
Escalation for De-Escalation? Hazy Nuclear-Weapon “Red Lines” Generate Russian Advantages

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According to the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), Russian nuclear strategy calls for the early use of nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict with NATO. It would be meant as a coercive tool to stop a major adversary from interfering in a regional conflict between Russia and its neighbors. The U.S. NPR [states](#) that Moscow “mistakenly assesses that the threat of nuclear escalation or actual first use of nuclear weapons would serve to ‘de-escalate’ a conflict on terms favorable to Russia.” On the Russian side, President Vladimir Putin at the 2018 Valdai conference [declared](#): “Only when we know for certain, and this takes a few seconds to understand, that Russia is being attacked, will we deliver a counterstrike... Of course, this amounts to a global catastrophe, but I would like to repeat that we cannot be the initiators of such a catastrophe because we have no provision for a preventive strike.”

Nonetheless, it remains vague as to whether the Kremlin’s military strategies contain an “escalation for de-escalation” procedure. Since the introduction of the concept in the early 2000s, it appears that Moscow keeps the specific conditions for when it can use nuclear weapons intentionally ambiguous in order to give itself the opportunity of being able to widely interpret the character of a conflict. This nebulosity is designed to make foreign powers and NATO extra cautious about military involvement in countries that Moscow considers in its sphere of interest. Furthermore, it also, perhaps purposefully, blurs the line between ascertaining the survival of the state (the Russian Federation) and the survival of the ruling regime.

Escalate a Conflict to Defuse it?

The idea of “escalation for de-escalation” was formulated at the beginning of the last decade when Russia was substantially inferior to the West in terms of conventional

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weapons, and when it also had a close eye on avoiding the fate of Serbia in 1999. Three important aspects should be examined pertaining to this strategy.

First, the Russian Military Doctrine of 2000 stated the concept openly. This policy [said](#) that the possibility of using nuclear weapons in a regional war should be made “under critical circumstances when conventional means have proven their inefficiency.” Deterring conventional conflicts, especially regional wars, with nuclear weapons means that the latter are regarded as a possible “reaction” method vis-a-vis a (regional) conflict. They serve as insurance that Russia will neither be defeated nor overly engaged in a regional war.

Second, the idea was completed by the concept of “predetermined damage,” which appeared in the policy instead of the usual notion of “unacceptable damage.” Predetermined damage is [defined](#) as “damage subjectively unacceptable to the enemy as being higher than the advantages the aggressor is waiting to gain from the application of the military force.” This notion perfectly fits the idea of a regional war taking place outside the sphere of U.S. vital interests. According to the document, “the aggressor,” having received damage from a nuclear weapons strike, would step back as a result of quickly performing a cost-benefit analysis. Indeed, the geopolitical orientation of the former Soviet republics (excepting, probably, the Baltic states, which are protected by NATO’s Article 5) would never be something that the United States would be willing to militarily support due to the potential massive sacrifice of U.S. soldiers and civilians, which would be inevitable if nuclear weapons became involved. Even if the conflict does not become a disastrous, global, nuclear exchange, the responsibility and the stakes would be so high for Washington and the sitting U.S. president that it would not be seriously considered.

Third, the concept of limited, strategic, nuclear strikes was developed by the Russian Ministry of Defense back in 2003. In particular, the idea was proclaimed of a “de-escalation of aggression with the threat of performing strikes of a different scale using conventional and/or nuclear means of destruction.”² In spite of its absence in the ensuing texts of the official Russian doctrines in 2010 and 2014, this doctrinal component has never been officially denied.

To Protect the Land or Save the Regime?

Since 2010, the Russian Military Doctrine has been [trying](#) to connect nuclear weapons use with the existence of the state: “In case if the emerging conventional conflict puts the existence of the state in jeopardy, the possession of nuclear weapons may lead to the transformation of a conventional conflict into a nuclear one.” Here, the meaning of

² Aktual'nye zadachi razvitiya Vooruzhennyh sil Rossijskoj Federacii, M.: Ministerstvo oborony RF, 2003, p. 42. [Актуальные задачи развития Вооруженных сил Российской Федерации, М.: Министерство обороны РФ, 2003, с. 42.]

“existential” is vague and can be defined differently in Russia or the West. It includes notions of territorial integrity, but probably also the survival of the political regime. It is less clear whether it includes Russia’s so-called sphere of influence. In any event, it does include the underlying scenario of a defeat in a large-scale but non-global conventional war – with Serbia in 1999 as a reference.

Is Russia’s rather ambiguous doctrinal threat just a coercive tool? Moscow always envisioned scenarios of confrontation with NATO over a range of contingencies, including, in no small measure, over Georgia or Ukraine. Russia always tried to present this as pure deterrence, especially to internal audiences. NATO, in contrast, almost without exception, regards the Russian threat of nuclear usage not as deterrence but as a tool to coerce the West from interfering with the expansion of Russian influence.

A major transition point came in 2014. Until then, Russia foresaw the limited use of nuclear weapons in less-than-global conflicts for the purpose of terminating conflicts on favorable conditions, which meant upholding the *status quo ante*. In a more fundamental way, it was clearly intended to deter NATO from engaging in any nearby conflicts (that could result in a major defeat for Russia).

In 2014, Russia’s new military doctrine evolved and introduced the notion of “conventional deterrence,” which has, at a minimum, raised the nuclear threshold and introduced the possibility that the same category of conflicts could be waged and terminated without resorting to nuclear weapons. However, the reliance on conventional weapons while increasing the threshold is not likely to change the more fundamental choice: either way, conventional strikes are supposed to signalize to NATO the seriousness of Moscow’s resolve and communicate the risk that if a conflict continues the next step could be using nuclear arms. At the same time, conventional weapons do not have the same deterrent effect as nuclear.

Defense or Offense?

To what extent and under what conditions would nuclear weapons still feature in regional conflicts is unknown. The ongoing vagueness is likely intentional and is designed to make NATO extra cautious. In the 2014 doctrine, the clause about nuclear-weapon use was [primed](#) for when the existence of the Russian state is in jeopardy, but the nature and character of that threat remains open. This doctrine appeared at the moment when Moscow annexed Crimea, started its hybrid war in Donbas, and accelerated military maneuvers at the borders of the Baltic states. Was it a reaction for some “military provocations” by the West? Did the tumultuous events in Ukraine threaten the stability of the Russian regime? Because Ukraine and the Baltics did not threaten Russian territory in any way, the latter argument seems most appropriate. The concentration of Russian troops at the Baltic states’ borders and the deployment of Russian strategic bombers near NATO airspace were efforts to coerce the West from

interfering in Russia's sphere of influence. NATO obviously interpreted Russia's actions differently. The alliance's main concern was probably whether Moscow was going to provoke a regional war in Europe where nuclear coercion would provide it with escalation dominance.

Since 2014, Moscow has demonstrated its primary goal of keeping the West away from non-NATO, CIS countries. Russia's approach, as brightly reflected in the Russian nuclear strategy, appears to rely on the idea of "a threat that leaves something to chance" (an [expression](#) by American economist Thomas Shelling that is commonly used in nuclear game theory). No one knows for sure if and when Russia will be ready to use its nuclear weapons *a fortiori*. Most of the weapons Russia currently produces are dual-use, and are intended to make the West extra careful, for example in its policy toward Ukraine or in other dealings Moscow considers sensitive. It seems unlikely that the introduction of conventional deterrence has removed the limited use of nuclear weapons in regional conflicts from the range of contingencies. If faced with a significant defeat in a conventional conflict, Russia is nonetheless likely to cross the nuclear threshold.

One question that arises is what kinds of weapons could be employed in the various potential scenarios. There is little reason to concentrate on tactical weapons; since at least 2003, Russian officials have said that they rely on long-range weapons, including for limited nuclear use. In his latest [address](#) to the Federal Assembly, Putin similarly said that if threatened by deployments of U.S. intermediate-range missiles in Europe, "Russia will be forced to create and deploy weapons that can be used not only in the areas we are directly threatened from, but also in areas that contain decision-making centers for the missile systems threatening us." This clearly hints at the United States. Even the intermediate-range weapons that he referred to, such as the Tsirkon hypersonic missile, will be used from mobile platforms and thus could be deployed within reach of the United States—following Soviet patterns of refusing to limit any conflict to just Europe.

The dual capability of the new Russian weapons systems, however, makes any conflict highly risky because the West will never know whether weapons are aimed at Washington or not and whether they carry nuclear or conventional warheads. Conventional armaments appear more likely, at least at the initial stage of a conflict, but the West will have to deal with uncertainty and might take the risk of engaging in a limited nuclear response to what might later prove to have been only a conventional strike.

Further, a nuclear stalemate can happen unintentionally, for example if the United States would try regime change in Belarus or if the Donbas conflict escalates (NATO interferes, Russia feels highly vulnerable). The haziness of the Russian nuclear-weapon-use doctrines means that practically anything that might probe Moscow's resolve in its sphere of interest could provoke a serious military operation. If such a scenario arises, the expected format is that Moscow would use a non-nuclear strike first, which would

then spark a significant response from the other side, which would then conceivably push Russia to use a limited nuclear strike. One question about this is whether such a strike would be a regional, limited strike or an out-of-the-region, limited strike. This train of logic obviously applies to conflicts that are not global in nature (i.e., regional) in accordance with Russian definitions. In fact, an all-out first strike borders on the impossible. It is, however, possible that a small, unexpected conflict could quickly escalate and become a large-scale conventional conflict, which could then become a limited-use nuclear weapons conflict, which could spark global warfare.

To touch on some examples, perhaps the most dangerous “regions” in this sense are those near Russia’s western borders (first the Baltics and second Belarus and Ukraine) not because Moscow wants to annex them but because excessive Russian military forces are concentrated there. The recent death of the INF Treaty only adds some further explosive potential to these areas because in 2020 the first U.S. intermediate range missiles will be ready for deployment and these European regions could be regarded by the United States as future deployment sites. Even if nuclear warheads are not included in the potential Western deployments, Moscow has pointed out that it will [regard threats](#) from conventional intermediate range missiles as similarly “destabilizing.”

Conclusion

Russia relishes having nuclear-weapon-use ambiguity, a highly useful threat that leaves something to chance in order to keep antagonists cautious. The introduction of conventional deterrence in the 2014 Military Doctrine (along with active development of conventional arms) raised the Russian nuclear threshold to a certain extent. But this probably did not make the Russian nuclear deterrence concept more stable and predictable.

Moscow still maintains ambiguity about the specific conditions for when it might use a nuclear weapon. Its doctrinal language on this point is intentionally vague in order to give Moscow the opportunity for a wide interpretation as to the character of a possible (nuclear) conflict. One could imagine that in Russia’s nuclear logic, the limited application of nuclear weapons is connected with the notion of regional war. Still, the latest statements from the Russian authorities are aimed to decouple these two notions, which gives a signal to the United States that there can be some “limited wars” in which Washington could be directly threatened by Russian missiles. After all, in his Federal Assembly address, Putin [said](#), “Russia will be forced to create and deploy weapons that can be used not only in the areas we are directly threatened from, but also in areas that contain decision-making centers for the missile systems threatening us.” His context was the deployment of U.S. intermediate range missiles in Europe, and apparently those “decision making centers” could be in the United States. [According](#) to *Izvestia* this past July, “Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov did not rule out the possibility

of Russia placing missiles banned by the INF Treaty closer to the United States in response to similar Washington actions.”

Still, the Putin administration has been persuasively repeating the idea that nuclear war is unthinkable and that it is only an extreme measure that Russia will use only if its interests are being attacked. On the one hand, Putin’s recent Federal Assembly speech indicates a “reaction” to the U.S. NPR, while on the other hand, Russia continues to employ nuclear coercion when it comes to the erosion of the INF Treaty. Meanwhile, the dual capability (nuclear and conventional) of all currently developing Russian weapon warheads makes this coercion even more disturbing.

To some extent, Russia’s “escalation for de-escalation” strategy has evolved since 2000 when it was mostly aimed at preserving Russia from the fate of Serbia in 1999. It was [used again](#) around the Russia-Ukraine crisis of 2014 in order to protect Russia’s sphere of influence. “We were ready to do this,” [said](#) Putin in regard to putting nuclear weapons into readiness at that time. The growth of Russia’s military might, along with effective nuclear coercion methods, has made Moscow’s threats real, while the dual capability of the latest Russian weapons makes it practically impossible to avoid the increased, intentional ambiguity of its operational doctrines.

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