

The U.S. and Its Allies Must Understand and Respond to Russia's Nuclear Threats

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Putin's martyr complex risks emboldening Russia to consider the use of nuclear and chemical weapons in the Ukraine war.

Russia redefined justifications for nuclear weapons use in 2020, elevating concerns that hysterical Russian rhetoric may result in the use of nuclear weapons.

The U.S. and its allies must monitor Russian nuclear activity and deter Putin from using chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.

Since February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine for the second time, Russia's nuclear threats have been stark and consistent. If the war continues, Russia says, Ukraine and the West risk escalation to nuclear conflict. The Russian state, Putin and other Russian leaders argue, faces an existential threat. In October, the Russian government released pictures of President Putin overseeing a training launch of both ballistic and cruise missiles as a part of a major nuclear response.

In November, *The New York Times* reported that Russia's generals have discussed the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons.¹ Russian military doctrine, combined with Russian practice, statements from the nation's political leaders, and informed Western commentary, can shed light on the seriousness of the threat of Russian use of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons.

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Russian doctrine has long accepted the use of shorter-range tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield, and it is much more cautious about long-range strategic nuclear weapons designed to hit the enemy's homeland. Since 2010, however, Russia has increasingly portrayed the West as an enemy and appears to now accept tactical *and* strategic nuclear weapons as an option for deterring further escalation of combat.

Neither should the West ignore the potential risks of chemical weapons use, considering that Russia appears to be fighting the war in Ukraine by the playbook it used in Syria. The West's failure to invest in understanding Russian strategic culture increases the dangers, while the Kremlin's language of existential threat raises the chances of a Russian nuclear launch, caused by a breakdown in the Russian chain of command or a misinterpretation of Putin's wishes.

The Russian nuclear challenge is not the only one facing the U.S. and its allies: In the near future, the U.S. will face a three-party dynamic of nuclear peers (China, Russia, and the U.S.). The strategic breakout by Chinese nuclear forces is serious.² The U.S. cannot ignore these threats. But it must, together with its allies, also minimize the risks emanating from Russia.

As the world's leading power, the U.S. has the most to lose from any loosening of the limits on the use of weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons. It is therefore very much in the interests of the United States to deter the use of nuclear weapons, because the more those weapons are used and the more such use is deemed acceptable, the more likely the U.S. is to be targeted by the one kind of weapon that could immediately do fundamental damage to it.

The U.S. must ensure that any use of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia is met by a highly robust Western and global response that is calibrated, conventional, and informed by an understanding of Russian behaviour and thinking. Russian use of nuclear weapons may be unlikely, but it is certainly not impossible, and the best way of lowering the chance of such use is to take Russian threats at face value, to engineer scenarios backwards, and to figure out how to prevent their use.

What Does Russian Military Doctrine Say?

Russia's most recent full military doctrine dates from 2014. Russia reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in two circumstances: (1) in response to their use by others and (2) when the existence of the Russian Federation is threatened.

But a doctrinal paper released in 2020 titled, "State Principles in the Sphere of Nuclear Deterrence," listed *four* circumstances that justify nuclear

weapons use. The first is an imminent attack on Russia—in other words, pre-empting a pre-emptive strike. The second, as in the 2014 statement, is use against Russia. The third is a threat, such as a cyberattack on Russia’s command-and-control systems, that would inhibit Russia’s control of its nuclear weapons, while the fourth, as in 2014, is an existential threat to Russia from conventional or nuclear weapons. Between 2015 and 2020, Russia thus *publicly* widened the doctrinal grounds for its use of nuclear weapons.

A complicating factor in interpreting Russian doctrine is the extent to which that doctrine is itself being *re*-interpreted by Russia’s leadership. At an October 2022 press conference, Putin, citing the 2014 doctrine, said that Russia could use weapons of mass destruction “to protect its sovereignty, territorial integrity and to ensure the safety of the Russian people.”³ This is an evolution, and apparently a significant expansion, of the idea that Russia could use nuclear weapons if Russia faced an acute existential threat.

For the Kremlin, nuclear weapons arguably provide a kind of comfort blanket. Paragraph 16 of the 2015 doctrine highlights Russia’s actual (and apparently psychological) dependence on the possession of these weapons and their centrality in protecting Russia. Nuclear weapons are, the doctrine suggests, an “important factor in preventing the outbreak of nuclear war and major conventional wars.”⁴ The implication is that, at worst, it is only the possession of nuclear weapons that prevent Russia from being attacked, while at a minimum, Russia inhabits a harsh, Manichean world.

Because of its doctrine, Russia is more likely than the West to employ tactical nuclear weapons. Russia has between 1,000 and 2,000 of these weapons of varying sizes. Soviet-era military planning documents, which were left behind in East Germany and became public after the Cold War, showed that the Soviets were far readier to using nuclear weapons than the West had believed. In *The Russian Way of War*, Lester Grau and Charles Bartles observe that “the Russians still plan and practice for surviving and conducting tactical nuclear battle.”⁵ So, for example, while the use of nuclear weapons is the culminating point in Western military exercises, in Russia the use of tactical nuclear weapons can take place early in the exercise or at mid-point.

Evidence from both the Syrian war and the Ukraine conflict also shows that the Russian regime has a much higher tolerance threshold than the West for military and civilian casualties. Indeed, as Russia seeks to attack Ukrainian morale, it becomes more likely, not less, that Russia will use nuclear and chemical weapons, given Russia’s success in creating mass panic and mass refugee flows in Syria through its close collaboration with the Assad regime.

Russia has failed to defeat the Ukrainian military and is now focusing on forcing the capitulation of the civilian population by attacking electricity and water supplies. It is therefore plausible that Russia will not only threaten to use, but actually use, a weapon of mass destruction to target civilian resistance in Ukraine. Russia is focusing on destroying Ukraine's power infrastructure, and with the nuclear industry now producing around 60 percent of pre-war power, a Russian attack on nuclear power stations to cut off electricity and create an improvised nuclear incident is a real prospect.

Does Russian Doctrine See the West as the Enemy?

In the last years of the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, a debate raged in Russian military circles about the nature of the threats to Russia. The outcome of this debate, accepted by Putin, was a victory for hard-line Soviet/traditionalist factions that “began with a presumption of conflict and Russia's isolation.”⁶ Russian doctrine that has been published in recent years, and especially after 2010, builds on this confrontational viewpoint.

All the major articulations of Russian doctrine—which are, after all, based on official Russian beliefs—are characterized by belief in increased global competition and tension. Russia sees the West as being too ready to use force to solve international problems,⁷ as destabilizing the world by developing new weapons systems,⁸ and as threatening Russia's national security by building up forces on its borders,⁹ while Russia condemns what it sees as the West's reckless policies in Ukraine.¹⁰ Russian doctrine portrays Russia as a purely defensive actor.¹¹

Russia believes that its independent foreign policy and its freedom of action are being stifled by the Western alliance, which is trying to contain Russia by using military and non-military means,¹² including an “entire spectrum” of political, financial and economic, and information tools, backed by “special services.”¹³ In addition, in the sphere of information and cultural conflict, Russia believes that the West is trying to erode its spiritual and moral values,¹⁴ manipulate the Russian consciousness, and falsify Russia's Soviet history.¹⁵

Russian doctrine is clear: Russia believes that it is in a global struggle with the West, a struggle that encompasses its political culture, language, and territory. The Kremlin believes that the West is fighting proxy wars, not in Africa or Asia as they were in the Cold War, but in Ukraine¹⁶ and other states that neighbor Russia, as well as via the Internet for the hearts and minds of Russian citizens. Russian doctrine presents a Russian state with leaders who see themselves as in conflict with the West.

It could be argued that the West has not worked hard enough to head off this new era of antagonism, but the reality is that both the U.S. and the U.K. have

tried to reset their relations with Russia. These resets have failed to reverse the settled Russian view of the world, which sees the West as a dangerous rival.

Has the Threshold for Nuclear Weapon Use Become Lower Since the Cold War?

The Soviets had a lower threshold for the use of nuclear weapons than the West, but it is not clear if today's Russia has an even lower threshold than did the Soviets.

In all likelihood, Russia's threshold for use was even lower in the late 1990s and early 2000s than it is today. The chaotic Russian state then feared Western intervention, either in disputed regions of Russia such as Chechnya, or in a neighboring state, such as Georgia. This fear was heightened by Georgia's desire to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the interventionist policies of President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair, and NATO's strikes in 1999 on Serbia during the Yugoslav wars. The latter event in particular sent shock waves through the Russian political classes in a way that few Westerners understood. Serbia was Russia's closest ally outside the former Soviet states. The Western attack on Serbia was a game-changer for Russia.

Moreover, although Russia had developed its own generation of conventional cruise missiles in the mid-1990s, it lagged behind the West's long-range cruise-missile technology and felt vulnerable to an overwhelming attack with conventional, precision strikes. Had the West decided to attack Russia in those years—however far-fetched that scenario would have sounded to Western ears—Russia would not have had an adequate, conventional response. So, Russia accepted that it would have to fall back on either tactical or strategic nuclear weapons.

Since the mid-1990s, Russia has developed indigenous cruise-missile technology and used these weapons extensively in Syria. It is arguably significantly less reliant on nuclear weapons now because it has a broader range of more powerful conventional tools.¹⁷ But that fact can be read another way: If those do not deliver the necessary results on the battlefield, escalation to nuclear weapons remains an option. This is the situation in Ukraine today.

Would Russia Escalate to the Nuclear Level to De-Escalate a Conventional Conflict?

There is very little in either the 2015 doctrine or the 2020 "State Principles in the Sphere of Nuclear Deterrence" to confirm the theory that Russia

plans to use nuclear weapons to de-escalate a conventional war. But other Russian military thinking does contain examples of this kind of thinking.

In a 1999 article in the Russian Ministry of Defense's in-house journal, *Voennaya Mysl (Military Thought)*, three senior military officers outlined a six-stage theory for using nuclear weapons to de-escalate a crisis. An initial "demonstration strike" is described as a single strike over water, such as the Black Sea. Stage two targets a sparsely populated location. Stage three is a "deterrence-demonstration" to strike a specific site, such as a transport hub. Stage four is an "intimidation" strike to target groups of forces and eliminate the advantage of an enemy breakthrough (such as Ukraine has recently achieved). The theory culminates in stages 5 and 6, with multiple tactical nuclear strikes throughout an entire theater of operations. (In the case of the current conflict, the theater of operations would likely be defined as southern and eastern Ukraine.)

Other Russian sources also refer occasionally to concepts of escalation management. In 2009, the commander of the Russian Strategic Missile Forces argued that, in a conventional war, Russia's ballistic-missile force would ensure that an opponent was forced to cease hostilities by using either single or multiple strikes, thereby effectively using Russia's strategic nuclear force as a tool to force de-escalation.¹⁸ While this argument is not part of Russian doctrine, it does reveal that senior echelons of the Russian strategic missile command think in these terms.

The Congressional Research Service (CRS) suggests that "escalation management" is a better term than "escalate to de-escalate" to describe Russia's layered threat response. The CRS describes an escalation process in which damage "would be applied progressively and in doses to demonstrate the potential for further punishment and provide incentives for settlement." Accordingly, it argued that military doctrine appears to use "escalation management" to control the growth of conflicts, to deter conflicts, and to support conflict resolutions that are acceptable to Russia.¹⁹

Finally, Russia expert Michael Kofman has argued that escalation management is part of a much broader strategy that integrates conventional, strategic, and nonstrategic nuclear weapons.²⁰ Information and messaging are central to this broader strategy. Sidarth Kaushal at the U.K.'s Royal United Services Institute argues that the Russian evolution of nuclear weapons doctrine mirrors that of NATO in the later stages of the Cold War.²¹ Then, it was the West, threatened by Soviet conventional military dominance, that planned the escalated use of tactical nuclear weapons in response to being overwhelmed by the conventional forces of the Soviet shock armies. Now it is Russia that threatens to reach for tactical nuclear weapons in the face of overwhelming Western conventional military superiority.

What Syria Taught the Kremlin About the Use of Chemical Weapons

While the threat of nuclear weapons grabs attention in the West and creates concern in Western audiences—both among policymakers and the general public—Russia repeatedly backed, supported, and abetted the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons in Syria. Chemical weapons would be far easier to deploy in Ukraine than tactical nuclear weapons.

Chemical weapons can be morbidly effective in towns and cities if the user has no morals or scruples. While cities can be destroyed by conventional munitions, defenders and civilians can still hide in or under the rubble, as they did in Syria. Chemical weapons, such as those with the nerve agent sarin and chlorine, are heavier than air. They sink to the basements and bomb shelters and suffocate their victims with appalling cruelty. The use of chemical weapons against metro stations in eastern Ukraine would be devastating.

In 2013, action by Russian and Syrian government forces concluded the four-year siege of Aleppo in just 17 days when the Assad regime employed chemical weapons against civilians and opposition forces. The Syrian government used these weapons after President Barack Obama failed to enforce his “red line” in August 2013 after the Assad regime killed more than 1,000 people in Ghouta with sarin gas. The U.K. and other Western nations refused to act when the U.S. failed to lead.

The former Russian commander in Ukraine, General Sergei “Armageddon” Surovikin, worked with his Syrian counterparts to destroy civilian opposition in Syria, facilitating the use of chemical weapons and treating schools and hospitals as primary targets, despite the fact that both are protected under the Geneva Convention. The Russians and the Assad regime struck these targets to break the will of civilians and to cause civilian flight.

The deliberate creation of mass refugee flows from Syria to Türkiye and thence into Europe has since been described as the weaponization of refugees.²² Russia is now deploying a milder version of this strategy in Ukraine, albeit without, so far, using weapons of mass destruction: Russia is targeting water and electricity sites so that normal life becomes increasingly hard in Ukraine and a second wave of refugees pressures neighboring states, such as Hungary, Moldova, and Poland.

Russia continues to accuse Ukraine and the U.S. of conducting research on biological weapons.²³ As the Russians often accuse others of what they themselves are planning, these allegations keep open an option to use chemical weapons. The same can be said of Russia’s allegations that the U.S. is

planning to use a dirty bomb, potentially to cover Russia's use of makeshift weapons of mass destruction to create mass hysteria and again weaponize the flow of refugees.

The false-flag threat of chemical, biological, or radiological dirty-bomb use is straight from Russia's playbook in Syria and could signal that Russia is preparing the ground for the use of one or more of these weapons in Ukraine.

The Narrative from Russia's Political Leaders

While doctrine is important, especially in an obsessively bureaucratic society, such as Russia's, the language of the state is just as important. Narrative is an indicator of intent. It helps to shape debate and is self-reinforcing.

Despite the Russian state's declared belief that it faces a crisis fomented by the West, there is, objectively, no serious existential threat to the Russian Federation. Regardless, the war in Ukraine has been framed in existential terms by the Russian state in its messaging to the Russian public. If NATO "seizes" Ukraine, the Russian state declares, then Russia itself will be next: NATO's aim, according to Moscow, is to break up the Russia Federation.

Unlike the West, the Russian state does not distinguish clearly between the state and today's regime. In Russia, today's government is often treated as though it embodies Russia. This is partly because Russian defeat in war has often signaled a profound change in the state or even its collapse (examples include the Crimean War, the Russo–Japanese War, World War I, and the Afghan War).

Moreover, Putin's concept of "greater Russia," with Ukraine and Belarus in Russia's sphere of influence, is indeed under mortal attack: Ukrainians collectively want to be free of Russian control. The greater the threat from Moscow, the greater the Ukrainian desire to be free. With or without Western support, Ukrainians will fight. Putin's dream of Russia as an anti-Western, quasi-Soviet, illiberal state is facing humiliation and defeat. In Putin's mind, this crisis may have become existential—which, under Russian doctrine, would justify the use of any and all weapons.

Putin sees Russia as a victim of the West, thereby embracing a martyr complex that finds its roots in Russian cultural history. He has spoken of the glory of dying for one's country, and when asked, he links nuclear weapons and the Orthodox Church as the physical and spiritual defenders of the motherland, as he did when he addressed journalists in 2007.²⁴ Indeed, Russian national ideologues have fetishized ideas linking Russian Orthodox Christianity and nuclear weapons. Russia's nuclear weapons and Russian Orthodoxy are the "sword and shield"—the so-called atomic

Orthodoxy—against the chaos, or the Antichrist, which these ideologues identify as the U.S. and NATO. The sword and the shield are also the symbols of Putin’s old KGB and now his FSB.²⁵

More broadly, not only military doctrine, but also Russia’s National Security and Information Security doctrines show that the Russian leadership perceive a psychological as well as physical threat. In its latest National Security Doctrine, updated in 2021, Russia warns of the risk that local conflicts (such as the one in Ukraine) can, through the participation of nuclear powers, escalate into regional wars—which is a tactical warning to the U.S. to avoid involvement in Ukraine. These and other factors “[contribute] to the strengthening of military dangers and military threats to the Russian Federation.”²⁶ If this wording is being used in its doctrinal sense, this is the first time in Russian doctrine that NATO has been described as a “military threat,” which is the highest form of danger and a cause for Russia to go to war.

The tiny Russian security elite may be working itself into a state of near hysteria about the existence of a rival value system—Western democracy and Kyiv’s attempt to adopt it—seeing it as a threat to the future of Russia. For example, senior Russian defense advisor Andrei Ilnitsky declared last year that the historic and current policy of the West is to “exterminate Russia as a species.”²⁷ The war against his country was *mental’naya voina* (a “war of consciousness”) aimed at the Russian mind to make Russians stop being Russians.²⁸ The threat against Russia, in whatever guise, is being presented as mortal.

While this assessment is ridiculous, such language can become self-reinforcing, particularly when leaders of Western powers place regular public emphasis not on core Western values—such as freedom of conscience—but on their highly contentious views about gender, views that alienate potential regime opponents in Russia and make it easy for the Russian security elite to portray the West as decadent in its opposition to Russian values.

Putin has, for example given his approval to the Russian political philosopher Ivan Ilyin, an emigré from the Soviet Union whose philosophy has been described as “Russian, Christian fascism.”²⁹ In his July 1950 essay “Russian Statehood,” Ilyin argued that Russia should chart a unique course.³⁰ He predicted the demise of the USSR and a Western conspiracy to destroy Russia under the guise of democratizing it. If this is the mindset of the Russian elite today, the danger to the West is considerable.

The hysterical rhetoric of Russian leaders may also make the accidental launch of nuclear weapons more likely. Russia has made it clear that it will treat any missile launched at its territory as a nuclear attack, whether it is

or not, with the incumbent risk of increased accidental launch. To make matters worse, Russia has modernized its nuclear warning systems, which are now semi-automated, with junior decision-makers removed.

While centralizing decision-making has its advantages, on at least two occasions, independent decision-making by junior officers helped to avert nuclear war. In 1983, Stanislav Petrov purposely did not report a suspected U.S. missile attack that turned out to be warning system malfunction, while during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, Vasily Akhipov refused to use nuclear torpedoes against U.S. forces. In both cases, Moscow criticized the moral courage of these officers, who averted nuclear war and paid for that with their careers.

Russian claims that the West is trying to destroy Russia (or the USSR) are not new, but in recent years have become overt and dominant. The drumbeat of conspiracy theory, the idea that there exists a Western plot to destroy Russia, is rooted in elements of Russian thought and is represented in late Soviet and post-Soviet military thinking. Putin has brought new respectability to the thinking that the West has long been out to destroy Russia, that it conspired to destroy the USSR, and that it will do the same to Russia. As General Makmut Gareyev, former deputy head of the Soviet Armed Forces and an influential military thinker, claimed: “Ill will towards Russia has been deeply rooted in the West since the days of yore.”³¹

The West Does Not Understand Russian Signaling

During the Cold War, when the danger from Russia was acute and the West recognized it as such, an entire academic field developed to understand Russian nuclear decision-making and Russian military action.³² It was known as the study of “strategic culture”—at its heart was the recognition that security elites make decisions based on their own worldview, their own culture.

Since the end of the Cold War, the West has largely lost the ability to see the world in any way but through Western, secular eyes. The Russians for their part, continue to study the West, and primarily to find vulnerabilities. The West has focused on political and military counter-insurgency and structured its military to defeat non-state terrorism. Preparedness for state-on-state warfare has taken a back seat, personified by the scramble to support Ukraine.

The central fact that the West should recognize is that, by threatening to use nuclear weapons, Russia is signaling its intent: It sees the “loss” of the Ukraine to the West as being, in the words of its own rulers, an existential threat.

What the U.S. and Its Allies Should Do

The U.S. and its allies in NATO must reassure the public that they are aware of the threat of Russian nuclear weapons. For too long, Western governments have dismissed Russian nuclear threats as a bluff. To do so is to fail to minimize the threat.

One of the key lessons learned from the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan was that a lack of information, in particular an accurate assessment of radiation levels, can lead to ill-informed decisions. The U.S. and its allies should improve how they detect and monitor radiation in case of nuclear use, a strike on a nuclear facility, or an accident stemming from a nuclear plant located in an area of military operations.

The U.S. government, supported by governments of the U.K. and France, the two other recognized democratic nuclear powers in NATO, can employ a series of measures to dissuade Russia from threatening to use, or using, nuclear weapons and to minimize, as far as possible, the catastrophic consequences should Russia deploy such weapons or use nuclear power stations as improvised weapons. These measures would also help the West to better prepare for nuclear accidents and emergencies.

The U.S. and its allies should:

- **Deter Russia from using chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons in the Ukraine conflict** by ensuring that the Kremlin understands that any use will elicit an overwhelming conventional response that would severely downgrade Russian forces and the elites serving Putin. In the long run, it is the U.S., as the leading nation in the world, that has the most to lose from the use of weapons of mass destruction, and it is therefore in the interests of the U.S. to deter such use.
- **Ensure that any use of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia** is met by a robust Western and global response that is calibrated, relies on conventional weapons, and is informed by an understanding of Russian behavior and thinking. But in so doing, the U.S. must recognize the wisdom of the Cold War principle that the U.S. should not engage in direct combat with Russian forces or attack Russian territory directly. The U.S.'s strategy during the Cold War was to support proxies that could inflict defeats on Russia without leading to a risky U.S.-Soviet clash.

- **Engage in diplomacy** to ensure that Russia's potential allies in the developed and developing world inform Russia of the unacceptability of using nuclear weapons. The critical players are not the U.S. and U.K., but China and India and, to an extent, France and Germany.
- **Develop and roll out a comprehensive monitoring system** to prepare for either military or civilian nuclear release and contamination, whether deliberate or accidental, and work with allies, especially in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, to review how they detect and monitor radiation levels. This monitoring and detection system should be rolled out across Europe and networked across governments. As the use of nuclear power grows, this system should be expanded to cover the globe.
- **Maintain medical stockpiles**, such as of potassium iodide, and supplies of personal protective equipment.
- **Keep channels of communication with Moscow open**, even if the Kremlin is not responsive.

Russia would probably prefer to threaten the use of nuclear weapons and to fight conventionally. But Putin and his generals are not necessarily bluffing. Threatening to use nuclear weapons to divide Western populations was a Soviet tactic: scaring the Western publics now may be part of the same playbook. But the West cannot be sure, and official Russian statements and doctrine present the loss of Ukraine, bizarrely or not, as “existential,” which under Russian doctrine allows Russia to use nuclear and chemical weapons.

Putin's dreams of Ukraine re-incorporated into Russia, of breaking up NATO, and of Russia leading a global anti-Western alliance are collapsing about him. Disaster for Russia's imploding armed forces may well await, and at some point, Ukraine's armed forces will likely threaten to break Russia's land corridor linking Crimea to the Donbas. At that point, Putin will make one of the most fateful decisions of the century: whether to employ nuclear or chemical weapons. The U.S. must act now to minimize that threat and to ensure the protection of the American public and U.S. allies.

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