

Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears

Russia's Political-Military Establishment Debates Credibility of Nuclear Threats and Potential Nuclear Employment

Anya Fink, Gabriela Iveliz Rosa-Hernandez, and Cornell Overfield

with contributions by Stephanie Stapleton



Abstract

Moscow's nuclear weapons doctrine, posture, and strategy are at an inflection point. Russian political leadership have repeatedly invoked and signaled with nuclear weapons to deter a direct US or North Atlantic Treaty Organization intervention into the war in Ukraine. Some Russian nongovernmental expert elites have advocated for a nuclear strike on Europe coupled with a shift to a preemptive nuclear doctrine, while others within the Russian military expert community have proposed more aggressive signaling with nuclear forces as well as changes to the strategic operations system. This report examines the ongoing debates in Russia about the ineffectiveness of nuclear weapons threats among three stakeholder groups: high-level political officials, the military-analytical community, and nongovernmental experts. The paper examines the potential implications of these debates for Russia's nuclear policy and posture. The concluding section discusses implications for US and allied forces.

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Anya Fink contributed to this report until February 2024 while on staff at CNA. Dr. Fink is currently employed as an analyst for the Congressional Research Service (CRS). Her contributions to this report were prepared prior to Dr. Fink's CRS employment. The views expressed herein do not represent those of CRS or the Library of Congress.

Following Dr. Fink's departure, Gabriela Iveliz Rosa-Hernandez, who served as lead author on the section about civilian experts, assumed leadership of the study with the assistance of Cornell Overfield, who served as lead author on the section on declaratory policy. All questions, comments, and concerns about the report should be directed to Rosa-Hernandez.

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Approved by:



David Knoll, Research Program Director
Countering Threats and Challenges Program
Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs Division

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Moscow's nuclear weapons doctrine, posture, and strategy are at an inflection point. Historically, Russia has leveraged its nuclear arsenal to maintain its great power status, deter nuclear and significant conventional attacks, manage escalation, and threaten nuclear employment in combat in response to existential risks. Since February 2022, Russian political leadership has repeatedly invoked and signaled with nuclear weapons in its efforts to deter the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from directly intervening in the war in Ukraine and to compel a cessation of Western military aid to Kyiv. In tandem with this signaling, Russian experts and military analysts have debated the effectiveness and credibility of Moscow's nuclear messaging and discussed whether Russia may need to implement measures to restore nuclear signaling credibility.

Previous CNA studies regarding the Russian military's views on nuclear weapons have sought to articulate the underlying concepts of Moscow's strategy and planning. The following study takes a different approach by examining the views of three stakeholder communities within Moscow's interconnected nuclear ecosystem to provide an early examination of what lessons Russian elites are learning from Russia's nuclear signaling in Ukraine and what possible changes they are advocating for Russia's nuclear policy and posture.

This study focuses on the views of the following three groups: (1) high-level political officials within the Kremlin who hold the most influence on Russia's

nuclear policy given President Vladimir Putin's role as the ultimate decision-maker; (2) a small circle of military planners and scholars in Russian Ministry of Defense institutes, referred to as "the military-analytical community," whose writings are the basis for nuclear planning; and (3) civilian experts who have questionable influence on the Kremlin's nuclear policy and posture but provide the Kremlin with alternative information. The debates and perspectives vocalized among the three stakeholder communities reflect ideas that policymakers consider behind closed doors, and all three communities can offer nuance and arguments that may help outsiders understand how Russian strategy is continuing to evolve.

The report examines how these stakeholders have discussed the role of nuclear weapons during the war in Ukraine and the implications for Russian nuclear policy and posture. The views of these stakeholders do not represent a coherent body of thought, and we do not attempt to present them as such. Instead, we treat these groups as communities in an ecosystem and seek to offer a range of perspectives before synthesizing some common themes. By understanding these three separate networks of thought, we can provide a more holistic assessment of what lessons Moscow has learned since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For each set of perspectives, we examine the source and its position in its respective community. We then explore what the writing says about the role of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, the effectiveness of Russian nuclear threats, potential lessons that Russia



should draw from this experience, and how they believe Russian policy and posture should change as a result.

The writings of stakeholder communities evoke a quest for a multifaceted escalation management strategy that can credibly communicate threats and alter Western decision-making to shape the calculus on what kinds of weapons should be provided to Ukraine. Russian officials, civilian experts, and military analysts generally agree that Russia's nuclear signaling in the context of its invasion of Ukraine has not achieved all its desired goals; however, these communities diverge somewhat on the reasons why. Both military and civilian experts suggest that Russia should resort to more assertive measures to restore its signaling credibility, including the following actions:

- Revisiting or withdrawing from arms control agreements
- Changes or clarifications to Russia's public nuclear doctrine
- Nonnuclear measures such as communicating threats to conventionally strike weapons depots within NATO member territory, introducing a no-fly zone over the Black Sea, conducting underwater and air patrols over the coasts of adversaries, and introducing dual-capable weapons outside Russian territory, among other measures
- Nonverbal nuclear measures such as more exercises, conducting nuclear tests and warning about nuclear threats, demo-nuclear explosions, flexible demonstrations of combat readiness, and exhibiting new military systems and their capabilities, among other measures

The communities disagree on what options Moscow should employ to achieve its goals in Ukraine. The official, civilian, and military discourses vary substantially on the issue of limited nuclear

employment in relation to the war. Most Russian officials, including Putin, have rejected the idea of lowering Russia's nuclear threshold and remain verbally committed to Russia's current nuclear doctrine throughout the period examined. However, the actions of the Russian government, including the deployment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Belarus and joint nuclear exercises with nonstrategic weapons, have undermined the credibility of this commitment. The writings of the military-analytical community did not mention Russia's limited employment of nonstrategic nuclear capabilities. Instead, they focused on suggestions for the Russian authorities to achieve greater clarity in the new roles of nuclear weapons in emerging strategic operations. Meanwhile, civilian experts have publicly wrestled with the logic and possible consequences of a limited nuclear strike throughout the war, but most of the civilian analytical community has rejected the idea of a limited nuclear strike on NATO territory.

Civilian expert and military-analytical communities have debated whether and how to change Russian nuclear policy and posture to improve its coercive credibility. Broadly, sources in these communities recommend that Russia either stay committed to current doctrine but engage in more explicit nuclear signaling via forceful demonstrations, or revise doctrine and posture to signal a lower threshold for nuclear use. The military-analytical community makes numerous arguments about how Moscow can improve its declaratory policy, including the use of more explicit doctrinal language and signaling with nuclear weapons. These writings show a commitment to advocating for a strategic deterrence system with ample escalation management options and operational employment roles for strategic nuclear and nonnuclear capabilities.

Against the backdrop of these debates, Russian civilian experts perceive shifts in Russian nuclear policy and posture, such as Russia's announced deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus, even as Russian officials have remained rhetorically

committed to established doctrine. Other experts chose to interpret the move to a dual-capable delivery system and nonstrategic nuclear weapons to Belarus as a prelude to an upcoming change in official Russian nuclear policy and posture. However, most experts implicitly or explicitly emphasized the symbolic nature of the move. Even so, what this shift means for the future of Russian nuclear policy and posture is unclear and contentious among Russian civilian experts.

In conclusion, this report finds that some stakeholders believe that Russia's current doctrine and posture is evolving, even as officials have repeatedly verbally committed Russia to its current doctrine. Stakeholder communities perceive that Russia lacks a coercive

advantage given the fact that its nuclear signaling has not compelled the West to entirely cease its military assistance toward Ukraine. Overall, military analysts and Russian civilian experts visualize a multifaceted escalation management strategy. Russia seeks a strategy that credibly and articulately communicates the potential costs and futility of continuing to arm Ukraine as Russia itself maintains ample escalation options. This report argues that the US and its allies are likely to deal with a Russia that may engage in more explicit forms of nuclear signaling subject to the battlefield conditions in Ukraine as it seeks a coercive advantage. Nonetheless, it would be unwise for the US and its allies to entirely dismiss Moscow's nuclear signaling, given the high risk of getting it wrong.

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INTRODUCTION

Moscow's nuclear weapons doctrine, posture, and strategy are at an inflection point. Given the performance of Russia's conventional forces, Western analysts have debated the nature of the Russian nuclear threat. In 2023, the US intelligence community warned that, over the short to medium term, the losses of Russian ground forces and expenditures of long-range precision strike munitions during the war in Ukraine could force the Russian military to increase its reliance on nuclear and other asymmetric capabilities.¹ The October 2023 report of the Strategic Posture Commission similarly noted that Russia's conventional losses could increase Russia's reliance on nuclear capabilities and warned about growing Russian nuclear strategic and nonstrategic threats.²

Building on past CNA work on the Russian military's views regarding escalation management, this study draws on open-source Russian-language data to explore how Russian leadership, the civilian expert community, and the military expert community view the use of nuclear threats during the war in Ukraine and to discuss the implications for Russian nuclear policy and posture.³



Building on past CNA work on the Russian military's views regarding escalation management, this study draws on open-source Russian-language data to explore how Russian leadership, the civilian expert community, and the military expert community view the use of nuclear threats during the war in Ukraine and to discuss the implications for Russian nuclear policy and posture.

¹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, 2023, p. 14, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

² Madelyn R. Creedon et al., *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, IDA, 2023, pp. 9–10, <https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/a/am/americas-strategic-posture>.

³ Anya Fink, *The General Staff's Throw-Weight: The Russian Military's Role and Views In US-Russia Arms Control*, CNA, 2024, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2024/03/russian-military-role-in-us-russian-arms-control>; Nicole Grajewski, *Russia and The Global Nuclear Order*, CNA, 2024, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2024/03/russia-and-the-global-nuclear-order>; Anya Fink and Michael Kofman, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Key Debates and Players in Military Thought*, CNA, 2020, https://www.cna.org/archives/CNA_Files/pdf/dim-2020-u-026101-final.pdf; Anya Fink, Michael Kofman, and Jeffrey Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, CNA, 2020, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/04/russian-strategy-for-escalation-management-key-concepts>; CNA Russia Studies Program, *Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence*, CNA, 2020, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/06/state-policy-of-russia-toward-nuclear-deterrence>.

As the first study that systematically draws from the perspectives of three different stakeholder communities, the report will attempt to paint a holistic picture of the domestic debate regarding Moscow's nuclear policy and posture, allowing the reader a view of the evolution of Russian nuclear discourse.

This report looks at the initial lessons stakeholder communities may be drawing from Moscow's use of nuclear threats during in the war in Ukraine—specifically, the options for changing Russian nuclear policy and posture that the Russian civilian and military expert communities have proposed. The study first explores Russian leadership's views on the role of nuclear weapons in the war and statements about possible changes to Russia's nuclear doctrine or posture. The second section explores the views of the military-analytical community through critical summaries of key articles from Russian military journals. The report then focuses on civilian views from 2019 to 2023 with an emphasis on the debate provoked by Sergey Karaganov's proposal to update Russia's nuclear doctrine to reflect a lower nuclear threshold.

This emphasis is warranted because Karaganov's provocative proposal likely prompted an unprecedented level of public engagement by the Russian expert community regarding possible changes to Russia's nuclear policy and posture amid the Russia-Ukraine war. Moreover, this debate elicited the only public interaction since 2022 between the highest level decision-maker on Russia's nuclear policy, President Vladimir Putin, and the Russian civilian expert community, represented by Sergey Karaganov, a Russian political analyst who is part of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, and Fyodor Lukyanov, the Research Director of the Valdai Discussion Club. These figures represent two of the stakeholder groups examined in this study.

The report then examines views across the military expert community on changes to declaratory policy, the evolution of the strategic operations system, new proposals on nuclear signaling, and the role of strategic deterrence in the context of the war in Ukraine. The report then discusses key themes and develops a framework to analyze Russia's nuclear policy and posture. The final section provides conclusions. Finally, the appendix contains an excerpt from past CNA work on Russian approaches to escalation management. The concepts in the appendix are helpful to better understand some of the views espoused by the three stakeholder communities.

Theoretical framework

Writing in 2010, Russian scholar and policy practitioner Alexey Arbatov noted the existence of a "paradoxical situation under which genuine policy-making on nuclear weapons [in Russia] is the most closed and narrow of all defense-related policy-making, while public discussion on this subject is the broadest and most substantive of Russia's various security dilemmas."⁴ He described the varying contributions of three sets of stakeholders: high-level political officials, a narrow circle of military planners and supporting scholars in Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) institutes, and nongovernmental experts.

The first two groups were (and remain) the ones with tangible influence on Russia's nuclear policy and planning, while the latter group was vocal but had very little potential influence on actual nuclear weapons employment planning. We use Arbatov's framework to paint a holistic picture of Russian views about the role of nuclear weapons. According to Arbatov's framework, nuclear policy-making occupies a unique position in Russia given the secrecy and the importance that surrounds nuclear

⁴ Alexei Arbatov, "Russia," in *Governing the Bomb: Civilian Control and Democratic Accountability of Nuclear Weapons* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 51.

weapons. However, the special position of nuclear weapons in terms of public awareness and expert debate contributes to their singular role. Thus, years of arms control negotiations contributed to more public information, and decisions to reduce defense spending and military reforms led to greater openness about defense matters. According to his framework, this “openness” included the involvement of broader nongovernmental circles in the debates (and indirectly in the decision-making) regarding nuclear policy.

Describing key stakeholder communities

This study takes a cue from Arbatov by drawing on open-source Russian-language data to explore the role of Russian nuclear weapons during the war and how certain stakeholders view these roles and discuss their implications for Russian nuclear policy and posture.

RUSSIAN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

This stakeholder community encompasses Russian government officials in leadership positions. Although interplay between Russia’s nuclear bureaucracy and Russian heads of state is crucial for Russian nuclear policy, Putin holds the ultimate authority on nuclear decision-making. Even so, this community holds the most influence on Russian nuclear decision-making and intersects with Russian civilian experts through public interactions. At the same time, Russian leadership interacts with the military-analytical community through the General Staff, which is responsible for the development of

military plans. As this study shows, they also track discussions among Russian civilian experts. The central limitation for studying this community is that we are rarely aware of the conversations that go on behind closed doors.

RUSSIAN CIVILIAN EXPERTS

Although Russian civilian experts may have little influence on nuclear policy, they can provide the Kremlin with alternative information that can acquire instrumental value in times of crisis. In addition, members of the Russian civilian expert community also hold links with their Western counterparts and can provide them with insight into Kremlin decision-making.⁵ Hence, they can influence how Western experts think about these issues, especially because civilian experts are generally active in debates about deterrence issues with Western counterparts. This fact inevitably injects a tension into the following analysis because it studies the work of Russian civilian experts while simultaneously being influenced by their work. Finally, paying attention to even minor differences in the writings of the Russian civilian expert community can be helpful in recognizing existing societal dynamics, regardless of whether they indicate inertia or the possibility of change.⁶

Furthermore, the contributions of some civilian experts, such as The Institute of World Economy and International Relations’ (IMEMO) Alexey Arbatov and Vladimir Dvorkin, have been instrumental in various debates within the military-analytical community regarding nuclear deterrence. Some experts in the civilian community have also held positions in the Russian government.

⁵ Anton Barbashin and Alexander Graef, *Thinking Foreign Policy in Russia: Think Tanks and Grand Narratives*, Atlantic Council, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/thinking-foreign-policy-in-russia-think-tanks-and-grand-narratives/>.

⁶ Alexander Graef, “The Limits of Critique: Responses to the War Against Ukraine from the Russian Foreign Policy Expert Community,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26, (2023), pp. 762–75, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41268-023-00303-4>.

MILITARY ANALYSTS

This study examined writings in authoritative military journals published by the Russian General Staff, Russian MOD research institutes, and service academies. Military-analytical writings are the basis for the concepts or theory behind military planning. The General Staff is responsible for developing possible courses of action, including crafting nuclear options for the country’s political leadership. Ideas in military-analytical writings rarely develop in a straight line. We are limited in assessing this community because we do not know how these writings influence classified nuclear discussions or plans.

Methodology

Focusing on the period from February 2022 to late 2023, we reviewed statements on nuclear weapons by Russian officials, Russian civilian nongovernmental articles and interviews on nuclear weapons, and articles on nuclear weapons that appeared in authoritative military journals. These views do not represent a coherent body of thought, and we do not attempt to present them as such. Instead, we treat them as their own respective groups and seek to offer a mosaic of perspectives before synergizing some of their common themes. Table 1 offers a summary of these sources.

Table 1. Data Sources

Component of Analysis	Data
Leadership views	We collected a dataset of more than 200 speeches, articles, and media coverage items from February 2022 to November 2023 in which select Russian officials referenced nuclear weapons. Covered officials include Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation; Sergei Shoigu, Minister of Defense; Valeri Gerasimov, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces; Nikolai Patrushev, President of the National Security Council; Dmitri Peskov, Spokesperson for the Kremlin; Sergei Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Dmitri Medvedev, Vice President of the National Security Council; and other officials in the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs.
Civilian expert views	We collected a systematic dataset of 60 articles, reports, and interviews with Russian nongovernmental elite experts between February 2022 and November 2023. However, we build on articles from 2019 to 2023 and acknowledge some articles in the February 2024 timeframe. Many of these articles centered on a debate about the credibility of nuclear deterrence and proposed nuclear employment in Ukraine that began in the summer of 2023 with an article by Sergey Karaganov.
Military expert views	We collected a dataset of 50 articles focused on nuclear weapons and strategic deterrence issues from the General Staff journal <i>Military Thought</i> between February 2022 and November 2023, but we acknowledge articles from up to February 2024. The respective section, however, details several specific articles focused on nuclear weapons credibility and the evolution of strategic deterrence from a key General Staff planning institute, from leadership and senior scholars affiliated with the Strategic Rocket Forces, and from the General Staff Academy analytical center.

Source: CNA.

Since February 2022, Russian official nuclear signaling has sought to prevent a direct US/NATO military intervention into the conflict and to first prevent and then compel a cessation to substantial Western military assistance to Ukraine. Although we cannot know the extent to which signaling (as opposed to just the existence of a Russian nuclear arsenal) has contributed to preventing US/NATO intervention, it has clearly failed to prevent or stop Western military assistance, but it has constrained the parameters of what military assistance the West provides Ukraine. Over time, Putin has appeared to calibrate his nuclear threats. Instead of the frequent public discussions of Russia's nuclear might that appeared to discomfit Russian partners in China and India in the spring of 2023, he has suspended Russia's participation in US-Russian and global nuclear arms control agreements, raised the possibility of nuclear testing, and announced the move of some Russian nonstrategic nuclear weapons to Belarus. Some of his and other Russian officials' statements suggest that they are frustrated that at least some elements of Russian nuclear signaling may not have been viewed as credible in the West.

The full-scale war in Ukraine—and with it the prolonged experience of being in an unresolved nuclear crisis—has also created wide debate across the Russian civilian and military expert communities. Russian civilian experts, who are denizens of academic think tanks and government advisory groups, have publicly discussed the potential merits and demerits of striking targets in Ukraine or in the West with nuclear weapons, even engaging Putin on this issue.

Meanwhile, across Russia's authoritative military journals, military experts from the General Staff, service branch academies, and MOD research institutes have debated the potential downstream implications of the evolving threat environment for Russia's efforts to signal with nuclear weapons and its nuclear employment plans.

For each set of perspectives, we examine the sources and their positions in their respective community. We then explore what they say about the role of nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine, the effectiveness of Russian nuclear threats, potential lessons that Russia should draw from this experience, and how they believe Russian policy and posture should change as a result. For this study, we asked the same structured questions for each dataset (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Questions for structured analysis

- 1 Who are these sources?
- 2 Do their views matter?
- 3 What do they say about the role of nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine (e.g., should they be used for deterrence, escalation management, war termination)?
- 4 What do they say about the effectiveness of Russian nuclear threats?
- 5 What do they say about lessons that Russia should learn from how it has used nuclear weapons threats in the war in Ukraine?
- 6 What are the implications for Russian nuclear policy according to these sources?
- 7 What are the implications for Russian nuclear posture according to these sources?

Source: CNA.

We examined the writings, statements, and interviews of each respective stakeholder through these questions to assess key themes related to the role of nuclear weapons, lessons learned, and proposed changes to posture or policy. Afterward, we explored the proposals of each stakeholder regarding Russia's future nuclear policy and posture using a set of categorical nuclear concepts, described more in the next subsection.

Exploring potential changes to Russia’s nuclear policy and posture

Nuclear policy is primarily understood as declaratory policy, which consists of formalized doctrinal statements intended to deter adversaries and assure allies. This policy must be backed by a nuclear posture that indicates credible employment plans. For this reason, scholars draw a distinction between nuclear policy (what one says one will do with nuclear weapons) and nuclear posture (what nuclear weapons one fields and how one plans to use them).⁷ In exploring how different communities in Russia view lessons learned from the use of nuclear signaling in Ukraine, this study focused on both policy and posture. See Table 2 for definitions.

This structure allowed us to better identify gaps in the perspectives of the respective communities and develop analytical indicators for understanding the evolution of Russian nuclear policy and posture in the future. We then coded the content of our sources in accordance with the structured analysis questions in Figure 1, and we ultimately organized our data using the categories in Table 2 to better compare the views of each stakeholder community. In addition, we did not assume that all stakeholders would perfectly fit each component of our definitions for policy and posture, nor did we assume they would be uniform because debates are often nonlinear, and the stakeholders present their own separate viewpoints.

Table 2. Components of nuclear policy and posture

	Component	Definition
Nuclear policy	Declaratory policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalized public doctrinal statement about the role of nuclear weapons and their intended use
Nuclear posture	Capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Types and numbers of weapons Location of weapons Force shaping criteria or limits on weapons, if any
	Employment plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Situations in which weapons would be used Concepts of employment
	Nuclear command and control (NC2) arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civilian/military relations in NC2 arrangements Degree of predelegation

Source: CNA and Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*.

⁷ Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in The Modern Era* (Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 4.

RUSSIAN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Since the start of the war, Russian leaders have generally stuck to a consistent message stressing that Russian doctrine has remained the same and is effective in deterring the most serious and direct Western threats to Russian security. We structured the following section around key themes regarding the role of nuclear weapons, lessons learned, and proposals.

We conclude that, faced with battlefield setbacks and a vigorous public debate among Russian civilian elites, Russian leaders from Putin down have stressed their adherence to published Russian nuclear doctrine from 2022 to November 2023. When Putin has considered or announced changes, he has referenced US policy and posture, not developments in Russia's war against Ukraine.

Putin's February 24, 2022, speech set the contours for how Russian nuclear rhetoric would play out as the war progressed; specifically, Russia's nuclear arsenal would deter Western "aggression" and safeguard Russia.⁸ However, the West's increasing arms transfers to Ukraine and Russia's bid to annex four Ukrainian provinces posed challenges to Russian official rhetoric. These newer threats that high-end weapons or counterattacks on Russian soil (including parts of Ukraine that Moscow now claims as its own) could or would lead to escalation have so

far failed to deter the US, NATO members, or Ukraine from those actions.

Russia's official elite have strongly stressed the continuity of Russian declaratory policy in their public remarks. Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council (whose role as a spokesperson for the Kremlin is unclear), appears to have been the most aggressive and independent senior leader speaking about Russian nuclear use in or in relation to the Ukraine war. In addition, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has repeatedly stressed that even he remains true to the same

terms of reference as the rest of the government—the established Russian nuclear doctrine. When confronted with the 2023 Karaganov-instigated debate among civilian elites about limited nuclear weapons use against Ukraine or US NATO allies, Putin clearly and firmly rejected Karaganov's proposals and insisted Moscow remained committed to its established course.

In their discussions of Russia's nuclear policy and posture, Russian officials publicly appear focused on United States policy and posture, not developments in the Ukraine war. When Putin has publicly mused about or announced changes (e.g., to Russia's stance on preemptive strikes, nuclear testing, or nuclear sharing arrangements), he has rhetorically justified

We conclude that, faced with battlefield setbacks and a vigorous public debate among Russian civilian elites, Russian leaders from Putin down have stressed their adherence to published Russian nuclear doctrine from 2022 to November 2023.

⁸ "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, Feb. 24, 2022, accessed Feb. 26, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

these moves or statements by pointing to US behavior. In Putin's justifications, US nuclear sharing with NATO allies set the template for Russian nuclear sharing with Belarus. Putin also believes Russia's adoption of a preemptive strike concept would be an act of "borrowing" from US theory, and he claims Russia would resume nuclear testing if the US did so first.

Role and effectiveness of nuclear weapons in the Russia-Ukraine war

In 2020, the Russian Federation expanded and clarified the language in its 2014 military doctrine regarding nuclear deterrence. Current Russian declaratory policy is stipulated in the June 2020 *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*.⁹ The document clarifies the role of nuclear weapons and stipulates possible conditions for the employment of nuclear weapons.¹⁰ According to it, Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against it or its allies, as well as in the event "of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy."

Among the conditions that make it possible for Russia to employ nuclear weapons are the arrival of reliable data on the launch of ballistic missiles attacking its territory or that of its allies, the use of nuclear weapons or other WMD by an adversary against it or its allies, attacks by an adversary against critical governmental or military sites (the

disruption of which would undermine the possible response actions of its nuclear force), and aggression against Russia with the use of conventional weapons that jeopardizes the very existence of the state. This language does not contradict Russia's 2014 military doctrine, which stipulated that nuclear weapons are a critical factor in preventing the outbreak of nuclear conflicts involving the use of conventional weapons.

From 2022 to late 2023, Russian officials employed the threat of nuclear escalation in attempts to deter direct Western intervention in Ukraine, deter or constrain Western lethal aid to Ukraine, protect Russian territorial integrity, and defend Russia's treaty allies. Despite these threats, Putin has reiterated the conditions that make it possible for Russia to employ nuclear weapons within its current nuclear doctrine as stipulated by the 2020 *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*. Nonetheless, Russian officials appear to believe that these threats have proven effective in deterring direct Western military intervention, somewhat effective in safeguarding Russian territorial integrity, and less effective in deterring Western military assistance to Ukraine.

The role of nuclear weapons

Invocations of Russia's nuclear weapons began on the first day of the full-scale invasion. In his address on February 24, 2022, Putin made repeated and explicit references to Russia's nuclear arsenal, and he drew several red lines—some linked to implicit nuclear threats. He reminded listeners that "Russia remains one of the most powerful nuclear states" and added that Russia "has a certain advantage in

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*; also see CNA's unofficial translation of the document at <https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/06/state-policy-of-russia-toward-nuclear-deterrence>.

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*.

several cutting-edge weapons.” The first red line was that any direct attack on Russia will trigger “defeat and ominous consequences” for the aggressor state. Putin explicitly named NATO expansion on Russia’s borders as a red line as well, although he acknowledged that the West had already overstepped this line many times. He also called the possibility of Ukraine’s acquisition of nuclear weapons unacceptable to Russia.

Finally, he warned that for anyone who “tries to stand in our way [in the course of the Ukraine war] or create threats for our country and our people,” Russia’s response will be swift with consequences “such as you have never seen in your entire history.”¹¹ This final warning was likely an implicit reference to nuclear weapons. This speech set the basic framework for how Russian officials would invoke (explicitly or implicitly) nuclear weapons through 2023: Russia’s nuclear status and technological edge will deter foreign intervention in the war and guarantee against threats to Russia’s territorial integrity.

DEPLOYING FOREIGN TROOPS TO DEFEND UKRAINE

Senior Russian leaders have made statements linking general foreign interference in the Russia-Ukraine war with possible nuclear escalation. In late April 2022, in the context of the Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test, Putin warned that any third-party intervention that Russia considered a “strategic threat” would be met with a “lightning fast” reaction. This warning echoed the one he had issued in his February 24, 2022, speech announcing the start of Russia’s invasion. He appeared to discourage any preemptive strikes by adding that all the required decisions for this response had already been taken.¹² On November 1, Medvedev argued

that the West’s attempts to deny Russia “total and final victory” could trigger “world conflict.”¹³ (Medvedev’s role as a spokesperson for the Russian regime has been unclear throughout the conflict. Although he has at times appeared to speak freely in his official Telegram channel, as discussed below, the Kremlin spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, has explicitly supported some of Medvedev’s nuclear-related statements and generally disavowed or rejected none of them.)

ARMS TRANSFERS

Russian leaders began issuing consistent and direct nuclear-related threats against foreign military assistance to Ukraine only in late 2022, and they appeared to focus on heavy and long-range systems as red lines. However, in June, Putin issued a statement that appeared to suggest that Western military assistance to Ukraine would simply lead to a drawn-out conflict to Ukraine’s detriment.

Early in the war, Russian leaders were circumspect about the possible link between Western military aid and nuclear escalation. Starting in late 2022 and early 2023, two senior officials—Medvedev and Shoigu—began warning that the West’s decision to provide long-range strike systems would be, in Medvedev’s words, “the fastest way to escalate the conflict to the irreversible consequences of a world war.” By May 2023, Sergei Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmitry Peskov, the Spokesperson for the Kremlin, and Medvedev were issuing what appeared to be coordinated warnings. Lavrov warned that Western lethal aid made them parties to the conflict, “increasing the threat of direct military clash between nuclear powers.” Medvedev stated that “the more destructive the weapons [the West gives Ukraine], the greater the likelihood of the scenario

¹¹ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation.”

¹² “Putin Threatens the West With Lightning-Fast Retaliatory Strikes” (Путин грозит Западу молниеносными ответными ударами), *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, Apr. 28, 2022, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/76682173>.

¹³ Telegram Channel: “Dmitry Medvedev,” Nov. 1, 2023, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/203.

that we call nuclear apocalypse.”¹⁴ A few days later, Peskov stated that Western aid and involvement are “growing every day,” which could lead Western countries to overstep “the limit.”¹⁵

However, in June, Putin complicated this coalescing message by stating that Western assistance to Ukraine would simply “prolong” and “aggravate” the situation for Ukraine.¹⁶ Putin passed on an opportunity to threaten nuclear consequences for escalating Western aid; rather, he threatened only drawn out, apparently conventional, consequences that would lead to the same place: Ukraine’s defeat.

LIMITED NUCLEAR EMPLOYMENT AND WMD

In the invasion’s first weeks, through March, senior officials in the MFA consistently and vociferously rejected any possibility of Russian nuclear first use in Ukraine. Maria Zakharova stated that Russian nuclear first use “cannot be realized under any pretext and under any circumstances.” Lavrov stated that he believed that any nuclear war would be initiated by

the West because it “was brought up exclusively by Western representatives.”¹⁷ Another Russian MFA figure stressed that Russia would “never escalate anything” and would use nuclear weapons only as laid out in its military doctrine.¹⁸

An MOD report in April accused the West of preparing a provocation with WMD and stated that Russia had no intention of using a nonstrategic nuclear weapon in Ukraine.¹⁹ An MOD spokesperson reiterated this point, arguing that nuclear use would be irrelevant to Russia’s war goals in Ukraine.²⁰ An MFA figure made similar comments in May.²¹

In October 2022, amid Western concerns that Russian rhetoric about a possible Ukrainian dirty bomb was a pretext for Russian nonstrategic use, Russian leaders again denied any plans to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. On October 7, Lavrov stressed that increased discussion of nuclear use was driven by “reckless” Ukrainian actions.²² In mid-October, Shoigu stated that “from a military point of view, there is no need to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine

¹⁴ “Medvedev Sees the Threat of Nuclear Apocalypse Due to the Delivery of Arms to Ukraine” (Медведев увидел угрозу ядерного апокалипсиса из-за поставок оружия Украине), RIA Novosti (РИА Новости), May 23, 2023, accessed Feb. 26, 2024, <https://ria.ru/20230523/f-16-1873603172.html>.

¹⁵ “Peskov Answers the Question of Where This Is All Headed” (Песков ответил на вопрос, к чему все движется), RBC (РБС), May 27, 2023, accessed Feb. 26, 2024, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/64720f049a79471910f3ae1a>.

¹⁶ “Putin: Delivery of Western Arms to Kyiv Achieves Nothing but Only Inflames the Conflict” (Путин: поставки западных вооружений Киеву ничего ему не дадут, только разожгут конфликт), TASS, June 13, 2023, accessed Feb. 26, 2024, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/18270689>.

¹⁷ “Lavrov Said He Does Not Believe in the Possibility of a Nuclear War” (Лавров заявил, что не верит в возможность начала ядерной войны), RBC (РБК), Mar. 10, 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/10/03/2022/6229d7fa9a79475af15dc043>.

¹⁸ “Russia Adheres to Responsible Approach to Matter of Use of Nuclear Weapons — Diplomat,” TASS, Mar. 22, 2022, accessed Feb. 26, 2024, <https://tass.com/politics/1425609>.

¹⁹ Telegram Channel: “Ministry of Defense of Russia,” Apr. 23, 2022, https://t.me/mod_russia/14689.

²⁰ “Sergei Shoigu Declares That a Goal of the Special Operation Is the Non-Nuclear Status of Ukraine” (Сергей Шойгу назвал целью спецоперации безъядерный статус Украины), Novye Izvestiia (Новые Известия), May 24, 2022, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/77409401>.

²¹ “Russia Does Not Intend to Use Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine, Says MFA” (Россия не намерена применять ядерное оружие на Украине, заявили в МИД), RIA Novosti (РИА Новости), May 6, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220506/oruzhie-1787168284.html>.

²² “Sergei Lavrov Commented on Zelensky’s Statement About a Preventative Strike on Russia” (Сергей Лавров прокомментировал слова Зеленского о превентивном ударе по России), Pervyi Kanal (Первый Канал), Oct. 7, 2022, <https://www.1tv.ru/news/2022-10-07/439189-sergey-lavrov-prokommentiroval-slova-zelenskogo-o-preventivnom-udare-po-rossii>; “The West Should Not Measure the Width of the ‘Red Line’: Following the Ministry of Defense, Maria Zakharova Spoke About a ‘Dirty Bomb’” («Западу не следует измерять ширину „красной линии“». Мария Захарова вслед за Минобороны заговорила о «грязной бомбе»), Meduza (Медуза), Oct. 24, 2022, <https://meduza.io/news/2022/10/24/zapadu-ne-sleduet-izmeryat-shirinu-krasnoy-linii-mariya-zaharova-vsled-zaminoborony-zagovorila-o-grязnoy-bombe>.

to achieve our goals.”²³ In mid- and late October, Lavrov and Zakharova warned against speculation about Russian nuclear use and urged the West and Ukraine to desist from “leading the world to a nuclear disaster.”²⁴ On October 18, an MFA figure asserted that Russia “has not and does not threaten Ukraine with nuclear weapons.”²⁵ Finally, on October 27, 2022, Putin dismissed the idea of a Russian nonstrategic nuclear strike in Ukraine as something that would make no sense politically or militarily.²⁶

PROTECTING RUSSIAN TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

Russian leaders, particularly Putin, have implicitly and explicitly highlighted the role of nuclear weapons in securing Russian territorial integrity. This view was particularly notable in September 2022 immediately before and after Russia’s illegal annexation of several Ukrainian provinces.

In a speech on September 21, 2022, Putin warned that attempts to “blackmail us with nuclear weapons” could easily turn on the blackmailers and promised to defend Russia with “all systems available to us” in the event of a threat to Russia’s territorial integrity.²⁷

He repeated this promise a week later in a speech marking the illegal annexation of several Ukrainian provinces to the Russian Federation.²⁸ In an October interview, Putin highlighted the provision of the Russian nuclear doctrine that envisions the use of nuclear weapons “to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and to ensure the safety of the Russian people.”²⁹

Throughout 2022 and into 2023, Western policy-makers and analysts expressed concern and reservations about supporting or enabling Ukrainian strikes on Crimea and attempts to oust the Russian occupation there.³⁰ If Russia saw an attack on Crimea no differently than it did an attack on internationally recognized Russian territory, then such an action would carry escalation risks much higher than those incurred by actions elsewhere in Ukraine.

In 2022 and early 2023, Medvedev made several comments that seemingly sought to confirm that the Kremlin indeed saw Crimea as it did Khabarovsk. In June 2022, he stated that “any attempt to encroach on Crimea is a declaration of war on our country. And if a country that is part of NATO does this, it

²³ “Shoigu: Russia Has No Need to Use Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine” (Шойгу: у России нет необходимости применять ядерное оружие в Украине), *New Times*, Aug. 16, 2022, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/79533963>.

²⁴ “Sergei Lavrov Commented on Zelensky’s Statement About a Preventative Strike on Russia”; “The West Should Not Measure the Width of the ‘Red Line’”; “Zakharova: There Is Evidence of Kyiv’s Intentions to Use the Nuclear Factor” (Захарова: есть доказательство намерений Киева использовать ядерный фактор), *Radio Sputnik* (Радио Спутник), Oct. 26, 2022, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20221026/zakharova-1826814130.html>; “Zakharova States That Zelensky Wants to Start a Global Nuclear Confrontation” (Захарова заявила, что Зеленский хотел бы начать ядерное противостояние в мире), *TASS*, Oct. 27, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/16170653>.

²⁵ “MFA: Russia Does Not Threaten and Has Not Threatened Ukraine with Nuclear Weapons” (МИД: Россия не угрожала и не угрожает Украине ядерным оружием), *Gazeta.ru* (Газета.ru), Oct. 18, 2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2022/10/18/18827485.shtml>.

²⁶ Vladimir Putin, “Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting,” Oct. 27, 2022.

²⁷ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” Sept. 21, 2022.

²⁸ Vladimir Putin, “Signing of Treaties on Accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson Regions to Russia,” Sept. 30, 2022.

²⁹ Putin, “Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting.”

³⁰ Malcolm Chalmers, “Crimea Could Be Putin’s Tipping Point in a Game of Nuclear Chicken,” *Financial Times*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/d632cae8-f06d-4f9d-9d90-f1cd0dfd7a70>; Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, “Go Slow on Crimea,” *Foreign Affairs*, Dec. 7, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/go-slow-crimea>; Pierre de Dreuz and Andrea Gilli, “Russia’s Nuclear Coercion in Ukraine,” *NATO Review*, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2022/11/29/russias-nuclear-coercion-in-ukraine/index.html>; John Grady, “Losing Crimea Would Escalate Russian-Ukraine Conflict, Former Defense Secretary Says,” *USNI News*, Feb. 2, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/02/02/losing-crimea-would-escalate-russian-ukraine-conflict-former-defense-secretary-says>.

is a conflict with the entire North Atlantic Alliance,” which he stated would cause World War III.³¹

On February 4, 2023, an interviewer asked Medvedev how Russia would respond if Kyiv “started carrying out strikes on Crimea or deeper in Russia” with the backing of the United States. His response hinted at a nuclear threat: “Our answer could be anything. [Putin] has been quite clear about this. We will not have any restrictions and are ready to respond with any type of weapons depending on the character of the threat” in accordance with Russian doctrinal documents, including those on nuclear deterrence. He concluded, “I can assure you: the answer will be fast, firm, and convincing.”³²

In March 2023, Medvedev repeated that attempts to “retake Crimea” could be the basis for “all forms of defense, including those provided for in the nuclear deterrence doctrine....So draw your own conclusions: it’s perfectly clear that there is a basis for using any weapon. Absolutely any....I hope our ‘friends’ across the ocean understand this.”³³ In both comments, Medvedev (1) grounded his threat in established doctrine and (2) conjured the specter of a possible nuclear response while leaving the door open to respond to attacks with conventional means.

RHETORIC ABOUT DEFENDING BELARUS

Beginning in mid-2022, Russian leadership began building the foundations for introducing a nuclear sharing arrangement with Belarus. In his June 25, 2022, meeting with Putin, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko requested nuclear weapons from Russia as part of a symmetrical response to alleged NATO nuclear posturing on Belarus’ borders. At that meeting, Putin demurred on nuclear weapons themselves, but promised to provide Belarus with the nuclear-capable Iskander-M, a system fielded by Russian ground forces, and Su-25 jets.³⁴

In late October 2022, Shoigu asserted that Ukraine was ready to use a dirty bomb and host NATO nuclear weapons and that Russia and Belarus thus had to jointly ensure their military security.³⁵ In early December, Putin stated that Russia would not “give anyone nuclear weapons” but promised that Russia would use “all available means” to defend allies “if required.”³⁶ However, later in the month, he suggested that he had changed his mind on the first point, repeatedly indicating that Russia would prepare Belarusian forces to deploy nuclear weapons. He described this approach as mirroring NATO’s nuclear sharing.³⁷

³¹ Dmitry Medvedev, “The Nuclear-Free Status of the Baltic Will Become a Thing of the Past” («Безъядерный статус Балтики уйдёт в прошлое»), Argumenti i Fakti (Аргументы и факты), June 28, 2022, https://aif.ru/politics/world/dmitriy_medvedev_aif_ru_bezyadernyy_status_baltiki_uydyot_v_proshloe.

³² Telegram Channel: “Nadana Friedrichson,” Feb. 2, 2023, <https://t.me/FridrihShow/7596>.

³³ “Medvedev: Ukraine’s Attempt to Recapture Crimea Will Give the Russian Federation Grounds for Using Any Weapons” (Медведев: попытка Украины отвоевать Крым даст основание РФ к применению любого оружия), TASS, Mar. 24, 2023, <https://tass.ru/politika/17360995>.

³⁴ “Meeting with the President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko” (Встреча с Президентом Белоруссии Александром Лукашенко), President of Russia (Президент России), June 25, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68702>.

³⁵ Sergei Shoigu, “Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu’s Introductory Remarks at the Meeting of the Joint Board,” Nov. 2, 2022, <https://telegra.ph/Vstupitelnoe-slovo-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-general-a-armii-Sergeya-SHOIGU-na-zasedanii-sovmestnoj-Kollegii-11-02>.

³⁶ “Russia Will Defend Its Allies with All Available Means, Says Putin” (Россия будет защищать союзников всеми имеющимися средствами, заявил Путин), RIA Novosti (РИА Новости), Dec. 7, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20221207/rossiya-1837041112.html>.

³⁷ “Putin Supports the Idea of Stationing Planes with Nuclear Warheads in Belarus” (Путин поддержал идею подготовки самолетов с ядерными боезарядами в Белоруссии), Lenta (Лента), Dec. 19, 2022, <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/12/19/puttin/>; “Putin Announced the Deployment of Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons to Belarus” (Путин заявил о размещении тактического ядерного оружия в Белоруссии), Lenta (Лента), Mar. 25, 2023, <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/03/26/yadernoye/>.

Effectiveness

STRATEGIC DETERRENCE

Since February 2022, Russian leaders have repeatedly stated that Russia's nuclear arsenal safeguards the country's sovereignty and integrity. In 2022, the MOD repeatedly praised Russian nuclear forces for safeguarding Russia and ensuring strategic deterrence. In April and May, the MOD and Medvedev both praised Russian strategic forces for providing an effective deterrent to protect Russian independence.³⁸ The MOD highlighted the Sarmat system, a liquid-fueled ICBM currently in development, as impossible to intercept.³⁹ The MOD made a similar statement in October.⁴⁰ On December 17, 2022, Shoigu credited Russian nuclear forces with "successfully implement[ing] nuclear deterrence."⁴¹ In January 2023, he described Russia's nuclear forces as "the main guarantee of our state's sovereignty and territorial integrity."⁴²

Putin has also praised Russia's nuclear forces as a strong and reliable deterrent against strategic attacks on Russia. In April 2022, he praised the Sarmat system as capable of "reliably ensuring Russia's security against external threats" and sending a "wake-up call for those who are trying to threaten our country in the frenzy of rapid, aggressive rhetoric."⁴³ At the

end of 2022, Putin directly addressed the theory of mutually assured destruction. He highlighted that Russia's swift and large-scale response to an adversary nuclear strike would ensure that "nothing remained of the adversary" and was thus a "serious deterrent."⁴⁴ However, he also warned that Russia needed to be aware that this deterrent effect might be weakened if adversaries, such as the United States, who he argued have embraced a theory of preventive strikes, were to believe themselves capable of carrying out such a strike.⁴⁵

WESTERN MILITARY INTERVENTION

Russian leaders have at times attributed success to the specter of nuclear escalation in deterring direct intervention but have repeatedly acknowledged that the West has largely ignored warnings about the escalation risks of weapons deliveries.

In May, Medvedev appeared to link the West's decision not to intervene directly in Ukraine with Russia's nuclear weapons arsenal, noting that Russian nuclear forces "calm those who are trying to push our country towards a third world war."⁴⁶ In October 2022, Ambassador Anatoly Antonov noted that some people in the United States understood the stakes of nuclear saber rattling and were calling for protecting US-Russian relations.⁴⁷ Meanwhile,

³⁸ Telegram channel: "Ministry of Defense of Russia," Apr. 20, 2022, https://t.me/mod_russia/14556; Telegram channel: "Dmitry Medvedev," May 17, 2022, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/80.

³⁹ Telegram Channel: "Dmitry Medvedev," May 17, 2022.

⁴⁰ Telegram Channel: "Ministry of Defense of Russia," Oct. 18, 2022, https://t.me/mod_russia/20952.

⁴¹ Telegram Channel: "Ministry of Defense of Russia," Dec. 17, 2022, https://t.me/mod_russia/22706.

⁴² Sergei Shoigu, "Opening Speech by the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, General of the Army Sergei Shoigu, at a Thematic Conference Call with the Leadership of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation," Jan. 10, 2023, <https://telegra.ph/Vstupitelnoe-slovo-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-general-a-armii-Sergeya-SHOjgu-na-tematicheskome-selektornom-soveshchanii-01-10>.

⁴³ Vladimir Putin, "Test Launch of Sarmat ICBM," Apr. 20, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68252>.

⁴⁴ "Press Conference Following the Visit to Kyrgyzstan" (Пресс-конференция по итогам визита в Киргизию), President of Russia (Президент России), Dec. 9, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70061>.

⁴⁵ "Press Conference Following the Visit to Kyrgyzstan."

⁴⁶ "Medvedev Calls the Atomic Shield the Guarantee of Russia's Independence" (Медведев назвал ядерный щит обеспечением независимости России), RIA Novosti (РИА Новости), May 17, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220517/oruzhie-1789079450.html>.

⁴⁷ "Russian Ambassador Urges USA Not to Wave the Nuclear Baton" (Посол России призвал США не размахивать ядерной дубинкой), RIA Novosti (РИА Новости), Oct. 20, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20221020/yadernyy-1825367994.html>.

Peskov stated that Russia had to constantly reiterate its red lines to the West because Western leaders “do not get it the first time.”⁴⁸

However, Putin and other senior Russian leaders have acknowledged that the West appears undeterred by Russia’s vague warnings about supplying Ukraine with weapons. In February 2023, Putin characterized Western aid to Ukraine as “participation” in the war and alleged Ukrainian crimes.⁴⁹ In March 2023, Putin appeared to recognize that Russian threats had failed to deter the West from crossing Russian “red lines” with respect to weapons deliveries to Ukraine, both before and after February 2022.⁵⁰ In May 2023, Peskov suggested that Western states providing lethal assistance to Ukraine might overstep the “rational” limit preventing more drastic escalation.⁵¹ In each case, Russian leaders implicitly acknowledged that Russia’s pronounced red line on arms transfers had not stopped the West. Peskov’s statements seemed to suggest that they were not backing away from this rhetoric; indeed, he seemed to imply that the West might eventually cross a nuclear line if it did not change course.

TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

Medvedev has repeatedly credited Russia’s nuclear weapons with safeguarding Russia’s general territorial integrity. In December 2022, Medvedev stated that absent a strategic nuclear arsenal, Russia’s adversaries would “break us up into parts.”⁵² In late July 2023, Medvedev made a case for nuclear

weapons’ having played a broader deterrent role throughout the conflict, saying they had prevented any attempt by Ukrainian forces to seize Russian land, which would have led to a nuclear response.⁵³ We did not find any public comments addressing the failure of nuclear threats to deter Ukrainian strikes on Russia’s claimed or internationally recognized territory in the timespan the study covered.

Declaratory nuclear policy

Russian officials have stressed continuity in declaratory nuclear use policy, while their actions on arms control suggest some policy changes even if these have not culminated in posture changes.

Nuclear employment

Since February 2022, Putin and his subordinates have generally committed themselves to established Russian doctrine on nuclear use and have on several occasions rejected the need to revise it.

PREVENTIVE OR DISARMING STRIKES

In December 2022, Putin discussed the possible logic of revising Russian nuclear doctrine to embrace the concept of preventive⁵⁴ strikes in addition to retaliatory strikes in the context of a nuclear exchange. He discussed what he believes is a US strategic and planning concept of a preventive (*превентивный*) strike with hypersonic missiles, which if successful would prevent a Russian strategic response, and

⁴⁸ “Peskov States that the West Must Recognize the ‘Red Lines’ Drawn by Moscow” (Песков заявил, что Запад должен увидеть “красные линии”, обозначенные Москвой), Interfax (Интерфакс), Oct. 30, 2022, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/870212>.

⁴⁹ Agence France Presse, “NATO Taking Part In Ukraine Conflict With Arms Supplies: Putin,” *Barron’s*, Feb. 26, 2023, <https://www.barrons.com/articles/nato-taking-part-in-ukraine-conflict-with-arms-supplies-putin-60886649>.

⁵⁰ “Putin Agrees That the West Violates Red Lines with Arms Deliveries to Ukraine” (Путин согласен, что Запад пересекает красные линии поставками оружия на Украину), TASS, Mar. 26, 2023, <https://tass.ru/politika/17371931>.

⁵¹ “Peskov Answers the Question of Where This Is All Headed.”

⁵² “Medvedev Explains Why the West ‘Cannot Tear Russia Apart’” (Медведев рассказал, почему Запад «не может порвать Россию на части»), *Izvestia* (Известия), Dec. 6, 2022, <https://iz.ru/1436611/2022-12-06/medvedev-rasskazal-pochemu-zapad-ne-mozhet-porvat-rossiiu-na-chasti>.

⁵³ Telegram Channel: “Dmitry Medvedev,” July 30, 2023, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/362.

⁵⁴ In this discussion of “preventive,” Putin appears to be referencing the idea of a first strike with strategic nuclear weapons. See “Press Conference Following the Visit to Kyrgyzstan.”

he contrasted this concept with Russia's current nuclear doctrine of retaliatory-meeting (*ответно-встречный*) strikes. He concluded that "if a potential adversary believes it possible to carry out a preventive [*превентивный*] strike, while we do not, then this forces us to think about the threats such ideas create for us in the field of defense of other countries."⁵⁵ Putin did not commit Russia to changing its position on preventive strikes, but he stated that "if we are to talk of this disarming [*обезоруживающий*] strike, perhaps we should think about adopting the innovations of our American partners and their ideas for ensuring their security."⁵⁶ Although this statement hinted at a willingness to consider preventive strikes, Putin appears to have made no further public comments discussing or encouraging the idea.

COMMITMENT TO PUBLISHED NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

Aside from Putin's December 2022 comments discussed above, Russian leaders have repeatedly and emphatically stressed the Russian government's continued commitment to the published nuclear concepts. In September and early October 2022, several senior officials, most notably Peskov and

Medvedev, stressed that Russia's nuclear military doctrine remained unchanged and in effect.⁵⁷ In January 2023, Peskov affirmed that recent statements by Medvedev about how Western interventions in the Ukraine war could drive Russia to escalate to nuclear war were in "full accordance with our nuclear doctrine" and did not represent an innovation.⁵⁸ In June 2023, Ambassador Antonov stated that despite the "cheap rhetoric" of the US elite, Russian nuclear policy remained unchanged and the "terms of [nuclear weapon] use remain the same."⁵⁹

In October 2023, at the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin responded directly to Sergey Karaganov, who had argued that Russia should revise its nuclear use policy considering the Russia-Ukraine war (see Civilian Expert Perspectives). He acknowledged Karaganov's concerns and praised the debate taking place, but he concluded, "I don't see this necessity to change our [nuclear use] concept."⁶⁰ He highlighted Russia's advanced and capable nuclear forces, including the new Sarmat system, which should keep "any person with a right mind and clear memory" from considering using nuclear weapons against Russia.⁶¹ He added that he did not see any current situation that threatened the existence of the Russian state.⁶²

⁵⁵ "Press Conference Following the Visit to Kyrgyzstan."

⁵⁶ "Press Conference Following the Visit to Kyrgyzstan."

⁵⁷ "Russia Has Not Changed Its Course to Nuclear Weapon Use, States Ryabkov" (Россия не меняла подход к применению ядерного оружия, заявил Рябков), RIA Novosti (РИА Новости), Sept. 26, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220926/oruzhie-1819527537.html>; Telegram Channel: "Dmitry Medvedev," Sept. 27, 2022, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/181; "Peskov: Irresponsible People Speak About Nuclear Escalation" (Песков: о ядерной эскалации говорят безответственные люди), *Kommersant* (Коммерсант), Sept. 30, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5592603>; "Kremlin Reacted to Kadyrov Calling for the Use of Nuclear Weapons" (Кремль отреагировал на призыв Кадырова использовать ядерное оружие), Radio Sputnik (Радио Спутник), Oct. 3, 2022, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20221003/kreml-1821119794.html>; "Peskov Commented on Medvedev's Statement About Nuclear Weapons" (Песков прокомментировал заявление Медведева о ядерном оружии), Radio Sputnik (Радио Спутник), Sept. 27, 2022, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20220927/medvedev-1819779314.html>.

⁵⁸ "Peskov Said That Medvedev's Statement Does Not Indicate a Change in Russian Nuclear Doctrine" (Песков сказал, что заявление Медведева не означает изменение ядерной доктрины РФ), Interfax (Интерфакс), Jan. 19, 2023, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/881377>.

⁵⁹ "Antonov: Speculation in USA About Russia's Possible Use of WMDs Is Absurd" (Антонов: спекуляции в США о возможном применении Россией ТЯО абсурдны), Radio Sputnik (Радио Спутник), June 23, 2023, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20230623/antonov-1879911595.html>.

⁶⁰ "Nuclear Weapons Have Come to the Fore Again" (Ядерное оружие снова вышло на первый план), *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, Oct. 13, 2023, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/88255125>.

⁶¹ "Nuclear Weapons Have Come to the Fore Again."

⁶² "Nuclear Weapons Have Come to the Fore Again."

Arms control

The collapse of US-Russian arms control agreements continued after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia has downgraded or ended its participation in several key arms control agreements, while stressing that it has not yet commenced concomitant substantial changes in Russian posture, force size, or testing practices. In each case, Russia has framed its actual or threatened actions as reciprocal responses to US actions. This subsection focuses on how Moscow has talked about its arms control issues rather than possible indicators of change in its nuclear posture.

In February 2023, Medvedev said Russia's suspension of the Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START) was a response to Western interference in the Ukraine war. He stated that Western leaders mistakenly believed they could isolate strategic stability efforts, likely referring to arms control initiatives or talks from their policies aimed at countering Russia. He indicated that he believed Western leaders might be willing to make concessions, such as cutting support to Ukraine or accepting quantitative warhead limits

that also affect or encompass British and French warheads.⁶³

During the First Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 11th Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in August 2023, a Russian statement reiterated that Moscow would continue to adhere to the central quantitative limits stipulated in the New START Treaty despite its decision to suspend the treaty. It also noted that it continues to "inform the United States of launches of ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missile through an exchange of relevant notifications and observe a unilateral moratorium on the deployment of ground-launched intermediate- and shorter-range missiles until similar US-made weapons emerge in relevant regions."⁶⁴

However, the Russian delegation alleges that Washington's plans to deploy ground-launched intermediate- and short-range missiles in Europe and the Asia Pacific region put pressure on the moratorium.⁶⁵

In October 2023, Russia announced its plans to withdraw its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's representative to international organizations

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⁶³ Telegram Channel: "Dmitry Medvedev," Feb 22, 2023, https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/272.

⁶⁴ "Statement by the Delegation of the Russian Federation at the First Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 11th Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Cluster 1: Nuclear Disarmament), Vienna, August 3, 2023," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Aug. 3, 2023, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1900234/.

⁶⁵ "Statement by the Delegation of the Russian Federation at the First Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 11th Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Cluster 1: Nuclear Disarmament), Vienna, August 3, 2023."

in Vienna, clarified on Twitter (now X) that “the aim is to be on equal footing with the #US who signed the Treaty but didn’t ratify it. Revocation doesn’t mean the intention to resume nuclear tests.” The process was completed on November 2, 2023.⁶⁶ In October, Putin indicated that Russia would resume nuclear testing only if the United States tested first.⁶⁷

Russia’s announcement of the deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus (discussed in the next section) is another example of it backing away from past narratives regarding treaty commitments. Previously, it argued that NATO’s nuclear sharing agreements are counter to the NPT.⁶⁸ Now, Moscow has chosen to justify its nuclear sharing plans with Belarus by citing those same NATO nuclear sharing agreements. According to Grajewski, these actions, including the decision to deploy nonstrategic nuclear weapons to Belarus, are broader symptoms of Moscow’s “intransigence,” in which it has shifted from critiquing US policy to actively mirroring it. This form of mimicry aims to draw attention to occurrences in which norms are selectively or perhaps inconsistently enforced, thus excusing Russia’s actions from international scrutiny.⁶⁹

Nuclear posture

Russian statements and actions have stressed Moscow’s nuclear modernization and introduced cutting-edge weapons systems to give Russia

an advantage over the United States. Russian leadership’s actions, particularly the 2023 deployment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons to Belarus, imply some potential changes in employment plans and C2.

Capabilities

Russian leaders, particularly Putin, have repeatedly praised new Russian weapons systems as giving Russia a key edge in preserving strategic deterrence with the United States. In March 2022, Putin praised the new Sarmat ICBM system as part of a robust guarantee against nuclear use by adversaries.⁷⁰ In late 2022, the MOD highlighted the Sarmat system as impossible to intercept.⁷¹ In September 2022, Medvedev highlighted Russia’s “strategic nuclear weapons and newly acquired weapons” as guaranteeing rapid retaliation to Western escalation.⁷² In January 2023, Medvedev celebrated Russia’s acquisition of the Tsirkon missile, which he claimed could overcome any air defense systems, and he promised that Russia would continue developing and producing cutting-edge weapons to strengthen Russia’s position against the West.⁷³ In October 2023, Putin highlighted Russia’s Sarmat ICBM and Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile as new capabilities coming online that would reinforce Russia’s deterrence position.

In addition, throughout the war, Sergei Shoigu has stressed the importance of Russian nuclear

⁶⁶ Mikhail (@Amb_Ulyanov) Ulyanov, “#Russia plans to revoke ratification (which took place in the year 2000) of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty...,” Post, Twitter (now X), Oct. 6, 2023, 12:03 p.m., https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1710324981840654830.

⁶⁷ “Nuclear Weapons Have Come to the Fore Again.”

⁶⁸ “Statement by the Deputy Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation at the Tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Cluster 1: Nuclear Disarmament),” Aug. 5, 2022, https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/revcon2022/statements/5Aug_MCI_Russia.pdf.

⁶⁹ Grajewski, *Russia and The Global Nuclear Order*.

⁷⁰ “Nuclear Weapons Have Come to the Fore Again.”

⁷¹ Telegram Channel: “Dmitry Medvedev,” May 17, 2022.

⁷² Telegram Channel: “Dmitry Medvedev,” Sept. 22, 2022.

⁷³ Telegram Channel: “Dmitry Medvedev,” Jan. 5, 2023.

modernization.⁷⁴ An MFA statement in October justifying Russian nuclear modernization stressed that Russia's moves were a reaction to US plans to modernize and improve nuclear weapons deployed in Europe.⁷⁵ However, in late 2022, Putin signaled that he believes that Russia's strategic nuclear forces (SNF) are in relatively good shape compared with other branches of the Russian armed forces and thus require comparatively less modernization investment.⁷⁶

Employment plans

LIMITED NUCLEAR USE

In September 2022, Medvedev stated that he believes Russian nuclear use in Ukraine would be effective and not trigger a Western military response. Specifically, he predicted that Western leaders would "swallow the [Russian] use of any [nuclear] weapon in the current conflict" to avoid the destruction of Western capitals.⁷⁷

However, Putin and other officials have repeatedly rejected the idea that a limited nuclear strike would be effective or necessary. They did so explicitly once more in response to the 2023 civilian debate discussed in the next subsection, in which Putin, responding to a civilian proposal that would have opened the door to lowering Russia's nuclear

threshold, recommitted himself publicly once again to Russia's established nuclear doctrine.

BELARUS

The principal development in nuclear weapon employment plans has been Russia's deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus, which represents likely the boldest move by the Russian government regarding force posture changes. The 2023 deployment of Russian nonstrategic nuclear weapons to Belarus can be traced to early indicators in 2021 and 2022 before the invasion of Ukraine. Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus's authoritarian leader, began openly indicating his willingness to host Russian nuclear weapons in November 2021⁷⁸ as Russia was building up its pre-invasion force. Less than a month later, Russia Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov stated that Russia may deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles to Europe without direct mention of Belarus.⁷⁹

Ryabkov's statement was the first public indication from Russia of potential nuclear deployment prior to the invasion. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova first noted that there was no intention to transfer nuclear warheads to Belarus or to deploy them on delivery vehicles. Overall, the transfer of nuclear weapons was not preordained, and other Russian officials have emphasized that this transfer was a possibility rather than a de facto decree.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Shoigu, "Opening Speech by the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, General of the Army Sergei Shoigu, at a Thematic Conference Call with the Leadership of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"; Sergei Shoigu, "Theses of the Opening Speech of the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, Army General S.K. Shoigu at a Meeting of the Board of the Russian Ministry of Defense," Nov. 30, 2022, <https://telegra.ph/Tezisy-vstupitel'nogo-slova-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-general-a-armii-SK-SHOJGU-na-zasedanii-Kollegii-Minoborony-Rossi-11-30>; Telegram Channel: "Ministry of Defense of Russia," Mar. 26, 2022, https://t.me/mod_russia/13593.

⁷⁵ "Russian MFA: Russia Will Take into Account 'Nuclear Modernization' of the USA in Europe" (МИД РФ: Россия будет учитывать "ядерную модернизацию" США в Европе), Radio Sputnik (Радио Спутник), Oct. 29, 2022, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20221029/bezopasnost-1827719745.html>.

⁷⁶ "Putin Names the Strong Points of the Russian Armed Forces" (Путин назвал сильные стороны российской армии), Radio Sputnik (Радио Спутник), Dec. 21, 2022, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20221221/vs-rf-1840307864.html>.

⁷⁷ Telegram Channel: "Dmitry Medvedev," Sept. 27, 2022.

⁷⁸ Vladimir Isachenko, "Belarus President Offers to Host Russian Nuclear Weapons," AP, Nov. 30, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-germany-migration-europe-ab1efae5e65bf01af3be2f6139ef6f4b>.

⁷⁹ Geopioneer Staff, "Russia Says It May Deploy Intermediate Nuclear Weapons in Europe," Geopolitical Report, Dec. 13, 2021, <https://www.geopolitical.report/russia-says-it-may-deploy-intermediate-nuclear-weapons-in-europe/>.

⁸⁰ Nikolai Sokov, "Russia Is Deploying Nuclear Weapons in Belarus. NATO Shouldn't Take the Bait," Bulletin of The Atomic Scientist, Apr. 24, 2023, <https://thebulletin.org/2023/04/russia-is-deploying-nuclear-weapons-in-belarus-nato-shouldnt-take-the-bait/>.

As part of this preparation and institutionalization phase, Belarus requested Iskander missile training inside Belarus on February 17, 2022.⁸¹ Russia's Iskander-M is a nonstrategic, theater-level system capable of delivering nuclear and conventional munitions, meaning it is a dual-capable delivery system. However, these systems are typically fielded by Russian ground forces. Next, Belarus amended its constitution on February 27, 2022, to allow Belarus to shift to a neutral versus nonnuclear state to allow for future nuclear deployment on its territory.⁸² The legal change came into effect on March 15, 2022.

After Russia's invasion, Russia and Belarus took actions toward creating the capability and infrastructure for nuclear sharing, including providing Belarus with dual-capable delivery systems via "Su-25 aircraft" and the Iskander-M system. Other infrastructure upgrades were necessary for the future basing of nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil in storage facilities.⁸³

On March 25, 2023, Putin announced plans to station Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus and for the signing of a nuclear sharing agreement. The

agreement was signed by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin in Minsk. During a national address on March 31, 2023, Lukashenko said that "if necessary, Putin and I will decide and introduce strategic nuclear weapons here...The entire infrastructure has been created and is ready." In addition, the Russian MOD reported that Belarusian pilots were being trained to handle special ammunition during trainings involving SU-25s.⁸⁴

As preparation for nuclear sharing continued through the spring, Belarus tested troop readiness,⁸⁵ began training on the Iskander system,⁸⁶ and upgraded deployment areas.⁸⁷ This activity culminated in a statement by Putin on June 9, 2023, that deployment of nuclear weapons would occur "on July 7 or 8, [when] preparations for the corresponding [nuclear] facilities will be done, and we will start activities regarding the deployment of the corresponding type of weapons on your territory at once."⁸⁸ Overall, regardless of when Russia completes the eventual transfer of nuclear weapons to Belarus, it is clear that the move is in progress and may have significant ramifications for strategic stability in Europe.

⁸¹ Belarus BY, "Belarus to Ask Russia to Set Up Iskander Training Center," *BY*, 2022, <https://www.belarus.by/en/government/events/belarus-to-ask-russia-to-set-up-iskander-training-center-i-0000140778.html>.

⁸² Belarus BY, "Lukashenko: New Constitution Will Enter into Force on 15 March," *BY*, 2022, <https://www.belarus.by/en/government/documents/lukashenko-new-constitution-will-enter-into-force-on-15-march-i-0000141705.html>.

⁸³ "Vladimir Putin Made a Series of Important Statements in an Interview With Journalist Pavel Zarubin" (Владимир Путин сделал серию важных заявлений в интервью журналисту Павлу Зарубину), *1tv.Ru*, 2023, <https://www.1tv.ru/news/2023-03-25/449776-vladimir-putin-sdelal-seriyu-vazhnyh-zayavleniy-v-intervyu-zhurnalistu-pavlu-zarubinu>; Jaroslaw Adamowsky, "Belarus Says Its Russian S-400, Iskander Missiles Enter 'Combat Duty,'" *Defense News*, Dec. 20, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2022/12/20/belarus-says-its-russian-s-400-iskander-missiles-enter-combat-duty/>; "Belarus Has Put the S-400 and Iskander Systems on Combat Duty" (Белоруссия поставила на боевое дежурство комплексы С-400 и «Искандер»), *TASS*, 2022, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16635011>.

⁸⁴ "Russian Defense Ministry: Belarusian Pilots Are Ready to Use Nuclear Weapons" (МО РФ: белорусские летчики готовы применять ядерные боеприпасы), *Radio Sputnik*, 2023, <https://radiosputnik.ru/20230414/letchiki-1865348971.html>.

⁸⁵ "Vladimir Putin Made a Series of Important Statements in an Interview with Journalist Pavel Zarubin" (Владимир Путин сделал серию важных заявлений в интервью журналисту Павлу Зарубину).

⁸⁶ AFP, "Belarusian Troops Begin Training on Russian Nuclear-Capable Missile System," *Moscow Times*, Apr. 4, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/04/04/belarusian-troops-begin-training-on-russian-nuclear-capable-missile-system-a80705>.

⁸⁷ Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Hand Kristensen, "Video Indicates That Lida Air Base Might Get Russian 'Nuclear Sharing' Mission in Belarus," *Federation of American Scientists*, Apr. 19, 2023, <https://fas.org/publication/video-indicates-that-lida-air-base-might-get-russian-nuclear-sharing-mission-in-belarus/>; Timothy Wright and William Alberque, "The Credibility and Implications of Russia's Missile and Nuclear Proposal to Belarus," *IISS*, July 21, 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/07/the-credibility-and-implications-of-russias-missile-and-nuclear-proposal-to-belarus>.

⁸⁸ "Vladimir Putin Made a Series of Important Statements in an Interview with Journalist Pavel Zarubin" (Владимир Путин сделал серию важных заявлений в интервью журналисту Павлу Зарубину).

C2 arrangements

Russian leaders have stressed the adequacy of NC2 arrangements. At several points since 2022, Putin and other senior leaders have stressed that Russia's NC2 is prepared to respond promptly to an adversary's nuclear strike. When introducing the Sarmat ICBM test, Putin hinted at Russia's C2 arrangements, stating that all the decisions required to launch a "lightning fast" reaction to an adversary's nuclear strike had already been taken.⁸⁹

However, in one speech, Putin mused about how a successful Western preemptive strike against C2

infrastructure could undercut deterrence.⁹⁰ Although Putin noted at the time that changes in Russian doctrine (and implicitly, in C2) might be necessary to mitigate this possibility, he has not followed up on this publicly.

Russia's deployment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons has had an unclear effect on C2 arrangements. No public Russian statements indicate any change in C2 arrangements, and US assessments reportedly do not anticipate significant changes.⁹¹

⁸⁹ "Putin Threatens the West With Lightning-Fast Retaliatory Strikes."

⁹⁰ "Press Conference Following the Visit to Kyrgyzstan" (Пресс-конференция по итогам визита в Киргизию).

⁹¹ Natasha Bertrand and Kylie Atwood, "Western Intel Officials Hunt for Signs of Wagner and Nuclear Warheads in Belarus Ahead of NATO," CNN, July 8, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/07/politics/belarus-wagner-russia-nuclear-weapons-nato-summit/index.html>.

MILITARY ANALYST PERSPECTIVES

Since February 2022, Russian military analysts from MOD institutes, service academies, and the General Staff Academy Research Center have debated issues relating to the role of Russia’s nuclear weapons during the war.⁹² This section highlights several sets of recommendations from authoritative scholars within the military-analytical community aimed at improving the credibility of Russian strategic deterrence. In contrast to the civilian analyst community, the military-analytical community does not discuss using nonstrategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) earlier during a regional conflict.

Instead, the debate provides four perspectives: (1) a call for changes in declaratory policy, (2) a call for more explicit demonstrations and signaling with strategic nuclear weapons, (3) a call for a shift in the system of strategic operations, and (4) a recent authoritative view on the need to facilitate the evolution of strategic deterrence. We summarize a set of key articles by the military-analytical community that represent major perspectives in the ongoing debate about the role of nuclear weapons during the war.

Most of these writings blame the United States for seeking to inflict “strategic defeat” on Russia and

dismantle the strategic stability architecture. They paint the war in Ukraine as an important event in the evolution of the international order toward polycentricity. In this evolution, “the strategic balance of forces (largely of the military-political and ideological character) that had existed for 70 years has completely collapsed, initiating revolutionary processes in shaping a new world order.”⁹³

Here, we must make a major caveat. Recent US government assessments suggest an increase in Russia’s “reliance”

on nuclear weapons that involves, inter alia, the expansion of Russia’s nuclear warhead stockpile and its upload capacity.⁹⁴ These developments, or any discussions of a need to increase the stockpile of NSNW or use these capabilities earlier during a regional conflict, are not featured in the authoritative military journal articles between 2022 and 2024 that we examined for this study. The reason for this absence could be that there is already an explicit role for these NSNW capabilities in terms of signaling, demonstrations, or military employment at the regional level of war.⁹⁵ As discussed in this section, however, several military authors hint at the potential for demonstrative use of strategic nuclear weapons to buttress deterrence.

This section highlights several sets of recommendations from authoritative scholars within the military-analytical community aimed at improving the credibility of Russian strategic deterrence.

⁹² This section was primarily written by Anya Fink.

⁹³ A. V. Serzhantov and S. I. Muzyakov, “Interstate Confrontation in Current Conditions: Factor Analysis” (Межгосударственное противоборство в современных условиях: факторный анализ), *Vestnik Akademii Voennykh Nauk*, no. 4, 2023.

⁹⁴ Madelyn R. Creedon et al., *America’s Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, pp. 9–10.

⁹⁵ Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*.

Declaratory nuclear policy

Role of nuclear weapons in strategic deterrence

For several decades, Russian military thinkers have written on the evolution of the strategic deterrence concept.⁹⁶ This section focuses on a key article that can be viewed as a response to those questioning the effectiveness of Russian nuclear signaling since February 2022. We focus on this article because it sets the stage for other articles to be discussed in this section. In the December 2023 issue of *Military Thought*, A. K. Mar'in of the General Staff Academy Research Center argued that

the formation of the new [multipolar] architecture, rules and principles of the world order is accompanied by the emergence of new challenges and threats to Russia's military security, which requires the clarification of the content and intensification of strategic deterrence measures as a key element of foreign policy aimed at strengthening strategic stability, ensuring the national security of the state and preventing military conflicts.⁹⁷

Mar'in argues that new threats have emerged to Russia's security, and these require specific strategic deterrence measures to ensure Russia's security. Mar'in concludes that

an improved theory of strategic deterrence in the foreseeable future should aim at planned and operational regulation of geopolitical

and regional stability with a minimum of armed pressure on the enemy, mainly for undermining its military and economic capabilities, and informational and psychological impact aimed at destabilizing the domestic political situation in the opposing state and the refusal of its leadership to cease efforts of achievement of its goals through violent methods.⁹⁸

This line of thought is generally consistent with the idea that Russia's inability to achieve signaling goals has little to do with nuclear weapons and signaling with these capabilities per se and much more to do with the need to broadly integrate these and other means in a holistic strategy with effective nonmilitary means. In other words, strategic deterrence—as it is understood in the institutions close to the General Staff—needs to be balanced across conventional, nuclear, and other capabilities.

Mar'in lists the following factors affecting the content of strategic stability:

- “The emergence of new threats that call for a correction to the deterrence strategy [new counters to new threats]”
- “The expansion of geography and the spheres of emerging crises and possibilities on reacting to threats”
- “Preventive impact on the most important things of value to the adversary and the deprivation of advantages [including disarming of the adversary]”
- “The implementation of joint limiting nonmilitary means against the adversary and his opponents”

⁹⁶ See extensive discussion of the concept in Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*.

⁹⁷ A. K. Mar'in, “Specifics of Strategic Deterrence in the Present Conditions” (Особенности стратегического сдерживания в современных условиях), *Voennaya Mysl'*, no. 12 (2023).

⁹⁸ Mar'in, “Specifics of Strategic Deterrence in the Present Conditions” (Особенности стратегического сдерживания в современных условиях).

- “The creation of a real threat of aggression by the demonstration of employing armed forces”

He argues that Russia, which has “nuclear weapons capable of assured infliction of assigned damage to any aggressor-state or coalition of states in the most difficult circumstances,” believes it has the ability to assure its own security by “the means of employment of all forces and means at its disposal, including nuclear weapons, but only in the situation where all measures have been exhausted or have proved ineffective.”

When a crisis is emergent, military forces primarily serve as a deterrent against adversary use of armed forces. When a crisis is escalating, “when nonmilitary means have been exhausted, military forces could be used as a measure of last resort, and then the active instrument of realization of strategic deterrence policy will be the armed forces.” He notes that Russia’s executive in chief (the Russian president) will decide which forces to use and how, as well as the approaches they will take, “considering the potential escalation level,” and the goals they will seek to achieve. In this context, strategic deterrence activities are implemented with the following principles in mind:

- “The continuity of strategic deterrence activities, carried out at all phases of escalation of interstate relations”
- “The flexibility of the implementation mechanism of the activities and their proportionality to the emerging military threats”
- “The uncertainty for the potential aggressor regarding the scale, time, and areas of carrying out activities, and the composition of the involved forces and means”

- “The decisive transition from conduct of deterrence activities to military actions in a situation where deterrence of the aggressor has not succeeded”
- “The maintenance of the composition of the involved forces and means at a level sufficient for the implementation of strategic deterrence tasks”
- “The centralized planning of involved forces and means, supporting the most complete correspondence of the scale, forms, and approaches to their comprehensive employment to the character and direction of military threats”

Strategic deterrence activities employing military forces are just one component of all deterrence activities that, as a whole, are aimed at “convincing the military-political leadership of unfriendly states of the hopelessness of their efforts to achieve their goals through violent means.” The goals of said activities are laid out in Russia’s military doctrine of 2014, among other documents.

Mar’in notes the continued dominance of Cold War perspectives among political elites in nuclear states about the role of nuclear weapons in strategic deterrence, saying that these elites “hold an ambiguous opinion that in the foreseeable future nuclear deterrence will remain an important tool for ensuring national security, designed to prevent the initiation of large-scale aggression, primarily on the part of members of the nuclear club.”

According to the author, this perspective persists because “nuclear weapons continue to be regarded as cost-effective, politically effective, and effective and reliable in military terms to neutralize the most dangerous external threats to the security of the State.” In turn, Russia’s open position on nuclear

weapons is a factor in deterring aggression and ensuring military security rejects double standards. Russia's position meets the country's fundamental interests and is fully consistent with international obligations and principles of nuclear strategy.

The author notes the "sequential implementation" of the following deterrent activities (among others) with military capabilities:

- "The conduct of reconnaissance-information actions"
- "Demonstration of military presence and military force"
- "Actions in providing security of the economic security of the state"
- "Peacekeeping actions"
- "Actions in air defense, protection, and safeguarding the state border in the airspace"
- "The increase (deployment) of grouping of forces in the directions of the threats"
- "Infliction of the threat of infliction of single strikes"

He then proceeds to clarify the roles of various parts of the Russian forces and branches and the roles they play in implementing strategic deterrence activities. These roles include the following:

- The ability of the navy to engage in power projection in "numerous key European and Asian industrial centers, playing an important role in ensuring their economic stability. The impairment of performance of such centers and life-sustaining systems can lead to serious political, economic, and other changes in activities of the opposing side." In a period of threatened aggression, the navy can "increase the intensiveness" of its implementation of strategic deterrence activities as well as the number of deployed forces.

- The importance of the Aerospace Forces (especially the air and missile and space forces) to Russia's comprehensive ability to deter the adversary, control the environment, and react to changes in the environment.
- The key role of the Strategic Rocket Forces owing to their "combat composition, capabilities, and significance of assigned tasks." They "hold an important place because they have the broadest variety of combat equipment [and] mighty strategic warheads able to successfully counter the missile defense of the potential aggressor."

Mar'in further notes that because of the widespread employment of a range of nonmilitary means, established deterrence approaches that are combined with "military-forceful actions" may be "insufficiently effective and not always [guarantee] the achievement of desired results in assuring military security." As a reason for this, he notes that Russia's responses have primarily aimed to counter the US policy of "forceful compellence." Instead, he argues that the more effective approaches are in political, economic, diplomatic, and other means that are buttressed by credible military forces. He calls for an "integrated approach" of government and military authorities to engage in preventive and proactive actions with the support of powerful military potential and the wide information opportunities for the formation of the necessary international authority and the indisputable military and political reputation of the state. Information and the use of information-psychological means, he argues, are key to achieving goals without the use of force, as are emerging "dynamic deterrence" concepts that aim to influence the adversary's values. For this reason, he argues that reworking strategic and doctrinal documents is necessary to ensure their effectiveness in an evolving international environment.

Declaratory policy

Over the past several years, *Military Thought* has featured numerous articles from the analytical team at the 27th MOD research institute. Led by V. V. Sukhorutchenko, the institute supports the development of modeling and planning for the General Staff. Its research facilitates the evolution of Russia's system of strategic operations and related deterrence concepts involving nuclear and strategic conventional weapons.⁹⁹ This team has been preoccupied with the potential implications of Russia's ability to plan and develop forces in the context of the collapse of the arms control architecture, NATO's expansion closer to Russia's borders, and the entrenched hostility in Russia's relations with the West.

In the May 2023 issue of *Military Thought*, V. V. Sukhorutchenko, A. S. Borisenko, and E. A. Shlotov called for Russian leadership to pursue a more assertive or offensive declaratory policy.¹⁰⁰ This policy would be in response to a "significant part of the current generation of Western politicians and analysts being unable to understand the full consequences of their current steps, and the danger of possible escalation of the current armed conflict and its potential growth into a full-scale nuclear war." The authors argue that

after large-scale wars of the past and the real employment of WMD, there

has been more than one generation that doesn't understand the consequences of mass employment of even conventional weapons, let alone nuclear or chemical weapons, natural experiments in the context of developing biological weapons.¹⁰¹

Their proposed approach to declaratory policy involves more explicit statements by the Russian leadership as well as revisions to doctrinal documents in order to signal to decision-makers, experts, and populations in the West. These statements and revisions, in the words of the authors, would be aimed at

communicating the possible consequences of the further increase of external military dangers and threats, ways of countering them, as well as the role and place of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in resolving the tasks of forceful strategic nuclear and nonnuclear deterrence, forms and means of their employment, main goals aimed at preventing aggression against the state, defense of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as the deescalation (cessation) of military conflicts on conditions acceptable to the Russian Federation.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ For more on the participation of the 27th MOD institute in the debates about Russia's escalation management strategy, see Fink and Kofman, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Key Debates and Players in Military Thought*.

¹⁰⁰ V. V. Sukhorutchenko, A. S. Borisenko, and E. A. Shlotov, "Russian Federation Policies in the Area of Assuring Military Security in the Environment of Stagnation of the International-Legal System of Control over the Armed Forces and Military Activities" (Политика Российской Федерации в области обеспечения военной безопасности в условиях стагнации международно-правовой системы контроля над вооружениями и военной деятельностью), *Voennaya Mysl'*, no. 5 (2023).

¹⁰¹ Sukhorutchenko, Borisenko, and Shlotov, "Russian Federation Policies in the Area of Assuring Military Security in the Environment of Stagnation of the International-Legal System of Control Over the Armed Forces and Military Activities" (Политика Российской Федерации в области обеспечения военной безопасности в условиях стагнации международно-правовой системы контроля над вооружениями и военной деятельностью).

¹⁰² Sukhorutchenko, Borisenko, and Shlotov, "Russian Federation Policies in the Area of Assuring Military Security in the Environment of Stagnation of the International-Legal System of Control Over the Armed Forces and Military Activities" (Политика Российской Федерации в области обеспечения военной безопасности в условиях стагнации международно-правовой системы контроля над вооружениями и военной деятельностью).

The authors propose six principles of declaratory policy. One way to read these is as critiques of the approach to declaratory policy during the war in Ukraine. The principles are as follows:

1. **“Publicity of the main strategic goals (principles) of countering military threats to security.”** According to the authors, this publicity would improve Russia’s ability to deter external threats and relieve international concern about Russia’s potential “aggressive” use of certain capabilities.
2. **“Ability to base declaratory policy on effective strategic nuclear and nonnuclear deterrence forces, mechanisms, and instruments.”** According to the authors, this ability would combine military and nonmilitary means such that the former serves as the foundation for the latter.
3. **“Combining cautiousness and military decisiveness of declarations on the possibility of retaliatory employment of armed forces and nuclear and strategic nonnuclear weapons under the stated conditions.”** According to the authors, this principle highlights the value of declaratory statements about the “compelled use” of military force in response to conditions outlined in the doctrine as well as declaratory “ultimatums” that include the potential employment of nuclear and strategic nonnuclear weapons “during a time of declared critical military security” conditions.
4. **“Military feasibility of declared statements.”** According to the authors, this feasibility would strengthen deterrence mechanisms because it would “eliminate the possible perception that the declared statement is not supported by the resolve of the military-political leadership to implement them, as well as the availability” of military capabilities.

5. **“Adequacy of declared statements to the conditions of the emerging and forecasted military-political and strategic environment, the scale of the real threats to Russia’s military security.”** According to the authors, ensuring such adequacy would involve balancing escalatory and deescalatory statements and actions depending on the evolution of the security environment.
6. **“Centralized statute management of the activity of federal executive bodies and ministries and agencies of the Russian Federation, ensuring the implementation of state declarative policy in the area of providing military security.”** According to the authors, such centralization would involve carrying out policies that are “unified” and “coordinated at the highest level.”

The authors further argue that Russia’s legal, conceptual, and doctrinal documents (in particular those focused on the implementation of nonnuclear deterrence) may not be providing a sufficient effect in terms of deterring the current and future actions of the United States and its NATO allies. As an element of declaratory policy, they claim that these documents on nuclear and nonnuclear deterrence need to contain information on the following topics:

- “On the officially adopted views of the military-political leadership of the Russian Federation on the role and place of nuclear and strategic nonnuclear forces in solving the tasks of strategic nuclear and nonnuclear deterrence.”
- “On the main capabilities realized by nuclear and strategic nonnuclear weapons, as well as information and control systems.”
- “On the key conditions of the transition to the employment of nuclear and strategic nonnuclear weapons, as well as the prerogative of decision-making on their use.”

- “On certain possible types of key critical targets of the adversary (including those located outside its national territories) that may be affected by both nuclear and strategic nonnuclear weapons depending on the involvement of the state in the military conflict and its scale and intensity.”
- “On the capabilities of defense-industrial complex enterprises as a way to create future military technology as well as to maintain (modernize) the existing types of weapons, military and special technology.”

To ensure the credibility of capability demonstrations, the authors argue for the importance of exhibitions of military systems and their capabilities, training and exercises that would demonstrate these capabilities, the ability of the forces to employ them on the adversary’s “territories and critically important targets of military and economic infrastructure” and the “presence of air- and naval-based dual-capable systems outside of the borders of the Russian Federation” as a “practical demonstration” of nuclear and nonnuclear capabilities that could be used in a timely fashion.

This type of declaratory policy would be aimed at Russia’s adversaries and their allies. These audiences, the authors maintain, need to understand the consequences of increasing missile defense and strike systems deployment close to Russia’s borders. In particular, they need to understand the consequences of Russia’s employment of nuclear and nonnuclear capabilities on critically important targets on their territories and the ecological implications of such employment. In addition, they claim that Russia’s “forced employment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons” and “retaliatory employment of

nuclear weapons in circumstances when Russia’s existence is at stake could lead to a large-scale war with catastrophic consequences.” Further, the Western “political elites” of these countries need to understand the “irreversibility of employment...of strategic weapons when one or several declared key conditions” of employment have been met.

In sum, the authors from the 27th MOD institute argue that Russia’s declaratory policy, including statements by high-level leadership and doctrinal documents, needs to be much more explicit about threats, red lines, and consequences—particularly if the United States and Russia are unable to engage in risk-reduction discussions. Their perspectives can be read as a critique of official signaling during the war in Ukraine and a proposal for a much more holistic and coordinated approach.

Arms control

The community acknowledges the threats posed to Russia by the disintegration of several arms control agreements.¹⁰³ In a July 2022 article, Sukhorutchenko, Borisenko, and Shlotov argue that these threats include uncertainty regarding the development of strategic offensive and defensive groupings, the proliferation of WMD, the deployment of short-range or mid-range ground-based ballistic or cruise missiles as a result of the end of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, unlimited US missile defense capabilities, and the “continuing uncontrolled militarization of outer space as a new sphere of strategic confrontation.”¹⁰⁴ According to the authors, arms control is crucial because it allows for less spending on armaments as treaties maintain balance at a less costly level.

¹⁰³ For a detailed discussion on the military’s views on arms control, see Fink, *The General Staff’s Throw-Weight: The Russian Military’s Role and Views In US-Russia Arms Control*.

¹⁰⁴ V. V. Sukhorutchenko, A. S. Borisenko, and E. A. Shlotov, “Threats to the Military Security of the Russian Federation Determined by the System of Control of Armaments and Military Activities” (Угрозы военной безопасности Российской Федерации, обусловленные системой контроля над вооружениями и военной деятельностью), *Voennaya Mysl’* (July 2022).

Nuclear posture

The following articles mainly discuss changes to Russian nuclear employment plans, capabilities, and signaling approaches.

Employment plans and capabilities

Over the past decade, Russian military thinkers and planners have worked to reconceptualize the system of strategic operations. These operations are military planning concepts that set out how the Russian armed forces would operate in certain wartime situations.¹⁰⁵ One of the newly emerging and debated operations is the strategic deterrent forces operation, which would involve the limited employment of precision conventional and nuclear strikes. It has been described in a Russian military dictionary as follows:

A prospective type of strategic actions of armed forces using strategic strike capabilities with conventional warheads, as well as a strictly limited number of strategic nuclear strikes to inflict unacceptable damage on the aggressor and deter him from dangerous actions. Could be carried out by a small component of forces to warn and thwart preparations for a readying attack in the form of demonstrating strategic might or through the full-scale use of all means in case of the beginning of aggression....The system of this operation in perspective could employ nuclear means with limited explosive yield and conventional precision

weapons of various basing types, as well as strategic reconnaissance-strike systems.¹⁰⁶

In a March 2023 article, I. R. Fazletdinov of Strategic Rocket Forces command and V. I. Lumpov of the Central Institute of the Ministry of Defense's Military-Technical Information¹⁰⁷ argue that the Strategic Rocket Forces should be given a leading role in the strategic deterrent forces operation. This operation, the authors argue, would need to be ready to deter and counter a US surprise large-scale counterforce nuclear attack or a US preventive conventional counterforce attack that, when coupled with Western missile defense capabilities, could destroy Russia's SNF potential.¹⁰⁸ Their starting premise is that because of "aggressive" US actions toward Russia (and the US development and deployment of offensive strike, missile defensive, and other capabilities), the system of Cold War strategic deterrence is undergoing significant evolution. The authors argue that in this new environment, the United States and NATO are planning to engage in "military-political or physical elimination of the undesirable regime [the Russian government] while preserving territorial, resource, enterprise, and population resources," including through the following:

- "Preliminary preemptive elimination of the Russian Federation's deterrent nuclear potential in the pre-nuclear period." The authors argue that this effort would include strategic nonnuclear capabilities acting in a surprise counterforce strike against Russian SNF targets that would destroy "no less than 65–70 percent" of the Russian combat grouping.

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of the strategic operations system, also see Michael Kofman et al., *Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts*, CNA, Aug. 2021, pp. 37–71.

¹⁰⁶ As quoted in Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁷ Between 1999 and 2009, Lumpov was associated with the General Staff team focused on nuclear weapons employment issues.

¹⁰⁸ I. R. Fazletdinov and V. I. Lumpov, "The Role of Strategic Rocket Forces in Countering NATO Multi-Domain Operations" (Роль Ракетных войск стратегического назначения в противодействии стратегической многоосферной операции НАТО), *Voennaya Mysl'*, no. 5 (2023).

- “Guaranteed repulsion of Russia’s ‘nuclear retaliation’ second strike by enduring the complete defeat of all remaining Russian Strategic Nuclear Forces warheads headed to US targets.” The authors argue that this effort would involve US missile defense capabilities countering “no less than 35–40 percent” of the Russian combat grouping.
- “Preservation of global military and economic leadership in the world and sufficient nuclear capability to deter nuclear powers not participating in the military conflict.” The authors argue that this effort would involve the US conducting minimally sufficient disarming strikes (or minimally sufficient decapitating strikes) against Russia to “physically eliminate it.”

The authors argue that such a US/NATO operation against Russia would involve three time periods:

1. The preparatory period of hybrid actions by the adversary that could take several months or more than a year and involve the US emplacement of diversionary strike “sleeper cells” on Russian territory aimed at Russian SNF targets.
2. The main period that involves aerospace offensive and defensive actions in which the West would seek to achieve “aerospace superiority and eliminate the strategic nuclear deterrence system of the Russian Federation.” This period would have several phases:
 - a. The US engages in a large-scale surprise conventional counterforce attack on Russian nuclear capabilities, and Russia responds (the “countering” phase).
 - b. The US and Russia engage in actions while Russia’s SNF seek to suppress and break through US missile defense systems (the “breakthrough” phase).

The authors maintain that Russia could counter US/NATO actions with a well-developed strategic deterrent forces operation. Such an operation could bring together Russian strategic offensive nuclear and nonnuclear weapons based across the various Russian armed forces in efforts to counter the attack (primarily via the Aerospace Forces), suppress it (via the whole of Strategic Deterrence Forces), and retaliate against it (primarily via the navy) with the Strategic Rocket Forces as the “main and most universal component of strategic forces” participating in the operation.

- c. The US and Russia exchange nuclear strikes while their respective missile defense systems remain partially operational (the “retaliation” phase).
3. The concluding period that involves ground combat operations aimed at assuring Russia’s “demilitarization, loss of sovereignty, and the military-political submission to own will.”

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navy) with the Strategic Rocket Forces as the “main and most universal component of strategic forces” participating in the operation.

They contend that it is no longer sufficient to “create and maintain a necessary combat readiness to employ a sufficient Strategic Nuclear Forces (Strategic Rocket Forces) grouping capable of inflicting unacceptable damage on an aggressor in retaliatory actions,” as laid out in Russian doctrinal documents. Russia also needs to develop a “System of Comprehensive Forceful Strategic Deterrence with the participation of the Strategic Rocket Forces” that would operate at the pre-nuclear and nuclear phases of deterrence to counter a conventional counterforce strike, suppress missile defense, and retaliate. Each of these three goals would need to have their own set of “deterrence instruments,” “supporting group of forces and means,” and communication approaches, the authors maintain. In sum, they argue that the United States is no longer deterred, and, together with NATO, it is planning a set of operations to destroy Russia. To address this threat, Russia needs to engage in a restructuring of its strategic forces and system of strategic operations.

Signaling

Numerous articles from those affiliated with the Strategic Rocket Forces have argued for a more credible approach to signaling that would involve strategic capabilities as well as broader signaling aimed at the development and maintenance of strategic capabilities.

For example, R. O. Nogin of the Strategic Rocket Forces Academy wrote in July 2022 that Russia’s

efforts to “bring some sense into” the United States and NATO and seek to jointly prevent a “new world war” have so far failed to achieve results.¹⁰⁹ He writes,

The right of the strong to execute for insubordination and pardon for loyalty—this is the concept that US policy now follows, and no changes are expected in the near future, without taking deterrence measures. This concept requires an adequate response—strategic deterrence using military force: “God must come with fists.”¹¹⁰

He argues that the chief problem is that US and NATO leadership are unable to perceive the true danger of nuclear threats (unlike in the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis); thus, the central challenge of Russian threats is their lack of credibility. In this article, he focuses on particular on signaling that could “cool” the hotheads in the West. He maintains that in their opinion, this approach of demonstrating the capabilities of nuclear potential with shocking surprise and decisive response within the framework of strategic nuclear deterrence and in modern conditions with appropriate information support will be quite effective. To reinforce the seriousness of the Russian military-political leadership’s intentions regarding strategic deterrence, Nogin argues, it is extremely important at key moments when a potential adversary is forming a military-political decision to use nuclear weapons, to demonstrate the capabilities of nuclear weapons delivery vehicles that are currently in service and are planned to be put into service.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ R. O. Nogin, “On the Role and Place of Strategic Rocket Forces in the Future System of Complex Strategic Nuclear Deterrence of a Possible Aggression Against the Russian Federation” (О роли и месте Ракетных войск стратегического назначения в перспективной системе комплексного стратегического ядерного сдерживания возможной агрессии против Российской Федерации), *Военная Мысль*, no. 7 (2022).

¹¹⁰ Nogin, “On The Role and Place of Strategic Rocket Forces in the Future System of Complex Strategic Nuclear Deterrence of a Possible Aggression Against the Russian Federation” (О роли и месте Ракетных войск стратегического назначения в перспективной системе комплексного стратегического ядерного сдерживания возможной агрессии против Российской Федерации).

¹¹¹ Nogin, “On the Role and Place of Strategic Rocket Forces in the Future System of Complex Strategic Nuclear Deterrence of a Possible Aggression Against the Russian Federation” (О роли и месте Ракетных войск стратегического назначения в перспективной системе комплексного стратегического ядерного сдерживания возможной агрессии против Российской Федерации).

The Strategic Rocket Forces Academy author writes of a system of strategic nuclear deterrence that would “form a model of a nuclear threat that makes a possible adversary aware of the high damage and unacceptability for him of the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons.” He notes that in the event of an escalation of aggressive actions against Russia, his conceptualized model would consist of demonstrative and real actions for the controlled build-up and maintenance of combat capability and readiness of the nuclear deterrence forces. The model of actions to take also includes consistent informational tools and actual demonstrations of nuclear employment to convey Russia’s readiness to inflict unacceptable damage on the aggressor in retaliation.¹¹²

He states that “at the same time, in a real military-political situation, it will be necessary to clarify the conditions, forms, and methods of force, including complex strategic nuclear deterrence and the direct use of forces and means of the Strategic Rocket Forces.”¹¹³

In an August 2023 article, M. L. Tikhonov of the Strategic Rocket Forces Academy sought to clarify the “operational art” of the Strategic Rocket Forces to improve the credibility of nuclear deterrence.¹¹⁴ He argues that Strategic Rocket Forces and an increase in force readiness contributed to deterrence during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Because of the threats Russia now faces, including NATO expansion, shifts in US and NATO nuclear posture, development of US operational concepts to counter Russia, improving missile defense, and dismantled arms control

accords, Russia could improve the credibility of its nuclear deterrence through the following “deterrent actions” that showcase the flexibility of SNF units:

- “Partial demonstrative increase in highest combat readiness levels of various [Strategic Rocket Forces] units for deterring nuclear and nonnuclear aggression”
- “Demonstrative preparation of nuclear missile strikes”
- “Readiness to conduct a retaliatory meeting strike”
- “Demonstration of set level of combat readiness”
- “Demonstration of ability to move to lowest forms of combat readiness”

He further posits that the role of Strategic Rocket Forces in strategic deterrence is to prevent aggression and achieve cessation of escalation. He clarifies as follows:

- Aggression is prevented “by deterrent actions of the Strategic Rocket Forces aimed at demonstrating their combat capabilities [and] the determination and readiness of the country’s military and political leadership to move if necessary to the use of nuclear weapons.”
- Cessation of escalation is achieved “with the demonstrative employment of Strategic Rocket Forces on individual targets (forces) of the adversary without inflicting significant damage to population and environment, as well as in damage (destruction) of single

¹¹² Nogin, “On the Role and Place of Strategic Rocket Forces in the Future System of Complex Strategic Nuclear Deterrence of a Possible Aggression Against the Russian Federation” (О роли и месте Ракетных войск стратегического назначения в перспективной системе комплексного стратегического ядерного сдерживания возможной агрессии против Российской Федерации).

¹¹³ Nogin, “On the Role and Place of Strategic Rocket Forces in the Future System of Complex Strategic Nuclear Deterrence of a Possible Aggression Against the Russian Federation” (О роли и месте Ракетных войск стратегического назначения в перспективной системе комплексного стратегического ядерного сдерживания возможной агрессии против Российской Федерации).

¹¹⁴ M. L. Tikhonov, “Main Directions in the Perfection of Theory of Operational Art of Strategic Rocket Forces Toward 2030” (Основные направления совершенствования теории оперативного искусства Ракетных войск стратегического назначения на рубеже 2030-х годов), *Voennaya Mysl'*, no. 8 (2023).

strategically important stationary objects of the infrastructure and armed forces of the opponent. The execution of this task with preemptive actions of strikes is possible only after the reconsideration of the content of the INF and New START Treaties.” If these treaties are reconsidered, he proposes that Russia could create a singular grouping of ICBMs and/or intermediate-range missiles intended to deliver single conventional or nuclear strikes or the strengthening (support) of groups intended for a nuclear first strike. If such a group is created, Russia would need to figure out a way to declare that politically.

Finally, the commander of Russia’s Strategic Rocket Forces, S. V. Karakaev, wrote the following in August 2023 regarding the role of nuclear weapons:

In conditions of instability and uncertainty in the development of the military-political situation in the long term, nuclear weapons will remain for all their owners the main means of ensuring national security and deterring a potential adversary (coalition of potential enemies) from large-scale aggression. And there is no reason to assume that this attitude toward nuclear weapons can change radically in the next 20–30 years.¹¹⁵

He further notes the possibility that “their importance in ensuring the country’s security will remain key until” new technologies are created to take their place. However, Karakaev, at least on paper, seems to convey awareness about the limits to achieving credible strategic deterrence.

In a nod to the ability of the Strategic Rocket Forces to carry out signaling, he notes the importance of combat duty and points to the following actions in peacetime and in the period of increased military threat:

- “Constant combat duty at command posts of all ranks, combat starting positions, combat patrol routes, permanent deployment points, technical positions”
- “Maintaining missile and special weapons, systems and means of combat control, and communications in readiness for combat use at a level that ensures the execution of combat missions in any situation, continuous monitoring of their initial position, technical condition and functioning”
- “Maintaining high combat and mobilization readiness of troops, demonstrating a high level of combat training of personnel, operational training of military command and control bodies for leading troops”
- “Demonstration of the high capabilities of missile weapons on combat duty, readiness to immediately carry out assigned combat missions, the highly professional level of combat crews of missile regiments during combat training launches of missiles in exercises and training of a strategic scale”

Those affiliated with the Strategic Rocket Forces have also advocated for sustained funding and even potentially increased procurement. In a July 2022 article, R. O. Nogin wrote of the need to consider whether current force levels are even sufficient given the evolution of the threat to Russian strategic forces, particularly from missile defenses.¹¹⁶ In a March 2023 article, A. M. Kovalyov and Col. A. A. Tuzhikov

¹¹⁵ S. V. Karakev, “On the Issue of Employment of Strategic Rocket Forces in Wars of the Future” (К вопросу о применении Ракетных войск стратегического назначения в войнах будущего), *Voennaya Mysl'*, no. 8 (2023).

¹¹⁶ Nogin, “On the Role and Place of the Strategic Rocket Forces in the Future System of Complex Strategic Deterrence of Possible Aggression Against the Russian Federation” (О роли и месте Ракетных войск стратегического назначения в перспективной системе комплексного стратегического ядерного сдерживания возможной агрессии против Российской Федерации).

argued that investment into the modernization of SNF should not be curtailed, even despite challenges regarding the Russian economy.¹¹⁷

In sum, writings by authors affiliated with the Strategic Rocket Forces suggest a critique of Russian government signaling with nuclear capabilities since February 2022. They offer up signaling and demonstrations with the Strategic Rocket Forces as a potentially much louder tool to restore the credibility of Russian deterrence in the minds of

Western elites. Their opinions, however, are not in consensus; those closer to the General Staff (such as Mar'in) advocate for a deterrence approach that is much more balanced between conventional and nuclear capabilities.

C2 arrangements

The articles that we assessed did not explicitly discuss this issue.

¹¹⁷ A. M. Kovalyov and A. A. Tuzhikov, "Possible Approaches to the Justification of the Combat Composition of a Future Grouping of the Strategic Rocket Forces" (Возможные подходы к обоснованию достаточности боевого состава перспективной группировки Ракетных войск стратегического назначения), *Voennaya Mysl'* (Mar. 2023).

CIVILIAN EXPERT PERSPECTIVES

This section discusses the views of Russian civilian experts on the role of nuclear weapons in the full-scale war period. To contextualize the debates, we combed through 60 articles, reports, and interviews from academic journals, libraries, research centers, and newspapers by Russian civilian experts. We then coded the sample in relation to the research questions stated in Figure 1 for a structural analysis.

During the last decade, Russian civilian experts have tried to determine what constitutes a dangerous level of nuclear disarmament, considering that “proliferator” states continue to develop their nuclear programs. Others have cautioned Russia to not rely too heavily on its nuclear arsenal for security and prestige.¹¹⁸

However, the debate initiated by Sergey Karaganov in summer 2023 in which he advocated for Russia to lower its nuclear threshold likely represents a turning point for civilian conversations regarding the sufficiency of Russia’s nuclear doctrine. For this reason, the following section uses Karaganov’s June 2023 article as a vehicle to discuss prominent viewpoints in the Russian civilian expert community.

The October 2023 Valdai Conference represents a unique object of analysis for this study because it is the only time during the timespan covered in this study that two of the stakeholder communities under analysis—the Russian government (at the highest level of representation) and Russian civilian experts—interacted with each other during a public discussion about a possible change to Russia’s declaratory policy. While Putin traditionally interacts

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with civilian experts, among others, during the annual Valdai Conference, Valdai 2023 was an interaction between at least one expert who publicly advocated for Russia to lower its nuclear threshold and the executive in chief, Vladimir Putin, who has ultimate decision-making authority on the development, deployment, and possible use of nuclear weapons.

Some have argued that this debate represents a conversation about how Moscow can disentangle itself from the difficult situation it has found itself in in Ukraine.¹¹⁹ Hanna Notte has argued that the Karaganov debate is a symptom of wider anxiety about Russia’s future among Russian elites during

¹¹⁸ Mikhail Trotsky and Aleksei Fenenko, “The Nuclear Factor in World Politics: Discussion in Russian Council for Foreign Affairs” (Ядерный фактор в мировой политике: Дискуссия на портале РСМД), *Perspectives* (2015), https://www.perspektivy.info/rus/desk/jadernyj_faktor_v_mirovoj_politike_diskussija_na_portale_rsmd_2016-02-11.htm.

¹¹⁹ Andrei Baklitsky, “What We Learned from Recent Calls for a Russian Nuclear Attack” (Ядерная несдержанность. Что показал спор о превентивном ударе по Западу), *Carnegie Politika*, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90160>.

the war.¹²⁰ Others have written that these debates might be part of preparatory signals to introduce provocative ideas to a Western audience and justify future Russian policy.¹²¹

The following section suggests that writings by Russian civilian experts post-2022 form part of a wider conversation among elites about the role of nuclear weapons, reflecting continuity in the ideas of civilian experts for the last 10 years.¹²² Thus, this section touches on the origins of the debate by briefly painting a picture of the discussions from 2019 to late 2022. It then transitions into discussing the debate Karaganov put in motion, analyzing the responses to Karaganov's article, and shedding light on secondary debates.

Role and effectiveness of nuclear weapons in the Russia-Ukraine war

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, debates between Russian civilian elites mainly focused on strategic stability and nonnuclear deterrence. After 2022, the debate has centered on signaling credibility, but the community has diverged on the measures Russia must take to regain credibility, resulting in a fundamental disagreement about the role and effectiveness of nuclear weapons in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Overall, the Russian civilian expert community appears to believe that Russia has achieved mixed success through its nuclear threats.

However, the community seems to explicitly or implicitly agree that nuclear weapons and verbal nuclear signaling have prevented direct NATO interference in the war but have not prevented NATO from continuing to provide Ukraine with unprecedented military assistance. One expert pointed out that Russian nuclear weapons have prompted repeated assurances by the United States and NATO regarding the exclusion of direct military intervention in the war. Russia's nuclear arsenal has also caused the allies to hesitate regarding supplying long-range high-precision systems to Ukraine.¹²³

A surprising aspect of these debates is the heightened level of engagement of the Russian civilian expert community in discussions about the possibility of limited nuclear employment by Russia. Beginning in June 2023, Russian experts held a relatively public debate about Russia's nuclear policy and posture. The discussions were triggered by an article by Russian foreign policy expert Sergey Karaganov, in which he argued that Russia should update its nuclear policy to reestablish the credibility of Russia's nuclear deterrence. Specifically, he called for Moscow to lower its nuclear threshold to reflect the possibility of preemptive nuclear use on nonnuclear NATO states.¹²⁴

Echoing his own previous writings, Karaganov urges a strategy of intimidation, deterrence, and even "use of nuclear weapons." Although provocative, the logic behind this proposal is not novel to Russia as a country at war but is based on specific ideas about nuclear deterrence espoused through writings in the last 10 years.

¹²⁰ Hanna Notte, "The West Cannot Cure Russia's Nuclear Fever," War on The Rocks, July 18, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/07/the-west-cannot-cure-russias-nuclear-fever/>.

¹²¹ Lawrence J. Korb and Stephen J. Cimbala, "Karaganov's Case for Russian Nuclear Preemption: Responsible Strategizing or Dangerous Delusion?," Bulletin of The Atomic Scientist, Aug. 21, 2023, https://thebulletin.org/2023/08/karaganovs-case-for-russian-nuclear-preemption-responsible-strategizing-or-dangerous-delusion/#_ftn5.

¹²² Sergey Karaganov, "Global Zero And Common Sense" («Глобальный ноль» и здравый смысл), *Russia in Global Affairs*, July 1, 2010, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/globalnyj-nol-i-zdravyj-smysl/>.

¹²³ Vladimir Baranovsky, "Escalation of Conventional Conflicts: About the Possible Transition of the Nuclear Threshold" (Эскалация конвенциональных конфликтов: о возможном переходе ядерного порога), *Polis*, no. 4 (2022), pp. 6–9.

¹²⁴ Sergey Karaganov, "A Difficult but Necessary Decision" (Тяжкое, но необходимое решение), *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 13, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-difficult-but-necessary-decision/>.

The proposal triggered a vigorous debate, with some senior foreign policy commentators offering qualified support for Karaganov's vision. Critics generally took issue with his confidence that escalation risks could be managed. The debate also prompted others to comment on the state of Russia's nuclear doctrine and posture, resulting in some experts explicitly or implicitly admitting that Russia's nuclear posture has shifted because of the war due to its decision to station nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Belarus.

On one hand, multiple Russian experts argued that NATO members were engaging in actions that are intensifying the conflict in Ukraine, which they considered proof that Russia's nuclear reminders were insufficient to influence the outcome of its war decisively. Those who disagreed with this premise and praised Russian leadership for its caution conceded that the Russian establishment had been slow to respond to NATO provocations and Ukraine's strikes on mainland Russian territory via long-range uncrewed aerial vehicles (including its attack on the Engels-2 airbase, which hosts Russian strategic bombers).

On the other hand, some writings described nuclear weapons as crucial tools for coercion and advocated for more public discussions among experts and policy officials alike about the possibility of Russian nuclear use, as these can serve to restore Russia's credibility for signaling purposes.

Overall, writings from 2019 to 2023 show that sharp divisions exist within the Russian civilian expert community (as is typical among elites). Some posit that nuclear weapons should be used only for deterrence purposes. For instance, Aleksei Arbatov has written numerous articles reiterating the value of the nuclear taboo and the reputational cost of a possible limited employment of nuclear weapons in

Ukraine unless circumstances meet the thresholds established in Russia's nuclear doctrine.¹²⁵ Staff at IMEMO have also underscored that nuclear weapons "cannot solve all problems." Others have argued that the mere fact that the West is launching a hybrid war against Russia is evidence of deterrence eroding, almost as if they believed that nuclear powers cannot lose conventional wars.

Based on these writings, the implications for Russian nuclear effectiveness remain elusive. Indeed, the Russian civilian expert community has made a lot of noise, particularly in response to the debate instigated by Karaganov because it involves a discussion of limited nuclear employment. However, it would be difficult to determine whether these experts are actually helping improve Russian deterrence through influencing global debates about deterrence, or whether they are undermining Russia's credibility given the repetitive nature of some writings and the very "noise" of the articles themselves. It is also interesting to see how there is little self-awareness in recognizing that perhaps Russia's nuclear reminders in the current context of the war are not credible.

Clearly, Russian civilian experts are actively reminding Moscow that Russia has alternative courses of action to augment its credibility through "nonverbal nuclear" signaling. After all, if Russia is to deter a conflict, end a conflict, or avert escalation, it would seek to communicate the costs of the conflict and the inefficacy of continuing aggression against Russia's core security interests, especially since the US does not have vital interests at stake. Signaling pathways are crucial for these efforts and, unfortunately, often understudied.¹²⁶ This fact may have implications for potential coercive strategies and may precede them, but only time will tell.

¹²⁵ Aleksei Arbatov, "Ukrainskiy Krizis i Strategicheskaya Stabilnost," *POLIS*, no. 4 (2022).

¹²⁶ Fink, Kofman, and Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*.

Declaratory nuclear policy

Nuclear use

The debate about possible changes to Russia's declaratory policy took place in the summer of 2023 and continues to this day against the backdrop of the US announcing its decision to provide Ukraine with F-16s. The debate is the only source of Russian civilian expert discussions about changing Russia's nuclear declaratory policy between 2019 and 2023, which is why it is the focus of this subsection. Karaganov, an establishment national security expert close to the Security Council,¹²⁷ kicked off the public debate about possible nuclear use with a June 2023 article titled "A Difficult but Necessary Decision."¹²⁸

In it, Karaganov argues that Russia's high nuclear threshold allowed the West to unleash "a full-scale war" via Ukraine. That is, without Western help to Ukraine, the war would have been brief and contained, ending in a rapid Russian victory. But Western leaders did not believe Russia would escalate to nuclear use and therefore were not deterred from giving Ukraine such support.

Now, only actions that lower Russia's nuclear threshold by climbing what he called a "deterrence-escalation ladder," including possibly limited nuclear use, could force the West to take Russian nuclear threats seriously and desist from providing Ukraine with military assistance. Karaganov did not lay out what he means by a "deterrence-escalation ladder,"

but the term seems to refer to a series of escalatory steps that Russia could take to compel the West to cease providing military assistance to Ukraine. By updating its nuclear doctrine, he argued, Russia could both communicate a lower nuclear threshold and lay out its vision of the escalation ladder.

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Karaganov specifically argues that Russia needs to make the enemy aware that it is ready to deliver a preemptive (*упреждающий*) strike on a NATO country, such as Poland, in order to prevent the world from sliding into thermonuclear war. Although this statement is not declaratory, he argues it should be reflected in Russia's official nuclear doctrine; therefore, we include it in this section but discuss it further

in the next sections.

The article prompted numerous responses from those in the Russian civilian expert community, most of whom acknowledged that Russia's nuclear signaling did not stop the West from slowly providing Ukraine with more advanced military assistance through incrementalism. The most prominent article that was sympathetic to Karaganov came from Dmitry Trenin, who agreed with many of the article's premises but questioned Karaganov's confidence that the West would stand by after a Russian limited nuclear strike.¹²⁹

Trenin was not the only one to reject Karaganov's policy prescription of a limited nuclear strike on NATO territory. Those who sympathized with Karaganov's claims agreed that Russia should update its nuclear

¹²⁷ Karaganov is the honorary chairman of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, and he is on the expert group attached to the Russian Security Council.

¹²⁸ Karaganov, "A Difficult but Necessary Decision."

¹²⁹ Dmitry Trenin, "Conflict in Ukraine and Nuclear Weapons" (Украинский конфликт и ядерное оружие), *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 22, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/ukraine-and-nuclear-weapons/>.

deterrence strategy and doctrinal documents. Some analysts in the community suggested that Moscow should carry out nonverbal signals, although it is not clear what they mean by this. It could perhaps mean more exercises, but Trenin does clarify that nonverbal signals are short of nuclear use and are “meant to bring back fear” to restore signaling credibility. Other Russian civilian writings supported the idea that a Russian strategy of coercion should not eschew readiness to use nuclear weapons, but they viscerally rejected the idea of limited nuclear employment.¹³⁰

Numerous experts in the community rejected the notion that Russia’s current nuclear doctrine is insufficient. These experts highlighted Russia’s nonnuclear capabilities and emphasized Russia’s nuclear modernization plans. Staff from IMEMO argued in 2022 that Russian use of nuclear weapons would not be preemptive but reciprocal. They espoused the view that the Ukraine conflict does not meet the framework for the single use of NSNWs, nor does the conflict contain targets that would render Russia’s conventional long-range strike capability ineffective.¹³¹

IMEMO head Alexei Arbatov has been among Karaganov’s fiercest critics in the public sphere for many years. Indeed, the summer of 2023 is not the first time that Arbatov has openly disagreed with Karaganov, but previous debates did not focus on the sufficiency of Russia’s nuclear doctrine. Nonetheless, the logic behind the arguments espoused in the 2023 debate can be seen in their previous writings in the last 10 years.¹³²

In an interview with *Novaya Gazeta* on June 19, 2023, Arbatov said:

Professor Karaganov claims that he has been involved in nuclear strategy for many years and knows a way to “minimize” the risk of a nuclear retaliatory strike from the other side. So let him share his secret with our General Staff, which has been trying to solve this problem for many decades, as well as the Pentagon.¹³³

He did, however, underline that Karaganov’s piece is likely not his exclusive opinion, but rather reflects the perspective of part of the political elite.

Karaganov addressed his critics in September 2023 in an article titled “How to Prevent Nuclear War.” In the piece, he reiterates major points from his June 2023 article and advocates that Russia should increase its reliance on nuclear deterrence considering that it may emerge from the Russia-Ukraine war too exhausted to compete in a conventional arms race.¹³⁴ He then suggests practical steps to consider to prevent a global war and a costly military operation in Ukraine.

At the October 2023 Valdai Conference, Karaganov asked Putin directly about the need to lower Russia’s nuclear threshold. He stated his belief that Russian nuclear doctrine was inadequate for the current security environment. In response to this situation, he asked Putin, “Is it high time we modify the doctrine on using nuclear weapons, lowering the nuclear threshold and moving steadily, sufficiently, and

¹³⁰ Aleksander Bartosh, “Sderzhivanie priobretayet razlichnyeottenki,” *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, no. 24 (2023).

¹³¹ IMEMO Staff, *The Nuclear Factor in The Ukrainian Conflict*, IMEMO, 2022, https://avalonlibrary.net/Ukraine/IMEMO_Report_October_2022_Nuclear_factor_in_the_Ukraine_conflict/%5BReport%5D_Nuclear_Factor_in_the_Ukrainian_conflict_IMEMO_report_%28October%202022%29.pdf.

¹³² Aleksei Arbatov, “Common Sense and Disarmament” (Здравый смысл и разоружение), *Russia in Global Affairs*, Aug. 12, 2010, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/zdravyj-smysl-i-razoruzhenie/>.

¹³³ Interview with Aleksei Arbatov, “Uprezhdajushhiy udar vozmezdiya,” *Novaya Gazeta*, 2023, <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2023/06/19/uprezhdaiushchii-udar-vozmezdiia>.

¹³⁴ Sergey Karaganov, “How to Prevent a Third World War,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Sept. 26, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/how-to-prevent-a-third-world-war/>.

quickly along the staircase of escalation, deterrence, and bringing our partners down to earth?”¹³⁵ As discussed in the previous section, Putin replied by reiterating Russia’s current nuclear doctrine while noting that he had read Karaganov’s articles and understood his feelings.

But the conversation did not end there. Fyodor Lukyanov, who had disagreed with Karaganov about updating Russia’s nuclear doctrine to reflect the possibility of a preemptive strike based on current Western aggression toward Russia, then asked Putin about the risks of gradual Western escalation in the face of flagging Russian deterrence credibility. In response, Putin cited Ukraine’s casualties during its counteroffensive and assured the public that Russia was slowly advancing to accomplish its goals in Ukraine. Putin was likely attempting to assure Russian elites that the war was going according to plan, while also teasing the narrative that the Western media is attempting to provoke Russia into changing its nuclear doctrine.¹³⁶

The interaction at Valdai 2023 perhaps exemplifies the divergences between the civilian and political leadership communities. Some believe that Putin shut down the debate regarding Russia’s nuclear policy in Valdai 2023 and that actors such as Karaganov

are out of sync with the Kremlin.¹³⁷ However, by maintaining his distance from the nuclear debate, Putin’s reply did not stem the discussion. It could even be interpreted as an approval of the discussion even though he dismissed the idea of any changes to doctrine or posture. Putin referred to Karaganov and other experts as “people with patriotic attitudes” who have empathy for what is going on and are concerned about the line of contact with Ukraine. “I

understand all this and, take my word for it, we do respect your perspectives. That said, I do not see the need to change our conceptual approaches. The potential adversary knows everything and is aware of what we are capable of,” Putin said.¹³⁸

Nonetheless, what is novel about this discussion is that it has continued even after Putin dismissed Karaganov’s suggestions about the possibility of lowering the nuclear threshold or otherwise changing Russia’s nuclear doctrine. In articles

in January and February 2024, Karaganov again advocated for Moscow to increase its reliance on nuclear deterrence, reiterating the need for “accelerated movement up the escalation ladder” and arguing that Russia needs to resume nuclear testing.¹³⁹

The fact that these discussions have continued despite Putin’s dismissal may hint that some of the

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¹³⁵ Kremlin, “Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting,” [Kremlin.Ru](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72444) (2023), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72444>.

¹³⁶ Kremlin, “Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting.”

¹³⁷ Steven Pifer, “Russia, Nuclear Threats, and Nuclear Signaling,” Brookings, Oct. 13, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-nuclear-threats-and-nuclear-signaling/>.

¹³⁸ Kremlin, “Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting.”

¹³⁹ Sergey Karaganov, “An Age of Wars? Article One” (Век войн? Статья первая), *Russia in Global Affairs*, Jan. 1, 2024, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/an-age-of-wars-article-one/>.

solutions to Russia's nuclear signaling credibility issues that Russian experts have proposed are being discussed within the Kremlin. This would not be surprising considering that other nuclear powers have discussed the role of nuclear weapons and their use while actively participating in conventional conflicts.

Arms control and strategic stability

From 2019 to 2022, Russian civilian experts discussed the future of strategic stability and its viability as a model for the changing world. This discussion was often linked to arms control given the withering state of arms control agreements. These writings often note that trends for reducing tensions between NATO and Russia are in reverse, although risk management mechanisms still exist. Some writings are riddled with questions about the viability of the Cold War model of strategic stability, considering the emergence of new nuclear weapon states as stakeholders.¹⁴⁰

In addition, writings before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine attempt to shed light on a future without arms control agreements or the prospect of new agreements.¹⁴¹ Others attempt to visualize the composition of the Russian strategic forces if New

START were extended or if Russia were to enter a follow-up agreement to New START, noting which systems should not be covered by agreements to assure deterrence.¹⁴² More recent writings suggest that Russia should continue to adhere to the central limits of the treaty beyond 2026 despite the withering of the agreement's verification and inspection aspects.¹⁴³

After February 2022, some experts emphasized the nuclear risks of the Russia-Ukraine war and that arms control treaties should not be leveraged like bargaining chips during a crisis.¹⁴⁴ Others have recommended that Russia should update risk reduction mechanisms and create deconfliction zones in the Baltic and Black Seas while emphasizing possible coercive strategies.¹⁴⁵

One Russian civilian expert in particular, Trenin, commented that Russia is currently revisiting all arms control agreements and even its participation in international organizations and evaluating their contributions to Russia's security. He likens this reevaluation to an audit. Most Russian civilian writings acknowledge the dangers to Russia amid the collapse of agreements and recommend maintaining expert dialogues and expanding links between

¹⁴⁰ Viktor Mizin, "Novye Kontury Strategicheskoy Stabilnosti V Globalnoi Mnogopolyarnoi Konkurentsii," *Mezhdunarodnie Protsessi* 18, no. 2 (2020), pp. 141–168, <https://www.intertrends.ru/jour/article/view/226>.

¹⁴¹ Sergey Poletaev and Dmitry Stefanovich, "Postyadernyy yadernyy mir," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 4, 104 (2020), <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/postyadernyy-yadernyy-mir>; Dmitry Stefanovich, "Vechno segodnyashnie: Ob evoljutsii balansa odnositelnyh voennyh potencialov Rossii i NATO," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Nov. 8, 2021, doi: 10.31278/1810-6439-2021-19-6-61-74, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vechno-segodnyashnie/>; Andrei Kortunov, "Bog bez DRSMd: v dozhdivnyj sezon ne obojtis' bez zontika," *Russia in Global Affairs*, Aug. 2, 2020, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/god-bez-zontika/>; Vasily Kashin, "Rossijskaja yadernaja doktrina: neobhodimaja prozrachnost'," *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 4, 2020, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/rossijskaja-yadernaya-prozrachnost/>.

¹⁴² Vladimir Dvorkin, "O Balanse I Scenariyakh Yadernogo Sderzhivaniya," *Analysis and Forecasting. IMEMO Journal*, no. 2 (2020), https://www.afjournal.ru/index.php?page_id=276.

¹⁴³ Vladimir Orlov, Evgeny Buzhinsky, and Sergey D. Semenov, "Against Compartmentalization" (Против расчлененки), *Kommersant*, 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6427147>; Steven Pifer, Victor Mizin, and Patricia Jaworek, *The Uncertain Future of the New START Treaty*, Deep Cuts, Dec. 2023, <https://deepcuts.org/publications/issue-briefs/issue-brief-the-uncertain-future-of-the-new-start-treaty>.

¹⁴⁴ Andrei Kortunov, *Bomba Dlya Chetyryeh Pryezidentov: Kakyadernaya Ugroza Obostryayet Krizis Vokrug Ukraini*, Russia International Affairs Council, 2022, https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/bomba-dlya-chetyrekh-prezidentov-kak-yadernaya-ugroza-obostryayet-krizis-vokrug-ukrainy/?sphrase_id=94808473.

¹⁴⁵ Vladimir Baranovsky et al., "Avoiding Nuclear War. Problems of Escalation/De-escalation of Armed Conflicts When Approaching the 'Nuclear Threshold'" (Избежать ядерной войны. Проблемы эскалации/деэскалации вооруженных конфликтов при приближении к "ядерному порогу"), *POLIS*, no. 6 (2022): pp. 114–134, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365752258_Izbezat_adernoj_vojny_Problemy_eskalaciideeskalacii_vooruzennyh_konfliktov_pri_priblizhenii_k_adernomu_porog.

expert communities.¹⁴⁶ This acknowledgement is likely a reference to Russia's official position that it does not wish to compartmentalize arms control from the current security environment and intends to develop "a security equation" that considers all aspects of strategic stability.

However, all Russian civilian writings seem to acknowledge that peace in Ukraine could represent the foundation for a new European security architecture and could propel new arms control agreements to solidify the new security equation in Europe. But until then, the future of strategic stability may be entirely based on deterrence. Nonetheless, some believe that the "proxy-conflict of Ukraine" between Russia and the West could provide useful lessons on managing escalation in times of hybrid war.¹⁴⁷

Nuclear posture

Capabilities

NONNUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Some Russian experts expressed support for nuclear modernization as necessary for deterrence. From 2019 to 2022, some writings noted that Russia was taking steps to strengthen its strategic deterrence by rapidly developing conventional high-precision weapons¹⁴⁸ while also contributing to nonnuclear deterrence through its conventional force posture.

In contrast, other experts were skeptical about the notion of Russia relying on nonnuclear deterrence,

Some writings from 2022 stressed that Russia should take nonnuclear deterrence measures, including privately communicating to the West its readiness to conduct conventional precision strikes on offensive weapon supply convoys intended for Ukraine located in NATO member states to cull Western military assistance to Ukraine.

especially strategic conventional systems, to deter a superior adversary (i.e., NATO), while arguing that Russia was simply taking steps toward a "deterrence by denial" strategy.¹⁴⁹ One analyst noted that Russia should respond to the United States by building its own multilayered comprehensive deterrence model based on a deep understanding of the strategic culture of potential adversaries.¹⁵⁰ Strategic nuclear deterrence, he writes, would be only one element of this multilayered model.

Some writings from 2022 stressed that Russia should take nonnuclear deterrence measures, including privately communicating to the West its readiness to conduct conventional precision strikes on offensive weapon supply convoys intended for Ukraine located in NATO member states to cull Western military assistance to Ukraine. This approach is somewhat

¹⁴⁶ Dmitry Trenin, "CFE Did Not Pass The Audit" (ДОВСЕ не прошел аудит), *Kommersant*, 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5986646>.

¹⁴⁷ Dmitry Trenin, "Ukrainski krizis i Yadernoe Oruzhe," *Ekspert Voruzheny*, no. 165 (2022), pp. 41–5.

¹⁴⁸ Viktor Esin, Andrei Kokoshin, and Aleksandr Shlyahurov, "Strategicheskoe sderzhivanie vpolitike nacionalnoi bezopasnosti Rossii," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, no. 40 (2021); Aleksei Fenenko, "Asimmetrichnaya Model Yadernogo Sderzhivaniya," *Analysis and Forecasting. IMEMO Journal*, no. 3 (2021), <https://www.afjournal.ru/files/File/2021-3/FENENKO.pdf>; Mizin, "Novye Kontury Strategicheskoy Stablnosti V Globalnoi Mnogopolyarnoi Konkurentsii."

¹⁴⁹ Alexander Yermakov and Dmitry Stefanovich, "Vozmozhno li neyadernoe sderzhivanie?," Russian Foreign Affairs Council, June 23, 2020, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/vozmozhno-li-neyadernoe-sderzhivanie/>; Aleksei Arbatov, "The Ten Aporias of Our Time. The Theory and Practice of Nuclear Deterrence," *POLIS*, no. 4 (2021), pp. 88–111, doi: 10.17976/jpps/2021.04.08, https://www.politstudies.ru/en/index.php?page_id=453&id=5798&at=a&pid=.

¹⁵⁰ Bartosh, "Sderzhivanie priobretaet razlichnyeottenki."

consistent with previous CNA research on the views of Russian elites. It is similar to the logic behind the concept of deterrence by the threat of force to create fear in an opponent and prevent undesirable results in military-analytical writings.

BELARUS

In spring 2023, the Kremlin announced that it would deploy nonstrategic nuclear weapons to Belarus following numerous requests from Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko. The move prompted commentary about Russia's nuclear policy and posture from the Russian expert community. Arbatov wrote that Russia's decision to position NSNW in Belarus shows a shift in Russia's nuclear doctrine. After all, Russia has maintained that NATO nuclear sharing agreements are contrary to the NPT, and transporting warheads to Belarus implies that Russia has widened the scope of its nuclear doctrine.¹⁵¹

His article implies that the move may also contribute to a change in posture because stationing nonstrategic nuclear weapons closer to NATO territory would make Russia vulnerable to strikes by precision guided weapons. The facilities that store these weapons would be tempting targets for preemption, increasing the danger of a clash. Concurrently, the move could also be seen as an effort to boost the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. He also mentions that Putin has spoken of the Russia-Ukraine war in existential terms.¹⁵²

Ironically, Karaganov would later agree in a 2024 article that the deployment of dual-capable delivery systems in Belarus constitutes a change to Russia's nuclear doctrine and posture, but he would disagree with Arbatov on what the deployment means for Russia's nuclear doctrine.¹⁵³ However, this article

is beyond the scope of this study. Another expert expressed hesitation about what the deployment of limited numbers of NSNW to Belarus by Russia might mean other than a visceral signal of a nuclear umbrella. He also questioned how this move along with NATO nuclear sharing agreements would contribute to greater stability in Europe.

Overall, Russian experts who have publicly commented about Russia's announcement to station NSNWs in Belarus agree that it constitutes a shift in Russia's nuclear doctrine and, in turn, its nuclear posture; however, they are unsure about what the deployment means for military planning. After all, Kaliningrad hosts various dual-capable missile systems and is home to a nuclear weapons storage facility.

Employment plans

The expert community briefly discussed the possibility of limited nuclear use in the war in Ukraine against a NATO country during the debate instigated by Karaganov. However, this discussion initially focused on the possibility of a change to Russia's declaratory policy to reflect a preemptive strike. In his June 2023 article, Karaganov argued that if the West refuses to cut off support to Ukraine, Russia should carry out this limited strike and call Washington's bluff on its collective defense commitments. If Western leaders still refuse to back down, Russia should "hit a bunch of targets in a number of countries" (i.e., continue to escalate).

The costs, Karaganov argued, would be limited and worth paying. If Russia implemented an aggressive nuclear doctrine of "intimidation and deterrence and even use of nuclear weapons," the risk of

¹⁵¹ Aleksei Arbatov, "Nuclear Metamorphoses," *POLIS*, no. 5 (2023), pp. 7–28, doi: 10.17976/jpps/2023.05.02, https://www.politstudies.ru/en/index.php?page_id=453&id=6060&at=a&pid=

¹⁵² Arbatov, "Nuclear Metamorphoses," pp. 7–28.

¹⁵³ Sergey Karaganov, "The Age of War? Part 2: What Is to Be Done?" (Век войн? Статья вторая. Что делать), *Russia in Global Affairs*, Feb. 21, 2024, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vek-vojn-cto-delat/>.

nuclear retaliation to a limited Russian nuclear strike would be “reduced to an absolute minimum.” He acknowledged that Russia would likely face reputational costs with China, India, and other states for using nuclear weapons, but he maintained that they would eventually forgive Russia for breaking the nuclear taboo. Still, even if Russia was ultimately never forgiven, lowering Russia’s nuclear threshold and carrying out a preemptive strike would be justified because it would advance Russia’s strategic interests. Then, Russia would achieve its strategic aims without risking broader nuclear war. Finally, he argues that Russia must force all of Ukraine to surrender, completely demilitarize it, and transform it into a buffer state friendly to Moscow.

In addition, he stated that the notion that NATO would respond to Russia’s limited nuclear use in Europe is not credible. In general, the debate revealed that numerous Russian civilian experts did not find the notion that the United States would risk nuclear war over a limited strike on a NATO country in the eastern flank credible. Other civilian experts disagreed.¹⁵⁴

Those against Karaganov’s policy proposal outright rejected the possibility of nuclear use and argued that these public discussions about Russia using a nuclear weapon were part of a Western information campaign to put psychological pressure on Russian officials. They also underscored that there was no guarantee that NATO would not retaliate by launching a conventional strike or by entering the Russia-Ukraine war if Russia were to conduct nuclear strikes on one or more military facilities in Poland

that supply Ukraine.¹⁵⁵ For instance, Ivan Timofeev pointed out that if this were to happen, then Russia would face the more difficult choice of whether to lose the war outright or to deliver more and larger nuclear strikes, which would risk a full-scale nuclear exchange. Meanwhile, Arbatov, Konstantin Bogdanov, and Dmitry Stefanovich emphasized that in the wake of Russian nuclear use, NATO would likely begin with a massive precision conventional weapons attack against the Russian military and infrastructure on land and at sea. These strikes would also cause damage near major Russian cities and would make any ceasefire or peaceful settlement of the conflict harder to achieve as escalation ensues.¹⁵⁶

Some Russian civilian experts highlighted the humanitarian costs and effect on the world economy that would result from Russia carrying out a limited nuclear strike, and the reputational cost Russia would suffer. Interestingly, even analysts who directly disagreed with Karaganov agreed that Russian efforts to change the Western calculus with threats have failed.¹⁵⁷ Yet these Russian civilian writings often posit that nuclear weapons cannot resolve all of Russia’s problems and reiterate that the role of nuclear weapons is deterrence. This perspective is the opposite of Karaganov’s argument, since he believes that Russia should update its nuclear doctrine to state that nuclear weapons can play a role in the termination of a local conflict to deter a large-scale war. Nonetheless, Karaganov’s views (like those of some Russian officials regarding the level of war they perceive the Russia-Ukraine war to be in) are ambiguous because they often highlight that the US and NATO are directly involved in the conflict.

¹⁵⁴ Ilya S. Fabrichnikov, “Demonstrative Restraint as a Recipe Against Unnecessary Decisions,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 16, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/demonstrative-restraint/>; Konstantin Bogdanov, Aleksei Arbatov, and Dmitry Stefanovich, “Nuclear War: A Poor Solution to Problems” (“Yadernaja vojna — plohoe sredstvo resheniya problem”), *Kommersant*, 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6055340>.

¹⁵⁵ Ivan N. Timofeev, “A Preemptive Nuclear Strike? No!,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 20, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/a-preemptive-nuclear-strike-no/>.

¹⁵⁶ Bogdanov, Arbatov, and Stefanovich, “Nuclear War: A Poor Solution to Problems” (“Yadernaja vojna — plohoe sredstvo resheniya problem”).

¹⁵⁷ Fyodor A. Lukyanov, “Why We Won’t Be Able to ‘Sober Up the West’ with a Nuclear Bomb,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 26, 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/sober-up-the-west/>.

Thus, these views hint that the conflict is perceived to possess some of the characteristics of a regional war. According to these groups, Russia is at war with the West but is carrying out a special military operation in Ukraine.

In his rebuttal piece in the fall of 2023, Karaganov argued that Russia should lower the nuclear threshold in its doctrine and cautiously but decisively move up what he calls the “deterrence-escalation ladder.” He does not lay out what this “deterrence-escalation ladder” entails; rather, he inconsistently prescribes a set of nonverbal measures, including conducting “a demo-nuclear explosion” after a complete withdrawal from the CTBT and retaliation

against the territories of US allies and, if necessary, US bases abroad as part of a “nuclear containment-deterrence-awakening” in response to the West’s aggressive policy toward Russia.

C2 arrangements

C2 arrangements were not explicitly discussed in the dataset, but they were implicitly discussed in writings about the return of nonstrategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems to Belarus. Putin has stated that any weapons deployed to Belarus will remain under Moscow’s control. However, dual-capable delivery systems are not part of this arrangement.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ William Alberque, “Nuclear Weapons in Belarus: History Repeats Itself,” *Russia Matters* (2023), <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/nuclear-weapons-belarus-history-repeats-itself>.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This section seeks to synthesize the official, civilian, and military perspectives presented in the previous three sections. It reviews three key themes identified in these sources and then describes potential indicators to track in the future. It is important to note that the sample analyzed is constrained from 2022 to late 2023. However, the analysis in the sections presenting the civilian and military perspectives draws from empirical data from several years before the war to identify shifts in perspectives. These two sections also include select articles from January to March 2024.

Summary of key themes

Consensus on mixed success of nuclear threats

The Russian official, civilian, and military communities generally agree that Russia's nuclear signaling in the context of the war in Ukraine has not achieved its desired goals, but their opinions diverge on the reasons for these limits of nuclear deterrence.

Russian officials have argued that nuclear weapons have been effective in forestalling a direct Western military intervention and assuring Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The threats focused on compelling the West to cease arms transfers or to avoid transferring certain capabilities to Ukraine have been less successful. Some officials are concerned that Russian threats regarding military assistance to Ukraine are not understood or potentially not perceived as credible by the West.

Attitudes are similar across the civilian expert community, whose members continue to debate the reasons behind the lack of credibility of Russian nuclear threats and ways to address the credibility gap. Some experts maintain that Russia has not

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been tough enough in terms of nuclear rhetoric and actions targeted at adversaries. Others maintain that threats with nuclear weapons are intrinsically limited and that not all of Russia's misgivings can be solved by nuclear deterrence.

Military-analytical writings present similar themes. Some argue that the challenge is that Western elites no longer fear nuclear weapons and are trying to provoke Russia into escalation, but these authors also hint at their frustration with the content and execution of the messaging. Others maintain that nuclear weapons continue to retain their psychological deterrence value, particularly for deterring large-scale war between nuclear powers, but the broader issue is that strategic deterrence as a concept is evolving given the growing role of its informational component.

Limited nuclear employment is divisive

Russian official nuclear rhetoric has fluctuated over time. Russian leaders sometimes issue threats that leave something to chance while invoking Russia's nuclear and other strategic capabilities; other times, they make threats to trigger an international reaction

and then explicitly disavow the prospect of nuclear use. Among Russian officials, only Medvedev has explicitly discussed limited employment in Ukraine, arguing that it would not elicit a Western response. Whether his view is more widely shared is unclear. However, Russian officials have expressed concern that this discussion feeds into Western narratives about Russia being aggressive and irresponsible with nuclear weapons. Putin has instead focused on vague verbal gestures, including raising the possibility of restarting nuclear testing.

The issue of limited nuclear employment in the context of the war in Ukraine is seriously debated only among civilian experts, and even in that context, it generates significant disagreement. Some have argued that such employment, including on targets in NATO countries, to terminate the war or to improve the credibility of Russian nuclear deterrence would not result in a NATO response and would therefore entail manageable and acceptable reputational costs. Others have countered that any use would trigger uncontrolled nuclear escalation that would be disastrous for Russia.

In the authoritative military-analytical literature we examined, we found no explicit calls for limited nuclear employment, although we found some references to nuclear employment more broadly. The reason for this absence is likely that this issue is considered highly provocative, and Russian military analysts may believe that any writings could be interpreted

as signaling. Authoritative military articles instead focus on the much broader policy and posture issues discussed in the following subsections.

Debates about continuity and change in policy and posture

Both the civilian expert and military-analytical communities have debated ways to change Russian nuclear policy and posture to improve its deterrent credibility. Against the backdrop of these debates, Russia's actual policy and posture have been evolving, including through the announcement of the deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus and the suspension of arms control agreements. These two components of change do not appear to have been openly advocated for by those in the military-analytical community.

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Across the civilian expert community, some have advocated for the need to update Russia's nuclear doctrine to reflect the possibility of preemption. Putin explicitly addressed this view by arguing that Russia's nuclear doctrine remains credible and does not require a change, even though he previously publicly flirted with the possibility of transitioning to nuclear preemption. Others in the expert community have similarly defended the existing doctrine, noting that Russia has other military capabilities (including nonnuclear ones) in its escalation management toolkit and advocating for more explicit communication between threats and consequences in declaratory policy. Still others

have explicitly advocated for conventional force reconstitution and nuclear modernization.

The military-analytical community has made numerous arguments about ways to improve Russia's declaratory policy (including more explicit doctrinal language) and its efforts to signal with nuclear weapons, particularly regarding Russia's strategic nuclear weapons and its attempts to outline new roles for these weapons in the Russian system of strategic operations. At the same time, however, it appears that those closely advising the General Staff regarding the evolution of strategic deterrence remain committed to a strategic deterrence system that retains escalation management and operational employment roles for strategic nonnuclear capabilities alongside nuclear weapons.

We found no explicit calls for Russia to conduct a nuclear strike on Ukrainian territory from those in the military-analytical community or from Russian civilian experts, which suggests cohesion with a vision of Russia achieving its intended goals with nonnuclear weapons in a local conflict. Most, if not all, of the debate centers on a possible nuclear strike on NATO territory. Among Russian officials, however, only Medvedev noted in September 2022 that Russia could carry out a limited nuclear strike in Ukraine if it became necessary. Medvedev also often raised the specter of nuclear conflict over Ukraine by linking it to a condition (e.g., Ukrainian attacks on Russian missile launch sites, a successful Ukrainian

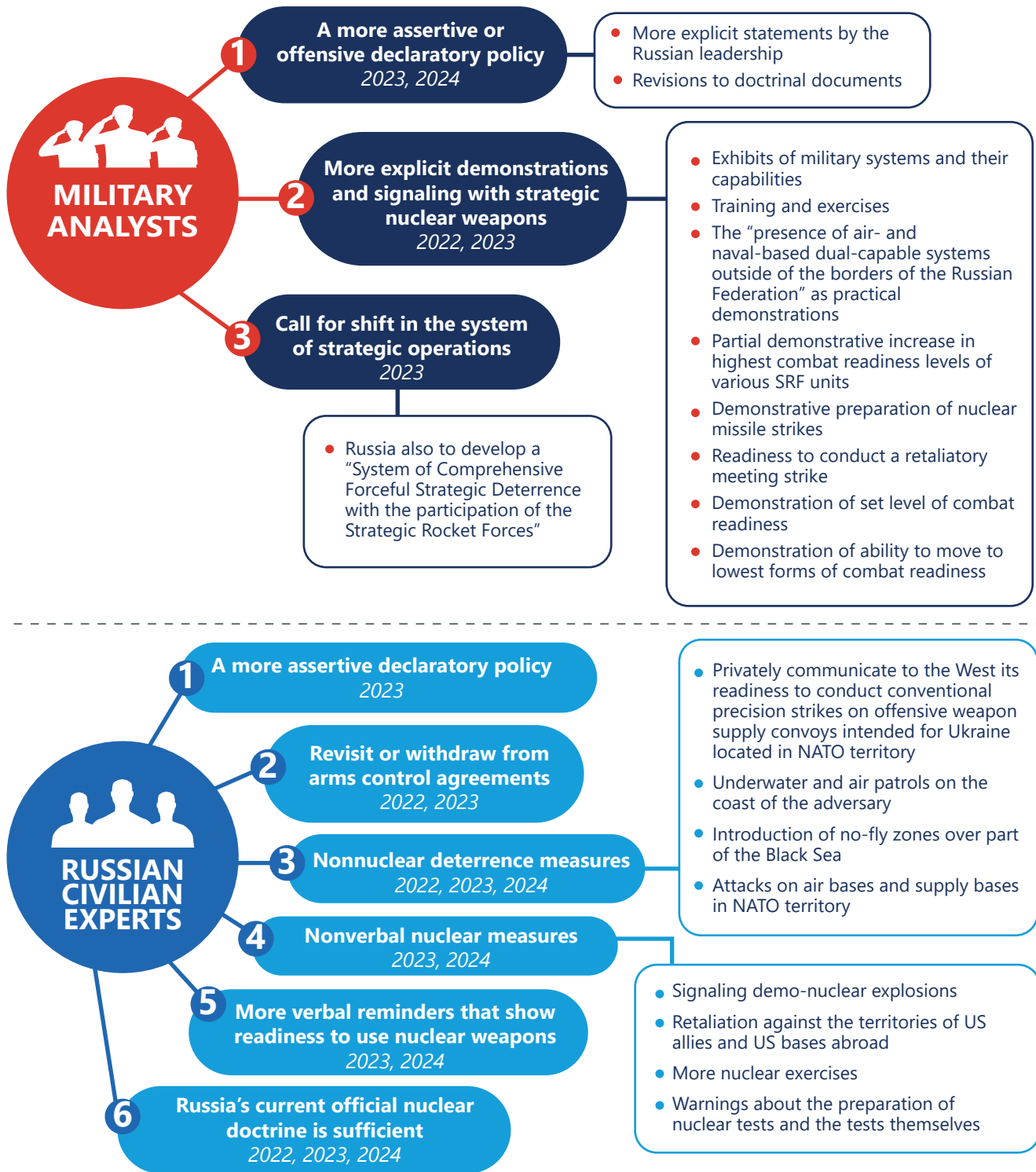
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spring counteroffensive). Moreover, his role as a spokesperson for Russia's official policy is unclear.

Of note, neither Russian officials nor civilian experts appear to have called for a quantitative increase in Russia's SNF. Instead, officials have opted to heavily emphasize modernization of the force, particularly highlighting the progress of Russia's new strategic weapons. However, those associated with the Strategic Rocket Forces have pointed to the possible need to assure and potentially even increase the procurement of Strategic Rocket Forces' capabilities as well as evolve employment plans. Those associated with the General Staff, however, have pointed to the need for a more balanced approach to the overall force (see Figure 2 for an overview of these military and civil positions).

Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears

Figure 2. What measures do stakeholder communities propose for Russia to restore its signaling credibility?



Note: These are prominent but not consensus positions by these two stakeholder communities.

Source: CNA.

Tracking the discussions

This study sought to capture a snapshot of discussions across the official, civilian, and military perspectives about the role of nuclear weapons during the war in Ukraine. It is an unfinished mosaic of perspectives. As the war proceeds, these discussions are likely to continue, and it remains imperative for Western military analysts to look closely at all three sources to develop a more comprehensive picture of the evolution of Russian policy and posture. Table 3 (on the next page) offers a summary of the discussions so far and highlights potential ways to track the issue in the future.

Implications for the US and allied forces

In planning for major contingencies, US and allied forces must consider an adversary's possible strategy for deterrence, escalation management, or war termination; otherwise, NATO members might be vulnerable to manipulation, unwanted conflict, and coercion. Although this study cannot provide a precise linear evolution of ideas across the three stakeholder communities, it provides a snapshot of ongoing intersecting discussions between Russian elites, giving a more accurate description of the context behind Russian nuclear policy-making.

Understanding these intersections and the commonalities between the three stakeholder groups can provide critical insight to counter the possible Russian stratagems, especially considering that the three stakeholder communities have repeatedly assessed that the United States is trying to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia. This section will neither pretend nor intend to suggest what capabilities and investments US planners could prioritize to alter the Kremlin's strategic calculus, but it provides a baseline for subsequent research efforts, especially considering that nearly all the

debates in the respective stakeholder communities center on countering NATO rather than Ukraine itself. However, this study can offer a glimpse of the evolution of Russian threat perception and planning that NATO allies may have to contend with as the war progresses.

This study finds that all stakeholder communities advocate that Russia should take a set of nonverbal measures to restore the credibility behind its nuclear signaling, including a more assertive declaratory policy and more explicit demonstrations with its nuclear weapons to shape Western decision-making. Given contemporary events since the findings of this study, including recent Russian-Belarusian nuclear exercises with nonstrategic weapons, depending on the trajectory of the war in Ukraine, the United States is likely to deal with a Russia that deals in more explicit nuclear signaling and links its actions to the West's aggressive actions, especially if Ukraine engages in strikes on Russian territory that Russian leaders perceive as unacceptable.

Until now, the boldest shift in Russian nuclear policy and posture has been the introduction of nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Belarus, and it does not appear to have been advocated by any stakeholder community. While the move or preparations for the move may not be seen as a reason for NATO members to reconsider its corresponding setup, it can be seen as a symbol of a more assertive Russia in terms of nuclear gestures. Regardless, the US and its allies might feel as if they need to respond to the move politically and consider new nuclear sharing agreements as the Kremlin intensifies its signaling.¹⁵⁹

In addition, NATO members may be forced to consider the future of limiting the proliferation of missiles and missile technology and the multilateral efforts involving the subject given the delivery of the dual-capable Iskander-M at the behest of Lukashenko. Historically, Russia has provided its allies including Armenia with the Iskander-E version of the

¹⁵⁹ Sokov, "Russia is Deploying Nuclear Weapons in Belarus. NATO Shouldn't Take the Bait."

Table 3. Summary of debates about Russia’s nuclear policy and posture

Component/Definition	Status	Tracking the Issue
<p>Declaratory nuclear policy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalized public doctrinal statement about the role of nuclear weapons and their intended use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussions so far have focused on the revision of doctrinal documents to reflect the possibility of nuclear preemption or a more assertive declaratory policy that clearly and credibly communicates threats and consequences and involves more explicit signaling with strategic nuclear weapons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Release of formal doctrinal documents with new language on nuclear weapons or the whole of strategic deterrence capabilities Putin’s statements explicitly discussing doctrinal changes General Staff statements or articles explicitly discussing evolution of nuclear policy
<p>Nuclear posture: Capabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Types and numbers of weapons Where these weapons are deployed Force-shaping criteria or limits on weapons, if any 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite a stated commitment to modernization, there seems to be a concern among those in the Strategic Rocket Forces about the potential deprioritization of nuclear weapons in defense budgets Proposals about the development of new capabilities and force groupings to support operations in a changing threat environment without arms control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcements about and development and deployment of capabilities; nuclear exercises Announcement of commitment to arms control limits Official statements and authoritative military articles discussing changes to force-shaping criteria
<p>Nuclear posture: Employment plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Situations in which these weapons would be used How these weapons would be used in operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some expert discussions of the possibility of limited nuclear use in the war in Ukraine and a more extensive debate about preemption Military-analytical community proposals about greater clarity in and newer roles for strategic nuclear weapons in emerging strategic operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official announcements about changes to employment plans Authoritative military articles discussing the evolution of the strategic operations system or proposing changes to current employment system
<p>Nuclear posture: NC2 arrangements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civilian/military relations in NC2 arrangements Degree of pre-delegation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No explicit discussion of this issue, but issue implicitly raised in the context of the potential “nuclear sharing” arrangement with Belarus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official announcements of changes in NC2 arrangements Tracking of changes to warhead locations and handing arrangements

Source: CNA.

system, which is designed to meet the guidelines of the Missile Technology Control Regime.¹⁶⁰ NATO members might also need to consider in which ways the alliance might engage or disengage with Belarus on nonproliferation efforts, especially considering the Kremlin's de-ratification of the CTBT and its suspension of New START. The latter hints at an intransigent Russia that is less willing to cooperate in the establishment of nuclear norms as it continues to attack Ukraine.

For the time being, the US and its allies could perhaps focus on safeguarding the practice and knowledge regarding verification and inspections until better times emerge. Russians seem to believe that because the outcome of the war will be the basis for a new security architecture, any arms control deals will only be reinforcing the aftermath of the invasion. Despite the Kremlin's insistence on a "security equation," meaning a comprehensive remake of the security architecture before returning to any arms control talks,¹⁶¹ both military planners and most Russian civilian experts acknowledge the benefits of arms control. However, even though military planners do not appear to be for or against arms control, they do acknowledge the role of arms control in alleviating pressure on budgets as some Russian civilian experts advocate for continuing to observe the central limits of New START.

The US and its allies should brace themselves for more Russian strategic gestures and occasional unpredictability. Allied forces should conduct a clear-eyed assessment of how their coordinated response can contribute to improved deterrence against a Russian attack against the alliance, or a possible nuclear employment. To achieve better coordination, the US and allies should continue to conduct exercises based on possible Russian escalation pathways to achieve a better understanding of ally

dynamics and develop ways to counter specific escalation management pathways.

Throughout the war, the United States has taken an incremental approach to providing military assistance to Ukraine. Russian stakeholders examined in this report have wrestled with the loss of credibility of Russian nuclear threats and posited that Russia needs to restore its coercive reputation. This report shed light on the possible follow-on escalation management steps that Russia could take.

It is important to note that some of the approaches Russian analysts propose could have unintended consequences. Because of this, the US, and its allies should not dismiss Russia's nuclear signaling and must show prudent judgement when it comes to the limits of Russian strategic deterrence. The US and its allies must continue to credibly communicate the costs of any escalation management steps that Russia might take. As a result, the United States and allied forces should continue to track the movement of Russia's nuclear forces and invest in research to further understand Russia's strategic culture. Since the completion of this report, Moscow has begun to publicly flirt with the idea of updating Russia's public nuclear doctrine. In their writings, military analysts and Russian civilian officials have provided Moscow with a menu of actions that Russia could take to strengthen its coercive reputation, yet very few of them wrestle with the with the credibility of their objectives.

For the foreseeable future, the US and its allies will be forced to contend with the possible range of actions that Moscow might take to build up its coercive reputation. Furthermore, only Russia's force structure, signaling, and shifts in rhetoric can help validate the logic behind the proposals from stakeholder communities. But understanding the logic behind the proposals from each community can

¹⁶⁰ "The Credibility and implications of Russia's Missile and Nuclear Proposal to Belarus."

¹⁶¹ Pavel Podvig, "Restoring Russian-U.S. Arms Control," *Arms Control Today*, May 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-05/features/restoring-russian-us-arms-control>.

also provide policy-makers with an understanding of Moscow's own nuclear strategy.

In conclusion, the writings we examined offer a beneficial glimpse of some lessons Moscow is learning from its experience in Ukraine. Although we cannot predict the Kremlin's future decisions,

understanding commonalities in how stakeholders discuss these issues may help us identify precludes to formal changes in Russia's nuclear policy and posture. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the debates discussed in this report are not static; they are fluid, ongoing, and subject to change.

APPENDIX: KEY CONCEPTS

Some concepts from past CNA work are relevant for understanding Russia’s approaches to escalation management.¹⁶² In abstract terms, Russia’s escalation management decision-making framework can be explained in three steps. First, the relevant authorities determine the phase of the conflict and likelihood of escalation. Second, the authorities determine

escalation management steps. Third, they determine whether conditions for nuclear employment have been met and further steps to take. Russian military doctrine defines the following levels of conflict (Table 4):

Table 4. Conflict phases and types in Russian military doctrine

Conflict Phase/Type	Description
Military danger	State of interstate or intrastate relations, characterized by the correlation of factors that could under certain conditions lead to the appearance of a military threat.
Military threat	State of interstate or intrastate relations, characterized by the real possibility of an appearance of military conflict between opposing sides, as well as a high degree of readiness of any state (or group of states) or separatist (terrorist) organizations to use military force (armed violence).
Armed conflict	Armed conflict of a limited scale between states (international armed conflict) or between opposing sides in the territory of one state (internal armed conflict).
Local war	War in which limited political-military goals are pursued, military actions are conducted within the borders of combating states, and the interests (e.g., territorial, economic, political) of just these states are primarily affected.
Regional war	War with the participation of several states from one region, led by national or coalition armed forces, during which the sides pursue important military-political goals.
Large-scale war	War between coalitions of states or the largest states of the global society, in which the sides pursue radical political-military goals. Large-scale war could be the result of escalation of an armed conflict, local, or regional war involving a significant number of states from various regions of the world. This war would demand mobilization of all available material resources and spiritual forces of the participant states.

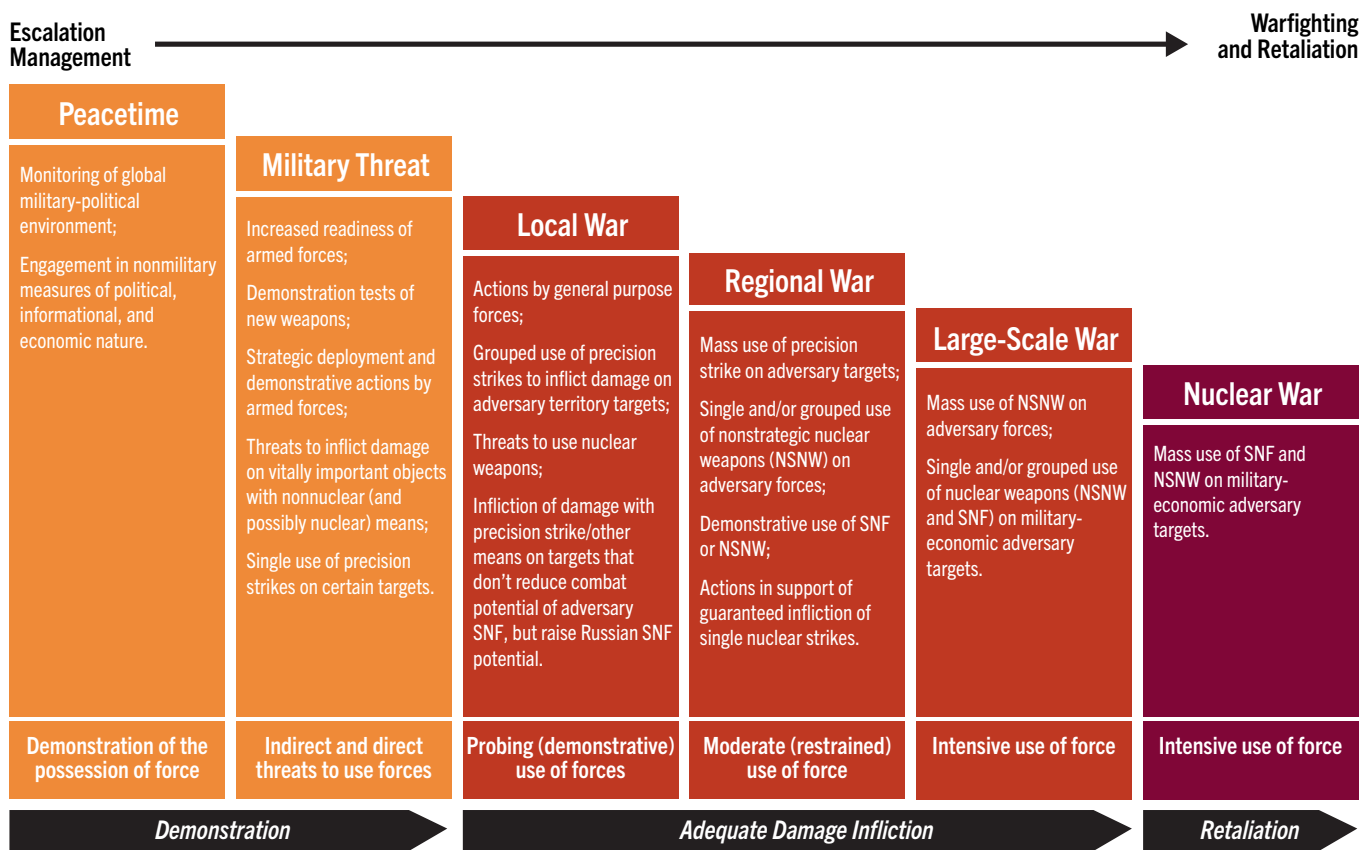
Source: *Russian Federation Military Doctrine* (Военная доктрина Российской Федерации), printed in *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, Dec. 30, 2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>.

¹⁶² Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*.

Depending on the level of the conflict, political-military leadership can choose to take a set of appropriate measures. Conceptually, these measures could begin with indirect threats and demonstrations of force, eventually transitioning to direct threats and use of force with conventional means in a local war. Then, these measures could potentially transition to nuclear threats, the limited

employment of nonstrategic nuclear weapons in a regional war, and eventually more extensive nuclear employment in a large-scale war. Figure 3 shows a notional escalation management framework developed by Russian military thinkers. This framework presents just one example of options that military planners could give to political leadership.

Figure 3. Potential Russian approaches to escalation management



Source: Kofman, Fink, and Edmonds, *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts*.

ABBREVIATIONS

CTBT	Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
IMEMO	The Institute of World Economy and International Relations
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOD	Russian Ministry of Defense
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NC2	nuclear command and control
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
NSNW	nonstrategic nuclear weapons
SNF	strategic nuclear forces
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

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