

The One Ring and How to Destroy It – How Russia Has Based Its Foreign Policy on Nuclear Weapons

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This autumn, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has reached a critical stage. On the one hand, the victory of Donald Trump has raised many rumours about future US efforts to pressure Russia and Ukraine to reach a peace agreement; on the other, it was marked by the long-awaited Biden administration permission for Ukraine to perform deep target strikes in Russian territory.

This decision was reiterated by the French and the British governments, which showed certain consensus about providing Ukraine with at least gaining some more advantage on the battlefield, though the general expert consensus is that such permission will not change decisively the balance in favour of Ukraine. Even with the limitation that such "deep strikes" be permitted only within the Kursk oblast, this decision has probably reinforced Moscow's long-discussed concerns that its nuclear deterrence is not working.

Reopening the debate on Russian nuclear deterrence

The debate on Russian nuclear deterrence was opened in summer 2023 by Sergey Karaganov, head of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, who claimed that the West is no longer fearful of nuclear war and that one should resurrect this fear through an escalatory use of nuclear weapons against NATO members supporting Ukraine.¹ It indicated Moscow's frustration with the universality of its nuclear threats, which Russia has used regularly since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine to reduce the Western support for Kyiv.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by nuclear signalling since the beginning of the so-called "special military operation".

¹ Sergei A. Karaganov, "How to Prevent a Third World War", in *Russia in Global Affairs*, 26 September 2023, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/?p=69371>.

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This signalling was meant to draw “red lines” for the West in this war, hinting that crossing them might have Russian nuclear escalation as a consequence. This nuclear signalling may be classified into two types. The first is aimed at deterring a direct involvement of the West in the war (using nuclear weapons as the umbrella for Russia’s conventional aggression), which was hinted at in Putin’s TV speech starting the war on 24 February 2022.² The second type is compellence, preventing Western partners of Ukraine from supplying Kyiv with long-range arms capable of striking Russian territory. This message was sent by Russia in May 2022, calling the supply of long-range systems to Kyiv “intolerable” and then in June, threatening to strike the decision-making centres in response.³ Initially, in May 2023, President Biden responded to Putin declaring no intention to supply long-range weapons to Ukraine (ATACMS). In the summer of 2023, however, the UK and France supplied Ukraine with Storm Shadow/Scalp missiles, while in the autumn of 2024, the first ATACMS were transferred to Kyiv by the US. Such developments

² Russian Presidency, *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 24 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>; “EU Says Putin’s Ominous Threat to Those Who Hinder Him Marks ‘Critical Moment’”, in *Reuters*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-says-putins-ominous-threat-those-who-hinder-him-marks-critical-moment-2022-02-24>.

³ Iryna Balachuk, “Russia Warns US against Supplying Long-Range Missile Weapons to Ukraine”, in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 28 May 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/05/28/7349046>; “Fuss Over Arms Deliveries to Kiev Aims to Stretch Out Conflict in Ukraine, Putin Says”, in *TASS*, 5 June 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1460781>.

triggered a wave of concern in Moscow about the ineffectiveness of Russian nuclear signalling.

In the end, the frequent use of Russian nuclear threats throughout the war has diminished their credibility, giving birth to this escalation debate. While in his autumn 2023 Valdai speech, Putin still reassured Russian citizens that no changes in the 2020 nuclear doctrine were necessary,⁴ the mood at Valdai 2024 was completely different as Putin declared the necessity for updates in the Russian nuclear doctrine.⁵ There were a number of reasons for that. First, Ukraine’s invasion of the Kursk oblast *de facto* was the first takeover of Russian territory after the Second World War, which Putin could not prevent or even curb efficiently; for that reason, it was often interpreted as a sign of weakness of the Kremlin.⁶ Second, the intensification of the debate in the West on the necessity to give permission to the Ukrainians to target Russian territories with Western weapons has always been a serious concern in Moscow. Especially the risk of Ukraine performing deep strikes on Russian cities has been considered by Russian experts as the real “red line” of Russia.⁷

⁴ Russian Presidency, *Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting*, 5 October 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72444>.

⁵ Russian Presidency, *Valdai Discussion Club Meeting*, 7 November 2024, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75521>.

⁶ Ryan Bauer, “Putin’s Silence on Kursk Offensive Might Be a Giant Mistake”, in *The Buzz*, 24 September 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/node/212908>.

⁷ Alexey Arbatov, “Arms Dismantling” [in Russian], in *RIAC Comments*, 6 February 2023, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/vozgonka-vooruzheniy>.

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In this context, the permission given by key Western supporters to Ukraine to strike the Kursk oblast was regarded as a dangerous tendency, carrying the potential for the further escalation.

As a result of these concerns, the last update of the Russian nuclear doctrine released on 19 November 2024⁸ shows that Russian authorities eventually agreed with the necessity to 'resurrect the nuclear fear' in the West starting from "lowering the nuclear threshold", which Karaganov proposed to Putin back in the 2023 Valdai meeting.⁹

Indeed, the doctrine itself can be structured into three points: (i) a definition of the adversaries against which Russia may use its nuclear weapons; (ii) a definition of the risks that Russian nuclear deterrence aims at neutralising; and (iii) updated conditions of nuclear weapons use.

Russia's "potential adversaries"

Starting from the first point, the updated doctrine defines as "potential adversary" those "individual states and military coalitions (blocs, alliances), that consider the Russian Federation as a potential adversary and possess nuclear and (or) other types of weapons of mass destruction or significant combat capabilities of general purpose

⁸ Russia, *Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence*, approved by the Executive Order of the President of the Russian Federation No. 991 of 19 November 2024, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131.

⁹ Russian Presidency, *Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting*, cit.

forces".¹⁰ In this regard, it is a reminder for Ukraine, which has declared Russia as its adversary on the doctrinal level,¹¹ that Russia may use nuclear weapons against it if Kyiv keeps escalating with successful deep targeting of Russian territory.

This claim is reinforced by Article 11 of the doctrine, which says that "aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) its allies by any non-nuclear state with the participation or support of a nuclear state is considered as their joint attack".¹² These statements carry several implicit messages: besides targeting Ukraine, they point to some NATO states openly supporting Kyiv "as long as it takes"¹³ and therefore added to Russia's adversary list.

Indeed, on 21 November, almost immediately after Ukraine's first strike against the Kursk oblast with Western missiles and two days after the release of the new nuclear doctrine, Moscow tried to demonstrate its resolve for further escalation using the intermediate-range missile Oreshnik against the Ukrainian city of Dnipro. This strike was accompanied by a public speech of Putin, who commented that it was performed in response to Ukraine

¹⁰ Russia, *Fundamentals of State Policy*, cit., article 9.

¹¹ Ukrainian Presidency, *Decree No. 121/2021 of 25 March 2021 on the Military Security Strategy of Ukraine* [in Ukrainian], <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1212021-37661>.

¹² Russia, *Fundamentals of State Policy*, cit., article 11.

¹³ UK Government, *UK to Stand with Ukraine for as Long as It Takes, PM to Tell NATO*, 10 July 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-stand-with-ukraine-for-as-long-as-it-takes-pm-to-tell-nato>.

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using ATACMS and Storm Shadow missiles against the Russian territory of Kursk and Bryansk: "From that point onward [that is, following the attack on Kursk with Western missiles], as we have repeatedly emphasised in prior communications, the regional conflict in Ukraine provoked by the West has assumed elements of a global nature",¹⁴ hence hinting that Russia started considering NATO states a part of the conflict.

The important message here is that every Russian military doctrine carries the idea of the possibility of using nuclear weapons in regional or large-scale wars.¹⁵ Thus, referring to the war in Ukraine as a conflict with elements of "a global nature" suggests that the possibility of nuclear weapons use by Russia is not that remote.

Second, the nuclear doctrine sent also a strong message to the United States President, Joe Biden, who has been determined to avoid nuclear escalation with Russia since the beginning of the war.¹⁶ The nuclear doctrine updates have been introduced to invigorate Russian compellence, which gradually seemed to lose efficacy in the past few years. In parallel, it widened the gap and

¹⁴ Russian Presidency, *Statement by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21 November 2024, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75614>.

¹⁵ Russia, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, approved by the President of the Russian Federation on December 25, 2014, No. Pr.-2976, https://london.mid.ru/en/press-centre/gb_en_fnapr_1947.

¹⁶ Janice Gross Stein, "Escalation Management in Ukraine: Assessing the U.S. Response to Russia's Manipulation of Risk", in *Kissinger Center Papers*, August 2023, <https://sais.jhu.edu/node/239910>.

contradictions between the current and the incoming US administrations, as Trump's allies expressed their concerns about Biden's decision to give Ukraine permission to strike the Kursk oblast, which in the former's view would threaten to trigger "World War III".¹⁷ Thus, lowering the nuclear threshold is also a means to put more pressure on the new US administration in the future peace talks on Ukraine that Trump has announced.¹⁸

Risks and "red lines"

The aim of Russian nuclear deterrence declaredly is to neutralise certain "risks" that "can evolve into military threats to the Russian Federation (threats of aggression)". Among them, one can find some relevant issues that the Ukraine war has raised, such as the "establishment of new or expansion of existing military coalitions (blocs, alliances), leading to the advancement of their military infrastructure to the borders of the Russian Federation".¹⁹ This point was directed to the official aspiration of Ukraine to join the NATO Alliance as well as the statement repeated at NATO's Washington Summit that "Ukraine's future is in

¹⁷ Morgan Phillips, "Trump Allies Warn Biden Risking 'World War III' by Authorizing Long-range Missiles for Ukraine", in *Fox News*, 18 November 2024, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/trump-allies-warn-biden-risking-world-war-iii-authorizing-long-range-missiles-ukraine>.

¹⁸ Rigels Lenja, "Can Trump Broker Peace in Ukraine? History May Hold the Answers", in *Social Europe*, 9 December 2024, <https://www.socialeurope.eu/?p=82696>.

¹⁹ Russia, *Fundamentals of State Policy*, cit., article 15.

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NATO²⁰ (of course, without referring to any dates or terms).

Another “risk” mentioned in the doctrine carries a message to Ukraine, warning it from “isolating a part of the territory of the Russian Federation, including blocking access to vital transport communications”.²¹ This clearly hints at Ukraine’s statements on its determination to destroy the Crimean bridge, which would stall Russia’s connection with the Crimean Peninsula. Russian officials have repeatedly called the destruction of the bridge as the ‘red line’ in the war.²²

Updated nuclear “casus belli”

In effect, most of the text of the new doctrine has been inherited from the 2020 Nuclear Doctrine. The principal new point is the inclusion of a new condition for a possible nuclear weapons employment by the Russian Federation, that is, “aggression against the Russian Federation and (or) the Republic of Belarus [...] with the employment of conventional weapons, which creates a critical threat to their sovereignty and (or) territorial integrity”.²³ Such a precedent already exists as a result of the Ukrainian occupation of the Kursk region of Russia, which may be regarded as “critical” by Russian

officials. The intentional ambiguity in the doctrine aims to cast reasonable doubts in the minds of Ukraine and its supporters as to how far they can go in testing Russian resolve.

The ambiguity, revolving around the notion of ‘critical threat’, is aimed at increasing the credibility of deterrence. However, it does not really add anything to the continuously reiterated idea that Russian territorial integrity and sovereignty are the main values protected by nuclear deterrence. In effect, the 2020 Nuclear Doctrine already made the breach of Russian territorial integrity a clause for the activation of nuclear provisions. Disregarding it, the Ukrainian invasion of the Kursk oblast crossed that red line, highlighting that some of the conditions declared in the doctrines are relative and may be challenged to a certain extent.

The other new addition in the 2024 doctrine, already advertised by the Russian President in September 2024, calls the “receipt of reliable data on the massive launch (take-off) of air and space attack means [...] and their crossing of the state border of the Russian Federation”²⁴ as a nuclear casus belli. The key word here is “massive launch”, which again introduces a certain degree of ambiguity regarding the massiveness of the launch that would enable nuclear use. This ‘red line’ seems to be weak enough as it is regularly undermined by the Ukrainian drones and missile strikes, which, in the end, erodes the credibility of the Russian threats.

²⁰ NATO, *Washington Summit Declaration*, 10 July 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/ar/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm.

²¹ Russia, *Fundamentals of State Policy*, cit., article 15.

²² Sarah Rainsford, “Ukraine War: Russian Hawks Celebrate Deadly Response to Crimea Setback”, in *BBC News*, 10 October 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63205446>.

²³ Russia, *Fundamentals of State Policy*, cit., article 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, article 24.

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A "critical" assessment

Summing up the new edition of the Russian nuclear doctrine, one can see the different efforts behind it. On the one hand, the idea of resurrecting the fear of nuclear war in the West stands behind the new points introduced in the doctrine. According to the updated doctrine, the Russian president may consider using nuclear weapons against Ukraine or NATO at any moment as the main provisions of the document define the character of the adversary, threat and the specific circumstances of nuclear weapons use very close to the current situation in the war.

Indeed, the doctrine states that nuclear weapons are used as a last resort, and the "criticality" of most cases for using nuclear weapons is about what can be regarded as a vital threat to Russia. In this regard, the principal change in the doctrine compared with 2020 is that the nuclear threshold has been lowered from the existential to the "critical" level. In turn, the level of criticality is defined by the Russian president independently of what is threatened: the existence of the state or its vital interests, which might extend beyond its legitimate borders. This transformative lowering of the nuclear threshold has been triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's growing ambition to persuade the West that this war is vitally important for the Russian state.

Analysing the doctrine, one should remember that one of its key components is the declaration of threat to the West, intended primarily at reaping political results: that is,

undermining the Western support for Ukraine, or at least widening the gap between supporters and non-supporters of Ukraine in the West. More specifically, the new nuclear doctrine aims to galvanise the existing debate between the two US administrations and to break the cohesion of the NATO allies in their commitment to support Ukraine as long as it takes.

Against this backdrop, the main task for the West will be to define an appropriate strategy for dealing with the new Russian nuclear doctrine. Of course, the main aim here is to preserve the delicacy of deterrence, which rests on two main pillars: resolve combined with capabilities, and non-provocation. In this regard, three principal considerations can be made.

First, the West should not repeat the mistakes of 2022-23 when it demonstrated its vulnerability and sensitivity to the Russian nuclear threats. In the end, this sensitivity at some point enabled Moscow to believe that nuclear weapons are the One Ring that enables its owner to unlimited geopolitical boldness and offers wide opportunities for compellence.

Second, the West must demonstrate its resolve and cohesion in supporting Ukraine as long as it takes. This should be done both at the international level (between NATO states) as well as the domestic one (especially in some states, like in the US, where Russia can use internal contradictions to leverage its nuclear threats even deeper). In this regard, the practical steps of boosting Europe's deterrence capabilities while minimising the officials' reaction to

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Russian nuclear intimidation look like the right step.

Third, NATO states should keep the door open to constructive negotiations with Russia in case it demonstrates to be prepared to stop the war in Ukraine and to compromise. The main message to Russia should be, on the one hand, that it would not be able to achieve peace built on nuclear intimidation; on the other, that the main aim of the West is to support a sovereign Ukraine with no intention of changing the regime or other “critical” shifts within Russia.

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