

ISSUE BRIEF

The Renewed Russian Nuclear Threat and NATO Nuclear Deterrence Posture

FEBRUARY 2016 MATTHEW KROENIG

The Brent Scowcroft Center's Transatlantic Security Initiative brings together top policymakers, government and military officials, business leaders, and experts from Europe and North America to share insights, strengthen cooperation, and develop common approaches. Through high-profile public conferences, off-the-record strategy sessions, and content-rich publications, the initiative provides practical, relevant, and bipartisan solutions for transatlantic leaders, as they navigate this tumultuous inflection point in the history of the world's most important political-military alliance.

The risk of nuclear war between NATO and Russia may be higher now than at any time since the 1980s.¹ Over the past decade, Russia has made nuclear weapons a predominant element of its national security strategy and military doctrine. Moscow is currently modernizing all three legs of its nuclear triad—intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and long-range bombers—and is developing new theater nuclear capabilities. Throughout the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, Russia has engaged in explicit nuclear brinkmanship, brandishing its nuclear forces at dangerously high levels; top Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, have issued explicit nuclear threats.² Moreover, as this brief will argue, Russia may be prepared to use nuclear weapons if necessary to avoid losing a regional war with NATO.

NATO, for its part, has consciously and conspicuously de-emphasized nuclear weapons in its defense policy and posture since the end of the Cold War. As a consequence, the Alliance now lacks the policies and capabilities needed to deter, and if necessary to respond to, a limited Russian nuclear strike. As NATO again faces a real nuclear threat from

- 1 This issue brief draws on the author's testimony to the US Senate: Statement of Dr. Matthew Kroenig, Hearing on "Regional Nuclear Dynamics," Senate Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, February 25, 2015.
- 2 See, for example, Colin Freeman, "Vladimir Putin: Don't Mess with Nuclear-Armed Russia," *Telegraph*, August 29, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/11064209/Vladimir-Putin-Dont-mess-with-nuclear-armed-Russia.html>.

Moscow, it must once again, like during the Cold War, cultivate a serious policy of and capability for nuclear deterrence.

In order to deter the Russian nuclear threat, NATO needs to realign its priorities by increasing the importance of its nuclear deterrence mission and considering possible modifications to its conventional and nuclear posture.

Russian Nuclear Strategy and Doctrine

Unlike the United States and NATO, Russia has placed an increased emphasis on nuclear weapons in its national security planning since the end of the Cold War. In the past, Moscow maintained a nuclear “no first use” doctrine, but this policy was abandoned in 2000. The Russian nuclear threat that is highly visible today, therefore, has roots that extend back years before the current crisis. Since the early 2000s, Russian strategists have promoted the concept of “de-escalatory” nuclear strikes.³ According to this “escalate to de-escalate,” or “escalation control” concept, Moscow will use the threat of, or even carry out, limited nuclear strikes in a conventional conflict to force its opponent to capitulate to its terms for peace.⁴ Russia’s military doctrine of 2000 stated that nuclear strikes might be conducted in any situation “critical to the national security” of the Russian Federation.⁵ This more expansive language was scaled back in the Russian military doctrine of 2010:

The Russian Federation reserves the right to utilize nuclear weapons in response to utilization of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, and also in the event of aggression

against the Russian Federation involving the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat.⁶

Yet, these somewhat narrowed conditions for nuclear use provide little reason for reassurance; Putin and his top advisers conceive of threats to Putin’s rule as synonymous with threats to Russia’s existence. Given that Putin’s legitimacy rests on his reputation as a strong leader uniquely willing and able to defend Russian interests, losing a war to NATO in Russia’s near abroad would threaten Putin’s regime, possibly convincing him to conduct a nuclear attack to avoid that fate.

The purpose of a de-escalatory nuclear strike in Russian military thinking is not to decisively degrade an opponent’s military forces, but rather to avoid a devastating battlefield defeat by demonstrating Russian resolve and convincing an opponent to back down to avert further calamity.

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In some ways, it is unsurprising that Russia, as the conventionally inferior power relative to the United States and NATO, would consider using nuclear weapons in a conventional war. After all, this is essentially the reverse of NATO strategy during the Cold War, when the Alliance faced a conventionally superior Soviet Union. While understandable, Russia’s current nuclear strategy and

capabilities seriously threaten the United States and its European allies and the Alliance must act accordingly. And, of course, Russia still enjoys massive conventional superiority over smaller countries in its near abroad, including NATO member states.

For years, Western analysts assumed that Russia’s heavy reliance on nuclear weapons was to reinforce a defensive crouch. Yet recent events, including those in Ukraine, have shown that these tactics can also be employed as part of an offensive campaign.⁷ During the crisis in

3 Kroenig, Statement on “Regional Nuclear Dynamics,” op. cit., p. 2; Nikolai N. Sokov, “Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike ‘De-escalation,’” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 13, 2014, <http://thebulletin.org/why-russia-calls-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation>.

4 Sokov, “Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike ‘De-escalation,’” op. cit.

5 Nikolai Sokov, “Russia’s 2000 Military Doctrine,” NTI, October 1999, <http://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/russias-2000-military-doctrine/>.

6 Alexander Golts, “Russia’s New Military Doctrine All Bark, No Bite,” *Moscow Times*, January 12, 2015, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/russia-s-new-military-doctrine-all-bark-no-bite/514247.html>.

7 Matthew Kroenig, “Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 57, no. 1, February 5, 2015, pp. 49-70.



A Topol-M road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missile during a military parade in Moscow in 2012.
Photo credit: Vitaly V. Kuzmin/Wikipedia.

Ukraine, Putin and other high-ranking Russian officials have repeatedly rattled the country's nuclear saber. As Putin said in August 2014, "I want to remind you that Russia is one of the leading nuclear powers... It's best not to mess with us."⁸

Moreover, Russia backs up its threats with physical demonstrations of its nuclear prowess, and at a level unseen since the end of the Cold War. Nearly all of Russia's major military drills over the past decade have concluded with simulated nuclear strikes.⁹ President Putin himself has overseen such nuclear exercises.¹⁰ In addition, Russia has patrolled nuclear submarines off the shores of European states, Russian aircraft have

⁸ Freeman, "Vladimir Putin: Don't Mess with Nuclear-Armed Russia," *op. cit.*

⁹ Sokov, "Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike 'De-escalation'," *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Alexey Nikolsky, "Putin Holds Military Drills to Repel Nuclear Strike," *RT*, May 8, 2014, <http://rt.com/news/157644-putin-drills-rocket-launch/>.

violated national airspace to conduct mock bombing runs, and Russian strategic bombers have practiced cruise missile attacks on the United States. One study identified forty-four such incidents in 2014 alone and these events continue to the present.¹¹

Russia has also reserved the right to deploy nuclear weapons in Crimea, Kaliningrad, and Syria.¹² During the Crimea crisis, Putin explained that he had considered

¹¹ Thomas Frear, Łukasz Kulesa, and Ian Kearns, "Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters between Russia and the West in 2014," Policy Brief, European Leadership Network, November 2014.

¹² On Russia's claims about nuclear weapons in Crimea, see Sergei L. Loiko, "Russia Says It Has a Right to Put Nuclear Weapons in Crimea," *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-nuclear-crimea-20141215-story.html>. On Russia's threats to deploy nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad, see Bruno Waterfield, "Russia Threatens NATO with Military Strikes over Missile Defence System," *Telegraph*, May 3, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/9243954/Russia-threatens-Nato-with-military-strikes-over-missile-defence-system.html>.

alerting Russian nuclear weapons, stating “We were ready to [put nuclear forces on alert]. . . . It was a frank and open position. And that is why I think no one was in the mood to start a world war.”¹³ The message is clear: The West must not interfere in Russia’s near abroad, lest it risk a nuclear conflict.

Many may find the prospect of a Russian (or indeed any) nuclear attack unthinkable, but it would be a mistake to view our adversaries as mirror images of ourselves. Given developments in Russian nuclear strategy, transatlantic policymakers must plan for the possibility. For Russian leaders, nuclear use is simply not out of the question.

For example, if Putin were to replicate its actions in Ukraine against a member of NATO or if the situation in Ukraine were to deteriorate, the United States could be compelled to enter a military confrontation with Russia. In response, Russia could very well employ its de-escalation strategy by threatening, or even conducting, a limited nuclear strike if it found itself on the losing end of a war with NATO. Moreover, Russia possesses the nuclear forces necessary to implement its bold nuclear strategy.

Russia’s Nuclear Capabilities

Russia, like the United States, is one of the world’s preeminent nuclear powers. From a strategic standpoint, it has a triad of ICBMs, submarines, and nuclear bombers.¹⁴ Under the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, Russia has committed to deploying no more than 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads by 2018.¹⁵ Moscow has routinely violated its international commitments in the past, but, so far, it shows no signs of failing to comply with this specific accord.

Russia’s resolute focus on its nuclear forces is clear. Despite challenging economic conditions, Russia has prioritized the modernization and development of its

nuclear capabilities.¹⁶ To that end, Russia is upgrading its bomber fleet, which will include a new long-range, precision-strike, nuclear-armed cruise missile.¹⁷ In addition, a new generation of nuclear submarines is poised to enter service, designed to deliver a more advanced SLBM intended to penetrate enemy missile defenses. Further, Russia has invented a nuclear-armed underwater drone designed to conduct nuclear attacks against Western port cities.¹⁸ Moscow is also developing road-mobile and silo-based ICBMs able to carry warheads with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, designed to overwhelm enemy defenses.

Russia has also tested a newly developed medium-range, ground-launched cruise missile, violating its commitments under the 1987 Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the only arms control treaty to ever ban a class of nuclear-capable delivery systems.¹⁹ What’s more, Russia’s RS-26 ballistic missile, while tested at longer ranges, can be operated at intermediate range, providing a technical circumvention of the treaty.

For the battlefield, Russia maintains an arms cache of about 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons.²⁰ This arsenal includes short-range surface-to-surface missiles, air-to-surface missiles and bombs, nuclear-armed torpedoes, depth charges, and surface-to-air missiles for air defense. While Russia has not announced plans to upgrade its tactical nuclear forces, it could be updating these systems under the radar as it modernizes its strategic forces. Furthermore, according to some reports, Russia has developed nuclear weapons designed for low yields and low collateral damage, potentially reducing the threshold for Russian nuclear use.²¹

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13 Fran Blandy, “Putin Mulled Putting Nuclear Forces ‘On Alert’ over Crimea,” *Business Insider*, March 15, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/afp-putin-mulled-putting-nuclear-forces-on-alert-over-crimea-2015-3#ixzz3kDDleZIC>.

14 For more detail on Russia’s nuclear forces, see Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, “Russian Nuclear Forces, 2014,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 70, no. 2, 2014, pp. 75-85.

15 “New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START),” April 8, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/t/avc/newstart/c44126.htm>.

16 Kroenig, Statement on “Regional Nuclear Dynamics,” op. cit., p. 1. On Russian nuclear modernization, see also Kristensen and Norris, “Russian Nuclear Forces, 2014,” op. cit.

17 Kristensen and Norris, “Russian Nuclear Forces, 2014,” op. cit.

18 Bill Gertz, “Russian Drone Submarine Would Threaten US Coast; Nuclear Vessel in Development,” *Washington Times*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/sep/8/russian-drone-submarine-would-threaten-us-coast/?page=all>.

19 Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Elimination of Their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty), December 8, 1987, <http://www.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm>.

20 Kristensen and Norris, “Russian Nuclear Forces, 2014,” op. cit.

21 “Russia’s Nuclear Posture,” National Institute for Public Policy, March 2015.

In sum, Russia's nuclear strategy and capabilities pose a clear danger to NATO. Rather than hoping for the best or relying on the goodwill of President Putin, NATO must recognize the challenge and revitalize and strengthen its nuclear doctrine and posture accordingly.

Implications for NATO Nuclear Policies and Posture

As long as nuclear weapons retain a prominent place in Russian force structure, procurement priorities, doctrine, and political rhetoric, and so long as Russia demonstrates intent to challenge NATO's interests, it remains an important mission for the United States and NATO to retain a serious capability for nuclear deterrence. NATO must be able to deter a Russian nuclear attack, counter the nuclear coercion inherent in Russia's hybrid warfare strategy, and assure NATO members that the Alliance is prepared to defend them. This will require strengthening NATO's existing nuclear deterrence strategy and capabilities.

Any changes to NATO nuclear posture will be difficult to achieve and controversial within the Alliance. Elites in many member states believe that bolstering NATO's nuclear posture (or even merely speaking of it) would be destabilizing in and of itself. But a strong nuclear posture is necessary to deter potential nuclear adversaries. While fully recognizing the political challenge involved, it is even harder to avoid the conclusion that some change is required.

In all three of its post-Cold War Strategic Concepts, NATO has emphasized its desire to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons and has downplayed the need for nuclear deterrence.²² Now, with a serious nuclear threat on its borders, NATO must rebalance these priorities. Nuclear deterrence once again must become the primary focus of NATO nuclear doctrine and force posture. NATO should, of course, continue to consider arms control measures that advance the Alliance's security interests, but such proposals must take a backseat to NATO's deterrence needs.

22 NATO, "Strategic Concept 2010," adopted at the NATO Summit in Lisbon, November 19, 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_82705.htm; NATO, "Deterrence and Defence Posture Review," Press Release, May 20, 2012, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87597.htm; NATO, "The Alliance's New Strategic Concept," November 7, 1991, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_23847.htm; NATO, "The Alliance's Strategic Concept," Press Release, April 24, 1999, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_27433.htm.

NATO must make clear in its nuclear deterrence doctrine that it will respond to any use of nuclear weapons against a NATO member with a devastating nuclear counterstrike. NATO should also retain the option of responding to a strictly conventional Russian assault against a NATO ally with a nuclear response. It should maintain this option not because an early nuclear response would be necessary or automatic, but rather because there is no reason to assure Russia that this would not happen. Moreover, NATO's easternmost neighbors would vastly prefer nuclear deterrence over a potential Russian incursion.

In addition, NATO's nuclear posture must be able to help deter Russian hybrid warfare and nuclear coercion against NATO's European members. This is not to say that NATO could credibly threaten to respond to "little green men," as Putin used to great effect in Ukraine, or other elements of Russian "network-centric warfare" with nuclear weapons. Yet, Russia's hybrid warfare strategy employs nuclear weapons as a backstop under which it can freely engage in lower-level coercion. By making it clear to Moscow and Alliance members that NATO has a credible and devastating nuclear response to any Russian nuclear use, NATO can counter Russian nuclear coercion, attacking a key element of Russia's hybrid war strategy.

In addition to declaratory policy, NATO must refresh its nuclear strategic communications. As Jacek Durkalec, a Polish national security analyst, has argued, NATO and its member governments should clearly communicate how seriously they take Russia's nuclear threat to NATO nations, including by issuing official communiqués from meetings of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group.²³ NATO must also directly address the role of nonstrategic nuclear weapons, which have been unnecessarily divisive within the Alliance. It would be helpful for Alliance members to come to a common understanding about the role these weapons play in the Alliance and publicize this role internally and externally.

Durkalec also argues that NATO should reexamine its crisis management tools. NATO could improve its intelligence capabilities to better interpret Russian nuclear signaling and to reconsider the conditions under which NATO might want to issue its own nuclear threats. This seemed beyond the realm of plausibility just a few years ago, but will once again form a necessary part of a successful deterrence and defense strategy.

23 Jacek Durkalec, "Nuclear-Backed 'Little Green Men': Nuclear Messaging in the Ukraine Crisis," The Polish Institute of International Affairs, July 2015.



A Royal Air Force Typhoon intercepts a Russian Bear aircraft in September 2014. *Photo credit:* United Kingdom Ministry of Defence.

Perhaps more controversial than changes to policy and doctrine are adjustments to capabilities. Not all of the required capability upgrades, however, are in the nuclear realm. Much can and should be done at lower levels to deter conflict initiation and escalation before crises intensify to the point of conceivable nuclear use. NATO and the Baltic states can, for example, engage in a political strategy to counter Russian propaganda and information warfare targeted at Russian ethnic minorities in NATO member states that might serve as a foothold for Russian hybrid aggression. In addition, NATO can improve its conventional military posture in the easternmost states (particularly with much-needed heavy armor and anti-armor capabilities) to deter and slow what could otherwise be a virtually uncontested Russian invasion and occupation of NATO capitals.

Still, adjustments to conventional forces will be insufficient on their own; modifications to nuclear forces are needed to make the above nuclear threats credible. NATO must continue to field a nuclear arsenal that is flexible and resilient, and that includes capable

nuclear delivery systems and supporting infrastructure.²⁴ To do this, the United States and NATO must follow through on their modernization plans for the Alliance's nuclear forces and infrastructure.

In addition, the United States and NATO should upgrade their homeland and theater ballistic and cruise missile defense systems. Though an upgraded missile defense system could not significantly attrit a large-scale Russian attack, it could defend against a more limited strike against the United States or its allies. This could eliminate Russia's option of pursuing a limited de-escalatory strike, forcing Moscow to make the more difficult decision of choosing between launching a larger nuclear attack or staying its hand.

Perhaps most importantly, however, NATO must make sure that it has a credible response to any Russian de-escalatory nuclear strike. This is the most pressing nuclear challenge the Alliance faces, but it currently

24 Kroenig, Statement on "Regional Nuclear Dynamics," *op. cit.*, p. 4.

lacks clear policy, doctrine, and, arguably, capabilities for such a contingency.²⁵ Imagine yourself in the shoes of a US President in the aftermath of a limited Russian nuclear strike on NATO targets. How might you respond? Some would surely advocate that NATO employ a devastating but conventional-only response, even in the wake of a nuclear attack. This would aim to restore the taboo against nuclear use and reinforce the West's longstanding goal of demonstrating a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons. For others, the answer will depend on the circumstances. How devastating was Russia's nuclear attack? Can NATO win the war without nuclear use? Are there military targets for which nuclear weapons are uniquely suited, etc.? Others would certainly decide that the United States and NATO must use nuclear weapons, regardless of the circumstances, to restore nuclear deterrence and set the precedent that no state in the future should hope to employ nuclear weapons without suffering a nuclear response.

Regardless of one's personal views on this issue, NATO leaders may very well decide that a nuclear response is necessary. If NATO leaders were to go this route, they may decide on overwhelming nuclear retaliation, but much more likely they would opt for some kind of limited retaliatory strike to demonstrate NATO resolve without escalating to a strategic nuclear exchange. In such an instance, which weapon(s) would NATO leaders use and against which target(s)?

Unfortunately, NATO's current nuclear capabilities are not well suited for a tailored retaliation to a Russian de-escalatory nuclear strike. The yields of strategic warheads may be too large for a response to a battlefield nuclear strike, and using ICBMs, SLBMs, or strategic bombers from outside the theater of battle could risk escalating the conflict to a catastrophic, strategic nuclear exchange. The dual-capable aircraft on which B61 nuclear gravity bombs are delivered would be highly vulnerable to Russian air defenses, especially in the most likely contingencies close to Russian territory. If Russia's nuclear use came at the end of a devastating conventional war, when its air defenses were already destroyed, then this would pose

25 For information on US nuclear forces and further details on the items in this paragraph, see Kristensen and Norris, "US Nuclear Forces, 2014," op. cit., pp. 85-93.

less of a problem. However, a NATO nuclear retaliation should not have to hinge on first suppressing Russia's sophisticated integrated air defense system. Clearly, a capability that could penetrate Russian air defenses would be preferable.

The leaders of the United States and NATO, therefore, must consider changes to NATO nuclear posture to ensure that NATO possesses a credible nuclear response able to deter a Russian de-escalation strike. These could include placing lower-yield warheads on SLBMs and ICBMs; training European crews to participate in NATO nuclear strike missions; forward basing B61 gravity bombs in Eastern Europe; improving the survivability of the B61s; rotationally basing B-52 bombers in Europe; equipping dual-capable aircrafts to carry nuclear air-launched cruise missiles; developing a new sea-launched cruise missile; designating the planned long-range standoff weapon (LRSO) for delivery by both air and sea; and creating an SRSO, a shorter-range variant of the LRSO that could be delivered by NATO tactical aircraft in theater.²⁶

Making even one or a small number of such adjustments may be sufficient to meet NATO's deterrent needs. Moreover, each option carries with it a different constellation of potential costs and benefits. Modifications to existing capabilities,

for example, may take less time than the development of new systems and will, therefore, be ready for deterrence missions sooner. In addition, changes that NATO's nuclear-armed members—Britain, France, and the United States—can make to their independent nuclear arsenals will likely create less tension within the Alliance than those that require the consent of all NATO members. Future work should carefully consider which among these various options should be pursued and which should be discarded.²⁷

26 Kroenig, Statement on "Regional Nuclear Dynamics," op. cit., p. 4; The deployment of substrategic nuclear weapons on naval ships might be seen as a violation of the 1991 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs), which is one among many factors to consider in weighing these various options. For more on PNIs, see Susan J. Koch, "The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992," Case Study Series, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction, National University, September 2012, http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/casestudies/CSWMD_CaseStudy-5.pdf.

27 The author of this issue brief is currently conducting a study on this issue.

Conclusion

Six years ago in Prague, US President Barack Obama articulated his vision for moving to a “world without nuclear weapons.”²⁸ As NATO worked on its 2012 Defense and Deterrence Posture Review, many assumed that the result would be, consistent with Obama’s vision, a removal of US substrategic nuclear weapons from the European continent.²⁹ In the end, the review reaffirmed a continuing role and presence of European-based nuclear weapons. But few predicted that just a few short years later, the most serious debate would be not about reducing, but rather augmenting, NATO nuclear policy and capabilities.

28 “Remarks by President Obama in Prague as Delivered,” White House, April 5, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

29 NATO, “Deterrence and Defence Posture Review,” Press Release, op. cit.

It was not NATO’s preference for nuclear weapons to take on increased salience in the European security environment, but, with a renewed Russian threat at its doorstep, it has no choice but to respond in order to defend itself. US and NATO nuclear forces have undergirded international peace and security for nearly seventy years and with appropriate changes to strategy and capabilities, they can continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

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