduggy87/russia-considered-attacking-japan-before-invading-ukraine-how-would-that-have-turned-out-2b0dde4c1b39>.

⁵ Alexander Mattelaer, "Making Russia Fear Escalation Again," *Hague Center For Strategic Studies*, 2026, <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Making-Russia-Fear-Escalation-Again-HCSS-2026.pdf>.



both conventional and nuclear conflict. Since Russia apparently believes it can dominate and control limited nuclear exchanges, the risk of conventional conflict does not faze it. Therefore, Russia acts freely below the threshold of armed conflict.⁶

Much research confirms this integration of “gray zone operations” with conventional and nuclear forces. These operations are inherently escalatory to the nuclear level, especially as there are good reasons for believing that Russia has a first-strike doctrine. Therefore, this article investigates Russia’s objectives, doctrine, strategy for integrating conventional and nuclear conflict, procurements, and exercises.

Russian Threat Assessment

Many signs point to a Russian nuclear first-strike doctrine and strategy that would respond to a conventional Western attack and also strike first, whether preemptively or not, including the many examples of nuclear threats and signaling before and since Russia invaded Ukraine.⁷ Russia’s continuing wartime mobilization that comprises a large-scale conventional buildup and nuclear weapon modernization also suggests a first-strike posture, most likely for an intended (or so Moscow believes) limited strike.⁸

Justifying this posture is a deeply rooted, pervasive assessment of growing Western threats to Russia that melds intelligence organs’ official paranoia with the latest iteration of classic Russian imperialism, including theological support for nuclear threats, if not warfare and imperialism.⁹ Putin frequently depicts the aggression against Ukraine as an existential war that NATO forced upon Russia.¹⁰

This unending paranoia drives much of Russia’s overall security and military policies, not just nuclear use.¹¹ It stems from the obsession with great power status, compelling domestic and foreign audiences to acknowledge that status, and Russia’s accompanying ability to act

⁶ Ibid., p. 1.

⁷ Aylin Matlé, András Rácz, “Russia’s Nuclear Signaling in 2026 and Implications for European Security,” *DGAP Memo*, German Council on Foreign Relations, June 2026, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russias-nuclear-signaling-2026-and-implications-european-security>.

⁸ Elbridge Colby, “Russia’s Evolving Nuclear Doctrine and Its implications,” Foundation for Strategic Research, 2016, <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/russias-evolving-nuclear-doctrine-implications-2016>; and, Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns and Mackenzie Knight-Boyle, “Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2026,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (2026), pp. 221-254, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00963402.2026.2659527?needAccess=true>.

⁹ Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford, CA and London: Stanford University Press, 2019); and, Dmitri Minic, “Russia’s Nuclear Deterrence Put to the Test by the War in Ukraine,” French Institute of International Relations, October 6, 2025, <https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/russias-nuclear-deterrence-put-test-war-ukraine>.

¹⁰ Steven Pifer, “Russia Ukraine and Existential War,” Stanford University Center for International Security and Cooperation, March 6, 2023, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/news/russia-ukraine-and-existential-war>.

¹¹ Minic, op. cit.

with impunity domestically and globally.¹² Alexei Arbatov long ago correlated internal and foreign policy through this pervasive imperial obsession, noting, “[t]his interdependence between the regime’s nature at home and its projection abroad explains why those trying now to rehabilitate Stalinism and appeal for a return to this or that form of authoritarian regime always link it to a revival of some form of Russian (or Soviet) empire and permanent confrontation with the West.”¹³

This imperial mystique pervades the Russian elite. As one official told journalist Edward Lucas in 2000, the aim is, “Nothing happens that we don’t know about, and nothing happens that we don’t like—apart from that, it is up to them.”¹⁴ Or, as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, quoting Catherine the Great’s advisors, “Not a cannon can be fired in Europe without our consent.”¹⁵

Nuclear weapons are the foundation for this claim to great power status. Russia’s official handbook for future diplomats, *Diplomaticheskaya Sluzhba*, states that, “Russia’s great power status is determined by its geostrategic position, nuclear potential, and status on the UNSC [United Nations Security Council] rather than by metrics such as economics—Moscow’s diplomacy must ensure the country’s position as an authoritative and influential member of the international community.”¹⁶ Since Russia’s great power identity and nuclear arsenal are inextricably tied to each other, any threat to the former triggers an invocation of the latter. Because Russia’s leadership and elite believe that NATO’s alleged non-kinetic influence operations supported by American conventional superiority permanently threaten it, Russia always deters the West by nuclear means. Consequently, there can only be détente if Washington and NATO remain shackled to the Cold War mutual hostage relationship based on mutual deterrence so that it cannot act unilaterally. Only then does Moscow gain a measure of restraint or even control over U.S. policy. Patrick Morgan explains that this kind of classic deterrence “cuts through the complexities of needing to have a full understanding of or dialogue with the other side.” Instead, it enables Russia, to “simplify by dictating, the opponent’s preferences.”¹⁷

Equally importantly, Russia’s non-kinetic operations are inconceivable without Russia’s nuclear shield and constant threats of escalation. Major Amos C. Fox (USA) wrote that

¹² Bobo Lo, “Between Aspiration and Reality: Russia’s Place in the World (Dis) Order,” *Russie.Eurasie.Visions*, No. 134, French Institute of International Relations, June 2024, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/ifri_lo_russia_world_disorder_2024.pdf.

¹³ A. Arbatov, “Russia’s Own Imperial Road,” N. Bubnova, Ed., *20 Years Without the Berlin Wall: A Breakthrough to Freedom* (Moscow: Carnegie Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011).

¹⁴ Edward Lucas, “The Coming Storm: Baltic Sea Security Report,” Center for European Policy Analysis, June, 2015, <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/The-Coming-Storm.pdf>.

¹⁵ Sergey Lavrov, “Russia’s Foreign Policy: Historical Background,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 3, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2124391.

¹⁶ Nicole Grajewski, “Russia and the Global Nuclear Order,” Center for Naval Analyses, March 2024, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2024/03/Russia-and-the-Global-Nuclear-Order.pdf>.

¹⁷ Stephen J. Blank, “Russia and Nuclear Weapons,” in Stephen J. Blank, Ed., *Russian Nuclear Weapons: Past, Present, and Future* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College Press, 2011), pp. 308-309.

Russian nuclear weapons and integrated air defense system facilitate deterrence of NATO expansion into Russia's historic sphere of influence; help restrain regional hegemony in Eurasia; and, demonstrate improvements to Russian military capabilities.¹⁸ Moreover, nuclear weapons represent the first critical component for hybrid warfare because they deter a massive ground response to an incremental limited war.¹⁹

Michael Petersen likewise observes that Russia's military strategy of strategic deterrence focuses on imposing costs on an adversary to manage escalation throughout all phases of a crisis, to undermine the adversary's will, and to resolve the conflict on terms favorable to Moscow.²⁰ Petersen also notes that, given the General Staff's orientation toward preemptive, or what Chief of the General Staff, General Vitaly Gerasimov calls preventive strikes, one cannot assume that Russia will confine itself in the initial period of war to purely tactical defensive strikes.

Instead, Russian forces (especially the navy) may launch offensive strikes against enemy civilian and military infrastructure to raise costs and impose deterrence upon the adversary so he will either not respond forcefully or escalate. This point accords with Russia's 2017 *Maritime Doctrine*.²¹ These strikes may be either conventional or nuclear, which, in the case of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) would be first-strike nuclear strikes to regulate the "intensity and scope of the conflict."²² Thus, there is an integral interplay between conventional and nuclear domains for Russia's concept of strategic deterrence.²³ There is also the risk of preemptive nuclear strikes, probably with TNWs or Russia's many theater-range strike systems.

Two conclusions arise from this situation. First, Russia's threat perception and militarization represent a permanent military-political challenge that is only solved by a systematic political-military deterrence strategy that counters Russia's escalatory theory of victory. Hence, arms control can only flourish after a prior decisive shift in Russo-Chinese-American political perceptions. The problem is political and strategic, not technological as too many analysts believe.²⁴ Second, given Russia's first-strike doctrine, deterrence must be restored throughout the entire spectrum of conflict.²⁵

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁰ Michael B. Petersen, "Toward an Understanding of Maritime Conflict with Russia," *The Sea In Russian Strategy*, Andrew Monaghan, and Richard Connolly, (eds.), (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), pp. 207-209.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 207-209, 221-223.

²² Kristina Melin, "Russia's Updated Basic Principles for Nuclear Deterrence A Broom for All Corners?," *Russia and Eurasia Studies Program, Nuclear Weapons Analysis*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, March 2025, p. 3, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208829>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Francis J. Gavin, "Understanding Schelling's Nuclear Paradigms with Francis J. Gavin," *Texas National Security Review*, Spring 2026, <https://tnsr.org/2026/04/understanding-schellings-nuclear-paradigms-with-francis-j-gavin/>.

²⁵ Mattelaer, *passim*.

Russia's War On the West

The evidence for Russia's continuing generation-long war is overwhelming. Russia's war with Europe began with the failure to subvert Ukraine's 2004 elections.²⁶ Since then Russia has believed itself to be at war with Europe. Therefore, Russia is undergoing an ongoing militarization of the state and preparation for war.²⁷ And, because its pivot to Asia failed, it increasingly aligns with China and poses a standing threat to Japan, which it regards as a platform for U.S and Japanese missile strikes against Russian Asia.²⁸

Moreover, one cannot clearly demarcate between "hybrid" and kinetic operations. The nuclear weapons revival and the threat assessment of nefarious Western intentions started in 2004, if not earlier.²⁹ Defense correspondent Pavel Felgenhauer reported in 2005 that the General Staff, including military intelligence (the GRU), controls information flows to Putin and historically has distorted information to provide deliberate worst-case analyses.³⁰ Likewise, Putin told the G-8 press corps in 2007 that Russia and the West were returning to the Cold War and added his readiness to threaten Europe with ballistic or cruise missiles.³¹ Recently Dmitri Peskov, Putin's Press Secretary, warned Europe that if it allows drone flights over its territories to attack Russian targets, Russia reserves the right to attack its drone factories.³² Indeed, Moscow published European addresses, overtly warning Europe of potential threats to it and indicating previous and ongoing reconnaissance of its targets.³³

Doctrine

Russia may employ nuclear weapons against purely conventional threats, not just nuclear ones. Doctrinal writings clearly make this point and actual behavior manifested in

²⁶ William Dixon and Maksym Beznosiuk, "Russia Will Never Agree to Peace in Ukraine," *The National Interest*, April 26, 2026, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-will-never-agree-to-peace-in-ukraine>.

²⁷ Andrew Monaghan, *Blitzkrieg and the Russian Art of War* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2025); and, Stephen Blank, "The Russian Total War Tradition," *Statecraft & Strategy*, June 26, 2026, <https://www.statecraftandstrategy.com/the-challenge-of-putins-russia/the-russian-total-war-tradition/>.

²⁸ Lyle J. Goldstein and Vitaly A. Kozyrev, *The New Cold War at Sea: Maritime Implications of the New China-Russia Quasi Alliance* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2026).

²⁹ "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," Channel One, Rossiya 1, Rossiya 24 and Public Television of Russia TV channels, and Mayak, Vesti FM and Radio Rossii Radio Stations, June 7, 2018, www.kremlin.ru.

³⁰ Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russia's Imperial General Staff," *Perspective*, October-November 2005, Vol. 16, No. 1, <https://open.bu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/a3b20aa8-b718-4c2a-9250-9f0753952980/content>.

³¹ "Putin Interviewed by Journalists from G8 countries – text," June 4, 2007, www.kremlin.ru. (Retrieved from Nexis-Lexis).

³² "Peskov Otsenil Veroyatnost Atak Rossii Na Ob'ekty Proizvodstvu dronov v Evropy," *Kommersant*, April 17, 2026, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/8603685>.

³³ Alexei Doval, "Potential Targets: Moscow Releases Data About European Firms Making Drones for Ukraine," *Euronews*, April 16, 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/04/16/potential-targets-moscow-releases-data-about-european-firms-making-drones-for-ukraine>.

procurements, exercises, and threats like Peskov's, confirm it.³⁴ American nuclear policies and conventional superiority also generate a constant quest for nuclear weapons.

An extensive and insightful literature exists concerning Russian nuclear doctrine and strategy. But assessments of Russian nuclear behavior, i.e., what Moscow actually does, are much sparser. Russian nuclear behavior since 2022 may be divided into four categories: rhetoric, including official and semi-official threats, and doctrine; war plans (where available in verified but unclassified versions); procurement, i.e., testing and new weapons systems deployed since 2022; and, exercises.

Russia's overall strategy is strategic deterrence.³⁵ *Strategicheskoye Sderzhivanie* (strategic deterrence) explicitly requires Russia to utilize every instrument of power it has to deter a nuclear or conventional attack, expressly advocating multi-domain coercion. Strategic deterrence differs from the U.S. concept of deterrence. Russians characterize U.S. deterrence programs as intimidating even though Putin's Russia is a classic intimidation culture, like the Mafia.³⁶ Russia's concept of deterrence also comports very well with fundamental tendencies in Russian strategic culture, and subsumes the widely used, even prevailing (although incorrectly applied) term for Russian strategy, hybrid warfare.³⁷

Thus, Moscow utilizes (or intends to use) all these instruments in multiple domains simultaneously and continuously, assuming a permanent condition of near war, if not actual war. The concept aims explicitly at compelling or coercing the enemy to act within a framework that Moscow controls, thereby linking this term to Russia's concept of reflexive control: inducing enemies to make decisions benefitting Russia even though they think they are advancing their own interests.

Second, strategic deterrence aims at imposing Moscow's control throughout all forms of deterrence, encompassing prewar, wartime and even postwar periods. This concept validates Harry Summers' observation that, "[a]t least from the military perspective, it is well understood that conflict prevention depends on a credible capability for conflict control."³⁸ Likewise, the Turkish scholar Bans Caglar argues that strategic deterrence presumes permanent warfare so that Russia can constantly apply military and non-military measures as needed to achieve escalation control on the battlefield by the effective threat of nuclear

³⁴ "Peskov Otseuil Veroyatnost Atak Rossii Na Ob'ekty Proizvodstvu dronov v Evropy," op. cit.

³⁵ Stephen Blank, "Clausewitz's Russian Chameleon: Russia's 'Nameless' War," Olga Bertlesen, Ed., *Russian Influence Operations: Disinformation and Beyond* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press for Ibidem Verlag, 2026); and Stephen Blank, "Nuclear Weapons in Russia's War against Ukraine," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Autumn, 2022), pp. 53-78, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss4/6>.

³⁶ Irenusz Pawel Karolewski and Viktoriya Kaina, "Is Russia Now a Criminocracy?," London School of Economics (LSE) Blogs, October 23, 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2023/10/23/is-russia-now-a-criminocracy/>.

³⁷ Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "Russian Strategic Deterrence," *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 2016, pp. 7-26.

³⁸ Harry G. Summers (Col., USA, Ret.), "War: Deter, Fight, Terminate; the Purpose of War Is a Better Peace," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1, Winter 1986, p. 20.

war.³⁹ This is not what Western observers called an “escalate to de-escalate” strategy, although that concept is not incompatible with a broader strategy of escalation control. Lastly, strategic deterrence effaces the demarcations between offense and defense and between deterrence and coercion.⁴⁰

Dmitry Adamsky similarly concluded that Russia’s concept of deterrence follows the Leninist and Soviet practice of erasing distinctions between offense and defense and between compellence (and coercion) and deterrence.⁴¹ Moscow’s global non-kinetic war fully integrates nuclear and non-nuclear instruments of force in a strategy designed to allow it to target the United States and its allies even in a regional war with NATO. Russia sees regional war as an opportunity to prevail by constantly brandishing the nuclear threat. Indeed, it has no other choice. Russia’s technological and thus conventional warfare inferiority vis-à-vis the West obliges it to raise nuclear threats to ensure the success of its conventional operations.⁴²

Doctrine and First Strike

In 2018, Putin described Russian nuclear policy as launch on warning of an approaching missile.⁴³ While this may include conventional NATO launches, it apparently does not include Ukrainian conventional strikes. But Putin’s remarks still leave space for a Russian nuclear first strike. Subsequently the military doctrine explicitly added missile attacks from Ukraine, if allied to NATO, against Russia and Belarus. Yet that has not happened despite continuing nuclear threats. Furthermore the 2024 *Fundamentals of Nuclear Deterrence* acknowledged that Russia conducts nuclear deterrence against purely conventionally armed states, warned that other countries’ missile defenses threaten Russia, and cited various conventional weapons that can be directed against Russia, along with concerns over NATO enlargement and Ukraine.⁴⁴

Conditions leading to nuclear use include receipt of credible warning, as noted in 2018, and, “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.” Thus, Moscow extended deterrence to Belarus after deploying nuclear weapons there in 2022, undermining the

³⁹ Bans Caglar, “The Spectre of Nuclear Weapons Use in Ukraine: The Nuances of Nuclear War Risk,” https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380146741_THE_SPECTER_OF_NUCLEAR_WEAPONS_USE_IN_UKRAINE_THE_NUANCES_OF_NUCLEAR_WAR_RISK#fullTextFileContent.

⁴⁰ Ven Bruusgaard, op. cit.

⁴¹ Dmitry Adamsky, “The Two Marshals: Nikolai Ogarkov, Andrew Marshall and the Revolution In Military Affairs,” in Hal W. Brands, Ed., *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World To the Digital Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2025), p. 915.

⁴² Caglar, op. cit.

⁴³ “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” March 1, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56957>.

⁴⁴ “Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,” December 3, 2024, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreignpolicy/international_safety/1434131/.

spirit, if not the letter, of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. These doctrinal statements and deployments also reduced restrictions on a nuclear first strike. Those weapons, the Oreshnik (Hazelnut) IRBM, are dual-use missiles whose training and deployment reveal their offensive nature despite Russian rhetoric.⁴⁵

Recent writing on the formal modelling of potential nuclear war also warns that a country like Russia, that believes its conventional arsenal to be insufficient against NATO, might strike first. Russia might threaten Western militaries with limited nuclear strikes since its conventional deterrent is insufficient.⁴⁶ Therefore, if Russia faces an apparent defeat in Ukraine, it might regard that as an existential threat justifying an asymmetric escalation to a limited nuclear first strike.⁴⁷ Or, if the current war escalated to include NATO missile strikes, especially against critical Russian targets, there could be a Russian nuclear first strike.

Other doctrinal documents also indicate first-strike options. Russia's navy may launch offensive conventional or nuclear strikes against civilian and military infrastructure to raise costs and impose deterrence, by threatening to escalate as stated in Russia's 2017 *Maritime Doctrine*.⁴⁸ These may be nuclear first strikes to regulate the "intensity and scope of the conflict."⁴⁹ Here again there is interaction between conventional and nuclear domains for Russia's concept of strategic deterrence.⁵⁰

Earlier doctrinal statements led many Western observers to maintain that Russia would either threaten escalation to the nuclear level or actually detonate such a weapon to deter Western forces' response to a Russian conventional attack.⁵¹ Russia's 2017 *Maritime Doctrine* explicitly invoked naval use of nuclear weapons as a legitimate deterrent.⁵² It stated that the Navy,

Possess[es] strategic nuclear and conventional naval forces and the ability to implement its combat potential in virtually any area of the World Ocean;... as well

⁴⁵ Fabian Hoffmann, "Oreshnik and the End of Arms Control In Europe," *Missile Matters – with Fabian Hoffmann*, November 24, 2024, <https://missilematters.substack.com/p/key-takeaways-from-russias-oreshnik>.

⁴⁶ Evan Hellan Larsen, "Deliberate Nuclear First-Use In An Era Of Asymmetry: A Game Theoretical Approach," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 68, No. 5, 2024, p. 853.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.867.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-209, 221-223.

⁴⁹ Melin, op. cit., p. 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Michael Kofman and Anna Loukianova Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, September 19, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/09/escalation-management-and-nuclear-employment-in-russian-military-strategy-2/>; and Stefan Forss, "Russian Nuclear Policy, Doctrine, and Strategy," Glen E. Howard, and Matthew Czekaj, Eds., *Russia's Military Strategy and Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, February 2019), pp. 185-249.

⁵² Available in English as, *Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period Until 2030*, July 20, 2017, transl. by Anna Davis, [https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/RMSI_RusNavyFundamentalsENG_FINAL%20\(1\).pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=fjFDEgWhpd1ING%2FnmGQXqah5%2FDEujDU76EnksAB%2B1A0%3D](https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/RMSI_RusNavyFundamentalsENG_FINAL%20(1).pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=fjFDEgWhpd1ING%2FnmGQXqah5%2FDEujDU76EnksAB%2B1A0%3D), 11.

as a high level of readiness for actions, including strikes on critically important enemy targets.⁵³

That doctrine further extolled nuclear strikes from forward-based platforms, 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.⁵⁴

As Michael Petersen wrote, in wartime,

Military forces achieve these missions through pre-conflict and by inflicting specifically assigned damage criteria in local, regional, and strategic conflicts. In regional and strategic conflicts—wars against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in particular—this criterion is met in part via attacks against an adversary’s critical infrastructure. These operations perform the vital function of military signaling during what Russian thinkers term the “period of threat,” and then apply measured force against strategic targets during the ensuing “initial period of war.” Thereafter, these operations also provide a means of escalation management.⁵⁵

The 2022 Maritime Doctrine, which discusses the entire civil and nuclear fleet, is, however, silent about these issues.⁵⁶ Nevertheless Western analysts argue that the approach, utilizing naval strike forces as potential first-strike systems, remains as described in the 2017 doctrine.⁵⁷ William Alberque wrote that,

Among Russia’s carriers of tactical nuclear weapons, it lists “anti-submarine missiles with nuclear warheads placed on surface ships and submarines” and “ship and shore-based anti-aircraft guided missiles with nuclear warheads to defeat enemy air defense groups”. The admission was stunning given the inherent dangers of carrying nuclear weapons at sea even in peacetime.⁵⁸

Clearly the navy has a major nuclear mission that suggests a lowered nuclear threshold.

In September 2020, noted Russian journalist Pavel Felgenhauer wrote, “First, the nuclear threshold is becoming lower: in any serious skirmish, the Russian Navy would either need

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Michael B. Petersen, “Strategic Deterrence, Critical Infrastructure, and the Aspiration-Modernization Gap in the Russian Navy,” in Jeffrey Mankoff, Ed., *Improvisation and Adaptability in the Russian Military* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), pp. 31-32.

⁵⁶ Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 31 July 2022, Anna Vest and Ryan Davis, Trans., Russia Maritime Studies Institute, https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/20220731_ENG_RUS_Maritime_Doctrine_FINALtxt.pdf?sv=2017-04-17&sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=2zUFSaTUSPcOpQDBk%2FuCtVnb%2FDoy06Cbh0EI5tGpl2Y%3D.

⁵⁷ Monaghan and Connolly, Eds., op. cit.; and, Forss, op. cit., pp. 185-249.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

to go nuclear or risk being sunk.”⁵⁹ Russian Navy performance in the war against Ukraine suggests he was correct. The leaked documents from 2024 provide more substantiation that Russia sees naval nuclear weapons as a way of “making Russia’s navy ‘more effective.’”⁶⁰

This lowered nuclear threshold presaged the 2024 doctrine that appeared after Western decisions to transfer some longer-range missiles to Ukraine that can strike Russian territory added another threat that could conceivably lower Russia’s bar to a nuclear first strike, presumably against Ukraine.

This doctrine threatened Ukraine and Western suppliers of missiles to it. It also extended Russian nuclear deterrence to both Belarus and Russian bases abroad, confirming that Russian power projection also possesses a strategic deterrence mission.⁶¹ Subsequently, other rhetorical threats of nuclear escalation have continued, not least because experience has told Moscow they frighten Western audiences.

Procurements

By 2022, it was clear that, “Russian military planners [have been] pursuing a broad range of upgraded and new versions of nuclear weapons,” suggesting “that the[ir] real doctrine goes beyond basic deterrence and toward regional warfighting strategies, or even weapons aimed at causing terror.”⁶² Washington’s withdrawal from the ABM Treaty did not lead Russia to invest in defenses for its ICBMs and other land-based missiles. Instead, Russia invested heavily and asymmetrically in offensive dual-capable missiles, particularly theater and intermediate-range platforms, displaying the offensive nature of its so-called active defense.

In 2018, Putin stated that Russia was developing new capabilities including an ICBM-mounted hypersonic glide vehicle, a nuclear-powered cruise missile, and a nuclear-capable autonomous underwater system. The latter two systems were tested in 2025, according to a 2026 Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) statement.⁶³ According to 2025 testimony of U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) Commander General Gregory Guillot, “if fielded,” these

⁵⁹ Pavel Felgenhauer, “The Hypersonic Hype and Russia’s Diminished Nuclear Threshold,” Jamestown Foundation, August 6, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/the-hypersonic-hype-and-russias-diminished-nuclear-threshold/>.

⁶⁰ Mark B. Schneider, “The Leaked Russian Nuclear Documents and Russian First Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *Information Series*, No. 579 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 18, 2024), https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-leaked-russian-nuclear-documents-and-russian-first-use-of-nuclear-weapons-no-579-march-18-2024/.

⁶¹ Stephen Blank, “Gunboat Diplomacy a la Russe: Russia’s Naval Base in Sudan and Its Implications,” *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 38, No. 4, 2022, pp. 1-21, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14751798.2022.2122204>.

⁶² Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, “Nuclear Notebook: How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have in 2022?,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 78, No. 2, 2022, p. 102, <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2022-02/nuclear-notebook-how-many-nuclear-weapons-does-russia-have-in-2022/>.

⁶³ Statement of Director, Defense Intelligence Agency Lt. Gen. James Adams, USM, Before the Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations, U.S. House of Representatives, 119th Congress, 2027, Budget Posture Hearing, 2026, p. 11, <https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/119162/witnesses/HHRG-119-AS26-Wstate-AdamsJ-20260416.pdf#page=11>.

novel Russian capabilities “will severely challenge [the U.S.] ability to detect and characterize an inbound attack and determine an appropriate response during a conflict.”⁶⁴

This nuclear-capable underwater platform allegedly includes autonomous underwater vehicles (AUVs) with “no global analogues.”⁶⁵ General Guillot also testified about other offensive procurements, namely,

Russian President Vladimir Putin has also announced that [the] Sarmat (heavy ICBM-author) will feature a FOBS [Fractional Orbital Bombardment System] capability that will enable it to approach the homeland via a southern trajectory, hoping to evade our legacy early warning radars. Meanwhile, Russia is increasing its non-nuclear capabilities, including conventionally armed cruise missiles that Russian doctrine envisions using to strike North American critical infrastructure in an attempt to degrade political will, disrupt force flows, and terminate a conflict on terms acceptable to Russia. Throughout 2025, Russia continued to deploy cruise missile launch platforms in the approaches to North America, including multiple heavy bomber patrols near the Alaskan coast and lengthy deployments of Severodvinsk-class submarines.⁶⁶

In addition, a full range of procurements is taking place. First, Moscow, once again violating earlier arms control treaties, is developing a space-based nuclear weapon:

We learned that Russia is developing a new satellite designed to carry a nuclear weapon on orbit—an anti-satellite capability which, if detonated, could potentially wipe out an entire orbit of assets crucial not just to the United States, but the entire world.⁶⁷

This weapon would be most useful as an anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon to blind or destroy American or other satellites early in a conflict. Therefore, this system drives a strong supposition of an intended first or preemptive strike.⁶⁸ It could target critical infrastructure

⁶⁴ “Russia’s Nuclear Weapons,” Congressional Research Service, April 22, 2026, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12672>.

⁶⁵ “Russia Confirms Development of Fifth Generation Strategic Nuclear Submarine: How Will It Perform?,” *Military Watch Magazine*, December 23, 2025, <https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/russia-confirms-development-fifth-gen-strategic-submarine>.

⁶⁶ “Statement of General Gregory M. Guillot, United States Air Force Commander United States Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command,” Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 19 March 2026, pp. 4-5, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/guillot_opening_statement1.pdf#page=5.

⁶⁷ “Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies”: Remarks by Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Dr. Vipin Narang at CSIS,” August 1, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3858311/nuclear-threats-and-the-role-of-allies-remarks-by-acting-assistant-secretary-of/>.

⁶⁸ “New Russian Anti-Satellite Weapon Revives Fear of Nuclear Conflict In Space,” *El Pais*, December 2, 2024, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-12-02/new-russian-anti-satellite-weapon-revives-fears-of-nuclear-conflict-in-space.html>.

like U.S. satellites or SpaceX's Starlink network upon which Ukraine has relied.⁶⁹ Worse yet, the satellite that is allegedly supposed to guide this ASAT's movements has evidently lost its stability in orbit, raising serious questions about Russian command and control of its nuclear weapons and about damage to other states' space-based infrastructures.⁷⁰

Consequently,

This incident is part of a broader trend that deeply concerns military strategists: the **transformation of space into a potential battlefield**. Reports citing U.S. Department of Defense officials indicate that both Russia and China are conducting military training in Low Earth Orbit (LEO). This region, crucial for communication, intelligence, and observation satellites, has become a major strategic asset. The fear is that global powers are developing capabilities to jam, damage, or even **destroy vital space infrastructure** of an adversary in the event of conflict. The opacity surrounding many military space missions, coupled with the development of "dual-use" technologies (civil and military), complicates the assessment of real intentions.⁷¹

Second, there has been an enormous upsurge of intermediate and theater-range dual-capable missiles over the last 20 years, many of which violated the INF Treaty. Allegedly these systems responded to U.S. and NATO deployments in Central and Eastern Europe, including U.S. missile defense programs. But Moscow's desire to leave the INF Treaty long preceded Western deployments. Russia simply refused, consistent with its ingrained threat assessment, to believe that those Western deployments could not strike Russia's land-, sea-, or air-launched missiles.⁷² Thus it decided to violate the INF Treaty systematically.

Russia can produce 2,500 dual-capable ballistic missiles annually and is now stockpiling them, presumably for Ukraine. Given Western intelligence warnings about a Russian-initiated war between 2027 and 2035, the possibility of nuclear strikes due to European involvement in Ukraine, or in a subsequent attack on a NATO ally cannot be excluded. This is especially concerning since there is little reliable information concerning the estimated 1,000-2,000 Russian tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) that apparently mainly belong to the Russian Navy and therefore can strike European targets. Meanwhile, Russian procurement of nuclear weapons continues without reliable verification because the arms control regime collapsed (largely due to Russian cheating). Therefore, monitoring those weapons' numbers or missions is impossible.

⁶⁹ Ross Dixon, "Capable of Guiding Nuclear Weapons, the Russian Satellite Cosmos 2553 Has Gone Out of Control," *Farmingdale Observer*, May 1, 2025, <https://farmingdale-observer.com/2025/05/01/capable-of-guiding-nuclear-weapons-the-russian-satellite-cosmos-2553-has-gone-out-of-control-experts-are-sounding-the-alarm/>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Eirwen Williams, "'US on High Alert': Pentagon Confirms Mysterious Signal Traced to Russian Space Anomaly Now Feared as Major Threat," *Sustainability Times*, May 3, 2025, <https://www.sustainability-times.com/policy/us-on-high-alert-pentagon-confirms-mysterious-signal-traced-to-russian-space-anomaly-now-feared-as-major-threat/>. (Bold in original).

⁷² Forss, op. cit., pp. 185-249.

Exercises

Exercises are a key element of any deterrence posture and can seriously impact strategic stability. Exercise scenarios provide insight into states' assessments of their adversary's intentions and the kind of operations for which armed forces are preparing. How states choose to communicate—or not to communicate—around their exercises is also a relevant factor in deterrence. In particular, the concentration of forces that can occur in exercises tends to heighten the adversary's security concerns, especially when intentions are not clearly communicated or there are good reasons not to trust what is being communicated.⁷³

This holds true for both NATO and Russia. Moreover, exercises display capabilities and their intended uses, making them a key building block in any deterrence posture. The communication or lack thereof that surrounds such activity conveys messages to both allies and adversaries, whether to reassure, deter or both.⁷⁴

In June 2024, the Russian Navy rehearsed procedures consistent with the use of TNWs and Russian doctrine. These exercises involved the nuclear-capable Kinzhal hypersonic and Iskander missiles which can carry TNWs, suggesting a rehearsal of nuclear weapon scenarios involving TNWs.⁷⁵

Other naval exercises and revelations from leaked documents also pointed towards a first strike. In September 2024, Russia's armed forces practiced loading Soviet-era P-270 anti-ship cruise missiles onto a Tarantul-class corvette in Kaliningrad, where NATO officials say it stores an undeclared stockpile of tactical nuclear warheads. Footage of the drills showed troops of Russia's 12th Main Directorate (or GUMO), the forces tasked with control of nuclear weapons, practicing moving the missile in the container they would use to move a fully nuclear-armed missile, accompanied by the appropriate guard force and procedures for handling a nuclear warhead.⁷⁶

Similarly leaked documents dating from 2008-2014 had apparently mapped out hundreds if not thousands of targets including (as advocated in the 2017 naval doctrine) military and critical infrastructure targets. According to those documents, once Russia's military engaged with NATO forces, presumably in the Baltic States and Poland, targets all over Europe (if not in the North Atlantic) would be immediately at risk of a first strike, thereby risking total war. Analysts of these documents found language adumbrating the 2017 *Maritime Doctrine*. The documents cited the navy's high maneuverability, i.e., ability to conduct sudden and pre-emptive blows and massive missile strikes from various directions.

⁷³ Barbara Kunz and Aino Esser, "Calibrating Deterrence: Disruptors of Strategic Stability on NATO's New Northern Flank," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2026, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/0326_calibrating_deterrence.pdf.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

⁷⁵ Xiadon Liang, "Russia Links Nonstrategic Nuclear Exercises to Threats," Arms Control Association, *Arms Control Today*, June 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-06/news/russia-links-nonstrategic-nuclear-exercises-threats>.

⁷⁶ Anna Maria Dyer, "Ocean 2024 Exercises Demonstrate Russian Naval Capabilities, Strategic Signaling," Polish Institute of International Affairs, September 26, 2024, <https://pism.pl/publications/ocean-2024-exercises-demonstrate-russian-naval-capabilities-strategic-signalling>.

The documents further added that nuclear weapons are “as a rule” designated for use “in combination with other means of destruction” to achieve Russia’s goals.⁷⁷ Analysts reviewing the documents said they coincided with NATO’s threat assessment of long-range missile strikes by the Russian navy and the speed with which Moscow would probably resort to nuclear use. Moreover, the documents revealed a low threshold for nuclear use in first-strike or preemptive modes in Europe by saying that nuclear weapons could be used to contain aggression against Russia or for escalating conflicts.⁷⁸

Similarly, these documents revealed the Russian Navy’s “hit list” of targets from the United Kingdom and France’s Atlantic Coast through the Baltic that it would attack with nuclear-capable missiles in a first-strike mode.⁷⁹ One particular document also cited an option for a “demonstration strike” in a remote area “in a period of immediate threat of aggression” before actual conflict, i.e., before Russian aggression.⁸⁰ Given Putin’s June 2024 statement that the West would be “more or less defenseless” against Russian missile strikes, this document strongly supports the view that Moscow has a first-strike nuclear doctrine and strategy, despite its rhetoric to the contrary.⁸¹

Russian naval exercises confirm that these leaked documents are not isolated examples of deployments and tests publicized by Moscow to intimidate and raise the likelihood of nuclear first-strike employment. In 2022, when the Red Army suffered serious battlefield reverses, U.S. intelligence received signals not only that generals and other Kremlin propagandists were advocating first-strike nuclear use against Ukraine, presumably using TNWs, but that Putin, too, “almost” authorized their use.⁸² Furthermore, the deployment of nuclear-capable missiles on surface ships, as Albecque noted above, clearly violates the 1991 Soviet-American agreement banning such deployments, a violation consistent with Moscow’s wholesale violation of innumerable treaties pertaining to both nuclear weapons and European security.

These findings are not the only alarming Russian indicators of a heightened propensity for risk-taking and contempt for arms control treaties. Besides the never-ending rhetorical threats and so-called “redlines,” all of which have been broken without any nuclear escalations, at least four other escalations within the current framework of Russian behavior

⁷⁷ Max Seddon and Chris Cook, “Russian Navy Trained to Target Sites Inside Europe with Nuclear-Capable Missiles,” *Financial Times*, August 12, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/237e1e55-401d-4eeb-875b-03fe68f81575>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.; and, Mark Schneider, “The Zapad-2025 Theater Military Exercise: More Russian Nuclear Intimidation,” *Information Series*, No. 642 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, November 3, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-schneider-the-zapad-2025-theater-military-exercise-more-russian-nuclear-intimidation-no-642-november-3-2025/m

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² John O’ Sullivan, “Vladimir Putin ‘Almost’ Used Nukes in Ukraine as Intelligence Chiefs Warn of ‘Threat to World Order,’” *Irish Star*, September 9, 2024, <https://www.irishstar.com/news/us-news/russia-putin-nuclear-weapons-ukraine-33625656>.

suggest greater reliance on nuclear weapons and an increased tolerance for risk taking.⁸³ For example, a deserter from a nuclear weapons base revealed that from the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, nuclear weapons were fully in place and ready for a launch if the order came. Moreover, work to maintain this readiness is unceasing.⁸⁴

Also, in 2022, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, contacted their American and British opposite numbers with fabricated stories of an imminent Ukrainian dirty bomb. Russia's Ambassador to the UN similarly wrote to the UN Secretary-General. And, the Ministry of Defense announced preparations for acting in a radioactive environment. These actions evidently aimed to create a pretext for a nuclear first strike.⁸⁵ Strong U.S., Chinese, and Indian remonstrations with Moscow averted that outcome. But Russia continues making rhetorical and/or actual threats.

Third, just before the aggression against Ukraine, Russian naval exercises sent the Northern Fleet into the North Atlantic and the Black Sea Fleet, Mediterranean Eskadra, (Squadron), and air assets into the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic to exercise interdicting an organized NATO response in support of Ukraine. Russia thereby risked a preemptive strike on NATO fleets that could easily trigger Russian nuclear first strikes against NATO naval and air assets.⁸⁶

In December 2021, ships from the Pacific Fleet entered the Mediterranean for exercises there. In February 2022, Defense Minister Shoigu witnessed exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean that showcased, "exercises in operationally important areas of the World Ocean, as well as in the waters of the seas adjacent to Russia." This last statement underscores that Moscow considers the Mediterranean a sea adjacent to Russia, part of Russia's global naval ambitions. Here the ships of the Mediterranean Eskadra performed, "measures to search for foreign submarines, establish control over navigation in the Mediterranean Sea and the flight of aircraft over it." Here, too, the potential nuclear dimension is visible as Moscow sent airplanes carrying nuclear-capable missiles to Russia's Khmeimim air base in Syria. They included, "MiG-31K fighter jets containing hypersonic Kinzhal missiles and long-range Tupolev Tu-22M strategic bombers, intended to be used in military exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean." These exercises also aimed to target enemy warships, e.g., the American carrier strike group in the Mediterranean.

In January 2022, the Northern Fleet, ostensibly conducting exercises, surged into the North Atlantic, off Ireland's coast, astride the main sea lines of communication from North America to northern Europe. This activity was part of a larger exercise "involving 140 combat and supply ships from all four fleets, from the Pacific to the North Atlantic. Three of

⁸³ Mattelaer, *op. cit.*

⁸⁴ Will Vernon, "Russian Deserter Reveals Secrets of Guarding Nuclear Base," *BBC*, November 25, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c9dl2pv0yj0o>.

⁸⁵ Heather Williams, Kelsey Hartigan, Lachlan MacKenzie and Raja Younis, "Deter and Divide: Russia's Nuclear Rhetoric & Escalation Risks in Ukraine," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 4, 2023, <https://features.csis.org/deter-and-divide-russia-nuclear-rhetoric/>.

⁸⁶ Blank, "Gunboat Diplomacy à la Russe," *op. cit.*, pp. 1-21.

the Northern Fleet's amphibious assault ships that in mid-January were flexing muscles in the Baltic Sea and made Sweden . . . increase military readiness, sending troops to the island of Gotland, and then sailing into the Mediterranean." They were likely sailing to the Black Sea. Another assessment of these exercises noted that training maneuvers of the Northern Fleet in the Barents Sea began in January 2022. 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 there, as well as the airspace above. Those activities aimed to prepare the ground for potential Russian nuclear ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) operations. During the attack on Ukraine, the Project 1144 cruiser Peter the Great remained in the Barents Sea to guard Russian SSBNs against NATO's possible entry into the conflict.⁸⁷

Fourth and more recently, the Zapad-2025 exercises, for the first time, began not with a conventional threat or attack but with a scenario involving TNW strikes against Europe, signifying Russia's growing interest and possible readiness to begin a war with Europe with a seemingly limited nuclear strike.

In Zapad-2025, Russia and Belarus practiced non-strategic nuclear weapons use. Just before it, TASS, Russia's main official news agency, reported the exercise involved "...planning nuclear weapons deployment, including the use of the Oreshnik system [dual-capable MIRVed intermediate-range ballistic missile]." In Zapad-2025, Russia also showcased its dual-capable hypersonic missiles. This exercise was preceded and followed by gross Russian provocations, including an apparently deliberate drone attack against Poland and the violation of Estonian airspace by three Russian Mig-31 nuclear-capable fighters.⁸⁸

Russian nuclear forces also contribute to growing nuclear threats in Northeast Asia.⁸⁹ Therefore, considering the Sino-Russian entente as expressed in increasing maritime and aerial probes against Japan, South Korea, the Pacific coast of Alaska, and even Hawaii, the possibility of Russian, as well as Chinese and North Korean missile strikes cannot be overlooked.⁹⁰ Therefore, it is also necessary to examine the leaked reports of a potential Russian attack against Japan. Here again, Russia prepared detailed target lists comprising hundreds of civilian infrastructure and high-ranking military targets for missile strikes against Japan and South Korea in August 2021. These target lists appeared in a presentation explaining the capabilities of the non-nuclear KH-101 cruise missile. Although the lists were

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Schneider, "The Zapad-2025 Theater Military Exercise: More Russian Nuclear Intimidation," op. cit.

⁸⁹ Victor Cha, "North Korea as It Is: The Case For a Cold Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, April 21, 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/north-korea/north-korea-it-victor-cha>.

⁹⁰ "U.S. Coast Guard responds to Russian spy ship off Honolulu," *The Watch*, December 8, 2025, <https://thewatch-journal.com/2025/12/08/u-s-coast-guard-responds-to-russian-spy-ship-off-honolulu/>.

circulated in 2013-2014, they show that these plans also included typical preparations for what Moscow assumed would be a localized conflict.⁹¹

Apart from the senselessness of an unprovoked attack upon Japan, such plans amount to dropping a lighted match into a pool of gasoline. As South Korean ambassador Wi Sung-Lac has observed, even if Russia prevailed in Ukraine, a weakened and isolated Russia would more likely play a spoiler rather than a constructive role in East Asia. And this preceded its alliance with North Korea.⁹² Moreover Russia's increasing dependence upon both North Korea and China to prosecute this war underscores the risk that in either a Taiwan or Korean contingency Russia may be dragged into what already threatens a rapid escalation to a nuclear conflict. Alternatively, those two states may feel the need to rescue Russia or challenge the West. Thus, Admiral Rob Bauer, Chairman of NATO's Military Committee, warned that, "The scenario that greatly concerns NATO is that if China coordinates actions involving Russia and Taiwan, it would be highly beneficial for them if Russia were to attack one of the Allies."⁹³ Similarly, Danish intelligence warns that ties with China embolden Russia, which could attack Europe within a year after ending the war in Ukraine while Chinese cyber capabilities are on a par with U.S. capabilities.⁹⁴

These documents suggest that Putin's egregious strategic failure in Ukraine, i.e., the short-war illusion, was no accident but rather a predictable consequence of Russian policymaking.⁹⁵ Second, as in Ukraine, there undoubtedly would have been nuclear threats accompanying these missile strikes. Third, these plans seriously undermine the presumption of policymakers' rationality that pervades much of deterrence theory. Who in his right mind could believe that Japan and South Korea would not strike back and that U.S. policymakers would not reply forcefully? Given the evidence of these plans, the reality of Putin's growing paranoia, and mounting signs of a true crisis of the state, a watchful and vigorous deterrence is now urgent.

⁹¹ Isabel Van Brugen, "Russia Planned To Attack Japan in 2021: Leaked FSB Letters," *Newsweek*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-planned-attack-japan-2021-fsb-letters-1762133>; and Chris Cook and Max Seddon, "Russia trained officers for attacks on Japan and South Korea," *Financial Times*, December 31, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/d345a6e7-2d72-4dcb-9c12-76d571ba75eb?syn-25a6b1a6=1>.for attacks on Japan and South Korea.

⁹² Yang Xiangfeng, "Toward a Eurasian security complex? The Two Koreas' entanglement in the Ukraine war and the conjoining of European and Asian security," *Asia-Europe Journal*, Vol. 24, August 15, 2025, p. 272, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10308-025-00742-3>.

⁹³ Olena Mukhina, "Rob Bauer just named NATO's alarming scenario involving Russia and Europe," *Euromaidan*, April 19, 2026, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2026/04/19/rob-bauer-just-named-natos-alarming-scenario-involving-russia/>.

⁹⁴ Perkin Amalaraj, "Russia preparing for war with NATO, European spy agency warns," *Daily Mail*, April 29, 2026, <https://www.msn.com/en-nz/news/other/russia-preparing-for-war-with-nato-european-spy-agency-warns/ar-AA21trz1>.

⁹⁵ Vladimir Gel'man, *Russia's Gamble: The Domestic Origins of Russia's Attack on Ukraine* (Cambridge, UK and Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2025).

Russian Objectives

When we correlate these exercises with procurement, official doctrine, and rhetoric, it becomes clear that Russia's conventional and nuclear first strike and preemptive missions, primarily employing regional and theater missiles, represent real threats to the West. Moreover, Moscow habitually invokes them for good reasons beyond intimidating the West. Indeed, intimidating the West is merely a means to an end or to several ends.

Russia's ultimate objective is survival of the regime, not only as an empire but also as a patrimonial autocracy. Putin's imperial drive, as Arbatov noted above, derives from his system's domestic dynamics. But Russia's more immediate objectives are concerned with undermining the post-Cold War settlement in Europe. Specifically, Ukraine's sovereignty, if not its territory, must be suborned; NATO must retreat to its 1997 boundaries, i.e., before enlargement; and Russia must regain an uncontested sphere of influence across Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Only by this territorial-strategic revisionism can the regime's unchallenged domestic power survive because Putin's system is clearly under mounting stress.

The problem for foreign governments is that this imperial restoration, given the abiding nature of Putin's system, cannot bring peace because Russia will not believe itself to be secure, not least because empire means the forcible diminution of subject territories' sovereignty and integrity. Thus, a Russian empire is incompatible with European security and perpetuates the state of siege spanning all of Europe. So, to ensure a lasting Russian defeat that upholds the post-Cold War settlement, a credible European-based deterrence should be implemented sooner rather than later.

Conclusions for Western Deterrence

Under the circumstances, conventional and nuclear deterrence of Russia in Asia and Europe should be reinvigorated. Today's situation resembles the 1980s. Europe and the United States then confronted an analogous threat of an immense asymmetry regarding theater or short- and intermediate-range Soviet nuclear and conventional missiles that targeted the continent.

The response then was Pershing-2 and cruise missiles based in Europe that held the USSR at risk if it attacked. Today, defenses are available but given the cost and time needed to build them, it seems more cost-effective for NATO to deploy theater capable weapons. Today, NATO is at a strategic disadvantage that can be quickly redressed by deploying missiles in central and Eastern Europe.⁹⁶ Thus, the Trump Administration's decision out of pique to break the 2024 U.S.-Germany agreement to deploy IRBMs ranging from 460-2,700

⁹⁶ Luis Simon and Alexander Lanoszka, "The Post-INF Missile Balance: Thinking About NATO's Deterrence Strategy," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2020, https://tnsr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/02_TNSR-Journal-Vol-3-Issue-3-Lanoszka.pdf.

km exemplifies the strategic mistakes that typify the Trump Administration.⁹⁷ Although the sea-based SLCM-N admirably fits the bill for defending Europe, it has yet to be built in sufficient number to make a difference.

Therefore, restoring trust among allies that the Administration has so wantonly and recklessly abused is the key priority for defense. By doing so, it is not only possible to advance U.S. interests but also to deter Russia and China. Only that will allow a defense pivot to Asia, and in particular China, which is rightly termed the “pacing threat.” Therefore, collaboration with Europe to strengthen European economies, thereby enabling them to sustain a coherent, credible, and thriving, competitive defense-industrial sector is urgently needed. The consequences and implications of Ukraine’s success should be disseminated and assimilated across Europe to deter Russia at the lowest level of conflict. This means nuclear and modernized conventional deterrence and an enhanced societal resilience and retaliatory capability against Russia’s non-kinetic probes.

Even if peace broke out tomorrow, Putinism, a system fully consonant with Russian imperial tradition, would continue threatening Europe and Asia, if not beyond. The only way, then, to engender a lasting peace in Eurasia is ultimately regime change in Russia. Obviously, this cannot be NATO’s strategy, either openly or implicitly. But containment of Russia within its present treaty-sanctified borders can be that strategy. As George Kennan foretold and history validated, containment generates internal pressures inside Russia that only find their outlet in domestically driven reform or regime change. Two things are needed to bring about that change: defeat of Russia in Ukraine and Ukrainian membership in NATO.

Russia’s defeat in Ukraine is the precondition for reform, if not regime change, in Russian history. Since the autocratic imperial state is optimized for war, defeat imposes upon it the need for reform just as the defeats in the Crimean, Russo-Japanese wars, Afghanistan and the Cold War did. Only if Russia is defeated—and decisively so—will not only Ukraine but also Europe be safe from Russia’s revanchism. For the same reason Ukraine should become a full member of NATO and the EU. Ukraine’s tragic experience since 2014, when Putin seized Crimea, indicates that only its membership in NATO, adding its own credible defense to NATO, will deter Russian attempts at imperial restoration. Since a Russian empire is incompatible with European security, only if Ukraine is secured by credible deterrence—and NATO is the only credible European security organization—can it and Europe be secure against Russian efforts to restore its empire. Clearly, this security comprises not only defense and retaliatory capability against “hybrid attacks” but also conventional and nuclear deterrence.

Ideally, and because any new Russian empire in Europe would be, what Thomas Jefferson called, “a breakfast for Bonaparte,” this deterrence must include an active American role. If commentary on Europe agrees on anything it is that the U.S. position in

⁹⁷ “US considers scrapping long-range missile deployment in Europe,” *Le Monde*, May 5, 2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/05/05/us-considers-scrapping-long-range-missile-deployment-in-europe_6753150_4.html.

Europe that the Trump Administration seems intent on demolishing is instead in America's vital interests and confers immense benefits upon it. Current U.S. policy runs counter to those interests and, as already is becoming visible, undermines our global power and reputation. That trend can only augment the threats to international security and that cannot be in the U.S. or its allies' interests.

Stephen Blank is Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. This is an updated and revised version of his March 23, 2026 article, "Reflections on Russia's Nuclear Behavior," published by the Kennan Institute and available at <https://www.kennaninstitute.org/articles/reflections-on-russias-nuclear-behavior>.