

Newly found Reductionism in Nuclear Deterrence Russian-Style

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Since the start of its war against Ukraine, Russia has struggled to adjust its nuclear policy to the evolving patterns of conventional warfare. The general conceptual framework guiding the use of nuclear instruments is deterrence, which has never been a coherent strategy, but rather a fluid mix of methods for dissuading opponents from executing certain actions. President Vladimir Putin has focused this mind game, as [Rose Gottemoeller](#) has argued, on curtailing Western support for Ukraine. His warnings of [unprecedented consequences](#) were not entirely unproductive, but clearly had far less impact than he had anticipated.

The intensity of signalling typically ambiguous threats then increased as Putin's need for communicating readiness to use nuclear capabilities in order to achieve other conflict objectives grew, closely following the destruction and depletion of Russia's conventional military forces. But this trend of energizing deterrence by [escalating](#) nuclear threats appears to upended since the beginning of August, when the pattern of combat operations significantly changed. Putin's newfound caution in resorting to nuclear blackmail is counterintuitive and deserves further investigation.

Downplaying the Kursk debacle

August is known to be a dark month on the Russian political calendar, marked by various historical misfortunes, such as the failed coup in August 1991, default in August 1998, and the sinking of the Kursk submarine in 2000. The offensive operation launched by Ukraine into the Kursk region on August 6, 2024, stands out in this context as a disaster of unprecedented proportions. In its initial days, the event could have been mistaken for a tactical incursion, and

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Putin's order to respond to the "provocation" with a [counter-terrorist operation](#) seemed appropriate. By the end of the first week of fighting, it became evident that the Ukrainian brigades were not planning a quick withdrawal. By the end of August, the Russian high command had to acknowledge that sustaining the [attacks on Pokrovsk](#) and pushing Ukrainian forces out of Sudzha were incompatible objectives.

Putin's initial reaction was clearly misinformed, yet he continued to regard the occupation of Russian territory by enemy forces as a minor issue. No effort was made to mobilize additional manpower, and the propaganda machine was focused on portraying the shocking setback as the "[new normal](#)." This uncharacteristic timidity prompted President Volodymyr Zelensky to ridicule the attempts of the "[sick old man from the Red Square](#)" to dictate the drawing of the "red lines." Putin was indeed prone to exploit the [imagery of "red lines"](#) to make explicit threats of using nuclear weapons, but the substance of this metaphor was typically vague, except in cases involving violations of Russia's territorial integrity. The loss of about 5% of the territory of the Kursk region certainly qualifies as such a violation, yet there has been no indication of a possible nuclear escalation. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov found it necessary [to warn against](#) making jokes about Russia's "red lines", but he clearly has no say on the matters of deterrence.

This decision to refrain from any brinkmanship is puzzling to many [Western experts](#) who argued that Putin's nuclear threats should be taken seriously. Just two months prior to the Kursk debacle, Putin indicated that Russia's [nuclear doctrine](#) could be revised to lower the threshold for delivering the first strike. This [revision](#) may still be in the cards, but the scope will most probably be symbolic rather than substantial. The idea of breaking the taboo on using nuclear weapons and targeting European NATO member states with a strategic attack, rather than using non-strategic warheads on battlefields in Ukraine, was advanced by [Sergei Karaganov](#) in early 2023 and further [elaborated](#) by his several adherents. In August 2024, however, this choir of nuclear "hawks" became completely silent, and even the [hyper-jingoistic pundits](#) insisted on repelling the invasion by conventional means.

These muted nuclear debates make the lull in the activity of Russian strategic forces more pronounced. Seven launches of intercontinental missiles were planned for 2024, but only two were conducted in March and April. The [Knyaz Pozharsky](#) strategic submarine was launched at the Severodvinsk shipyard in February, but it has yet to conduct the test launch of its Bulava missile and thus cannot be commissioned. The Northern Fleet did not send a nuclear submarine to the Baltic Sea for the traditional naval parade in July, so the ceremony in St. Petersburg was scaled down, and the event in Kronstadt was [cancelled altogether](#). One element of the strategic triad that has been extremely busy is long-range aviation, which performs more combat missions toward Ukraine

than its maintenance system can support, so the [crash of a Tu-22M3](#) bomber on 15 August in the Irkutsk region was not an isolated incident. Even remote strategic airbases like [Olenya](#) in the Murmansk region are coming under attack by Ukrainian long-range drones, which apparently does not constitute a breach of a “[red line](#).” The annual exercise of strategic forces is typically scheduled for October, except for February 2022, when it was intended to emphasize the potency of Russian deterrence strategy. In August 2024, however, no such need was identified, so the Strategic Rocket Forces, commanded since June 2010 by Colonel-General Sergei Karakayev, remained idle. Additionally, [the third stage](#) of the exercise of non-strategic forces, which began in July, was curtailed.

Ignoring the arrival of F-16s

Another notable instance of Russian indifference to a significant development during the war concerns the deployment of the first squadron of F-16 fighters with the Ukrainian Air Force. Unlike the Kursk incursion, there was no element of surprise in this upgrade of Ukrainian air capabilities, as Denmark and the Netherlands had committed to providing the planes in early 2023, and [the coalition](#) for training pilots and organizing logistics was formed at the July 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius. It took a year, however, for this initiative to yield material results. Zelensky announced the [arrival of ten fighters](#) on August 4—two days prior to the launch of the offensive operation in the Kursk region.

The timing was hardly a coincidence and the intention to erase yet another Russian “red line” was unmistakable. Moscow repeatedly excoriated the F-16 coalition, and Putin making a visit to North Korea in mid-June 2024, denounced the forthcoming delivery of fighters as a [crude breach](#) by the West of international obligations concerning high-precision weapons. Commentary in mainstream Russian media argued that the deployment of Ukrainian F-16 squadrons to bases in Poland and Romania would make these facilities [legitimate targets](#) for Russian nuclear strikes. “Patriotic” pundits [fantasized in great detail](#) about combined arms operations reducing Ukrainian air capabilities to smouldering rubble. The confirmed arrival of the long-promised fighters at an undisclosed airbase in Ukraine was met, nevertheless, only with [dry assertions](#) that it would make no difference.

The impact of the new Ukrainian air capabilities is certain to increase as more F-16 squadrons are deployed and pilots gain additional combat experience. The first squadron significantly contributed to the high level of interceptions of Russian air-launched [Kh-101 cruise missiles](#) during the massive strikes on August 26 and 27, and the [loss of one plane](#) was the cost of learning to perform this complex combat task. The primary targets of continuing strikes are production facilities within Ukraine’s [energy infrastructure](#), rather than the airbases hosting the high-value fighters. Moscow sensibly refrained from reiterating that F-16s would be [considered as delivery systems](#) for nuclear weapons.

Leaving Belarus in limbo

Ukrainian offensive into the Kursk region was instantly recognized by Belarusian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko as a major security challenge, and he ordered deployment of his troops to the border area. He also claimed that the only “[red line](#)” was the border itself and that any attempt to violate it would trigger a nuclear response. Adding another twist to the brinkmanship, Lukashenko suggested that the aim of the Kursk incursion was to provoke a nuclear escalation and that Ukraine would be “[very happy if Russia or Belarus used tactical nuclear weapons.](#)” Such speculations fit his pattern of assertive nuclear rhetoric but sharply contrast with Moscow’s restraint in making nuclear threats despite the prolonged occupation of a significant part of Russia’s territory by hostile forces.

One year into the war with Ukraine, Putin deemed it useful to extend Russia’s deterrence posture to Belarus, which led to the announcement of a decision to [transfer tactical nuclear warheads](#) in March 2023. The modernization of the [Asipovichy nuclear storage facility](#) was completed only in spring 2024, but there has been no verifiable evidence of the physical transportation of nuclear munitions to the site. [Joint Russian-Belarusian exercises](#) involving simulators with non-strategic delivery systems, particularly the Iskander-M ballistic missiles supplied by Russia in December 2022, were conducted in May 2024. The Kremlin found Lukashenko’s propensity to brag about readiness to employ nuclear weapons against neighboring NATO member states [useful for augmenting](#) Russia’s own nuclear posturing. The Kursk debacle has altered those calculations.

In reality, however, Lukashenko could never have hoped to obtain a “[dual key](#)” for accessing the Asipovichy nuclear depot, even if it did contain tactical warheads. As Ukraine sustained and expanded its Kursk operation through the end of August, Lukashenko could not ignore the reality of Moscow’s muddled response to the incursion, which effectively undermined his declarations of readiness to repel any hypothetical aggression with all available military means, including nuclear. He ordered his army (consisting of around [20,000 combat-ready](#) personnel) to return to the barracks and [shifted his rhetoric](#) to urging Russia and Ukraine to engage in peace talks. While concerns about domestic stability may be entirely his own, the hollowness of Russia’s extended deterrence strategy is exposed beyond reasonable doubt.

Conclusion

The rationale behind Putin’s moderate and even timid response to Ukraine’s August offensive into the Kursk region, as well as his reluctance to resort to nuclear weapons, remains unclear. The political humiliation from failing to expel enemy troops from Russia’s territory is evident and appears to be increasing, but Putin still seemingly prefers to endure the humiliation rather than to issue nuclear threats and risk exposing his bluff. The decision-making

process regarding the use of nuclear weapons is highly streamlined, a situation exacerbated by the removal of the authoritative (though deeply corrupt) Sergei Shoigu from the position of Defence Minister and the appointment of Andrey Belousov, a career bureaucrat with no expertise in strategic culture.

It seems probable that Putin believed the Kursk operation was not orchestrated by US leadership. Assuming Ukraine had minimal political agency, he likely concluded that the incursion would deplete available reserves within a few weeks and end ingloriously. While the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) [publicly claimed](#) that the operation was planned and prepared by the USA, the UK, Poland and Germany, its actual assessments are most likely quite different.

An attempt to conceal real intentions cannot be ruled out, suggesting that Putin's apparent indifference to the prolonged Kursk disaster could be a cover for his preparations to use nuclear options. However, this scenario seems less likely given the apparent lack of concern in Brussels and Washington D.C. In autumn 2022, US intelligence [assessed the risk](#) of nuclear escalation during the battle for Kherson, where Russian troops were trapped on the far side of the Dnipro River—as dangerously high. Consequently, the Biden administration "[rigorously](#)" prepared a set of responses to address the looming crisis. In August 2024, President Joe Biden, after delivering a valedictory address to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, went on vacation in California.

The observable inability of the Russian high command to utilize its most powerful strategic reserve—nuclear capabilities—for either political or military purposes in the situation of an unexpected negative turn in the protracted war indicates a profound confusion rather than a deliberate transformation of Russia's nuclear deterrence strategy. This confusion does not necessarily reflect a success of NATO's deterrence strategy, which remains plagued by political disputes over resource allocation and residual concerns about Putin's "red lines." The Allies cannot take Putin's newly-found caution in brinkmanship for granted and must remain prepared for sudden surges in the application of Russian nuclear instruments. These could range from a low-yield explosion at the Novaya Zemlya test site to a series of strikes with non-strategic weapon systems in Ukraine.

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