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NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

Stephen Blank

Russia has not used nuclear weapons in its war of aggression against Ukraine. Nevertheless, Russian nuclear weapons' potential deployment has been and remains a major focus of this war. Indeed, Russia's nuclear threats and the resultant concern about potential nuclear use continue to suffuse Western policy responses to the war. These vague threats build on earlier threats and exercises that established a belief among many Western observers that Russia can and will use nuclear weapons, including in a conflict that begins as a purely conventional war, to force its enemies to accept its terms. Anxiety about possible Russian nuclear use therefore has been pervasive and has inhibited some Western relief efforts—for example, the campaign for a no-fly zone or for sending warplanes to Ukraine. Consequently, Western restraint and statements to the effect that “we will not fight World War

III with Russia over Ukraine” have encouraged repeated and unrestrained Russian threats of nuclear use that are taken as inherently credible, even as Western deterrence is not seen as credible. Thus, the balance of deterrence has been destabilized.¹

Russian president Vladimir V. Putin and his retinue continue to make nuclear threats almost daily. This article attempts to explain why this continues, beyond the fact that such threats represent for Russian elites a kind of political Viagra; they make them feel powerful and feared, and in an intimidation culture such as Putin's Russia—resembling that of the Mafia—instilling fear is the paramount motivation.

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The article also examines Russian nuclear strategy not only during the war but during the crisis leading up to it, from well before the onset of hostilities. “Russian military planners [have been] pursuing a broad range of upgraded and new versions of nuclear weapons,” which “suggests that the[ir] real doctrine goes beyond basic deterrence and toward regional warfighting strategies, or even weapons aimed at causing terror.”² The article further argues that Russian nuclear-weapons strategy, as manifested in Ukraine, aims at achieving the following interrelated goals: intimidating and deterring any NATO reaction to Russian participation in a war; obtaining and retaining escalation dominance, and thus the strategic initiative and freedom of action throughout all stages of a crisis, from start to finish, regardless of how it develops; and creating—in theory, if not also operationally—a seamless web of threats to Russian enemies from both conventional and nuclear weapons, to retain that control over escalation processes. Finally, Russia’s rhetoric and exercises display the regime’s concept of strategic deterrence in action.

STRATEGIC DETERRENCE

In Russian policy, *strategicheskoye sderzhivanie* (strategic deterrence) explicitly calls for the state to use all the instruments of power at its disposal to deter an attack, whether nuclear or conventional. In other words, it is expressly a concept of multidomain coercion. This concept of using all the state’s capacities to effectuate deterrence is the product of some twenty to thirty years of post-Cold War rethinking of the contemporary character of war and of Russia’s strategic situation, and it has been very much on display in this war.

Strategicheskoye sderzhivanie bears only a tenuous connection to the U.S. concept of deterrence. Because the Russian government and its defense planners inhabit a rather different cognitive universe from ours, *deterrence* connotes much more to them than it does to us. *Sderzhivanie*, the term they use to characterize Russian operations, means holding back, keeping out, restraining, or even constraining. In contrast, they characterize U.S. deterrence programs as being intimidating. This is despite the fact that Putin’s Russia, if not its predecessors, betrays all the hallmarks of a classic intimidation culture, not unlike that of the Mafia, to which Putin’s rule often has been likened.³ This is the logic behind the Russian preference for the more anodyne word *sderzhivanie* rather than the Russian word for intimidation, *ustrashenie*, which is derived from the word for terror, *strakh*—which is used habitually to characterize U.S. deterrence programs.⁴

This usage conforms to the first rule of Russian propaganda, polemics, and thinking about war and peace—namely, that Russia is always right, and equally always is threatened by other, malevolent powers. Therefore, whatever Russia does is intrinsically defensive and should be seen as such. If external actors do not view Russian military-political activities as defensive, then their resistance,

however it expresses itself, is invariably, a priori threatening to Russia. This justifies Moscow's subsequent activities aimed at negating, countering, or overcoming that resistance. *Strategicheskoye sderzhivanie* is also a concept of deterrence that comports very well with fundamental tendencies in Russian culture (not just strategic culture), and even could subsume the widely used, even prevailing (although often incorrectly applied) term for Russian strategy, *hybrid warfare*.⁵

This correspondence with Russian strategic and general cultural traditions and with the practices widely known as hybrid warfare can be discerned from the official Russian definition of the term *strategicheskoye sderzhivanie*:

A coordinated system of military and non-military (political, diplomatic, legal, economic, ideological, scientific-technical and others) measures taken consecutively or simultaneously . . . with the goal of deterring military action entailing damage of a strategic character. . . . Strategic deterrence is directed at the stabilisation of the military-political situation . . . in order to influence an adversary within a predetermined framework, or for the de-escalation of military conflict. . . . The objects to be influenced through strategic deterrence may be the military-political leadership and the population of the potential adversary state (or coalition of states). . . . Strategic-deterrent measures are carried out continuously, both in peacetime and in wartime.⁶

Thus, the Russian government carries out (or at least intends to do so) all these measures in multiple domains simultaneously and continuously, whether the country is at peace or war. In fact, it assumes the existence of a condition of near war, if not actual war, at all times. The concept aims explicitly at compelling or coercing the enemy to act within a framework that Moscow controls, thereby also linking *strategicheskoye sderzhivanie* to the concept of *reflexive control* (discussed later). This scope of the concept clearly includes the entire domain of information warfare.

Second, *strategicheskoye sderzhivanie* aims at imposing Moscow's control on the entire process of deterrence, encompassing prewar and wartime periods, if not postwar times as well. The concept thus also conforms to Harry Summers's observation that, "[a]t least from the military perspective, it is well understood that conflict prevention depends on a credible capability for *conflict control*."⁷

Third, the concept of *strategicheskoye sderzhivanie* does not subsume only the cross-domain coercion we have observed in Ukraine, in Syria, and across all Russian security policy. It also presupposes constant tensions that could explode at any time into actual hostilities.⁸

Fourth, another objective of *strategicheskoye sderzhivanie* clearly is to use Moscow's entire arsenal (some of which will be described in more detail later) to maintain constant escalation control. This is not what Western observers have called an "escalate to de-escalate" strategy, although that aspect of *strategicheskoye sderzhivanie* is by no means incompatible with a broader strategy of escalation control.

Fifth, *strategicheskoye sderzhivanie* represents a conscious ambition or aspiration of Russian planners and leaders to efface the demarcations between offense and defense and between deterrence and coercion. According to Kristin Ven Bruusgaard,

The third unique feature of the Russian deterrence concept is its *blending of the logics of deterrence and coercion* through its continued role in wartime. The Russian concept transcends a traditional perception of deterrence having failed if conflict erupts. It should continue to work “in times of war to prevent escalation, to ensure de-escalation, or for the swift termination of conflict on terms acceptable to Russia.” The Russian concept seeks more actively to influence wartime calculations through demonstrating Russian willingness to use coercive measures. One interesting aspect of this logic is how the need to *demonstrate* coercive capability increases as the destructiveness of the deterrent tools employed decreases. Whereas the sheer destructiveness of nuclear weapons means their mere existence should be enough to deter, non-nuclear and non-military tools in particular must be demonstrated or used coercively in order to deter a potential adversary. The Russian term strategic deterrence is thus a clustered term used to describe all of the following: activities aimed at containing any threat from materialising against Russia; activities aimed at deterring any direct aggression against Russia; and, lastly, activities focused on coercing an adversary to cede in a confrontation to terms dictated by Russia.⁹

Dmitry Adamsky arrives at the same conclusion: that the Russian concept of deterrence follows the Leninist and Soviet practice of erasing distinctions between offense and defense and between compellence (and we may add coercion) and deterrence. As Bruusgaard notes, all this easily could yield the perception of a classic security dilemma—and a misperception of the situation. Thus, the challenge for any adversary that cannot understand fully the logic behind Moscow’s actions is to devise a strategy that holds the line and does not misread Russia’s intentions and actions.¹⁰

Russia’s Arctic deployments express this strategy. They aim not only to hold U.S., Canadian, and other allied targets at risk, but to impose control over U.S. policy. This involves not only defending Russian territory but also threatening allied lands. The goal is to decouple the NATO alliance, and thereby to compel the United States to accept the Russian view that these two great powers must be shackled together like prison inmates, and to be shackled as well to a mutually assured destruction regime whose a priori logic is that conflict between them is unavoidable, and in fact constitutes the very foundation of modern international life.

This strategy rests on what the German theorist Carl Schmitt called the presupposition of conflict, and in this regard it remains faithful to a Leninist *weltanschauung* (worldview) and legacy. By presupposing the a priori existence of

conflict—even when, in the present case, there was no allied threat to or from Ukraine—Russia has generated and launched a process that, in the absence of many arms-control mechanisms—not least because of Russian cheating—easily could explode.

In sum, under the rubric of *strategicheskoye sderzhivanie*, Russia aims to deter every conceivable threat to itself, on a continuous basis, irrespective of distinctions between peacetime and wartime. It blends together the logic of deterrence and that of coercion, making it all too easy for Russia to convince itself that threats exist—allegedly in Ukraine—that must be deterred by means of threatened or actual coercion.¹¹

NUCLEAR WEAPONS, INFORMATION WARFARE, AND REFLEXIVE CONTROL

In Russian political culture, displaying the state's capacity to intimidate others is of utmost importance. Just as Russia desperately needs to see itself as a great power, it equally needs to be feared, to validate its self-perception as a great global power. But since intimidation expresses above all a psychological relationship between the parties involved, the prominent display of nuclear weapons carries with it a powerful informational-psychological charge that also fully comports with Russian strategic thinking.

Russia's threats clearly aim to intimidate NATO into not intervening in Ukraine, to impede efforts to enhance NATO cohesion, and to block weapons supplies, and thus to isolate the Ukrainian theater of operations and retain the strategic initiative and escalation dominance in the war. These are basic objectives of Russian nuclear, and thus military, strategy.

Such approaches have a deep-rooted basis in Soviet practice. Prior Soviet tactics and strategies have provided a foundation for the development of new Russian strategies that incorporate at least some of the Leninist repertoire along with new factors, such as the availability and use of nuclear and high-precision weapons and large-scale cyber and information-warfare tools. All these are combined in the conduct of continuous political warfare against hostile targets. The continuity in tactics employed in Ukraine with those used in earlier, Communist takeovers underscores this point. For example, Moscow attempted to convince Kyiv that its allies could not or would not defend it—just as it did with Prague in 1968, when it succeeded in isolating the Dubček regime. At that time, Ivo D. Duchacek expressed the contention that “[f]or a successful revolution the Communists must have among other things a clearly favorable balance of potential outside aid. The democratic majority must feel isolated *internationally*, while the Communist minority is sure of direct or indirect support from Soviet Russia or other Communist states.”¹²

Isolation of the theater and the enemy, however achieved, facilitates Moscow's objective of achieving the strategic initiative and dominance of the escalation ladder. To do this, it merely needs to make what are assumed to be innately credible threats of nuclear use, even if they are unsupported in reality. Thus, after Putin in February 2022 supposedly placed Russian nuclear forces on a higher alert status—one that may not even be a real category—no observer saw any “muscle movements” of Russia's nuclear forces.¹³ Yet Russia's rhetorical invocation of nuclear threats that are assumed to be inherently credible, regardless of the facts, reflects Russia's understanding that nuclear weapons are not merely tools of enormous destruction but also a very potent information weapon that can be employed to manipulate enemies' psychology and decision-making.

In that context—and accepting the idea that Russia's military operations can be understood using the concept, originated by Adamsky, of cross-domain coercion—we can see how the mere credible threat of nuclear escalation and use can be subsumed, along with other instruments of power, within the conceptual framework of cross-domain coercion. Today, it is the integrity and resilience of societal and political institutions that represent the Clausewitzian center of gravity from which power springs for all belligerents in this war. From this perspective, the centrality to all sociopolitical activity, not just kinetic combat operations, of the availability of accurate and true information becomes quite clear. Therefore, Russian leaders and theoreticians rightly emphasize the informational-psychological aspect of war as the most critical element, even more than actual combat operations. They invest much time and resources in that form of warfare to derange and unhinge actual and potential opponents. They see information warfare as a possible first strike in itself, and even as something that can and should be waged continuously, not just in wartime but in peacetime.¹⁴ Thus, cross-domain coercion actually represents a form of warfare targeted on societal and state resilience and the opponent's ability to comprehend and act on reality. As Adamsky writes, “[T]he current Russian cross-domain coercion campaign is an integrated whole of non-nuclear, informational, and nuclear types of deterrence and compellence. Finally, the campaign contains a holistic informational (cyber) operation, waged simultaneously on the digital-technological and on the cognitive-psychological fronts, which skillfully merges military and non-military capabilities across nuclear, conventional, and sub-conventional domains.”¹⁵

Even the ultimate (i.e., nuclear) weapon fits right into this perspective on contemporary war. Deliberately reckless rhetoric, nuclear overflights, and submarine probes (to be detailed later) all contribute to this aspect of contemporary war—and none of these phenomena would be unfamiliar to the fathers of deterrence theory: Schelling, Brodie, Kissinger, Wohlstetter, Kahn, and others. But Russia's

embrace of these tactics does highlight the fact that the psychology and character of the current regime are essentially those of an intimidation culture. As Andrei A. Soldatov and Irina Borogan observe, "The Putin approach is all about intimidation, more often than actual coercion, as an instrument of control."¹⁶ The Russian emphasis on nuclear weapons not only relates to this culture and system of intimidation; it also comports fully with the long-standing element of Russian political culture that relies on the external projection of fear to augment the regime's domestic support and attenuate the enemy's base of support and will to resist.¹⁷ Consequently, Putin's strategy has been to amass instruments comparable to what he and his entourage believe the West is deploying against Russia and to deploy them preemptively and uninterruptedly against the West. And whereas the West devalues nuclear weapons in its rhetoric and policy, Russia must elevate their utility because it lacks other means of suasion that can be deployed to make credible intimidating threats.¹⁸

However, beyond Moscow's use of nuclear weapons as informational weapons to intimidate external audiences with Russia's power and its resolve to use them in a first-strike mode if challenged or resisted, nuclear weapons also function as instruments of Russian *reflexive-control operations*. "Reflexive control is defined as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action."¹⁹ Reflexive control is linked directly to information warfare. As Major General N. I. Turko, who served in Russia's General Staff Academy in the 1990s and 2000s, observed, "The most dangerous manifestation in the tendency to rely on military power relates more to the possible impact of the use of reflexive control by the opposing side through developments in the theory and practice of information war rather than to the direct use of the means of armed combat."²⁰ For Turko and his disciples, reflexive control can be employed in the context of potential nuclear use. "For example, [Turko] and a colleague described a new containment theory under development that portrayed new means for coping with confrontation between new large-scale geopolitical groupings. This theory involves information warfare means; specifically, the threat of inflicting unacceptable levels of damage against a state or group of states by attacking their information resources."²¹

Moscow long has exploited the associated techniques of reflexive control and information warfare to frighten Western leaders and societies into making decisions that redound to its benefit.

Russia has repeatedly implied that tactical nuclear weapons might be used against NATO states in the event of conflict. Moscow capitalizes on the prospect that this is highly alarming for Western leaders. Within this overall atmosphere of apprehension, Russia cultivates its image as an irresponsible actor in order to increase the credibility

of the nuclear threat. It also actively disseminates the highly dangerous argument that the best way to respond to Russian nuclear posturing is to withdraw the last remaining non-strategic nuclear weapons from Western Europe. In this way, counter-intuitively, Russia creates a mindset where abolishing a significant deterrent at the West's disposal is presented as a rational response to Russian behavior.²²

Russian writers from about 2005 onward increasingly identified information warfare and the manipulation of targeted adversaries' psychological states as the most crucial element in modern war.²³ The intimidation effect created by the prominent display of nuclear weapons aims to convince gullible foreign observers that defying Russia means war, and potentially nuclear war. Since it appears that Russia, as did the Soviet Union, equates deterrence with the ability to fight a nuclear and large-scale conventional war—and even though it prefers to use nonnuclear deterrents, if possible—because it lacks those nonnuclear weapons Moscow must shackle Washington to a deterrence relationship that presupposes enmity *ab initio*. As nuclear war is unthinkable, the West must yield, at least in part, to Russian demands—or so the logic of Russia's position goes.

This thinking is evident in a paper prepared in 2017 by Jacob W. Kipp and Matthew Kroenig.

In the past decade and a half, Russia has come to rely more on nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence and for warfighting to manage local wars. The possibility of a local war against NATO remains Moscow's highest priority security threat. Russia relies on the early resort to nuclear use in part to offset its aggregate conventional inferiority vis-à-vis NATO. Moscow's concept of "de-escalatory" nuclear strikes envisions limited nuclear strikes on NATO targets early in a conflict in a bid to frighten Western leaders into suing for peace on terms favorable to Moscow. Even if such strikes are never employed, the possibility enhances Russia's coercive leverage in a crisis and . . . blackmail threats in peacetime.²⁴

In light of steadily deteriorating perceptions of the external security order and growing apprehensions about the threat, and in view of Russia's continuing conventional inferiority to a fully mobilized NATO, especially the United States, this perception and strategy regarding nuclear weapons create strong pressures for first-strike use. As Kipp and Kroenig observe,

Russia's nuclear forces and strategy also present a number of weaknesses, however, that could be subject to Western exploitation. Russia does not prefer dependence on nuclear weapons, but is forced to rely on them largely in order to offset conventional disadvantages. This creates a number of problems, including imposing demands for rapid escalation in the case of successful initial operations by opposing forces. In addition, leaders in Moscow must confront the prospect that limited nuclear warfare might be conducted across the depths of Russia's homeland if NATO honors commitments to the Baltic States and the conflict escalates to the nuclear level.²⁵

Therefore—and in the best tradition of Sun-tzu's recommendation that the best strategy is one that negates the opponent's strategy without firing a shot—a robust Western conventional deterrent in the Baltic and Black Sea theaters and across Europe negates incentives for Russia to believe it can win quickly in a limited conventional war that might bring in NATO. This robust conventional deterrent also thereby deters nuclear escalation.

Another reason for advocating such an approach pertains to the information dimension inherent in nuclear threats that is related to the intimidation factor discussed above. As Ofer Fridman has noted, Russian military professionals assign informational tasks to their armed forces to support otherwise nonmilitary actions during a conflict, simply by virtue of the armed forces' presence and their demonstration of military potential. Thus, this aspect of nuclear strategy is actually part of Russia's overall military strategy.²⁶

But while nuclear use in a first-strike mode to retrieve a losing conventional war and force NATO to de-escalate may be part of the strategy (escalate to de-escalate), that arguably is merely a part of a much broader nuclear strategy that relies heavily on the psychological and intimidating or informational components of nuclear weapons.²⁷ In other words, we see a broader nuclear strategy that aims to use these weapons to control the entire process of escalation throughout the crisis from start to finish. If the crisis becomes kinetic, escalating to de-escalate may well become an operative possibility.

For instance, in a March 2015 meeting in Germany, Russian generals told Western delegates that any NATO effort to retake Crimea and return it to Ukraine would lead them to consider “a spectrum of responses from nuclear to non-military.”²⁸ Apart from the obvious physical threat and its intimidation “quotient,” the information conveyed clearly partakes of *information warfare*, understood in Russian terms as manipulating opponents' psychological reactions and hence their policies. Putin too, no doubt with similar ends in mind, has made numerous remarks threatening nuclear strikes. Such rhetoric, accompanied by the regular dispatch of bomber and submarine probes against all members of NATO (covered in more detail in a later section), clearly is intended to intimidate and deter—the mission par excellence of bombers and submarines in peacetime.²⁹ But it also is indisputable that, for Russian leaders and commanders, nuclear weapons are to be used for war-fighting missions and operations. Indeed, as General Sir A. Richard D. Shirreff, who was NATO's Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe from 2011 to 2014, has stated, “Russia hardwires nuclear thinking and capability to every aspect of their defence capability.”³⁰

Thus Russia, since NATO's Kosovo operation in 1999, gradually has developed both a strategy and a capability involving nuclear weapons that Western elites do not comprehend fully. Its approach is much broader than the catchphrase “escalate

to de-escalate” implies.³¹ In fact, that formulation unfortunately exemplifies the increasing U.S. tendency to mirror image countries such as Russia, including to depict the strategies and goals of Russian leaders as if they were Americans. In fact, the Russian nuclear strategy is broader still than the one described here. Russia’s deployment of nuclear and conventional weapons indicates that Moscow believes the former deter not only nuclear but conventional attacks. This mode of strategizing and thinking directly rebuts the complacent and groundless notion that nuclear weapons deter only other nuclear weapons. For Russia, both types of weapons are intended to deter the U.S. or broader NATO *aerospace attacks* (as Russia calls them), thereby allowing Russia to operate offensively under the umbrella of its potent integrated air-defense system (IADS). In other words, Russian defense policy emphasizes medium-to-large-scale conventional and even nuclear war fighting at the expense of insurgency, counterinsurgency, stability operations, and the like. Consequently, nuclear weapons are at the core of this so-called asymmetry, to forestall the application of NATO’s conventional superiority.

Adamsky’s insight that the “nuclear component is an inseparable part of Russian operational art that cannot be analyzed as a stand-alone issue,” because it abets Russian conventional threats and aggression through the deterrence of adversaries’ counteraction to that aggression, is equally apt here.³² Similarly, Major Amos C. Fox, USA, wrote that the strategic defense provided by Russian nuclear weapons and the IADS facilitates the attainment of all Russia’s conventional-warfare objectives: deterring NATO expansion into Russia’s historic sphere of influence, retaining regional hegemony in Eurasia, and demonstrating improvements to Russian military capabilities.³³ But beyond that,

[t]he presence of nuclear weapons is perhaps the first critical component for modern hybrid warfare. Nuclear weapons provide insurance against a massive ground response to an incremental, limited war. The offensive nation that possesses nuclear weapons knows that the adversary or its allies will not likely commit large ground forces to a conflict for fear of the aggressor employing those weapons against ground [or naval] forces. This dynamic emboldens the aggressor nation. In the case of Russia, its possession of nuclear weapons emboldens leaders to take offensive action because they know that even the threat of nuclear employment forces potential adversaries to a standstill.³⁴

In other words, nuclear weapons make the world safe for conventional war on the nuclear power’s terms—or so its leaders may believe. We see this belief reflected in Moscow’s behavior and its apparent nuclear strategy. Since the document detailing that strategy and the conditions for nuclear use is classified, the doctrinal statements available are hardly revealing. To say that nuclear weapons might be used in a first strike if there is a vital threat to the state’s survival is hardly revelatory for any nuclear power, especially one haunted by the real specter of

state disintegration and that cannot afford to lose any war in which it engages. But Russia's "nuclear behaviour" is sufficient grounds for real anxiety. As Colin S. Gray observed, despite the fact that there is no sign of Russian discourse coming true concerning the use of a nuclear weapon to defeat NATO in limited nuclear scenarios, Moscow talks as if it can achieve this outcome. Thus, Gray wrote the following:

In a manner that is ominously reminiscent of Adolf Hitler, Putin and others have chosen to introduce explicitly ruthless threats, including nuclear threats, into Russian reasoning about acute international crises. They hypothesize about the high political value that would accrue as a result of nuclear use on a limited scale. The hope, apparently, is that the NATO enemy, certainly the less robust members, at least, would be out-gunned either by the actuality, or more likely only by the credible threat[,] of nuclear use [especially in a first-strike mode].³⁵

Not surprisingly, and in conformity with the argument laid out above, for Gray the inescapable conclusion was that Russia seeks escalation dominance.

In the language of now-classic strategic theory from a past generation of theorists, the Russians currently are talking with apparent seriousness about *nuclear escalation dominance*. Russian theorists claim, perhaps expect, they could win a war wherein Russia employs nuclear weapons only on a very modest scale. This expectation follows from a Russian belief that Moscow's employment of a few nuclear weapons would give them a decisive coercive edge in the diplomacy that should follow. Russian authors have advised us ironically that the use of these weapons would prove to be a decisive de-escalatory move—de-escalatory because NATO would be expected to capitulate. The high determination shown unmistakably by the fact of Russian nuclear use would surprise, even shock, audiences politically around the world. Thus, with unmatched boldness Russia should achieve a considerable political, perhaps even military[,] victory.³⁶

While no such scenario yet has occurred, nor is its incidence immediately likely, the current war with Kyiv does not just display Moscow's brazenness; equally, if not more importantly, it also shows how nuclear scenarios can become intertwined with conventional wars. Nuclear weapons represent important, even critical, parts of Putin's so-called asymmetric or indirect strategy. These sectors are critical not only because they show up in procurement priorities but also because until recently Russia clearly envisaged fighting a limited nuclear war, and it still may think in terms of doing so. It is true that a reading of Russia's most recent published military doctrines suggests a move toward greater reliance on what might be called nonnuclear or conventional deterrence.³⁷ But Russia's procurement programs and the exercises it conducts reveal a habitual recourse to nuclear-, chemical-, or biological-weapons use, and also point to a lowered threshold for escalating to such operations. While the controversy over the role of

nuclear weapons in Russian strategy and the question whether Russia's threshold for nuclear use is high or low remain unresolved, the Ukraine war nevertheless shows how Moscow instrumentalizes the mere threat of nuclear escalation as an intrinsic element of its overall strategy.³⁸

RUSSIAN NUCLEAR STRATEGY

Judging by current appearances, NATO must fear nuclear escalation, while Putin need not do so. Consequently, it is reasonable to assert that Russia's nuclear arsenal has enabled the current war in Ukraine, not least because of the implicit credibility of Putin's nuclear threats.³⁹ This fact also confirms Adamsky's argument quoted previously, that "the nuclear component is an inseparable part of Russian operational art that cannot be analyzed as a stand-alone issue." This is because nuclear threats abet Russian conventional threats and aggression by deterring adversaries from counteracting that aggression.⁴⁰

Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs Celeste Wallander stated the following with regard to Russia:

Its nuclear arsenal backs a military doctrine that emphasizes the coercive military value of nuclear weapons, including limited nuclear first-use in conventional regional conflict, at multiple levels of the conflict spectrum. As we have seen even recently, Russia routinely threatens nuclear use irresponsibly and often casually, causing alarm with its nuclear saber-rattling, including in conjunction with its renewed invasion of Ukraine. We are also likely to face Russian systems and methods of warfare as Russia proliferates military capabilities to others, including the potential basing of nuclear weapons in Belarus.⁴¹

Many of, if not all, these elements of Russian nuclear policies are on view in this war. We see the cavalier and irresponsible threats to use nuclear weapons (or *saber rattling*) and the likely deployment of weapons in Belarus to heighten the existing threats to the West.⁴² Since Russia itself is not under threat and the stationing of nuclear weapons in Belarus neither enhances Russian security nor materially affects operations in Ukraine, we must conclude that the purpose of the move, apart from further cementing Russian hegemony in that country, is to threaten Europe with more nuclear contingencies that seem altogether too credible, and thus to deter Western replies to the aggression against Ukraine.

The entering argument—that Russian threats are inherently credible—appears incontestable. Alexander R. Vershbow, deputy secretary general of NATO from 2012 to 2016, stated that NATO leaders at that time had concluded that Russian plans for nuclear use in a major crisis were sincere, and thus credible.⁴³ Similarly, Christopher S. Chivvis of the Carnegie Endowment has recounted that during his time as a U.S. intelligence official for Europe, scores of allied war games projected that Putin would launch a single nuclear strike if he faced limited fighting

with NATO or major setbacks in Ukraine that could be blamed on the West.⁴⁴ This credibility, apart from intelligence reports, derives from Russian leaders' published statements, in the form of doctrine and rhetoric, and also Russian military exercises, as will be discussed in a later section. Moreover, the widespread anxiety about a prospective Russian escalation exists despite the fact that such a step requires several persons to effectuate it; Putin does not appear to have sole or exclusive discretion over the use of nuclear weapons.⁴⁵

Moscow's inclination toward first use is evident from Russian doctrinal guidance. By 2000, Moscow had introduced the idea of "de-escalating" a war by responding to a large-scale conventional attack—one that exceeded its ability to defend against it—with a limited nuclear strike.⁴⁶ By 2010, Russia's nuclear weapons were assigned only to conflicts in which Russia is fighting another nuclear-weapon state.⁴⁷ And all its major exercises through 2013 also contained the contingency of a limited nuclear strike.⁴⁸ Indeed, this characteristic of Russian exercises continues into the present.⁴⁹ But despite Russia's stated emphasis on developing its nonnuclear-deterrence capabilities, nuclear weapons and threats still enjoy pride of place in its strategy and doctrine.

Doctrine

Russia's naval doctrine of 2017 states that in a major conflict Russia could conduct a "demonstration of readiness and determination to employ nonstrategic nuclear weapons" (also known as tactical nuclear weapons—TNWs).⁵⁰ As noted, this strike supposedly would function as a "de-escalating factor."⁵¹ Such writings reinforce the idea, which first appeared in 2003 and is now popular in the West, that this Russian strategy aims at "escalating to de-escalate" or "escalating to win," as such a strike would be presumed to lead to a negotiation on Moscow's terms.⁵²

These are by no means isolated Russian thoughts on nuclear strategy. This naval doctrine explicitly invokes the navy's use of nuclear weapons as a legitimate deterrent.⁵³ But it goes still further in extolling the possibility of nuclear strikes launched from forward-based naval (and, implicitly, air-based) platforms. Thus, it observes that "development and maintenance of the naval capability to strike ground targets of a potential enemy with conventional as well as nuclear weapons" is a priority of the Russian navy.⁵⁴ Some excerpts from the doctrine follow.

32. The Navy is one of the most effective instruments of strategic (nuclear and non-nuclear) deterrence, including preventing "global strike." This is due to the Navy possessing strategic nuclear and conventional naval forces and the ability to implement its combat potential in virtually any area of the World Ocean; ability to deploy naval expeditionary groups in a short period of time into the areas of conflict and remain in these areas for an extended period of time without violating the sovereignty of other states; as well as a high level of readiness for actions, including strikes on critically important enemy targets.

33. With the development of high-precision weapons, the Navy faces a qualitatively new objective: destruction of enemy's military and economic potential by striking its vital facilities from the sea.
34. Possession of a sufficient number of high-precision weapons and the ability to use them in different ways ensures deterrence of a large-scale military action against the Russian Federation.
35. The primary elements of the strategic deterrence system are nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence.
36. Conventional naval forces retain an important place in the implementation of strategic deterrence objectives.
37. During the escalation of military conflict, demonstration of readiness and determination to employ non-strategic nuclear weapons capabilities is an effective deterrent.⁵⁵

Building on those statements, Michael B. Petersen of the U.S. Naval War College has written that

[i]n Russian thinking, strategic deterrence operations are executed in peacetime and wartime, and they feature what western strategists might define as conflict dissuasion and escalation control. Military forces achieve these missions through pre-conflict signaling and by inflicting specifically assigned damage criteria in local, regional, and strategic conflicts. In regional and strategic conflicts—wars against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in particular—this criteria is met in part via attacks against an adversary's critical infrastructure. These operations perform the vital function of military signaling during what Russian thinkers term the "period of threat," and then apply measured force against strategic targets during the ensuing "initial period of war." Thereafter, these operations also provide a means of escalation management.⁵⁶

The 2020 guidelines for nuclear use published by Moscow clearly delineate a first-strike posture and a lowered or broadened threshold for first-strike nuclear use—for example, against conventional strikes that endanger the stability of the government.⁵⁷ Western elites—with good reason—have taken Putin's declaration of a lowered threshold for a nuclear first strike, and the resultant threats of such use, as being credible, thereby establishing his bona fides.

The first point to be made is that, despite some Western claims to the contrary, a nuclear strike against Ukraine, or a NATO that is openly aligned with it, comports perfectly with Russian nuclear doctrine, exercises, and rhetoric. Arguments that Putin is merely bluffing misread Russian doctrine and Putin.⁵⁸ Indeed, already in 2014, while seizing Crimea, Putin mulled the possibility of calling a nuclear alert, despite the absence of any strategic threat.⁵⁹ So both this instinct to invoke disproportionate nuclear threats and Putin's linked obsession with Ukraine are well-established behavioral patterns. Today that idea—that Ukraine

posed a threat to Russia that triggered his newest efforts at intimidation—is recognized as absurd, but nonetheless its congruence with Russian doctrine makes it much more dangerous. Putin's war against Ukraine represents a wager on his regime's survival. Therefore, and since Russia “reserves the right to use nuclear weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat,” the Putin regime itself is now under threat, both domestically and externally, owing to its initial aggression and subsequent mismanagement of this war.

The point here is that the posing of the threat in ambiguous and vague terms is intrinsic to Russian strategy, because the overall strategy aims at escalation dominance—that is, retention of the strategic initiative throughout all stages of a crisis to enable Russia to impose its terms on an adversary. It therefore must deploy the threat of, if not the actual, launch of these weapons as an informational-psychological weapon in its own right.

This operative condition for nuclear use now has come into play, which clearly frightens the West. Given that Putin has stated explicitly that an independent, or even merely a West-leaning, Ukraine represents an existential threat to Russia, the conditions for nuclear use became operative immediately on the start of this war.⁶⁰ But we also see here how Putin conjoins information operations, in the form of nuclear threats that seem credible but are actually insubstantial, to instrumentalize fear of nuclear war to make others bow to his ambitions.⁶¹ Such processes fully validate an assertion put forward by *The Economist* that Putin's modus operandi is escalation, not cutting his losses.⁶²

Second, in tandem with the Western assumption of the credibility of Russian threats, there appears to be a growing consensus that the longer this war lasts the more dangerous it becomes; Russian operational failures, combined with Putin's inability to retreat, increase the possibility of escalation.⁶³ But to Moscow, that perception enhances the utility of its nuclear threats.

Third, Russia's war shows that a nuclear power can engage in brutal regional aggression yet escape the most severe penalties for doing so because of its nuclear arsenal.⁶⁴ This is a dangerous example to nuclear wannabes. In other words, Russia's aggression deranges not only European security but also the overall nuclear global order.⁶⁵

Prewar and Wartime Rhetoric and Exercises

Even before the Ukraine war began, Russian rhetoric and exercises firmly established Russia's credibility for escalating to the nuclear level if foreign intervention occurred. Since the onset of hostilities, this pattern of Russian behavior has continued, with marked success—for example, by inhibiting Western discussions of supplying planes to Ukraine or establishing no-fly zones—owing to fears of escalation. Since Putin, in accordance with Russian strategy, retains both escalation dominance and the operational-strategic initiative, he has no reason to refrain

from attempting to intimidate NATO via rhetorical-threat escalation, or operational escalation on the ground (e.g., chemical weapons use, bombing areas near Poland), or both.⁶⁶ Furthermore, because Putin cannot afford to be seen as losing this war, escalation not only appears to work for him; it has become his default option, making this a war of escalation.⁶⁷

Russian Rhetoric. Russia's prewar rhetoric overtly displayed a readiness to make nuclear threats, often in combination with conventional threats. In December 2021, senior Russian officials warned that NATO enlargement to the east would lead to Russian deployments of TNWs.⁶⁸ This threat was particularly visible in the naval or maritime domain. Rhetorically, the propensity to escalate and intimidate also was clear from Putin's speeches on 21 and 23 February 2022, in which he announced the war.⁶⁹ These speeches included what most observers believed to be threats to use TNWs or low-yield weapons in first-strike and war-fighting modes.⁷⁰ In the 23 February speech, Putin said, "Anyone who tries to interfere with us, or even more so, to create threats for our country and our people, must know that Russia's response will be immediate and will lead you to such consequences as you have never before experienced in your history."⁷¹ Then on 27 February, Putin invoked Western threats to justify raising the alert status of Russian nuclear weapons, claiming that "[s]enior officials of the leading Nato countries also allow aggressive statements against our country, therefore I order the minister of defence and the chief of the general staff [of the Russian armed forces] to transfer the deterrence forces of the Russian army to a special mode of combat duty. . . . Western countries aren't only taking unfriendly actions against our country in the economic sphere, but top officials from leading Nato members made aggressive statements regarding our country."⁷²

Other Russian officials also made threats regarding nuclear use if NATO refused to guarantee an end to its expansion. Likewise, Russia also demanded that NATO withdraw from Romania and Bulgaria, and that Finland and Sweden, in which public support for joining NATO was growing, must provide security guarantees to Russia.⁷³ Moscow also threatened repeatedly to strike at NATO vehicles transferring weapons to Ukraine.⁷⁴ Subsequent threats expressed a refusal to rule out nuclear escalation in the event of an "existential crisis" to Russia growing out of the war.⁷⁵ Such threats, as delivered by former president Dmitry A. Medvedev, Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov, and Putin's press secretary Dmitry S. Peskov, inevitably regenerate foreign apprehension about nuclear use and inhibit allied responses to Russia's aggression, thereby allowing the Putin regime to retain the initiative despite its poor military performance.⁷⁶

Russian Military Exercises and Deployments. Russian nuclear exercises build on this wide-ranging understanding of the usefulness of nuclear weapons' utility and

potency. Obviously, one function of exercises is to intimidate potential or real enemies with the actuality of potential military use, as showcased in the field. They convey genuine possession of and readiness to use nuclear weapons, to impress on audiences Russia's threat by showing it in fact rather than rhetorically and by demonstrating Russia's readiness to use such weapons in a first-strike mode. Thus, they extend and confirm the information conveyed in official rhetoric.

Evidence of Russian nuclear threats may be found in the fact that a huge nuclear exercise, Operation GROM (THUNDER), whose purpose clearly was to intimidate the West, immediately preceded the war. In GROM-2022, Russia simulated nuclear strikes in the Arctic and on Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Moscow reportedly deployed to sea some of its missile and attack submarines, with some carrying the Yars mobile intercontinental ballistic missile, which can attack both the United States and Europe. Finally, some reports claim that Putin relocated to a secret nuclear bunker in Siberia.⁷⁷

Operation GROM-2022 was not an anomaly. In 2009, during the annual ZAPAD exercise, Russia simulated an attack on Warsaw with a nuclear missile. Since then the Russian military has simulated nuclear attacks on Sweden and the United Kingdom, conducted regular submarine and aerial probes of Europe and the United States and aerial probes against Japan and South Korea, and made diplomatic threats against Denmark. Most dangerously, in March 2022 Russian planes—Su-24 bombers escorted by Su-27 fighters—carrying nuclear weapons purposefully violated European Union airspace.⁷⁸ Thus, overt Russian nuclear threats continue.

Similarly, the GROM-2019 exercise—which at the time was unprecedented in size and complexity—highlighted a program of what Pavel K. Baev calls “nuclear renaissance.” It included the idea that “Russian leadership not only accepts the possibility of but also seeks to prevail in a large-scale nuclear war involving multiple exchanges of various strikes.”⁷⁹ GROM-2019 evidently was intended to showcase Russian nuclear superiority in Europe.

Involving all elements of the strategic triad and spreading across all strategic directions, *Grom-2019* was unprecedented in scale and complexity; Putin personally supervised it, pushing the buttons of the super-computer in the National Defense Control Center. The plan for launching simultaneously combined nuclear strikes in different theaters indeed goes far beyond the “escalate-to-deescalate” proposition, which envisages a single or a very limited use of nuclear weapons aimed at altering the pattern of a conventional operation. Russian military experts suggested that the scenario of the exercise indicated that Russian leaders prepared for massive nuclear exchanges in a previously unthinkable total war. This may appear to be speculation that goes too far, but it reflects the alarming expansion of political discourse on the readiness for and the practicable possibility of a victory in nuclear war.⁸⁰

Another important feature of this exercise was the integrated employment of strategic and nonstrategic capabilities, the latter involving sea-launched 3M-54 Kalibr cruise missiles and land-based 9K720 Iskander tactical missiles.⁸¹ This integration of conventional and nuclear weapons is now a hallmark of Russian escalation doctrine—one that threatens to pose many problems to defenders against Russian missile strikes, because all the new missiles are dual capable, which makes it difficult to determine what kind of attack is incoming. Arguably there is a seamless web that leads from conventional scenarios up to and including these supposedly limited nuclear-war scenarios, perhaps involving low-yield or tactical nuclear weapons—scenarios for which the West has found no response yet.⁸² As former Finnish lieutenant colonel Pentti Forsström argues,

In this way . . . the concept of traditional strategic deterrence is broadened to cover both Russian nuclear and conventional assets. On the other hand, the abolishment of the restrictions for the use of nuclear weapons means that the dividing line between waging war with conventional or with nuclear weapons is vanishing. When the principle of surprise is connected to this idea, it seems that Russia wants to indicate that non-strategic nuclear weapons could be regarded as “normal” assets on a conventional battlefield. This is the basis upon which Russia regulates the level of deterrence in the Kaliningrad exclave, for example. By introducing the concept of pre-emptive strike to its military means, Russia is trying to enhance its non-nuclear deterrence even further.⁸³

Other exercises just before this war had comparable intentions and purposes. First, in January 2022, the Northern Fleet, ostensibly conducting exercises, surged into the North Atlantic, specifically off the Irish coast, astride the main sea lines of communication from North America to northern Europe. This activity was part of a larger exercise “involving 140 combat and supply ships from all four fleets, from the Pacific to the North Atlantic. Three of the Northern Fleet’s amphibious assault ships that in mid-January were flexing muscles in the Baltic Sea and made Sweden . . . increase military readiness, sending troops to the island of Gotland, are now sailing into the Mediterraneana[n].” They were “[l]ikely on their way to the Black Sea amid growing tensions and part of Russia’s military buildup in the area.”⁸⁴ Another assessment of these exercises commented as follows:

A series of training maneuvers of the Northern Fleet in the Barents Sea began in January. During the exercises, the participating forces practiced maritime communications protection, including in crisis situations. A few days before the war, about 20 Russian ships entered the Barents Sea to search for foreign submarines and to establish control over navigation in this body as well as the airspace above. It is now possible to conclude that those activities were to prepare the ground for potential Russian nuclear ballistic missile submarine (SSBM [*sic*]) operations. During the attack on Ukraine, the

Project 1144 cruiser *Peter the Great* notably remained in the Barents Sea to protect the Russian SSBMs in case NATO were to attempt to enter the conflict.⁸⁵

Then in February, Russia issued the largest warning ever for the Norwegian part of the Barents Sea for another exercise. The scope of this notice to air missions (known as a NOTAM) of Russian missile activity in the zone stretched about a thousand kilometers, from Kolguyev Island in the eastern Barents Sea to Bear Gap—and half this distance falls inside Norway's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which is, however, in international waters.⁸⁶ Subsequently, once Putin supposedly raised the nuclear alert level, the Northern Fleet launched a new exercise around the Kola Peninsula, the home base of the nuclear portion of the fleet, ostensibly to “train [on] maneuvering in stormy conditions.”⁸⁷

Apart from these exercises, some “human activity” was responsible for the cutting at Svalbard of the cable that Space Norway operates at the SvalSat park. The cable serves over one hundred satellite antennae and can provide all-orbit support to operators of polar-orbiting satellites, making the site a key intelligence and communications node.⁸⁸ Although this disruption of (or effort to interdict) North Atlantic communications cannot be attributed definitively to anyone, it smacks of Russian sabotage operations of the type that would be used to blind allied intelligence and satellite communications in the initial period of a war. Certainly, the surge into the waters off Ireland and the exercises in the Barents Sea, along with the possible missile operations inside Norway's EEZ, resemble operations that the Northern Fleet would conduct during the period preparatory to war, the initial period of the war, or both, to threaten or interdict North Atlantic shipping. Since Russian surface vessels and submarines (like the Arctic-based air forces) increasingly are armed with dual-capable missiles that can attack both Europe and the United States, the nuclear threats that such deployments pose are clear.⁸⁹

Other exercises, around the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, have had the aim not only of deterring NATO but of ensuring the isolation of Ukraine from external maritime support. Moscow dispatched long-range, nuclear-capable Tu-22M3 Backfire bombers and MiG-31 fighters carrying the latest Kinzhal (Dagger) hypersonic cruise missile (with a range of up to two thousand kilometers and a speed of Mach 10) to Russian bases in Syria and Kaliningrad. Their purpose was to threaten U.S., other NATO, and Ukrainian targets, including ships in the Mediterranean, and thus deter U.S. and other NATO support for Ukraine. These flights dovetailed with the patrols that Tu-22 bombers flew over Belarus in 2021.⁹⁰ These deployments and the threats they embody are the same as would be made preparatory to war, so they serve both a deterrent and an operational function against NATO and Ukraine.

Such exercises and deployments of dual-capable aircraft to Syria seem to have become habitual. In May 2021, three Backfire bombers landed at Russia's air base

in Khmeimim, Syria. Hitherto they had flown from Russia to Syria, dropped their bombs, and returned home. Now they will remain based in Syria, giving them coverage of the entire Levant and Middle East. Since these are among Moscow's most potent antiship strike platforms, the threat to the Mediterranean, Red Sea, and Persian Gulf is readily discernible.⁹¹ For example, the new, improved Tu-22M3 version of the Backfire has a range of 1,850 miles. Therefore, it could deliver nuclear or conventional missiles not only to Middle Eastern targets but also to European ones or those in the Indian Ocean.⁹² Recent Russian videos show the loading of the Backfire with long-range, nuclear, air-launched cruise missiles (either the nuclear-capable Kh-101, with a 4,500-kilometer range, or the nuclear-only Kh-102, with a 5,000-kilometer range). Moreover, along with those jets Russia also sent to Syria MiG-31 fighters that can fire the hypersonic and dual-capable Kinzhal missiles—supposedly for Mediterranean and Middle East “training.”⁹³ These deployments signify Moscow's intention to concentrate meaningful airpower throughout the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East, and perhaps the Indian Ocean and Sahel as well. But they also could threaten escalatory strikes against any NATO ships seeking entry into the eastern Mediterranean and later perhaps the Black Sea.

So, while the ostensible aim of converting the Russian navy by 2020 into a platform primarily for conventional deterrence was announced way back in 2014, the current reality is rather more clouded—leaving space for first-strike nuclear escalation in the naval domain.⁹⁴ These deployments in the eastern Mediterranean highlight that in Russian theory and practice, power projection and deterrence are tied together inextricably; therefore, power projection is a prerequisite for deterrence, and it often is intended to accomplish that purpose.

The deployments discussed above have not been restricted to any particular theater. In fact, their size and scope show that a conflict originating in Ukraine easily could morph into a multitheater or global conflict. Thus, the aim of Russian naval exercises conducted just before the onset of hostilities, beyond simple training, was to deter NATO from entering the eastern Mediterranean or blocking ships sent from the Northern and Baltic Sea Fleets from entering the Black Sea. And indeed, in December 2021 ships from the Pacific Fleet entered the Mediterranean to participate in exercises there.⁹⁵ In February 2022, Defense Minister Sergey K. Shoigu traveled to Syria, where he witnessed exercises conducted in the eastern Mediterranean. By thus showcasing “exercises in operationally important areas of the World Ocean, as well as in the waters of the seas adjacent to Russia,” Russia highlighted its global naval ambitions.⁹⁶ During the exercises, the ships of the Black Sea Fleet's Mediterranean Eskadra (Squadron) performed “measures to search for foreign submarines [and] establish control over navigation in the Mediterranean Sea and the flight of aircraft over it.”⁹⁷ This last phrase

captures clearly the strategic benefits that eastern Mediterranean bases offer Moscow in relation to scenarios that might play out in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe—including Ukraine.

Russia repeatedly has invoked nuclear threats as part of its overall strategy. This started before the Ukraine war began and has continued afterward.

As a first general observation, it is clear that in this particular aspect of the Ukraine war (which otherwise has displayed a rather lackluster performance by Moscow), the strategy has been successful in inhibiting NATO from undertaking a bolder and more imaginative response (e.g., creating a no-fly zone) and in limiting the types of weapons the West has provided to Ukraine. Thus, in this war, even if Russia will not use nuclear weapons—as some commentators have maintained—Russia arguably has obtained a certain leverage over allied decision-making.⁹⁸ The ongoing refusal to admit Ukraine to NATO also suggests as much.⁹⁹

Second, despite the widespread malfeasance its military has displayed, Russia clearly retains the strategic initiative and escalation dominance. The evidence for this is the publication in the West of articles arguing for a compromise with Russia or a cease-fire and a rapidly negotiated settlement.¹⁰⁰ Invariably those championing such a course invoke the specter of escalation, seemingly mindless of the fact that the Russian armed forces have proved themselves even less able to take on NATO than was assumed previously to be the case. The commentators also seem to forget that Putin never has come close to posing a direct challenge to NATO, and in fact has retreated from previous challenges to the West's interests when Washington or Brussels subtly communicated its resolve, such as in preventing forcible regime change in Georgia in 2008.¹⁰¹ That example, combined with Moscow's failure to make good on its threats to strike foreign weapons-supply lines to Ukraine, suggests there are real opportunities for the West to take bolder steps, including sending Ukraine more of the weapons for which it has been pleading (e.g., aircraft, longer-range artillery, and more—essentially, everything it needs).

Given Russia's propensity for making nuclear threats, a settlement that leaves Russia in control of some of the territory it has seized since 2014 merely freezes the war and leaves open the possibility of a Korea-like situation or a Cold War-era Germany in Ukraine. And—given Moscow's obsession regarding Ukraine, plus the sense of failure it would suffer for failing to achieve its goals of destroying Ukraine as an independent state and incorporating Ukrainian territory into Russia's by deportation and conquest—we can count on Russia's (i.e., not just Putin's) abiding efforts to use its remaining nuclear trump card and other kinetic and nonkinetic instruments to undermine any new rump Ukrainian state.

Since—if Russia is not defeated in Ukraine, or absent some other suitable Western response—the regime's nuclear threats clearly will have been shown to

inhibit its enemies, its use of them not only will continue but will increase. This will be so not only because of their partial success in Ukraine but because much of Russia's vaunted conventional capability will have been destroyed there. Paradoxically, if NATO is to dispel the belief that nuclear threats offer Russia strategic success, it must move faster and more broadly to undermine Russia's belief in the efficacy of this threat. Even if NATO has defied Russian threats to strike weapons convoys, Moscow probably still believes in the efficacy of its nuclear threats to deter Western intervention.

Besides, the nuclear threat is all that Moscow has left. In the absence of some effective Western response, Russia may continue to delude itself into believing that it actually has salvaged something from the debacle it has unleashed on Ukraine—and on Russia itself.

NOTES

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