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Russia's Nuclear Deterrence Put to the Test by the War in Ukraine

Dimitri MINIC

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Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel. : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website: Ifri.org

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Author

Dimitri Minic is a historian with a PhD in History of International Relations from Sorbonne University (2021). He is a Research Fellow at Ifri's Russia/Eurasia Center, where he also serves as Deputy Editor-in-chief of the digital collections *Russie.Eurasie.Visions* and *Russie.Eurasie.Reports*. His research focuses primarily on Russian strategic thought and culture, Russian military and politico-military elites, the Russian armed forces, and Russia's hybrid and high-intensity capabilities. He also specializes in Russian strategic and nuclear deterrence and relations between Russia and the West. His recent publications include:

- "Russian Strategic Thinking and Culture Before and After February 24, 2022" (National Defence University, Helsinki, September 2024).
- "What Does the Russian Army Think About Its War in Ukraine? Criticisms, Recommendations, Adaptations" (Ifri, September 2023).
- "How the Russian Army Changed its Concept of War, 1993–2022" (*Journal of Strategic Studies*, May 2023).

He is also the author of *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes : du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine* (*Russian Strategic Thought and Culture: From Bypassing Armed Struggle to the War in Ukraine*, Paris, Maison des sciences de l'homme, April 2023), a book that is based on his doctoral thesis and for which he received the Prize Albert Thibaudet 2023.

Executive summary

At the fall of the USSR, the question of deterrence and its mechanisms was still relatively underdeveloped in the Russian military. Heirs to a no-first-use doctrine, Russian elites gradually shifted their position and took a greater interest in deterrence and the centrality of nuclear weapons within it. Between 1993 and 2003, Russian military theory (subsequently reflected in official doctrines) advocated an extension of nuclear deterrence to conventional wars (of any scale) and explicitly assumed the possibility of first-use of nuclear weapons in that context, to prevent such a war or to deter the adversary from continuing it (*deèskalaciâ*), including from the very outset of a conflict. From the 2000s onward, nuclear deterrence was integrated into the broader concept of "strategic deterrence," combining nuclear, conventional, and non-military/subversive components.

The practice of Russian deterrence in Ukraine suffered from problematic continuities, anticipated vulnerabilities, and an unforeseen new strategic context that seemed to call into question the relevance of strategic deterrence, both as a concept designed to bypass armed struggle and as a system. Ukrainian resistance and the relative solidarity demonstrated by the West in 2022 rendered partially obsolete Russia's style of deterrence, which had partly rested on the assumption of a weak and decaying West. As early as 2022, Russian military elites advocated an urgent theoretical and practical adaptation of Russian strategic deterrence, particularly its nuclear component. Starting in 2023, Moscow adjusted its approach, both by backing up its aggressive rhetoric with concrete measures and by lowering the threshold for nuclear use in a new doctrine. This phase of rebuilding deterrence credibility culminated with the launch of the Oreshnik, after long months of Western actions that Moscow deemed escalatory.

Donald Trump's Russia policy tends to push further away the already very slim prospect of Moscow resorting to limited, demonstrative nuclear use in the context of the war in Ukraine, and might even shorten the lifespan of the new nuclear doctrine. Drafted and published in what now seems a distant context, this doctrine is first and foremost in the service of the Kremlin's imperialist ambitions in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe. Far from being restrained by Trump's reelection, Moscow is encouraged by American timidity and European hesitations, which drive it to intensify its concrete conventional deterrence measures—more aggressive and audacious. Russia's main objective has not changed: to isolate Ukraine from the West and Europe from the United States.

Résumé

À la chute de l'URSS, la question de la dissuasion et de ses mécanismes était encore relativement peu pensée dans l'armée russe. Héritières d'une doctrine de non-emploi en premier, les élites russes ont progressivement modifié leur position et se sont intéressées plus avant à la dissuasion et à la centralité des armes nucléaires en son sein. Entre 1993 et 2003, la théorie militaire russe (suivie par les doctrines) a prôné un élargissement de la dissuasion nucléaire aux guerres conventionnelles (de toute ampleur) et assumé la possibilité d'un emploi en premier de l'arme atomique dans ce cadre, pour empêcher une telle guerre ou dissuader l'adversaire de la continuer (*deèskalaciâ*), y compris dès le début du conflit. À partir des années 2000, la dissuasion nucléaire a été intégrée dans le concept plus large de « dissuasion stratégique » combinant composantes nucléaires, conventionnelles et non militaires/subversives.

La pratique de la dissuasion russe en Ukraine a souffert de continuités problématiques, de vulnérabilités pressenties et d'un nouveau contexte stratégique imprévu qui ont semblé remettre en cause la pertinence de la dissuasion stratégique, à la fois comme concept de contournement de la lutte armée et comme système. La résistance ukrainienne et la relative solidarité dont l'Occident a fait preuve en 2022 ont rendu partiellement obsolète le style de dissuasion de la Russie, en partie fondé sur le mépris d'un Occident lâche et déliquescent. Les élites militaires russes ont très tôt, dès 2022, prôné une adaptation théorique et pratique urgente de la dissuasion stratégique russe, et en particulier de sa composante nucléaire. Dès 2023, Moscou a adapté son approche, à la fois en accompagnant sa rhétorique de mesures concrètes et en abaissant le seuil d'emploi de l'arme nucléaire dans une nouvelle doctrine. Cette phase de reconstruction de la crédibilité de la dissuasion a culminé avec le tir de l'Orechnik, après de longs mois d'actions occidentales jugées escalatoires par Moscou.

La politique russe de D. Trump tend à éloigner la perspective – déjà très faible – d'un emploi nucléaire limité et démonstratif de Moscou dans le cadre de la guerre en Ukraine, et pourrait même raccourcir la durée de vie de la nouvelle doctrine nucléaire. Celle-ci, rédigée et parue dans un contexte désormais fort lointain, est d'abord et avant tout au service des actions impérialistes du Kremlin dans l'espace post-soviétique et en Europe orientale. Loin d'être inhibé par la réélection de D. Trump, Moscou est encouragé par la frilosité américaine et les hésitations européennes, qui le poussent à intensifier ses mesures de dissuasion (conventionnelle) concrètes, plus agressives et audacieuses. L'objectif principal de la Russie n'a pas changé : isoler l'Ukraine de l'Occident et l'Europe des États-Unis.

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Glossary of Acronyms

CNII: Ministry of Defense's Central Institute for Scientific Research.

CVSI: General Staff's Center for Strategic and Military Studies. Since 2010, incorporated within the General Staff Military Academy.

INF: Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

GOU: General Staff's Main Operational Directorate.

GU: General Staff's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU). Since 2010, Main Directorate (GU).

GŠ: General Staff.

IAMD: Integrated Air and Missile Defence.

ICBM: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

IRBM: Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile.

ISR: Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance.

KNB: National Security Concept.

NCUO: General Staff's National Defense Management Center.

OVA: Combined Arms Academy (former Frunze Military Academy).

RVSN: Strategic Missile Forces.

SS: *Strategičeskaâ stabil'nost'*.

SVO: "Special Military Operation".

TEL: Transporter Erector Launcher.

VAGŠ: General Staff Military Academy.

VARVSN: Military Academy of the Strategic Missile Forces.

VAVN: *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*.

VD: Voennaâ doktrina.

VM: *Voennaâ Mysl'*.

VNIIEF: All-Russian Scientific Research Institute of Experimental Physics.

Introduction

From the outset of its "special military operation" (SVO) against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russia, which possesses one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals, has adopted aggressive deterrence measures and a resolutely menacing rhetorical stance. The initial failure of the SVO, the prolonged and unexpected high-intensity war that has ensued, and Russia's military setbacks have all fueled fears that the Kremlin might resort to the use of nuclear weapons. Such concern has been all the more acute because, starting in 1993, Russia's post-Soviet nuclear strategy gradually extended nuclear deterrence to conventional war, and considered the possibility of first use of nuclear weapons in order to prevent such a war from breaking out or to deter the adversary from pursuing it (*deèskalaciâ*), including from the very outset of the conflict.[1]

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the question of deterrence and its mechanisms was still relatively under-theorized and insufficiently understood within the Russian military. After a fruitful period of theorizing—whose foundations continue to structure the general Russian theory of deterrence—military thought progressively evolved, shifting from the centrality of nuclear deterrence in 1993-2003, marked by a lowering of the threshold for use, to a broader conception of so-called "strategic" deterrence (*strategičeskoe sderživanie*) from the mid-2000s onward. In this framework, the nuclear component was progressively supplemented by conventional and nonmilitary/subversive forces, methods, and means. This expansion reflected a context shaped by at least two factors: the modernization of Russia's conventional forces and a threat perception more focused on hybrid conflicts and local wars[2] than on a conventional war with

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1. A strategy often described in the West as "escalate to de-escalate," an expression that is not used in Russian military theory and obscures the complexity of the reality it is meant to cover. Russia has probably not developed a clear and stable theoretical and practical concept (for cultural, conceptual, and bureaucratic reasons) of limited nuclear strikes and de-escalation (a term whose only doctrinal appearance dates back to 2003); nevertheless, these have nonetheless become a component of Russia's post-Soviet nuclear strategy. See in particular: D. Adamsky, "If War Comes Tomorrow: Russian Thinking About 'Regional Nuclear Deterrence'", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2014, pp. 178-188.

2. A local war is a war between two or more states pursuing limited political-military objectives, in which military operations are conducted within the borders of the opposing states and which primarily affects the interests of those states. A regional war involves two or more states (or groups of states) from the same region, on the territory of that region, pursuing significant political-military objectives. A large-scale war involves a significant number of states from different regions of the world (including the major world powers), pursuing radical political-military objectives and mobilizing all available material and moral resources. See in particular the Military Doctrines (Voennaâ Doktrina, VD) of 2000 (II.7–11), 2010 (I.6), and 2014 (I.8).

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This evolution led Russia, in 2010, to raise the threshold for nuclear use.

In a recent article published in *Les Champs de Mars*,[3] we traced the theoretical and doctrinal evolution of Russian strategic and nuclear deterrence from 1993 to 2022, relying on a large corpus of Russian primary sources. This corpus includes doctrinal documents (military doctrines, national security concepts and strategies, nuclear doctrine, naval doctrine), speeches by political and military officials, and, finally, military literature (journals, newspapers, dictionaries, and encyclopedias of the Russian Ministry of Defense), access to which, already limited in the 2010s, has been considerably restricted since 2022. The indispensable return to Russian sources allowed us to deepen and reassess certain aspects of the valuable research produced on Russian deterrence,[4] refining the understanding of the theory by reconstructing the categories, terms, and concepts through which the Russian military conceives of deterrence. It also provided a better understanding of the chronology and logic of theoretical and doctrinal developments, as well as the relationships between Russian strategic culture, theory, doctrine, and practice. Moreover, this work enabled a clearer comprehension of the extension of deterrence theory to conventional and nonmilitary/subversive domains and showed how this evolution reflected a renewed vision of strategy, marked by the theorization of bypassing armed struggle. Finally, the article briefly showed how the SVO's failure called into question the entire Russian strategic deterrence system and how Russia had begun adapting to the weaknesses in its deterrence.

In conclusion, the article noted that Russia could ultimately lower its threshold for use in a new doctrine, not only to try, in the short term, to restore the credibility of its nuclear deterrence in the context of the war in Ukraine, but also—and more importantly—in the longer term, in order to compensate for the weakening of its conventional forces and its economic and technological potential, as well as to guard against any conventional confrontation with NATO, which the Kremlin sees as increasingly plausible. Since the publication of the new nuclear doctrine in November 2024, some experts have tended to downplay its significance, while others have

3. D. Minic, "Dissuasion nucléaire et dissuasion stratégique russes : théorie, doctrine, pratique et perspectives (1993-2024)", *Les Champs de Mars*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2022/2 (Manuscript submitted in December 2023 and published in February 2025), pp. 85-128.
4. See in particular: D. Adamsky, "If War Comes Tomorrow: Russian Thinking About 'Regional Nuclear Deterrence'", op. cit., pp. 163-188; D. Adamsky, "Nuclear Incoherence: Deterrence Theory and Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Russia", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2014, pp. 91-134; K. Bruusgaard, "Russian Strategic Deterrence", *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 4, 2016, pp. 7-26; K. Bruusgaard, « Russian Nuclear Strategy and Conventional Inferiority », *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2021, pp. 3-35; M. Kofman, A. Fink and J. Edmonds, "Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts", Research Memorandum, CNA, April 2020; O. Oliker, A. Baklitskiy, "The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian 'De-Escalation': A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem", *War on the Rocks*, February 20, 2018.

interpreted it as the expression of a supposed "Karaganov doctrine" —thereby reproducing analytical shortcuts that impede a clear understanding of Russian strategy, much like the so-called "Gerasimov doctrine" or "Gromyko doctrine".

Drawing on new primary sources and incorporating the most recent practical cases (2024–2025), this study extends the previous research article and deepens its conclusions regarding the experience of the SVO, in order to provide a comprehensive and original analysis of the evolution of Russian nuclear deterrence under the test of the war in Ukraine. This study builds on our doctoral research on post-Soviet Russian strategic thought and culture,[5] which highlighted the importance of relying on Russian primary sources and taking into account the specific historical, political, cultural, and ideological contexts that shape Russian strategic theories, doctrines, and practices, rather than mechanically applying conceptual or analytical frameworks derived from a generalist Western perspective. This new study also continues our work on how Russian military elites perceive the war in Ukraine and its political, strategic, and military-operational consequences.[6]

After synthesizing the main stages of the theoretical and doctrinal evolution from 1993 to 2021—essential for the reader to grasp certain specificities of Russian deterrence—we assess the impact of the war in Ukraine on this deterrence, in particular its nuclear component. What was Moscow's deterrence strategy when it initiated the SVO? How has the war in Ukraine exposed the nature and limits of Russian deterrence? What assessments, critiques, and recommendations has the Russian military made? How did Russia try to adapt? How should we interpret the publication, content, and implications of the new nuclear doctrine? To what extent does Donald Trump's election alter Russian calculations regarding nuclear deterrence? And can persistent European solidarity and Moscow's military quagmire in Ukraine influence the likelihood of Russian nuclear use?

5. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes: du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine*, Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'homme, 2023, 632 pp.; D. Minic, "How the Russian Army Changed Its Concept of War, 1993–2022", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2024, pp. 29-63.
6. D. Minic, "La guerre en Ukraine dans la pensée militaire russe: leçons politico-stratégiques", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 88, No. 1, 2023, pp. 161-173; D. Minic, "Que pense l'armée russe de sa guerre en Ukraine? Critiques, recommandations, adaptations", *Russie.Eurasie.Reports*, No. 44, Ifri, September 2023, available at: www.ifri.org; D. Minic, "L'évolution de la pensée stratégique russe après la guerre en Ukraine", in: J. Fernandez and J.-V. Holeindre (ed.), *Annuaire français de relations internationales*, Paris: Éditions Panthéon-Assas, 2024, pp. 629-643; D. Minic, "Russian Strategic Thinking and Culture Before and After February 24, 2022: Political-Strategic Aspects", pp. 21-35 in: P. Forsström (ed.), "Russia's War against Ukraine—Complexity of Contemporary Clausewitzian War", National Defence University, 2024.

Theoretical and doctrinal developments: the centrality of nuclear weapons and the expansion of deterrence (1993–2021)

At the end of the USSR, Soviet political-military elites rejected the possibility of a limited nuclear war and advocated a no-first-use doctrine.[7] The question of deterrence and its mechanisms was largely neglected, "insufficiently developed," and "poorly understood" by these elites, who relied primarily on the threat of massive retaliation.[8] Deterrence theory was therefore a relatively new topic for the Russian military of the 1990s.[9] Gradually, the Russian political leadership transformed the nuclear arsenal from an instrument to conduct and win a war—without clearly distinguishing between conventional and nuclear war, since all available instruments were considered to contribute to victory—into an instrument of deterrence.[10]

Between 1993 and 2003, three main factors prompted the Russian state and military to take a deeper interest in deterrence and in the centrality of nuclear weapons within it: first, the perception of significant conventional, economic, and technological weakness relative to its principal identified adversary, the West;[11] second, the attribution of great power to modern conventional (high-precision) weapons;[12] and third, the observation—sometimes distorted and often self-justifying—of Western theories, doctrines, and actions.[13] As at other, higher levels of post-Soviet

7. A. Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917-91*, New York: MIT Press, 1998, pp. 4, 134-135; D. Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2024, pp. 21-23.
8. Ibid.
9. V. V. Suhorutčenko, A. S. Borisenko and Š. Š. Aliev, "O nekotoryh aspektah sderživaniâ na ètape smeny sistemy miropolitičeskogo ustrojstva", *Voennaâ mysl'* (*VM*), No. 7, 2025, pp. 44.
10. D. Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 22-23.
11. Almost all the Russian military theorists studying nuclear deterrence, cited and referenced in the first part of this study, share this view.
12. See for ex.: V. Staruhin and G. Kuznecov, "Koncepciâ âdernogo sderživaniâ v sovremennom mire", *Strategičeskaâ stabil'nost' (SS)*, No. 1, 1998, para. 39, 46; V. V. Kruglov, "O vooruženno j bor'be budušego", *VM*, No. 4, 1998, para. 4, 6; A. N. Zaharov, "Voennyj faktor v koncepcii global'noj bezopasnosti", *VM*, No. 9, 1993, para. 16.
13. Although Western military actions in Bosnia and Kosovo are virtually absent from the discourse. See for ex.: V. Staruhin and G. Kuznecov, "Koncepciâ âdernogo sderživaniâ v sovremennom mire", op. cit.,

Russian military thought—namely, the theorization of bypassing armed struggle—this observation led to the importation of deterrence concepts and theories developed in the West and which had long been considered a "monstrous heresy".[14] In just a few years, Russian military theorists had closed the gap by assimilating the Western literature on nuclear deterrence produced during the Cold War.

The rise of Russian nuclear deterrence

A careful analysis of post-Soviet Russian military theory and doctrinal texts suggests that the impact of NATO's 1999 Kosovo operation on the evolution of Moscow's nuclear strategy should be kept in perspective, though not downplayed. Certainly, in response to this intervention, Boris Yeltsin publicly ordered the development of new tactical nuclear missiles to lend credibility to a limited first use strategy in the face of conventional aggression—a decision interpreted at the time as a "radical shift"[15] in Russian defense strategy. Military theory since 1993, however, as well as the 1993 and 1997 strategic doctrines, already justified this orientation, and not only in relation to "tactical" nuclear weapons.

In reality, the shift was gradual. Dissenting voices[16] argued that a limited nuclear war, and thus limited use and controlled escalation, would necessarily escalate into global nuclear war—a position that was likely still visible in the 1993 Military Doctrine (*Voennaâ doktrina*; henceforth, VD). Some critics even questioned the reality of the military threat posed by the West, partly because of its supposed greater sensitivity to human casualties and the vulnerability of its infrastructure.[17] (This argument would later be inverted to justify the new nuclear strategy.) These opponents of limited nuclear war, however, were soon marginalized.

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para. 44, 46-48, 67, 78; G. H. Berezkin, "Ocenka vliâniâ razvitiâ voennyh poten cialov zarubežnyh ctpan ha harakter vnešnih ugroz Rossijskoj Federacii", *SS*, No. 4, 1999, para. 30-35; V. A. Râbošapko, "Usloviâ perehoda k vozmožnomu primeneniû âdernogo oružiâ", *VM*, No. 4, 1996, para. 2, 5. On observation, see D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, op. cit., pp. 291-336.

14. D. Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 22-25.

15. T. Whitehouse, "Yeltsin Ups Nuclear Ante", *The Guardian*, April 30, 1999, available at: www.theguardian.com; "Yeltsin Signs Decree on Tactical Nuclear Weapons", Arms Control Association, April 2024, available at: www.armscontrol.org.

16. See for ex.: A. I. Nikolaev, "Osnovnye istočniki voennoj opasnosti, vozmožnye tipy i vidy vojn s učastiem gosudarstv Sodružestva v sovremennyh usloviâh", *VM*, 1993, para. 24; F. I. Ladygin, "Nekotorye vyvody iz analiza sovremennoj voenno-političeskoj", *VM*, 1993; V. Â. Savčenko, "K voprosu obespečeniâ strategičeskoj stabil'nosti v mnogopolûsnom mire", *VM*, No. 1, 1994, para. 6; A. N. Zaharov, "Âdernoe sderživanie v sisteme voennyh mer predotvraŝeniâ vojny", *VM*, No. 2, 1994, para. 39.

17. V. N. Cygičko, "Geostrategičeskie aspekty koncepcii nacional'noj bezopasnosti Rossii", *VM*, No. 5 (9-10), 1996, para. 5; V. N. Cygičko and A. A. Piontkovskij, "Russia's National Security in the Early 21st Century", *Military Thought*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2001, pp. 77-78; A. A. Kokošin, "Voenno-političeskie i èkonomičeskie aspekty reformy Vooružennyh Sil Rossii", *VM*, No. 6 (11-12), 1996, para. 17, 44. This underestimation of the West is deep, deeply rooted, and historical among the Russian political-military elites. See D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, op. cit., pp. 231-244.

Indeed, according to many military theorists, the 1993 VD lacked clarity: While it seemed to renounce the No First Use policy and to extend nuclear deterrence to conventional war, it posited that any use of nuclear weapons, however limited, could escalate into a massive exchange with catastrophic consequences.[18] Considered contradictory, the doctrine cast doubt on the "will and determination of the Russian leadership" to undertake limited first use to repel conventional aggression, making the "mechanism of nuclear deterrence [...] less flexible" in the face of such a threat.[19] Theorists insisted on the need to clearly acknowledge the possibility of first use in the event of a large-scale conventional war.[20] Greater "transparency" and "coherence" in this area were seen as a means of "reflexive control" and of strengthening the deterrence mechanism.[21]

The 1997 National Security Concept (KNB) met theorists' expectations by removing the reference to the dangers of limited use, by referring to the nuclear deterrence of not only large-scale but also regional conventional war (here going even further than prevailing theory), and by clearly mentioning the possibility of first use in the event of a "threat", by "any armed aggression", to the "very existence" of the country "as an independent sovereign state"[22]—an almost word-for-word reiteration of the proposals made by General Klimenko, head of the General Staff's Center for Strategic and Military Studies (CVSI), in 1993 and in 1997. The 2000 VD went a step further, referring to first use in the event of "large-scale aggression with [...] conventional weapons" in "situations critical for national security".[23] This was a faithful reproduction of the wording proposed, in 1998, by General Dvorkin, head of the 4th Central Institute for Scientific Research (CNII), who understood this to mean a threat to independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity (a fusion of Klimenko's 1993 and 1997 proposals, which were partially taken up in the 1997 KNB), as well as actions aimed at disrupting the functioning of strategic nuclear forces or targeting nuclear facilities (a condition already present in the 1993

18. *Voennaâ doktrina (VD)*, November 2, 1993, 4.1 and 3.1.
19. S. V. Krejdin, "Global'noe i regional'noe âdernoe sderživanie: k sisteme principov i kriteriev", *VM*, No. 4, 1999, para. 17.
20. A. F. Klimenko, "Metodika ocenki voennyh ugroz i mery po ih nejtralizacii", *VM*, No. 5, 1993, para. 36; V. Â. Savčenko and S. V. Vasil'ev, "Učet vnešnih ugroz bezopasnosti gosudarstva pri obosnovanii dopustimogo urovnâ sokraŝeniâ SNV", *VM*, No. 4, 1994, para. 47, 27, 29, and 31; V. A. Râbošapko, "Usloviâ perehoda k vozmožnomu primeneniû âdernogo oružiâ", op. cit., para. 2, 5-8, 19; A. F. Klimenko, "Teoretiko-metodologičeskie problemy formirovaniâ voennoj doktriny Rossii. Sposoby ih rešeniâ", *VM*, No. 3 (5-6), 1997, para. 32.
21. V. Â. Savčenko and S. V. Vasil'ev, "Učet vnešnih ugroz bezopasnosti gosudarstva pri obosnovanii dopustimogo urovnâ sokraŝeniâ SNV", op. cit., para. 47; V. A. Râbošapko, "Usloviâ perehoda k vozmožnomu primeneniû âdernogo oružiâ", op. cit., para. 2, 5-8, 19; S. V. Krejdin, "Global'noe i regional'noe âdernoe sderživanie: k sisteme principov i kriteriev", op. cit., para. 19, 21; A. F. Klimenko, "Teoretiko-metodologičeskie problemy formirovaniâ voennoj doktriny Rossii. Sposoby ih rešeniâ", op. cit., para. 16-17.
22. *Koncepciâ nacional'noj bezopasnosti* (KNB), December 17, 1997, in: *Vnešnââ politika i bezopasnost' sovremennoj Rossii. 1991- 2002*, Moscou: Rosspèn, Vol. 4, 2002, pp. 69, 71.
23. *VD*, April 21, 2000, I.8.

VD).[24] Theorists welcomed this clarification.[25] The "Aktual'nye zadači razvitiâ Vooružennyh sil Rossijskoj Federacii" ("Current Tasks for the Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation"; henceforth Current Tasks) document, published in 2003, confirmed the trend: The document explains that "lowering the threshold" requires Russia to "restructure" its "command-and-control system" and its "approaches" to deterrence at "various" levels. At the same time, it mentions the "de-escalation of aggression", which aims to "force the enemy to cease its military actions by threatening or directly carrying out strikes of varying scope".[26]

The 2000 and 2003 doctrinal provisions were the fruit of a phase of reflection that, after a fertile period between 1993 and 1997, peaked between 1998 and 2003. A crucial development during this time, in the wake of the 1997 KNB, was the extension of nuclear deterrence (and thus the possibility of first use) to medium- and low-intensity conflicts, including "local" wars, in an effort to adopt a "more flexible" and "more realistic" approach.[27] It was during this period that theorists began to conceive of deterrence not as a rigid phenomenon but as a "dynamic" process: a "scale of deterrence".[28]

What is the essence of the newly proposed nuclear strategy? It rests on the possibility of limited, demonstrative, and "countervalue" first use, both to guarantee deterrence and, if necessary, to enable the "de-escalation" of military action.[29] First use should not be destructive so much as

24. V. Z. Dvorkin, " Predloženiâ po osnovnym napravleniâm âdernoj strategii Rossijskoj Federacii", *SS*, No. 3, 1998, para. 11-13. See also the 1993 VD (3.1) and Klimenko's articles (1997 and 1993) mentioned above.
25. V. N. Cygičko and A. A. Piontkovskij, "Russia's National Security in the Early 21st Century", op. cit., pp. 75-76.
26. *Aktual'nye zadači razvitiâ Vooružennyh sil Rossijskoj Federacii* (Current Tasks in the Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation), October 2003, III and VI.
27. V. Staruhin and G. Kuznecov, "Koncepciâ âdernogo sderživaniâ v sovremennom mire", op. cit., para. 81-82, 84; S. V. Krejdin, " O problemah global'nogo i regional'nogo âdernogo sderživaniâ krupnomasštabnoj agressii", *VM*, No."4, 1998, para. 2-3, 6, 13; S. V. Krejdin, "Global'noe i regional'noe âdernoe sderživanie: k sisteme principov i kriteriev", op. cit., para. 5, 8-10, 13; V. I. Levšin, A. V. Nedelin and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O primenenii âdernogo oružiâ dlâ deèskalacii voennyh dejstvij", *VM*, No. 3, 1999, para. 36; V. Staruhin and G. Kuznecov, "Koncepciâ âdernogo sderživaniâ v sovremennom mire", op. cit., para. 55, 68; V. I. Lumpov and N. P. Bagmet, "K voprosu o âdernom sderživanii", *VM*, No. 6 (11-12), 2002, para. 17; V. V. Vasilenko and G. A. Kuznecov, "Utočnenie principov âdernogo sderživaniâ primenitel'no k konfliktam nizkoj intensivnosti", *SS*, No. 1, 2000, para. 48-49; V. I. Levšin, A. V. Nedelin and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O primenenii âdernogo oružiâ dlâ deèskalacii voennyh dejstvij", op. cit., para. 36; A. S. Babenko, I. V. Brajčev, G. A. Kuznecov, *et al.*, "Budušee âdernogo oružiâ Rossii", *SS*, No. 2, 1999, para. 11, 13, 18; V. L. Vahrušev, "Lokal'nye vojny i vooružennye konflikty harakter i vliânie na voennoe iskusstvo", *VM*, No. 4, 1999, para. 56, 61; S. V. Krejdin, "O problemah global'nogo i regional'nogo âdernogo sderživaniâ krupnomasštabnoj agressii", op. cit., para. 2-3, 6, 13; S. V. Krejdin, "Global'noe i regional'noe âdernoe sderživanie: k sisteme principov i kriteriev", op. cit., para. 5, 8-10, 13.
28. V. V. Vasilenko and G. A. Kuznecov, "Utočnenie principov âdernogo sderživaniâ primenitel'no k konfliktam nizkoj intensivnosti", op. cit., para. 16-17, 19-20, 48, 21-23.
29. V. Staruhin and G. Kuznecov, "Koncepciâ âdernogo sderživaniâ v sovremennom mire", op. cit., para. 47-53, 56-57, 60, 69-70, 81-82, 84; S. V. Krejdin, "O problemah global'nogo i regional'nogo âdernogo sderživaniâ krupnomasštabnoj agressii", op. cit., para. 2-4, 6, 12-13, 23-26; S. V. Krejdin,

"sensational" and terror-inducing; It should heighten the adversary's "fear of war".[30] The success of this strategy relied on the perception of greater Western "sensitivity" to the "damage" resulting from a "nuclear conflict".[31] At the time, certain theorists considered this premise to be both dangerous and erroneous, particularly if it led to a strike after the defeat of Russian conventional forces, suggesting instead that "regional nuclear deterrence" should target Western Europe's nuclear power plants from the outset of the conflict.[32] Although no final decision was ever made regarding the timing of such strikes, most theorists believed that they should be carried out at the onset of aggression[33] and that the absence of any mention of an "immediate" nuclear response in doctrine doomed the country to defeat.[34] Military exercises conducted between 2004 and 2010 (following the example of Zapad-1999) instead indicated that the nuclear threshold would be crossed (with nonstrategic nuclear weapons) in the final phase of the conventional conflict, when the adversary had shown itself to be overwhelmingly superior, in order to compel the adversary to end hostilities.[35]

"Global'noe i regional'noe âdernoe sderživanie: k sisteme principov i kriteriev", op. cit., para. 5, 8-10, 13-15, 17, 32; V. V. Suhorutčenko, "Aktual'nye aspekty problem âdernogo sderživaniâ i dostatočnosti âdernyh vooruženij", *VM*, No. 7, 2004, para. 4, 6, 12-13, 15-17; A. S. Babenko, I. V. Brajčev, G. A. Kuznecov, *et al.*, "Budušee âdernogo oružiâ Rossii", op. cit., para. 11, 13-15, 18, 27-28; A. V. Nedelin, "Neobhodimye korrektivy âdernoj strategii Rossii", *SS*, No. 4, 1998, para. 37; V. Z. Dvorkin, "Predloženiâ po osnovnym napravleniâm âdernoj strategii Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., para. 24-26; V. I. Lumpov and N. P. Bagmet, "K voprosu o âdernom sderživanii", op. cit., para. 17, 28; V. I. Levšin, A. V. Nedelin and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O primenenii âdernogo oružiâ dlâ deèskalacii voennyh dejstvij", op. cit., para. 36; V. V. Vasilenko and G. A. Kuznecov, "Utočnenie principov âdernogo sderživaniâ primenitel'no k konfliktam nizkoj intensivnosti", op. cit., para. 55-65, 72; V. V. Kruglov and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O roli nestrategičeskih âdernyh sredstv v âdernom sderživanii", *VM*, 1997, para. 17-22; A. Arbatov, "Voennaâ reforma: doktrina, vojska, finansy", *Mirovaâ èkonomika i meždunarodnye otnošeniâ*, No. 4, 1997, pp. 8-9; E. Nahmerov, N. F. Kravčenko and I. I. Sobčenko, "O napravlennosti regional'nogo âdernogo sderživaniâ", *VM*, No. 4, 2000, para. 4-5, 6-7, 9, 12-15.

30. V. V. Vasilenko and G. A. Kuznecov, "Utočnenie principov âdernogo sderživaniâ primenitel'no k konfliktam nizkoj intensivnosti", op. cit., para. 43-47; V. I. Levšin, A. V. Nedelin and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O primenenii âdernogo oružiâ dlâ deèskalacii voennyh dejstvij", op. cit., para. 29, 31-34.

31. See for ex.: V. Staruhin and G. Kuznecov, "Koncepciâ âdernogo sderživaniâ v sovremennom mire", op. cit., para. 72-73, 75-76, 78; A. Arbatov, "Voennaâ reforma: doktrina, vojska, finansy", op. cit., p. 9.

32. E. Nahmerov, N. F. Kravčenko and I. I. Sobčenko, "O napravlennosti regional'nogo âder nogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 4-7, 9, 12-15.

33. V. Z. Dvorkin, "Predloženiâ po osnovnym napravleniâm âdernoj strategii Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., para. 24-26; S. V. Krejdin, "O problemah global'nogo i regional'nogo âdernogo sderživaniâ krupnomasštabnoj agressii", op. cit., para. 6; S. V. Krejdin, "Global'noe i regional'noe âdernoe sderživanie: k sisteme principov i kriteriev", op. cit., para. 14, 17; V. Staruhin and G. Kuznecov, "Koncepciâ âdernogo sderživaniâ v sovremennom mire", op. cit., para. 47-53, 69-70; A. S. Babenko, I. V. Brajčev, G. A. Kuznecov, *et al.*, "Budušee âdernogo oružiâ Rossii", op. cit., para. 13-15, 18, 27-28; V. V. Kruglov and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O roli nestrategičeskih âdernyh sredstv v âdernom sderživanii", op. cit., para. 7-9, 12-15; S. V. Krejdin, "Problemy âdernogo sderživaniâ boevaâ ustojčivost' âdernogo potenciala", *VM*, No. 4, 2000, para. 12, 15; E. Nahmerov, N. F. Kravčenko and I. I. Sobčenko, "O napravlennosti regional'nogo âder nogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 4-5.

34. E. Nahmerov, N. F. Kravčenko and I. I. Sobčenko, "O napravlennosti regional'nogo âder nogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 4-5.

35. D. Adamsky, "Regional Nuclear Deterrence", op. cit., pp. 173-174.

The issue of the weapons required to implement this new strategy also arose. While theorists recognized the growing importance of nonstrategic nuclear weapons,[36] they did not adopt rigid positions on them. Instead, they sought to integrate the entire nuclear arsenal—the dialectic of "global" and "regional" nuclear deterrence—into this framework.[37] When pressed, theorists tended to profess the belief that the de-escalation of conventional aggression (at any scale) would be enabled by the strategic nuclear forces (including for a limited use).[38] This mixed arsenal strategy is explained in part by the Russian military's reservations with respect to nonstrategic nuclear weapons: First, the concern that command and control (C2) and planning were ill-suited to the "controlled escalation" of an armed conflict; and second, the fear that tactical nuclear weapons would have little chance of survival on the battlefield ("combat stability", "survivability") in the face of modern (high-precision) conventional weapons.[39] It was this second concern that inclined theorists toward favoring the use of nuclear weapons at the outset of operations.[40]

During this fertile period of theoretical work, practical principles of deterrence were defined. While doctrine must respect the principles of "plausibility" and "uncertainty", Russian military thinkers identified several principles for applying nuclear deterrence: graduated damage and targeting; proportionality; concentration on the weak links in the enemy

36. See the pioneering works of V. V. Kruglov and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O roli nestrategičeskih âdernyh sredstv v âdernom sderžhivanii", op. cit., para. 7-9, 12-15, 17-22. See also: V. L. Vahrušev, "Lokal'nye vojny i vooruženne konflikty harakter i vliânie na voennoe iskusstvo", op. cit., para. 56, 61; V. A. Ivasik, A. S. Pis'âukov and A. L. Hrâpin, "Âdernoe oružie i voennaâ bezopasnost' Rossii", *VM*, No. 4, 1999, para. 4, 9, 11-12; L. I. Volkov, "Sily âdernogo sderžhivaniâ. Rossiâ, XXI vek", *SS*, No. 2, 2000, para. 11, 14, 21.

37. V. I. Levšin, A. V. Nedelin and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O primenenii âdernogo oružiâ dlâ deèskalacii voennyh dejstvij", op. cit., para. 7-8, 17-23, 28-29, 36; V. Z. Dvorkin, "Predloženiâ po osnovnym napravleniâm âdernoj strategii Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., para. 19, 23; V. V. Suhorutčenko, "Aktual'nye aspekty problem âdernogo sderžhivaniâ i dostatočnosti âdernyh vooruženij", op. cit., para. 4, 6, 12-13, 15-17; S. V. Krejdin, "O problemah global'nogo i regional'nogo âdernogo sderžhivaniâ krupnomasštabnoj agressii", op. cit., para. 7-8, 10-12, 14; S. V. Krejdin, "Global'noe i regional'noe âdernoe sderžhivanie: k sisteme principov i kriteriev", op. cit., para. 5, 8-11, 13; S. V. Krejdin, "Problemy âdernogo sderžhivaniâ boevaâ ustojčivost' âdernogo potenciala", op. cit., para. 4, 1-2, 9-10, 18; P. I. Dubok and N. A. Zakaldaev, "O nekotoryh voprosah upravleniâ raketnymi vojskami i artilleriej pri osušestvlenii regional'nogo âdernogo sderžhivaniâ", *VM*, No. 6, 1999, para. 18; V. I. Lumpov and N. P. Bagmet, "K voprosu o âdernom sderžhivanii", op. cit., para. 17, 28.

38. V. Staruhin and G. Kuznecov, "Koncepciâ âdernogo sderžhivaniâ v sovremennom mire", op. cit., para. 69-70; A. S. Babenko, I. V. Brajčev, G. A. Kuznecov, *et al.*, "Budušee âdernogo oružiâ Rossii", op. cit., para. 11, 13-15, 18, 27-28; L. I. Volkov, "Sily âdernogo sderžhivaniâ. Rossiâ, XXI vek", op. cit., para. 11, 14, 21, 40.

39. S. V. Krejdin, "Global'noe i regional'noe âdernoe sderžhivanie: k sisteme principov i kriteriev", op. cit., para. 5-6, 8-10, 32; A. S. Rukšin, "Âdernoe sderžhivanie: soveršenstvovanie sistemy upravleniâ âdernymi silami", *VM*, No. 6, 2000, para. 1, 3-4; A. A. Protasov, S. V. Krejdin and S. Û. Egorov, "Sistemy upravleniâ vojskami (silami) kak instrument strategičeskogo sderžhivaniâ", *VM*, No. 7, 2009, pp. 9-10; S. V. Krejdin, "Problemy âdernogo sderžhivaniâ boevaâ ustojčivost' âdernogo potenciala", op. cit., para. 4, 1-2, 9-10.

40. V. V. Suhorutčenko, "Aktual'nye aspekty problem âdernogo sderžhivaniâ i dostatočnosti âdernyh vooruženij", op. cit., para. 4, 6, 12-13, 15-17.

coalition; the ultimatum; the imperative to carry out a threat once it has lost its deterrent effect (which implies that threats must be credible and verifiable); the reverse loop of de-escalation; allowing the enemy to lose while saving face; strong centralization; measured, controlled, and predictable use; concentration of all forces; and, finally, anticipation of enemy actions.[41] The stages of deterrence and use in the framework of regional nuclear deterrence, meanwhile, include: increasing the combat readiness of nonstrategic nuclear forces; supplying nuclear warheads to the armed forces; strengthening the nuclear potential of conventional forces; deploying formations equipped with nonstrategic nuclear weapons in threatened areas; conducting military exercises simulating the use of nuclear weapons; raising the combat readiness of strategic nuclear forces (some to "higher" levels); preparing to launch demonstrative and de-escalatory nuclear strikes (both nonstrategic and strategic); and conducting a test of a very powerful nuclear weapon on a politically symbolic date.[42] If these deterrent measures do not work, the advice is to launch graduated nuclear strikes (in and/or outside the theater). These strikes would be "demonstrative" at first (with little or no damage), to be followed by "countervalue" but "limited" strikes, notably against the enemy's economic installations, which in turn would be followed by collective strikes on one or more troop groupings, in order to achieve "de-escalation".[43]

Although it was focused on the nuclear dimension of deterrence, the period of intense theoretical reflection from 1993 to 2003 still forms the bedrock of Russian strategic deterrence theory today, and it paved the way for an expansion to other forces and means. Thus, like most military theorists who argued that the threshold should be lowered, the "Current Tasks" document (2003) does not ignore conventional forces: "de-escalation" is made possible by both nuclear and conventional weapons.[44] Integrating these weapons systems is central to the concept of strategic deterrence, which would be further developed in the 2000s.

41. V. Z. Dvorkin, "Predloženiâ po osnovnym napravleniâm âdernoj strategii Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., para. 14; V. V. Vasilenko and G. A. Kuznecov, "Utočnenie principov âdernogo sderživaniâ primenitel'no k konfliktam nizkoj intensivnosti", op. cit., para. 55-65, 72; V. I. Lumpov and N. P. Bagmet, "K voprosu o âdernom sderživanii", op. cit., para. 32-37.

42. V. I. Lumpov and N. P. Bagmet, "K voprosu o âdernom sderživanii", op. cit., para. 28; A. V. Nedelin, "Neobhodimye korrektivy âdernoj strategii Rossii", op. cit., para. 37; V. V. Vasilenko and G. A. Kuznecov, "Utočnenie principov âdernogo sderživaniâ primenitel'no k konfliktam nizkoj intensivnosti", op. cit., para. 43-47.

43. S. V. Krejdin, "O problemah global'nogo i regional'nogo âdernogo sderživaniâ krupnomasštabnoj agressii", op. cit., para. 23-26; A. V. Nedelin, "Neobhodimye korrektivy âdernoj strategii Rossii", op. cit., para. 37; V. V. Vasilenko and G. A. Kuznecov, "Utočnenie principov âdernogo sderživaniâ primenitel'no k konfliktam nizkoj intensivnosti", op. cit., para. 43-47; V. I. Levšin, A. V. Nedelin and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O primenenii âdernogo oružiâ dlâ deèskalacii voennyh dejstvij", op. cit., para. 7-8, 17-23, 28, 36.

44. *Current Tasks*, IV.

The era of strategic deterrence

Most Russian military theorists who stressed the centrality of nuclear weapons viewed it as a *temporary* necessity (until 2005–2015, by their forecasts) and, beginning in the early 1990s, they (over)estimated the effectiveness of modern conventional (high-precision) weapons.[45] The first mention of "non-nuclear deterrence," which would not be incorporated into doctrine for another seventeen years (2014 VD), was even made in 1997 by Klimenko, whose definition appears verbatim in the 2014 VD.[46] The first in-depth reflections on the non-nuclear dimension of deterrence, in which the CVSI and the 46th CNII played an important role, date from the mid-2000s. Most Russian theorists, who had never been comfortable with the idea of first use against a nuclear-armed state, argued that modern conventional weapons would enhance the flexibility and credibility of deterrence for local wars and armed conflicts—an assessment that had been, in their view, confirmed by the experience of the Soviet-Afghan and Chechen-Russian conflicts—and that the effect of such weapons would be amplified by the vulnerability of modern states, given the presence of hazardous installations on their territory.[47] The concept of "strategic deterrence" gradually came to embody this broader vision of deterrence.

Russia's conception of strategic deterrence has been shaped by the nuclear deterrence reflections of the 1990s. First, its aims are to prevent aggression or, in the event of aggression, to compel the adversary to de-escalate,[48] although the timing of de-escalation remains a subject of debate and is not specified in the doctrine.[49] Second, strategic deterrence is divided into two levels (global and regional).[50] Third, strategic deterrence echoes nuclear deterrence theory in terms not only of the limited and selective character of "preemptive" and "countervalue" strikes to prevent aggression

45. In addition to the theorists already mentioned, see: A. A. Kokošin, "Voenno-političeskie i èkonomičeskie aspekty reformy Vooružennyh Sil Rossii", op. cit., para. 24, 45; V. I. Slipčenko, *Vojny šestogo pokoleniâ. Oružie i voennoe iskusstvo budušego*, Moscow, Veče, 2002, p. 49.
46. A. F. Klimenko, "Teoretiko-metodologičeskie problemy formirovaniâ voennoj doktriny Rossii. Sposoby ih rešeniâ", op. cit., para. 47-48, 50-51.
47. V. V. Korobušin, "Perspektivy razvitiâ haraktera strategičeskogo sderživaniâ i ego rol' v obespečenii bezopasnosti Rossii", *VM*, No. 6, 2005, para. 43-44, 46-49; A. L. Hrâpin and V. A. Afanas'ev, "Konceptual'nye osnovy strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", *VM*, No. 1, 2005, para. 15, 19; V. M. Burenok and O. B. Ačasov, "Neâdernoe sderživanie", *VM*, No. 12, 2007, para. 2-4, 6-8, 10-16; G. P. Kupriânov, "Osnovnye tendencii razvitiâ form vooružennoj bor'by v vozdušno-kosmičeskoj sfere", *VM*, No. 1, 2005, para. 5.
48. In addition to the developments of the theorists cited in this section, see the definition of "strategic deterrence" in the online Encyclopedic Military Dictionary (VES) of the Ministry of Defense (the definition appears to have been introduced in the 2010s), which repeatedly uses the term "de-escalation": http://encyclopedia.mil.ru.
49. V. V. Matvijčuk and A. L. Hrâpin, "A Strategic Deterrence System Under New Conditions", *Military Thought*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2010, pp. 46-47. They mention "de-escalation" at the "early stages."
50. See for ex.: A. L. Hrâpin and V. A. Afanas'ev, "Konceptual'nye osnovy strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 14.

or enable de-escalation, but also their targets (vital installations).[51] It also incorporates the envisioned consequences if "preemption" and "de-escalation" measures fail: to "inflict a decisive defeat on the enemy", including by invading a hostile country.[52]

Strategic deterrence is a comprehensive, integrated, and "systemic" mechanism.[53] While conventional weapons offer a measure of "flexibility" and an "additional opportunity for de-escalation" before crossing the nuclear threshold,[54] they are not viewed as substitutes for nuclear weapons, even at the regional level.[55] The non-nuclear dimension is considered particularly useful at the levels of armed conflict and of local and regional war, but it is not restricted to those levels.[56] Beyond weaponry, practical measures of strategic deterrence have been established to implement a "demonstration of force" and "military presence", partly modeled on those of nuclear deterrence. These include military exercises and maneuvers; substantial buildup (deployments) of force groupings; a "widely publicized" elevation of forces' status from peacetime to wartime (raising combat alert); demonstrative firings with high-precision weapons involving nuclear forces; "publicized" preparation of forces and weapons (including nuclear ones) for single and/or multiple strikes; patrols by aircraft, alone or in groups, carrying nuclear warheads; statements and addresses by state leaders, warning messages about the possible use of military force in the event of a

51. V. M. Burenok and O. B. Ačasov, "Neâdernoe sderživanie", op. cit., para. 3, 6-8, 10-13, 16; A. L. Hrâpin and V. A. Afanas'ev, "Konceptual'nye osnovy strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 3, 15, 33; V. V. Matvijčuk and A. L. Hrâpin, "A Strategic Deterrence System Under New Conditions", op. cit., p. 46; V. I. Polegaev and V. V. Alferov, "Nonnuclear Deterrence in the Strategic Deterrence System", *Military Thought*, No. 3, Vol. 24, 2015, pp. 9, 14; E. S. Sirotinin, "Sderživanie agressii v kontekste novoj Voennoj doktriny Rossijskoj Federacii", *VM*, No. 1, 2010, p. 9.

52. A. L. Hrâpin, D. A. Kalinkin and V. V. Matvijčuk, "Strategic Deterrence against the US Global ABM System and Prompt Global Strike Capabilities", *Military Thought*, No. 1, 2015, pp. 1-2. See still recently: A. K. Mar'in, "Osobennosti strategičeskogo sderživaniâ v sovremennyh usloviâh", *VM*, No. 12, 2023, p. 23; A. A. Protasov, S. V. Krejdin and S. Û. Egorov, "Sistemy upravleniâ vojskami (silami) kak instrument strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., p. 8.

53. A. E. Sterlin, A. A. Protasov and S. V. Krejdin, "Sovremennye transformacii koncepcij i silovyh instrumentov strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", *VM*, No. 8, 2019, para. 56, 63.

54. A. E. Sterlin, A. A. Protasov and S. V. Krejdin, "Sovremennye transformacii koncepcij i silovyh instrumentov strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 47; O. L. Salûkov and A. V. Šigin, "Mesto i rol' Suhoputnyh vojsk v strategičeskom sderživanii", *VM*, No. 4, 2021, pp. 22-23, 25.

55. See for ex.: A. L. Hrâpin, D. A. Kalinkin and V. V. Matvijčuk, "Strategic Deterrence against the US Global ABM System and Prompt Global Strike Capabilities", op. cit., p. 3; A. L. Hrâpin and V. A. Afanas'ev, "Konceptual'nye osnovy strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 14; S. G. Čekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "Strategic Deterrence and Russia's National Security Today", *Military Thought*, No. 1, Vol. 21, 2012, pp. 26-27; V. V. Matvijčuk and A. L. Hrâpin, "A Strategic Deterrence System Under New Conditions", op. cit., p. 46.

56. A. A. Protasov, S. V. Krejdin and S. Û. Egorov, "Sistemy upravleniâ vojskami (silami) kak instrument strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., p. 10; A. E. Sterlin, A. A. Protasov and S. V. Krejdin, "Sovremennye transformacii koncepcij i silovyh instrumentov strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 49-51, 52-55; O. L. Salûkov and A. V. Šigin, "Mesto i rol' Suhoputnyh vojsk v strategičeskom sderživanii", op. cit., p. 22. Few reduce it to these types of conflicts: V. I. Polegaev and V. V. Alferov, "Nonnuclear Deterrence in the Strategic Deterrence System", op. cit., pp. 10, 14; S. A. Ponomarëv, V. V. Poddubnyj and V. I. Polegaev, "Criteria and Indicators of Nonnuclear Deterrence: The Military Aspect", *Military Thought*, No. 4, 2019, pp. 113, 115.

threat to vital interests; issuing ultimatums to the aggressor; denouncing (and withdrawing from) conventions and agreements on military security and arms control; and even the use of sanctions.[57]

Despite strong interest in modern conventional weapons, leading deterrence theorists argue that they are not a credible alternative to nuclear weapons for Russia (particularly at the global and regional levels) in terms not only of cost, but also of effectiveness in the "countervalue struggle".[58] While doubts persist about the ability of information and C2 systems to enable nuclear demonstrative and de-escalatory strikes, as well as about their deterrent value in today's world (given the de-localization of economies, the role of international public opinion, etc.),[59] some theorists continued to argue as late as 2019 that only the threat and execution of a "preventive nuclear strike" could prevent or de-escalate a conventional war (large-scale or regional—including by preventing a local war from turning into a regional one).[60] It is for this reason that raising the threshold for nuclear use in the 2010 VD could be considered a serious mistake, one that resulted in a "loss of strategic initiative from the outset [of the conflict]".[61]

57. See V. V. Vasilenko and G. A. Kuznecov, "Utočnenie principov âdernogo sderživaniâ primenitel'no k konfliktam nizkoj intensivnosti", op. cit., para. 43-47; V. V. Matvijčuk and A. L. Hrâpin, "A Strategic Deterrence System Under New Conditions", op. cit., p. 47; A. A. Protasov, S. V. Krejdin and S. Û. Egorov, "Sistemy upravleniâ vojskami (silami) kak instrument strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., p. 10; M. A. Gareev, "Strategičeskoe sderživanie–važnejšee napravlenie obespečeniâ nacional'noj bezopasnosti Rossii v sovremennyh usloviâh (doklad)", *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk* (*VAVN*), Vol. 25, No. 4, 2008, para. 25.1; S. G. Čekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "Strategic Deterrence and Russia's National Security Today", op. cit., pp. 26-27, 30; O. L. Salûkov and A. V. Šigin, "Mesto i rol' Suhoputnyh vojsk v strategičeskom sderživanii", op. cit., p. 23. See also: VES online, "Strategic Deterrence", op. cit., available at: http://encyclopedia.mil.ru; and *Voennaâ èniklopediâ* (VE), Vol. 7, 2003, "Political-Military Deterrence", pp. 407-408.

58. A. E. Sterlin, A. A. Protasov and S. V. Krejdin, "Sovremennye transformacii koncepcij i silovyh instrumentov strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 49-51, 52-55; V. I. Polegaev and V. V. Alferov, "Nonnuclear Deterrence in the Strategic Deterrence System", op. cit., pp. 8-9, 10, 14; S. A. Ponomarëv, V. V. Poddubnyj and V. I. Polegaev, "Criteria and Indicators of Nonnuclear Deterrence: The Military Aspect", op. cit., p. 115; V. V. Matvijčuk and A. L. Hrâpin, "A Strategic Deterrence System Under New Conditions", op. cit., p. 47; A. L. Hrâpin and V. A. Afanas'ev, "Konceptual'nye osnovy strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 37; V. V. Korobušin, "Perspektivy razvitiâ haraktera strategičeskogo sderživaniâ i ego rol' v obespečenii bezopasnosti Rossii", op. cit., para. 50-51"; M. A. Gareev, "Uroki i vyvody iz velikoj otečestvennoj vojny, lokal'nyh vojn i perspektivy razvitiâ sovremennoj voennoj nauki i voennogo iskusstva", *VAVN*, No. 2, 2005, para. 144; S. G. Čekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, "Strategic Deterrence and Russia's National Security Today", op. cit., p. 28; A. L. Hrâpin, D. A. Kalinkin and V. V. Matvijčuk, "Strategic Deterrence against the US Global ABM System and Prompt Global Strike Capabilities", op. cit., p. 2; E. S. Sirotinin, "Sderživanie agressii v kontekste novoj Voennoj doktriny Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., p. 7.

59. A. A. Protasov, S. V. Krejdin and S. Û. Egorov, "Sistemy upravleniâ vojskami (silami) kak instrument strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., pp. 9-10; A. V. Smolovyj, V. V. Lojko and K. A. Trocenko, "O naučnoj kritike v voennom dele", *VM*, No. 10, 2021, pp. 149-150.

60. V. I. Polegaev and V. V. Alferov, "Nonnuclear Deterrence in the Strategic Deterrence System", op. cit., pp. 9, 14; S. A. Ponomarëv, V. V. Poddubnyj and V. I. Polegaev, "Criteria and Indicators of Nonnuclear Deterrence: The Military Aspect", op. cit., pp. 112-113.

61. VD, February 5, 2010, I.6., II.16. and III.22; V. I. Polegaev and V. V. Alferov, "Nonnuclear Deterrence in the Strategic Deterrence System", op. cit., p. 9.

The decision to raise the threshold, as set out in the 2010 VD and reiterated in 2020,[62] and the emphasis on conventional deterrence, visible as early as 2010 and confirmed in the 2014 VD (which introduced the concept of "non-nuclear deterrence"),[63] were based on at least two factors: one, the theoretical and material importance attached to the power and rebuilding of conventional forces; and two, a shift in threat perception toward one centered on armed conflicts, local wars, and "hybrid" conflicts. Yet while non-nuclear deterrence strengthened the strategic deterrence mechanism, for theory and doctrine it *complemented* nuclear deterrence at the regional and local levels far more than it replaced it. The latest naval doctrine (2017) confirmed the importance attached to nuclear weapons, particularly nonstrategic ones, within the broader strategic deterrence system.[64]

Russian military theorists have shown greater interest in the integrated use of strategic deterrence assets than in compartmentalizing them into rigid, purpose-built frameworks. Russian strategic deterrence as a dual approach (military and nonmilitary) developed gradually, without ever excluding elements that would eventually come to define it. In addition to nuclear and conventional components, nonmilitary and subversive means and methods were added, whose relevance had already been evident in the 1990s and whose theoretical exploration within the framework of strategic deterrence (as well as related concepts,[65] though this concept would eventually prevail) began in the early 2000s.[66] Like the other elements of strategic deterrence, these means and methods inherited an intrinsically offensive, proactive, coercive, and even preemptive character.[67]

To go a step further: The concept of strategic deterrence is a product of post-Soviet Russian strategic thought and culture, and therefore of the theorization of bypassing armed struggle. Strategic deterrence, understood as a whole (military and nonmilitary), with a strong and prioritized reliance on nonmilitary means and methods (subversive, indirect, asymmetric) supported by military components (conventional and nuclear), aimed to achieve Moscow's political objectives *indirectly*, without a real direct armed

62. *Ob osnovah gosudarstvennoj politiki Rossijskoj Federacii v oblasti âdernogo sderživaniâ*, Kremlin, June 2, 2020, oukase No. 355, III.19.g), available at: www.kremlin.ru; VD, December 25, 2014, II.15-16 and III.26-27.
63. *VD, 2010,* II.12., III.22, *op. cit.*, and *VD*, 2014, I.8.n), op. cit. To understand the terms of the very brief definition provided in the doctrine, see A. F. Klimenko, "Teoretiko-metodologičeskie problemy formirovaniâ voennoj doktriny Rossii. Sposoby ih rešeniâ", op. cit., para. 50.
64. *Ob utverždenii Osnov gosudarstvennoj politiki Rossijskoj Federacii v oblasti voenno-morskoj dejatel'nosti na period do 2030 goda*, 2017, IV.37.
65. The Ministry of Defense's dictionaries and encyclopedias, for example, have long preferred the (similar) concept of "political-military deterrence." See VE, Vol. 7, pp. 407-408. See also D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, op. cit., pp. 120-130.
66. Ibid., D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, pp. 116-131.
67. Ibid., pp. 75-79, 116-131, 266-267, 350-352.

confrontation.[68] This approach was justified in part by Russia's economic and military weakness, by the evolution of conflict in the age of globalization, by the need to adapt to indirect (and largely imagined) Western threats, and by the presence of nuclear weapons and politico-military alliances in countries with which Moscow believes itself to be in a permanent state of war and that it feels entitled to subjugate. "Preventing aggression" through "preemptive actions [*upreždaûŝie dejstviâ*]" is more "important than military successes" and a "sign of the military leadership's higher level of preparedness", General Kruglov noted in December 2021.[69] If *direct* (that is, overt and acknowledged) armed force was deemed necessary—an option contemplated within the theorization of bypassing—it was to be limited, essentially demonstrative, and relatively brief. This is why the annexation of Crimea, without the "actual use of weapons", "loss of life", or "bloodshed", has been analyzed as the result of a well-executed strategic deterrence operation,[70] and why "hybrid warfare" has recently been described as a "new type of non-nuclear strategic deterrent".[71]

It is on the basis of three main pillars (nuclear, conventional, nonmilitary/subversive), divided into military (*silovoj*) and nonmilitary (*nesilovoj*) measures, that Russian strategic deterrence has gradually emerged as a concept[72] within the broader theoretical-strategic framework outlined above. It is broad, preemptive, offensive, and coercive;[73] it is employed on a permanent basis, in peacetime as well as wartime; and it integrates the use of all available tools.[74] The creation of the General Staff's National Defense Management Center (NCUO), in 2014, was also justified by Valey Gerasimov as part of these reflections on strategic deterrence.[75]

68. Ibid., pp. 122-127, 266-267, 351. See still recently A. K. Mar'in, "Osobennosti strategičeskogo sderživaniâ v sovremennyh usloviâh", op. cit., pp. 26-28.
69. V. V. Kruglov and A. S. Šubin, "O vozrastaûŝem značenii upreždeniâ protivnika v dejstviâh", *VM*, 2021, p. 33.
70. O. L. Salûkov and A. V. Šigin, "Mesto i rol' Suhoputnyh vojsk v strategičeskom sderživanii", op. cit., p. 22; M. A. Gareev, "Velikaâ Pobeda i sobytiâ na Ukraine", *VAVN*, No. 2, Vol. 47, 2014, p. 10.
71. A. A. Bartoš, "Tehnologičeskij suverenitet Rossii kak važnyj faktor pobedy v mirovoj gibridnoj vojne", *VM*, No. 8, 2023, p. 26.
72. See the definition of "strategic deterrence" in the online VES, op. cit.
73. See still recently: "The deterrence of a potential enemy's aggressive intentions" is based on "intimidation, restraint, and coercion." See V. V. Andreev and S. V. Hakberdyev, "Formirovanie sposobov primeneniâ ob"edinenij Vozdušno-kosmičeskih sil v strategičeskom sderživanii protivnika", *VM*, No. 10, 2023, p. 42.
74. See still recently: A. K. Mar'in, "Osobennosti strategičeskogo sderživaniâ v sovremennyh usloviâh", op. cit.
75. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, op. cit., pp. 175-176.

Russian deterrence in action: Problematic continuities, vulnerabilities confirmed by the SVO

Russian strategic deterrence is partly the product of a theorization—the bypassing of armed struggle—and a strategic culture—partly rooted in an anti-Western siege mentality—which has led the Russian military, since the early 2000s, to actively elaborate a proactive, aggressive, coercive, and preemptive strategy (of which Gerasimov's 2019 "active defense strategy"[76] was but one example) that has inspired the practical actions of the Russian state. This strategy led not only to the launch of the SVO—conceived as a preemptive operation and described as such by Vladimir Putin himself[77]—but also to its initial strategic failure,[78] which has called into question the coherence of Russian strategic deterrence as a whole.

The three theoretical and practical flaws of strategic deterrence revealed by the war

The SVO revealed at least three theoretical and practical flaws in strategic deterrence.

First, strategic deterrence failed as a concept for bypassing armed struggle. From the start, its proponents overestimated the ability of indirect means and methods (military or nonmilitary) to achieve decisive political objectives. The psycho-informational component, which is central to the theorization of bypassing armed struggle (and thus to strategic deterrence, which partly emerged from it), did not have the coercive, decisive effect that Russian military elites have for decades imagined it would.[79] "In modern war", Gerasimov claimed, "the victor is not the one who dominates, but the

76. V. V. Gerasimov, "Razvitie voennoj strategii v sovremennyh usloviâh. Zadači voennoj nauki", *VAVN*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 2019, p. 7.
77. V. Putin, "Parad Pobedy na Krasnoj ploŝadi", Kremlin, May 9, 2022, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
78. See my publications cited in this article, including regarding the preemptive dimension. Refer to footnotes No. 3, 5, and 6 of the present study.
79. Ibid.

one who changes the enemy's mind".[80] The head of the CVSI reiterated recently, in the midst of the war in Ukraine, that the "informational factor" would make it possible to achieve political objectives "without the use" of "military force", and that "occupying" the enemy's territory and "seizing" its resources are "secondary" to establishing "overall strategic control" over the "consciousness" of the target country's population and obtaining "complete power over the future of the conquered state".[81] The preemptive dimension of this grand strategy has not been called into question by the SVO's failure,[82] even by Colonel Bartosh, a leading bypassing theorist, who argued in early 2022 that "tactful responses" to Washington's "overweening arrogance" would be perceived by the latter as "consent".[83] Rather than questioning the tenets of bypassing theorization, Russia's military elites moved quickly and actively to debate and even criticize the way in which the operation was conducted, including by pointing to failures in forecasting and intelligence.[84]

Second, the effects of conventional deterrence were overestimated: Neither exercises nor threatening deployments of conventional forces prior to the SVO compelled Ukraine or the West to yield. Likewise, modern missiles (including hypersonic ones), whether dual-capable[85] (Iskander-M/-K, Kinzhal, Kalibr, Kh-32, and Oniks) or not (Kh-101), were not as effective as expected[86]—neither as a deterrent nor as an instrument to achieve de-escalation or the cessation of combat on terms favorable to Russia through in-theater use.

This conventional deterrence did not produce the effects that military theorists had attributed to it since the 1990s, even in a local war—what Russia considers the war in Ukraine to be. As late as 2019, Colonel Protasov, director of the 27th CNII (arrested for corruption in April 2025), Colonel Kreidin, a researcher at the 27th CNII and one of the leading theorists of lowering the threshold in the 1990s, and General Sterlin, a

80. Cited in A. S. Korževskij and I. V. Solov'ëv "Mental'noe protivoborstvo i problemy formirovaniâ celostnoj sistemy nastupatel'nyh i oboronitel'nyh dejstvij v nem", *VM*, No. 11, 2022, pp. 32-33.
81. A. V. Smolovyj, "Voennye konflikty budušego: sovremennyj vzglâd", No. 3, *VAVN*, 2022, p. 82.
82. V. V. Andreev, N. S. Krivencov et al., "Osobennosti primeneniâ gruppirovok aviacii v voennyh konfliktah budušego", *VM*, No. 6, 2022, p. 43; H. I. Sajfetdinov, "Gibridnye vojny, provodimye SŠA i stranami NATO, ih sušnost' i napravlennost'", *VM*, No. 5, 2022, p. 17; A. M. Il'nickij, "Strategiâ mental'noj bezopasnosti Rossii", *VM*, No. 4, 2022, p. 30; V. G. Cil'ko and A. A. Ivanov, "Tendencii razvitiâ obŝevojskovogo operativnogo iskusstva", *VM*, No. 11, 2022, p. 49; I. A. Kopylov and V. V. Tolstyh, "Ocenka vliâniâ političeskogo faktora na upravlenie nacional'noj oboronoj Rossijskoj Federacii", *VM*, No. 9, 2022, p. 14.
83. A. A. Bartoš, "Vzaimodejstvie v gibridnoj vojne", *VM*, No. 4, 2022, p. 21.
84. Refer to my publications cited in this article, including those addressing the preemptive dimension, and consult footnotes 3, 5, and 6 of this study.
85. A low-cost strategy (the same missile being usable for two roles) and strategic ambiguity, favored by Russia.
86. Not to mention older Soviet dual-capable missile models used in Ukraine, such as the Kh-22 and Kh-55, which were probably used more to saturate enemy air-defence systems than to hit specific targets.

department head at the General Staff's Main Operational Directorate (GOU), regarded strategic non-nuclear weapons as the principal means of strategic deterrence at the local level.[87] Leading specialists in deterrence at the CVSI estimated in 2020 that the Kinzhal would make it possible to "deter the outbreak of military aggression or the escalation of hostilities in a conflict" and "decisively change the course of a military conflict".[88] In 2021, the commander in chief of the Ground Forces, General Salyukov, joined by a professor from the Combined Arms Academy (OVA)'s Department of Operational Art, extolled the merits of the Iskander (-M and -K) for non-nuclear strategic deterrence—preferring, like most theorists[89], ground-based delivery systems, which are less detectable and less vulnerable than airborne systems—and added that modern non-nuclear strategic weapons would assume a "significant part" of the combat tasks currently assigned to "nuclear forces".[90]

In practice, their effectiveness has been limited. First, they failed in terms of deterrence: These weapons did not prevent war (that is, they did not prevent Ukrainian resistance), whereas on February 24 Putin clearly alluded to nuclear weapons (strategic, according to military theorists)[91] in an attempt to deter the West and thereby avoid escalation from a local to a regional or even large-scale war—a move which was relatively in line with theory and doctrine.[92]

Second, their use (individually and en masse) on the theater did not lead to de-escalation or the cessation of hostilities on terms favorable to Russia. The first combat uses of the Kinzhal on March 18 and 20, 2022,[93] just days after Kyiv rejected parts of the peace plan negotiated with Moscow (March 16)[94] and several days before the Russian military withdrawal from northern Ukraine (announced March 25), did not produce the desired effect. A later launch (May 4, 2023) was reportedly intercepted by a US

87. See A. E. Sterlin, A. A. Protasov and S. V. Krejdin, "Sovremennye transformacii koncepcij i silovyh instrumentov strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., para. 45-46.
88. A. V. Evsûkov and A. L. Hrâpin, "Rol' novyh sistem strategičeskih vooruženij v obespečenii strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", *VM*, No. 9, 2020, p. 29.
89. See for ex.: S. T. Brezkun, "Perspektivy 'regional'nogo' âdernogo oružiâ", *SS*, No. 3, 2003, para. 16, 42, 60, 68-69, 72, 75; V. V. Kruglov and M. E. Sosnovskij, "O roli nestrategičeskih âdernyh sredstv v âdernom sderživanii", op. cit., para. 7-9, 12-15.
90. O. L. Salûkov and A. V. Šigin, "Mesto i rol' Suhoputnyh vojsk v strategičeskom sderživanii", op. cit., pp. 21, 24, 27.
91. A. A. Cyganov, M. M. Debelo and S. V. Bandura, "O neobhodimosti sozdaniâ perspektiv nyh ob"edinenij vozdušno-kosmičeskih sil dlâ prikrytiâ ob"ektov vysših zven'ev upravleniâ i strategičeskih âdernyh sil", *VM*, No. 9, 2022, p. 131.
92. V. Putin, "Obrašenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii", Kremlin, February 24, 2022, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
93. See "Rossiâ zadejstvovala na Ukraine kompleksy 'Kinžal' i 'Bastion'", *RBK*, March 19, 2022, available at: www.rbc.ru; "Minoborony soobŝilo ob udarah "Kalibrami" i "Kinžalami" po ob"ektam VSU", *RBK*, March 20, 2022, available at: www.rbc.ru.
94. M. Seddon, "Ukraine and Russia Explore Neutrality Plan in Peace Talks", *Financial Times*, March 16, 2022, available at: www.ft.com.

Patriot missile defense system.[95] Moreover, the massive high-precision conventional strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure from November 2022 may have potentially allowed Moscow—then in a difficult position—to achieve a form of halt in escalation, but they did not provoke an implosion of its adversary (as General Slipchenko, a key theorist of non-contact warfare, had envisioned), nor did they create the conditions for a decisive military success in its January 2023 offensive. In addition, the very large number—widely underestimated before the war—of modern conventional missiles required to neutralize strategic and operational targets in Ukraine (such as air bases), compounded by the effectiveness of Western missile defense and by the Russian army's limitation in planning and coordinating such strikes to overcome enemy defenses—Moscow having launched a median of 17 missiles per day between September 2022 and September 2024,[96]—tended to confirm theorists' skepticism about the effectiveness of these weapons compared with nuclear arms—thereby encouraging use of the latter, especially in the context of a regional war.

High interception rates (around 83 percent per day on average[97]) of Russian missiles, including modern dual-capable missiles (Iskander-M/-K,[98] Kalibr, Kh-32, Oniks, and Kh-101/102[99]), by surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) systems deployed in Ukraine (Patriot, IRIS-T, NASAMS, SAMP/T, etc.) also call into question the credibility of Russia's limited-use nuclear strategy—a single, limited, and demonstrative strike (preferably nonstrategic) aimed at achieving de-escalation and cessation of hostilities on terms favorable to Russia. The Ukrainian experience may have exposed the limits of this model and could force Moscow to contemplate at least three complementary and risky adaptations. The first would be to rely more heavily on more sophisticated missiles—either hypersonic and maneuverable (e.g., Kinzhal, Tsirkon) or intermediate-range (e.g., Oreshnik)—despite their cost and complexity. The second would be to lean on the threat of massive nuclear strikes delivered with its other modern missiles (Iskander-M/-K, Kalibr, Kh-32, Kh-102, and Oniks) in order to saturate missile defenses. This option could result in widespread destruction and trigger major, uncontrolled nuclear escalation. The third

95. J. Marson and D. Cameron, "How the U.S. Patriot Missile Became a Hero of Ukraine War", *The Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2023, available at: www.wsj.com.
96. S. Kaushal and D. Dolzikova, "The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine", *Occasional Paper*, RUSI, August 2025, pp. 29-39, available at: https://static.rusi.org. See also: B. Jensen and Y. Atalan, "Assessing Russian Firepower Strikes in Ukraine", CSIS, October 23, 2024, available at: www.csis.org.
97. *Ibid*. See also the excellent interactive CSIS database: "Russian Firepower Strike Tracker: Analyzing Missile Attacks in Ukraine", available at: www.csis.org.
98. Even though Moscow seems to have gradually improved the maneuvering capabilities of the Iskander-M, one of the most frequently used missiles in Ukraine. See J. Trevithick, "Ukraine's Patriots Now Struggling To Intercept Enhanced Russian Ballistic Missiles", TWZ, August 14, 2025, available at: www.twz.com.
99. The Kh-101 is exclusively conventional, while the Kh-102 is exclusively nuclear and constitutes the air component of the strategic triad. Yet they are essentially the same missile, so a "disappointing" use of the Kh-101 could potentially affect the credibility of the Kh-102.

would be to compensate for a loss of credibility at the regional and local levels by relying more heavily on strategic nuclear weapons, something Russia has never truly stopped doing (see I/). This would be a hazardous course to embark upon.

Added to this is the vulnerability of nonstrategic nuclear weapons delivery platforms—except for the mobile ground platforms (transporter erector launchers or TELs) of the Iskander-M/-K, which are similar to those of the Oreshnik and 9M729—as well as of strategic platforms (the air leg of the nuclear triad). Such vulnerabilities have worried Russian military theorists since the 1990s–2000s in light of US capabilities in long-range precision strikes, missile defense, and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance). This vulnerability has been demonstrated to some extent in the war in Ukraine. Partly thanks to Western intelligence, Ukraine has managed to damage or destroy roughly 20–30 percent of the Russian Black Sea Fleet—potential platforms for the Kalibr and Oniks—as well as 10–20 percent of strategic and long-range bombers—platforms for the Kh-101, Kh-102, Kh-55, Kh-32, and, in part, for the Kinzhal. As theorists had anticipated, such a survivability deficit makes the use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons (and, possibly on a large scale, given present conditions) more likely at the outset of a regional war (see I/). Solutions that are already under development, however, could improve platform survivability, such as creating anti-satellite weapons (see IV/) to disrupt Western ISR; successfully fielding sufficient A-235 and S-500 missile defense systems[100] (the latter is theoretically capable of intercepting hypersonic missiles); and a greater reliance on mobile ground-based platforms (TELs), a shift facilitated by the end of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (see IV/).

Finally, Russia's nuclear deterrent has been only relatively effective. Putin's address on February 24, 2022, a few days after the *Grom* strategic nuclear exercise (originally scheduled for fall 2021 and postponed to mid-February 2022), undoubtedly illustrated the nuclear component's effectiveness in deterring Western conventional "aggression" in response to Russia's invasion, which might otherwise have turned a local war into a regional one. Putin's implicit reference to a potential first use of nuclear weapons against a superior conventional adversary—in this case, the United States and/or NATO—was a coherent demonstration of the theory and doctrine that, since 1993–1997, had extended nuclear deterrence to large-scale conventional and regional wars (to prevent them or to compel the adversary to de-escalate if such a war occurs), and envisaged the possibility of a limited and demonstrative first use of nuclear weapons—including strategic—in this framework. Washington, however, had already stated that it would not intervene militarily in Ukraine. This deterrent move and those

100. S. Kaushal and D. Dolzikova, "The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine", op. cit., pp. 29-39.

that followed in its wake—such as placing the strategic nuclear forces on "special combat duty regime"[101] on February 27, hours after the West decided to exclude several Russian banks from the SWIFT system and to freeze Russian assets—did nothing to dissuade the West from imposing heavy economic sanctions on Russia. Nor did they halt the flow of aid to Ukraine, which was only slowed. The placing of strategic nuclear forces in a "special combat duty regime", justified by the introduction of "hostile economic measures"[102] according to Putin—an element not recognized in doctrine as a condition for exercising nuclear deterrence—was particularly revealing of Russia's disproportionate practice of deterrence.

In turn, the consequences of the SVO and its initial failure called into question the relevance of Russian strategic deterrence (both as a concept and as a system) in three respects. First, Russia's nonmilitary and subversive potential in the West was weakened: through bans on its propaganda outlets, the curtailment of oil and gas trade, economic and financial decoupling, exclusion from sporting competitions, and the suspension of cultural cooperation. Moscow also saw the loss of certain subversive instruments, such as the Wagner militia. Second, Russia's conventional force has been weakened at every level (personnel and material) and partly discredited.

The record of nuclear deterrence is more mixed. To fully grasp its particularities and its limits, a historical review of its practice is necessary. This highlights the continuity of a disproportionate reliance on nuclear rhetoric, which reflects deeper cultural drivers, particularly in the way Moscow perceives and prioritizes threats.

Nuclear deterrence: a mixed record, part of long-standing practice

In 2014–2015, Moscow paired its operations with a series of nuclear deterrence measures: threatening statements by officials[103] (including Putin himself),[104] exercises, an increase in the number and range of strategic bomber flights, and the mobilization of nonofficial actors such as media

101. The special combat duty regime (*osobyj režim boevogo dežurstva*) is the primary and highest form of maintaining the combat readiness of the Strategic Rocket Forces (RVSN). See R. O. Nogin, "K voprosu o dal'nejšem razvitii operativnogo iskusstva Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ", *VM*, No. 11, 2024, p. 10.

102. V. Putin, "Vstreča s Sergeem Šojgu i Valeriem Gerasimovym", Kremlin, February 27, 2022, available at: http://kremlin.ru.

103. Z. Keck, "Russia Threatens Nuclear Strikes Over Crimea", *The Diplomat*, July 11, 2014, available at: https://thediplomat.com; "Samolet Rogozina ne pustili v vozdušnoe prostranstvo Rumynii", *Lenta.ru,* May 10, 2014, available at: https://lenta.ru.

104. D. Sharkov, "Russia Has Threatened Nuclear Attack, Says Ukraine Defence Minister", *Newsweek*, September 1, 2014, available at: www.newsweek.com; "Putin gotov byl privesti v boegotovnost' âdernoe oružie iz-za Kryma", *Vedomosti*, March 16, 2015, available at: www.vedomosti.ru.

propagandists[105]—a pattern that has been repeated since 2021–2022. At the time, NATO was already stressing that Russia's "recent use of nuclear rhetoric, exercises and operations" was "deeply troubling".[106] The objective was the same as before and during the SVO: to force the West to back down and to abandon Ukraine.

However, as noted above, Russian strategic deterrence is not confined to wartime or ongoing military operations: It is exercised continuously, including in peacetime, in a coercive and proactive manner. There were therefore numerous Russian nuclear deterrence measures (primarily rhetorical) in place before February 24, 2022, outside the context of the Russo-Georgian war (August 2008) and the most intense phase of the indirect war against Ukraine (2014–2015).[107]

On February 12, 2008, when the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO —Kyiv was then seeking a Membership Action Plan (MAP)—and the possible deployment of Western military infrastructure (notably a "missile shield") on Ukrainian territory were raised, Putin threatened to "aim missiles" at Ukraine, adding cynically that this was a "frightening" prospect.[108] A few months later, after Washington and Warsaw had agreed to deploy elements of missile defense in response to the Russo-Georgian war, Moscow reacted through General Nogovitsyn, a deputy chief of the General Staff, who stated that such a decision "expose[d]" Poland to a "strike, 100% [certain]" and recalled that Russian doctrine allowed the use of nuclear weapons against an active ally of a nuclear power.[109] In the 2010s, Russia intensified its strategic deterrence measures, notably in response to NATO's missile defense project, threatening to deploy nuclear and dual-capable weapons—including in Kaliningrad—, to strike missile defense infrastructure in Eastern Europe preemptively or even to target the Danish navy with nuclear missiles if Copenhagen persisted in joining the NATO system.[110] In 2019, speaking to Washington and mistakenly fearing

105. L. Kelly, "Russia Can Turn US to Radioactive Ash–Kremlin-Backed Journalist", Reuters, March 16, 2014, available at: www.reuters.com.
106. "Nato Chief Says Russian Nuclear Threats are 'Deeply Troubling and Dangerous'", *The Guardian*, May 28, 2015, available at: www.theguardian.com.
107. Y. Kopiika, "A Timeline of Russia's Nuclear Threats Against the West", *United 24 Media*, June 27, 2024, available at: https://united24media.com.
108. V. Putin, "Zaâvleniâ dlâ pressy i otvety na voprosy žurnalistov po okončanii peregovorov s Prezidentom Ukrainy Viktorom Ûšenko i vtorogo zasedaniâ Rossijsko-Ukrainskoj mežgosudarstvennoj komissii", Kremlin, February 12, 2008, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
109. "V Genštabe RF sčitaût, čto Pol'ša, razmešaâ èlementy PRO SŠA, stavit sebâ pod udar", Interfax, August 15, 2008, available at: www.interfax.ru; I. Traynor et al., "Moscow Warns it could Strike Poland over US Missile Shield", *The Guardian*, August 16, 2008, available at: www.theguardian.com.
110. D. Medvedev, "Press-konferenciâ po itogam zasedaniâ Soveta Rossiâ–NATO", Kremlin, November 20, 2010, available at: http://kremlin.ru; "V.Putin v šou Larri Kinga. Polnyj tekst interv'û", *RBK*, December 2, 2010, available at: www.rbc.ru; D. Medvedev, "Zaâvlenie Prezidenta v svâzi s situaciej, kotoraâ složilas' vokrug sistemy PRO stran NATO v Evrope", Kremlin, November 23, 2011, available at: http://kremlin.ru; N. E. Makarov, "O vzglâdah Ministerstva oborony Rossijskoj Federacii na problemy protivoraketnoj oborony", May 3, 2012, available at: https://textarchive.ru; "Russia

that the end of the INF Treaty would be used as a pretext to deploy land-based intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe, Putin declared himself ready for a new Cuban missile crisis.[111] As part of the strategic deterrence phase preceding the SVO (2021–2022), aimed at forcing the West and Ukraine to capitulate, Putin announced on December 13, 2021 that he was willing to deploy intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe west of the Urals.[112]

Recall that the European "missile shield" in no way threatened Russia's first-strike capability—a capability provided for in its military doctrine to offset its conventional inferiority, as we have seen. Nor did it threaten its second-strike capability, since the planned infrastructure (ten radars and interceptors) was designed to counter an Iranian or North Korean ballistic attack.[113] Contrary to Moscow's claims at the time, this was not a "first step" toward deploying a more robust system that would cover the entirety of Europe.[114]

What matters here is not whether the Kremlin truly believed that the West was directly threatening its security or in fact knew its accusations to be baseless. Historically, Moscow has believed both that the West is radically hostile—that it seeks to contain or even destroy Russia—and that it is structurally weak, ostensibly leaving room for Moscow to alter the status quo and pursue its imperial ambitions. This outlook—at once defensive and offensive—is deeply rooted in Russia's political and strategic culture, in which the West occupies a central place, and it shapes policy across the board, including strategic thought.[115] This outlook partly explains Russia's idiosyncratic conception of "strategic deterrence"—simultaneously defensive and aggressive, coercive and proactive—which, in practice, ultimately appears disproportionate and irresponsible.

Russia interpreted the missile defense deployment as yet another dimension of the West's indirect war against it, and the Kremlin may well have seen it as a "first step", following the pattern of NATO enlargement. Leaving aside the fact that this narrative helps keep Moscow's autocracy in power, the key point is that Russia viewed the deployment as an obstacle to its imperial policy in the post-Soviet space, in Central and Eastern Europe —regions the Kremlin believes it has the right to rule—and, more broadly, to its ambition to lead in Europe and to compete there with the United States.

Threatens to Aim Nuclear Missiles at Denmark Ships if it Joins NATO Shield", Reuters, March 22, 2015, available at: www.reuters.com.

111. V. Vladimirov, "Putin utverždaet, čto Rossiâ gotova k novomu krizisu tipa Karibskogo", *La Voix de l'Amérique*, February 22, 2019, available at: www.golosameriki.com.

112. "Russia Says it May be Forced to Deploy Mid-Range Nuclear Missiles in Europe", Euractiv, December 14, 2021, available at: www.euractiv.com.

113. S. Blank, "Missile Defenses in Eastern Europe: Who Threatens Whom?", Wilson Center, July 7, 2011, available at: www.wilsoncenter.org.

114. Ibid.

115. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, op. cit.

Hence Moscow's desire to maintain strong coercive capacity in Europe through short- and medium-range conventional and nuclear missiles. In the Kremlin's view, therefore, the "direct threat" to Russia's security is not limited to any tangible danger: It is any potential obstacle to its ability to act and to exercise domination or coercion in these zones. In other words, Russia understands its security as flowing from its neighbors' insecurity.

Following the same logic of Russian theoretical and doctrinal reflections on deterrence and the politico-strategic culture—mentioned earlier—that underpins it, the Russian state and military employed numerous nuclear deterrence measures before and after the SVO:

- Exercises and/or tests of modern strategic nuclear weapons (Sarmat, Yars, Bulava, and Burevestnik), as well as tests and demonstrations of modern dual-capable missiles (Kinzhal and Kalibr), which have been used in Ukraine with conventional warheads.
- Statements by several Russian officials raising the possibility of use: On May 12, 2022, Dmitry Medvedev, who has been a prolific issuer of threats,[116] warned that Western military aid to Ukraine could lead to all-out nuclear war.[117] In August–September 2022, Ramzan Kadyrov called for nuclear use after two military setbacks in Ukraine.[118] In September 2022, Maria Zakharova said that supplying long-range weapons to Kyiv was a "red line" that would make the United States "a party to the conflict";[119] in the same context, Medvedev reiterated Russia's right to use nuclear weapons against the "Ukrainian regime", insisting it was "not a bluff" and that NATO "would not directly interfere in the conflict even in this scenario".[120] On January 19, 2023, on the eve of the NATO meeting at Ramstein Air Base—where, notably, the issue of convincing Germany to send heavy tanks to Ukraine was on the table, and against a backdrop of increased Western military aid to Ukraine—Medvedev declared that the defeat of a nuclear power in a conventional war could trigger nuclear war.[121]

116. Y. Kopiika, "A Timeline of Russia's Nuclear Threats Against the West", op. cit.
117. For a review and analysis of the threats made by Russian officials, see in particular: A. Fink, "The Wind Rose's Directions: Russia's Strategic Deterrence during the First Year of the War in Ukraine", *Proliferation Papers*, No. 65, Ifri, August 2023, available at: www.ifri.org; A. Arbatov, "Âdernye metamorfozy", Polis. *Političeskie issledovaniâ*, No. 5, 2023; A. Kendall-Taylor, M. Kofman et al., "Assessing the Evolving Russian Nuclear Threat", CNAS, October 2023, pp. 5-7, available at: www.cnas.org; C. Mills, "Russia's Use of Nuclear Threats During the Ukraine Conflict", UK Parliament, December 20, 2024, available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk.
118. "Kadyrov Says Russia Should Use Low-Yield Nuclear Weapon", Reuters, October 1, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com.
119. "MID RF: SŠA stanut storonoj konflikta v slučae postavok Kievu raket bol'šej dal'nosti", TASS, September 15, 2022, available at: https://tass.ru.
120. "Medvedev Raises Spectre of Russian Nuclear Strike on Ukraine", *Euronews*, September 28, 2022, available at: www.euronews.com.
121. "Putin Ally Warns NATO of Nuclear War if Russia is Defeated in Ukraine", Reuters, January 19, 2023, available at: www.reuters.com.

On July 13, 2023, Sergey Lavrov described the delivery of F-16s to Ukraine as a direct Western threat in the nuclear sphere, an "extremely dangerous turn of events" that risked direct armed confrontation with Russia that would be "fraught with catastrophic consequences".[122]

- False accusations that Kyiv was preparing to use weapons of mass destruction (chemical weapons, "dirty bombs", etc.), which constitutes a potential trigger for first use in Russian doctrine.
- The portrayal of the SVO as an existential war, which echoes the principal potential trigger set out in Russian nuclear doctrine at the time, and since 2010 ("the existence of the state itself").
- Dmitry Peskov's characterization of the annexed territories in Ukraine as "inalienable parts" of Russia whose security is "provided for at the same level as [it is for] the rest of Russia's territory", one month after Putin spoke of using nuclear weapons to defend Russia's territorial integrity (which is one of the potential triggers, albeit a secondary one, in the 2020 nuclear doctrine).[123]
- Bellicose recommendations from well-known Russian experts with visibility in Western media, such as Sergey Karaganov, who—in an article on the eve of the 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius, where decisions could have been made regarding NATO's MAP and security guarantees for Ukraine—called for a preventive nuclear strike against the West to win the war.[124] A year after the article's publication, Karaganov boasted that the West had "called to avoid escalation[...], it worked!"[125] A few months after publicly disavowing Karaganov's analyses, Putin just as publicly commissioned him, in May 2024, to conduct studies on nuclear deterrence as European debates on sending ground troops to Ukraine were underway.[126]

122. "Russia to View F-16 Fighter Jets in Ukraine as Threat in Nuclear Sphere—Lavrov", TASS, July 13, 2023, available at: https://tass.com.
123. "Russia Says Seized Ukrainian Lands are under its Nuclear Protection", *Euronews*, October 19, 2022, available at: www.euronews.com.
124. S. Karaganov, "Primenenie âdernogo oružiâ možet ubereč' čelovečestvo ot global'noj katastrofy", June 13, 2023, author's personal website, available at: https://karaganov.ru. He reiterated his position on June 25, 2023, regretting that the current high threshold for use has created skepticism in the West: "Vybora ne ostaetsâ: Rossii pridetsâ nanesti âdernyj udar po Evrope", *RIA Novosti*, June 25, 2023, available at: https://ria.ru.
125. "'K ustrašeniû': èksperty predložili svoe videnie âdernogo sderživaniâ", Interfax, October 30, 2024, available at: www.interfax.ru. In October 2024, Karaganov published a book with D. Trenin and S. Avakyants, based on a report provided to Russian leaders that contained recommendations: "Ot sderživaniâ k ustrašeniû", available at: https://gvardiya.ru. Russian nuclear strategy, Karaganov notes —seemingly overlooking post-Soviet theoretical and doctrinal developments—has been deteriorating since the 1980s; the Russian president "must be freed from this stupid [nuclear] doctrine."
126. C. Jewers, "Putin Hires Hardline Professor who Suggested Nuking Europe to 'Test NATO's Resolve' for Kremlin Role 'Deterring the West' », *Daily Mail*, May 10, 2024, available at: www.dailymail.co.uk.

The primary aim of these measures, which are often implemented within the same sequence, is to isolate Ukraine, to deter the West (both its elites and populations) from getting more deeply involved in the conflict, and to compel it (elites and populations alike) to slow or cut off the flow of aid to Ukraine or even to press Ukraine to surrender regardless of the military situation. Moscow thus seeks to shape the behavior of Western countries by instilling fear of a nuclear escalation that would inevitably affect them. At the same time, the Kremlin attempts to push Ukraine's army, its elites, and its population toward surrender. These deterrence measures have also been used, sometimes in parallel, to support Russian combat operations in Ukraine, whether to prepare the ground by weakening the enemy's will to resist (such as the deterrent measures that culminated on February 24), to limit major enemy military successes (as in September–October 2022), or to support an offensive (as in April 2022[127] or during the siege of Ilovaisk in 2014).[128]

Direct talks between senior Russian and American officials have also offered Moscow opportunities to influence its adversaries. For example, during a conversation between US General Mark Milley (then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and Gerasimov in October 2022, at a time when Russia had suffered two major setbacks in Ukraine, Milley asked his Russian counterpart to specify the conditions that would prompt Moscow to use nuclear weapons: regime defense, countering a weapon-of-mass-destruction (WMD) strike, or averting "catastrophic battlefield losses", Gerasimov replied.[129] Milley assured him that "none of these conditions would be met". Gerasimov likely misled his interlocutor to curb Kyiv's ambitions and limit aid to Ukraine. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that the prospect of "catastrophic losses" for the Ukrainian army would have been a sufficient trigger, as they would only have been temporary, given Russia's reserves and resources.

Russia's strategic deterrence measures, particularly those that relate to nuclear deterrence, are simultaneously defensive, offensive, and coercive, as reflected in Putin's threat, issued February 24, 2022, to prevent direct Western military involvement against Russia and force the West to abandon Ukraine.[130] Like the other deterrence measures mentioned above, and often in parallel with them, Putin's allusions to the possible use of nuclear weapons were intended to deter/compel the West from involving itself more significantly and/or to limit ongoing Ukrainian successes:

127. "Putin: esli kto-to vmešaetsâ v situaciû na Ukraine so storony, to otvet budet molnienosnym", TASS, April 27, 2022, available at: https://tass.ru.
128. V. Putin, "Vserossijskij molodëžnyj forum 'Seliger-2014'", Kremlin, August 29, 2014, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
129. A. Uvarov, "The Art of Containing Escalation", *Riddle*, March 18, 2025, available at: https://ridl.io.
130. U. Kühn, "The Fall Crisis of 2022: Why did Russia Not Use Nuclear Arms?", *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2025, pp. 280-300.

- February 24, 2022, the day the SVO was launched.
- April 28, 2022,[131] when Russia suffered a military setback in northern Ukraine and had launched a new offensive in the Donbas on April 18.
- September 21, 2022,[132] amid setbacks in Kherson and Kharkiv and upon the announcement of partial mobilization.
- February 2, 2023,[133] in response to the delivery of German Leopard tanks.
- June 16, 2023,[134] even while denying the "need" to use nuclear weapons in response to a question that referenced the "public" debate sparked by Karaganov, who a few days earlier had recommended that Moscow launch limited preventive nuclear strikes on Western Europe to end the war in Ukraine. In October 2023, Putin reaffirmed that the use of nuclear weapons was unnecessary in an exchange with Karaganov at the Valdai Discussion Club.[135]
- February 29[136] and March 13, 2024,[137] in response to Emmanuel Macron's statement that he would not rule out sending ground troops to Ukraine.
- On June 5,[138] 7[139] (when he stated for the first time that he would not rule out modifying the nuclear doctrine), and 20[140] (when he confirmed that he was considering possible modifications), after Biden's decision, on May 30, 2024,[141] to authorize Ukraine to strike military targets in Russia linked to the Russian offensive in the Kharkiv region, which began on May 10; and a second decision,

131. "Putin: esli kto-to vmešaetsâ v situaciû na Ukraine so storony, to otvet budet molnienosnym", op. cit.
132. V. Putin, "Obraŝenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii", Kremlin, September 21, 2022, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
133. V. Putin, "Toržestvennyj koncert po slučaû 80-j godovŝiny razgroma nemecko-fašistskih vojsk v Stalingradskoj bitve", Kremlin, February 2, 2023, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
134. V. Putin, "Plenarnoe zasedanie Peterburgskogo meždunarodnogo èkonomičeskogo foruma", Kremlin, June 16, 2023, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
135. V. Putin, "Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdaj'", Kremlin, October 5, 2023, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
136. V. Putin, "Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniû", Kremlin, February 29, 2024, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
137. V. Putin, "Interv'û Dmitriû Kiselëvu", Kremlin, March 13, 2024, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
138. V. Putin, "Vstreča s rukovoditelâmi meždunarodnyh informagentstv", Kremlin, June 5, 2024, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
139. V. Putin, "Plenarnoe zasedanie Peterburgskogo meždunarodnogo èkonomičeskogo foruma", Kremlin, June 7, 2024, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
140. V. Putin, "Otvety na voprosy rossijskih žurnalistov", Kremlin, June 20, 2024, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
141. J. Politi, "Joe Biden Allows Ukraine to Use US Weapons to Hit Targets in Russia", *Financial Times*, May 31, 2024, available at: www.ft.com.

announced by the Pentagon on June 20, to extend this authorization (which did not yet cover long-range strikes and, therefore, Army Tactical Missile Systems—ATACMSs) to the entire border.[142]

The instability of this rhetoric, including Putin's, is striking. While the front had stabilized, he spoke, in late October 2022, of the "uselessness"[143] of Russia using atomic weapons and said Russia had "not lost all reason",[144] in early December 2022. Russian officials have repeatedly contradicted themselves—and Putin[145]—on the question of the use of nuclear. Moscow may well view this confusion as a strategy to create uncertainty and grant Putin greater freedom of action in decision-making.[146] In fact, this is nothing new: On December 10, 1999, after Bill Clinton had condemned Moscow's ultimatum to Chechnya the day before and warned of the "costs" of this strategy,[147] Boris Yeltsin, who characterized Clinton's statement as an attempt to pressure Moscow, reminded the US president that Russia "[had] a full arsenal of nuclear weapons".[148] Asked about this exchange, Putin, then prime minister, replied that it would be "incorrect" to speak of a "chill in Russian-American relations" and that relations were "very good".[149]

Nuclear deterrence gradually lost credibility as the deterrent actions that were carried out—largely discursive, in the form of threats and warnings—proved ineffective and Moscow's "red lines" were crossed. While these threats undoubtedly contributed to a slowing of Western aid to Ukraine, the absence of tangible demonstrations intended to reinforce this posture weakened their impact. Apart from the *Grom* strategic exercise held on the eve of the SVO,[150] none of the significant measures envisaged by theory (i.e., conducting an actual nuclear test, moving nuclear warheads from central depots to bases, deploying nuclear weapons within operational units, stationing tactical nuclear weapons on surface ships or submarines,

142. "Pentagon Says Ukraine can US Weapons Anywhere Across the Border into Russia", Euractiv, June 21, 2024, available at: www.euractiv.com.
143. V. Putin, "Zasedanie Meždunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdaj'", Kremlin, October 27, 2022, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
144. V. Putin, "Zasedanie Soveta po razvitiû graždanskogo obŝestva i pravam čeloveka", Kremlin, December 7, 2022, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
145. "Russia Says "No Need" to Use Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine", Reuters, August 16, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com; "Russian Will not Use Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine, Foreign Ministry Says", Reuters, May 6, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com; "Kremlin Spokesman: Russia Would use Nuclear Weapons only in Case of 'Threat to Existence of State'", Reuters, March 29, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com; "Moscow 'Not Threatening Anyone' with Nuclear Weapons–Russia's Ryabkov", Reuters, September 23, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com; "Russia is not Considering Using Nuclear Weapons–Kremlin Says", Reuters, November 17, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com.
146. A. Kendall-Taylor, M. Kofman et al., "Assessing the Evolving Russian Nuclear Threat", op. cit., pp. 5-7.
147. "Clinton's Words to Press: On the Mideast, Chechnya and Other Matters", *The New York Times*, December 9, 1999, available at: www.nytimes.com.
148. J. Gittings, "Yeltsin Gives US Nuclear Warning", *The Guardian*, December 10, 1992, available at: www.theguardian.com.
149. Ibid.
150. A. Fink, "The Wind Rose's Directions", op. cit., pp. 21, 25-26.

or fielding short-range tactical nuclear weapons for artillery) have been implemented. The reason is relatively simple: Taking such steps would strongly indicate that Moscow truly intended to use nuclear weapons —something that was certainly never the case in the context of the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the gap between very aggressive rhetoric and relatively cautious practice did in fact erode Russia's credibility.

This erosion of credibility was only made worse by Putin's involvement. The Kremlin leader involved himself personally in deterrence rhetoric in order to maximize its impact, a decision dictated in part by his paranoid reading of Western behavior and its supposed influence on Kyiv. Russian military theorists, however, warned that if a "threat strategy" was to create the "impression", through speeches, press articles, hints, and statements, that Russia would sooner take extreme measures than retreat, the head of state's involvement should be only indirect, and "no" statement should be framed in a way that would make it "difficult" to "refuse to carry out the threat".[151]

Moreover, the lack of any concrete response to repeated breaches of these "red lines" fostered a sense of weakness, one that was widely decried in patriotic circles of Russian society.[152] From this perspective, Karaganov was not only an agent of Russia's nuclear deterrence, but also likely a symptom of this frustration. That said, Russia's nuclear deterrence and doctrine has and continues to be developed elsewhere, more discreetly and with greater expertise: that is, within the Russian military, which, as early as 2022, shared these frustrations while justifying and advocating Moscow's doctrinal and practical adaptation, not only to learn from its mistakes, but also to respond to the new conditions created by the initial failure of the SVO and its consequences.

The threefold weakening of Russia's strategic deterrence mechanism —albeit temporary—and the new geopolitical context created by the SVO and its initial failure did not escape the attention of the Russian military elites and laid the groundwork for a change in approach and doctrine. Far from abandoning the set of nuclear deterrence measures discussed earlier, Moscow sought from the beginning of 2023 to accompany them with more concrete actions.

151. V. V. Vasilenko and G. A. Kuznecov, "Utočnenie principov âdernogo sderživaniâ primenitel'no k konfliktam nizkoj intensivnosti", op. cit., para. 67.
152. "Na Zapade zaâvili, čto bol'še ne boâtsâ 'krasnyh linij' Putina", Pravda.ru, April 6, 2023, available at: www.pravda.ru; "Šukšina pokazala mem, na kotorom nad RF sguŝaûtsâ 'krasnye linii'", Pravda.ru, September 17, 2022, available at: www.pravda.ru.

Assessment and recommendations of Russian military elites (February 24, 2022–August 2024)

The limited success of nuclear deterrence, the attrition and exhaustion of conventional forces, the constrained effectiveness of modern conventional weapons, the enlargement of NATO to include Finland and Sweden, fears of conventional confrontations with non-nuclear states (potentially backed by nuclear-armed states), and Russia's economic and geopolitical decline have led Russia's military elites, since February 24, to once again emphasize the nuclear pillar of strategic deterrence. At the same time, the many failures —including conventional ones—have prompted some theorists to urge Moscow to undertake concrete, practical, concrete actions to rebuild the credibility of Russia's strategic deterrent, which would also entail modifying its coercive strategy.[153] In practice, the Kremlin—whose main objective is to deter the West from continuing its aid to Ukraine and to compel the former to restrain Kyiv—pursued this course from the beginning of 2023, culminating in November 2024 with the publication of a new nuclear doctrine.

Back to the 1990s Posture? The drivers of change

Based on the experience of the war in Ukraine, the assessments and recommendations of military elites regarding nuclear deterrence highlight the shift in approach, the doctrinal revision, and the character of the forthcoming Russian nuclear threat. Far from the 2000–2010 enthusiasm for conventional deterrence (which, as we have seen, came with caveats), a number of senior officers and prominent generals of the Russian military —including the commander and first deputy commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces (RVSN), the deputy head and department heads at the RVSN Military Academy, and specialists from the 27th CNII—have reaffirmed the

153. This is also the conclusion reached by D. Adamsky in a recent article: "Quo Vadis, Russian Deterrence? Strategic Culture and Coercion Innovations", *International Security*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 2025, pp. 50-83, available at: https://direct.mit.edu.

centrality of nuclear weapons (and of the RVSN in particular) in Russian strategic deterrence for the next two to three decades.[154]

This reaction—which could also be read in the context of bureaucratic infighting—rests on two main ideas that had already led Russian military theorists in the 1990s (and, later, doctrine) to advocate lowering the threshold.

The first concerns the weakening of Russia's geopolitical position, not only in the "context of limited conventional force capabilities",[155] but also amid new "conditions of instability and uncertainty" and the "country's current economic situation".[156] Contrary to official statements, the impact of economic sanctions on Russia's military policy and geostrategic situation is deemed "serious", insofar as they reduce national resources and make it "difficult" to modernize the armed forces and produce high-tech military equipment.[157] Even strategic deterrence requires investment in advanced technology, such as automated command-and-control systems (ASU), which specialists at the Ministry of Defense's 27th CNII deem "inadequate".[158] Driven by the desire to make the best use of available resources,[159] Russian military elites argue that nuclear weapons are the "least costly means".[160]

The second reason for the (re)emphasis on nuclear deterrence is the threat allegedly posed by the West. The intensification of the West's indirect strategy (or "hybrid war") against Russia—through massive sanctions, a proxy war in Ukraine, the enlargement of NATO to include Sweden and Finland (which, Russian officers note, has "doubled"[161] the length of Russia's border with NATO), and the strengthening of Western military

154. S. V. Karakaev, "K voprosu o primenenii Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v vojnah budušego", *VM*, No. 2, 2023, pp. 7, 14; I. R. Fazletdinov and V. I. Lumpov, "Rol' Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v protivodejstvii strategičeskoj mnogosfernoj operacii NATO", *VM*, No. 3, 2023, p. 53; R. O. Nogin, "O roli i meste Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v perspektivnoj sisteme kompleksnogo strategičeskogo âdernogo sderživaniâ vozmožnoj agressii protiv Rossijskoj Federacii", *VM*, No. 7, 2022, p. 43.

155. M. L. Tihonov, "Osnovnye napravleniâ soveršenstvovaniâ teorii operativnogo iskusstva Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ na rubeže 2030-h godov", *VM*, No. 7, 2023, p. 28.

156. S. V. Karakaev, "K voprosu o primenenii Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v vojnah budušego", op. cit., pp. 7, 14; R. O. Nogin, "O roli i meste Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v perspektivnoj sisteme kompleksnogo strategičeskogo âdernogo sderživaniâ vozmožnoj agressii protiv Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., p. 43.

157. S. N. Mažuga, "Geostrategičeskie aspekty voennoj politiki Rossijskoj Federacii v sovremennyh usloviâh", *VM*, No. 6 2025, p. 67.

158. D. S. Belen'kov, A. S. Borisenko and V. V. Suhorutčenko, "Aktual'nye voprosy avtomatizacii ocenki strategičeskoj obstanovki pri rešenii zadač strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", *VM*, 2024, No. 8, pp. 69-70, 73.

159. I. R. Fazletdinov and V. I. Lumpov, "Osobennosti realizacii principa programmno-celevogo planirovaniâ pri obosnovanii perspektiv razvitiâ organizacionno-tehničeskogo oblika RVSN", *VM*, No. 5, 2024, p. 121.

160. I. R. Fazletdinov and V. I. Lumpov, "Rol' Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v protivodejstvii strategičeskoj mnogosfernoj operacii NATO", op. cit., p. 53.

161. S. V. Lazarev, V. V. Rumâncev and K. V. Lipatov, "Obespečenie voennoj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii v sovremennyh usloviâh: aktual'nye problemy i puti ih rešeniâ", *VM*, No. 11, 2024, pp. 63-64.

activity in Europe and along Russia's borders—is said to create the conditions for a "strategic defeat" of Moscow.[162] In the event that Russia were to survive this indirect strategy (a strategy which Western powers, "afraid" of direct confrontation with the Kremlin, prefer), the West will unleash the ultimate phase of its war against Russia, which it is already preparing. This phase would rely primarily on the "massive" use of high-precision, non-nuclear strategic aerospace weapons to decapitate ("instant global strike") Russia's nuclear forces (command centers, permanent deployment sites) and subjugate Moscow.[163] This scenario, long feared by the Russian military, reflects long-standing concerns about the survivability of nonstrategic as well as strategic nuclear delivery systems (air and land legs of the triad), concerns that were to some degree borne out by the experience of the war in Ukraine.

RUSI experts have challenged the classical explanation for the raising of Russia's nuclear threshold (set out in the 2010 and 2020 doctrines), which points to the modernization of conventional forces and developments in threat perceptions (now focused on local and hybrid conflicts). These experts have instead argued that the decision to raise the threshold was in fact made in response to Russia's fear of losing its second-strike capability as a result of US long-range precision-strike systems coupled with a "missile shield" capable of intercepting any missiles that survived the initial strikes.[164] (Washington's withdrawal, in 2002, from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty aggravated this fear.) By keeping its threshold low, Moscow was running the risk that Washington, fearing a limited Russian strike, would be incentivized to launch a massive, sudden first strike to neutralize it. By raising the threshold, the Kremlin reassured its adversary, reduced the risk of a hasty escalation, and protected its second-strike capability. Because this also restricted Moscow's flexibility to use nuclear weapons to avert a conventional defeat, Russia has sought to preserve its credibility in this domain by developing nonstrategic weapons.

162. An assessment of the situation shared by all the Russian officers whose writings we have been able to read.

163. S. V. Karakaev, "K voprosu o primenenii Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v vojnah budušego", op. cit., pp. 8-10, 13. This belief—that any direct Western armed aggression would take the form of a "global strike"—is widely shared among the Russian military elite. See also, most recently: A. A. Cyganov, M. M. Debelo and S. V. Bandura, "O neobhodimosti sozdaniâ perspektiv nyh ob″edinenij vozdušno-kosmičeskih sil dlâ prikrytiâ ob″ektov vysših zven′ev upravleniâ i strategičeskih âdernyh sil", op. cit.; V. V. Andreev and S. V. Hakberdyev, "Formirovanie sposobov primeneniâ ob″edinenij Vozdušno-kosmičeskih sil v strategičeskom sderživanii protivnika", op. cit. p. 41; I. R. Fazletdinov and V. I. Lumpov, "Rol' Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v protivodejstvii strategičeskoj mnogosfernoj operacii NATO", op. cit., pp. 54-58; I. R. Fazletdinov and V. I. Lumpov, "Osobennosti realizacii principa programmno-celevogo planirovaniâ pri obosnovanii perspektiv razvitiâ organizacionno-tehničeskogo oblika RVSN", op. cit., pp. 110-111; I. O. Kostûkov, "Deâtel'nost' NATO kak glavnyj istočnik voennyh ugroz Rossii", *VM*, No. 5, 2024, pp. 24-31, 35; S. V. Afanas'ev, "Itogi ûbilejnogo Vašingtonskogo sammita NATO v 2024 godu v novyh geopolitičeskih realiâh", *VM*, No. 11, 2024, pp. 54-57, 61; I. A. Kolesnikov and V. V. Kruglov, "O novyh voennyh opasnostâh i ugrozah dlâ Rossijskoj Federacii", *VM*, No. 6, 2024, pp. 9, 12, 14.

164. S. Kaushal and D. Dolzikova, "The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine", op. cit., pp. 14-15.

Interesting as it is, this analysis is debatable on several counts. First, it is contradicted by the new doctrine (2024), which lowers the threshold at a time when American capabilities have grown, as the authors themselves note. This produces an aporia: according to the authors' theory, if a high threshold reflects heightened fear, a low threshold should logically imply reduced fear—an implication the authors try to avoid by disputing the idea of a lowered threshold in the latest doctrine. The new doctrine, they claim, merely replaces the old formula with a similar one: "critical threat to the integrity of the state".[165] This is inaccurate. Second, this analysis rests on a superficial understanding of Russian threat perception: Not only is that perception an evolving one, but a close reading of primary sources shows that the Russian military gives little credence to the likelihood of such an aerospace operation, as opposed to its assessment of Western hybrid threats, including proxy wars. Most Russian military elites continue to hold a contemptuous view of the West as hedonistic, cowardly, and unwilling to tolerate even minimal nuclear damage in retaliation. This analysis also overlooks the possibility that Moscow may hold a lucid (and not wholly paranoid) perception of the West, its intentions, and its internal divisions. It overemphasizes Russian rhetoric on the "missile shield" without recognizing the aggressive (not merely defensive) character of that rhetoric. Third, it downplays the degree to which the Russian army of the 1990s–2010s overestimated modern conventional weapons.

Even after the start of the SVO, with Russia considerably weakened, the most elite segments of Russia's military do not seem alarmed by this aerospace scenario, nor by any other NATO-initiated scenario of direct confrontation. The head of the RVSN, Sergey Karakaev, deems it "doomed to failure", since Russia possesses a powerful nuclear retaliatory capability able to respond to a large-scale conventional aggression of this type.[166] The head and deputy head of the GU (GRU), mindful of divisions within the West over support for Ukraine (aid and ground troops), consider a direct military confrontation provoked by the West unlikely in the short to medium term unless Washington and its vassals are convinced of the "success" and "impunity" of their aerospace operation.[167] The principal military threats identified include the West's preparation of proxy wars on Russia's borders, as part of its indirect strategy (hybrid warfare), which

165. S. Kaushal and D. Dolzikova, "The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine", op. cit., p. 24.
166. S. V. Karakaev, "K voprosu o primenenii Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v vojnah budušego", op. cit., pp. 8-10, 13.
167. I. O. Kostûkov, "Deâtel'nost' NATO kak glavnyj istočnik voennyh ugroz Rossii", op. cit., pp. 24-31, 35; S. V. Afanas'ev, "Itogi ûbilejnogo Vašingtonskogo sammita NATO v 2024 godu v novyh geopolitičeskih realiâh", op. cit., pp. 55-57. See also General and VAGS professor Vahrušev, who considers the probability of a military option to be low, largely dependent on domestic political situations in Europe and the United States, where "economic and social unrest" could create an "explosive" situation: V. A. Vahrušev and V. V. Vylugin, "Analiz sovremennyh geopolitičeskih tendencij i ih vliâniâ na nacional'nuû bezopasnost' Rossijskoj Federacii", *VM*, 2024, No. 9, pp. 24-26.

could unfold, after Ukraine, in Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, Finland, and Sweden.[168]

To counter NATO's alleged plans, Russian military elites argue that the emphasis should be kept on strategic deterrence[169] and a high level of combat readiness with respect to nuclear forces and their support systems,[170] because they believe that the country's response to new threats (which are largely conventional) must predominantly be found in the nuclear domain.

"The red lines reddened with shame": Critique and recommendations

Concrete proposals have been formulated to restore the credibility of Russia's strategic (and not merely nuclear) deterrence, which has eroded since February 24. Theorists initially struggled to explain the "restraint" of "Russian leaders", who let the West get "eight to ten steps" ahead of Russia in the escalation race over Ukraine, responded to "not a single provocation", and made the Kremlin's "red lines" "redden with shame".[171] Even if the "discussions of Russian political scientists" about a possible preventive nuclear strike on a NATO country—clearly an allusion to Karaganov—serve chiefly to "intimidate" the West, they have been deemed "worrying". To avert a protracted conflict that will "inevitably" entail "disproportionate" expenditures of national wealth and human resources ("which is particularly tragic") and will "inevitably" produce negative sociopolitical consequences in Russia, Russian theorists argue that it is necessary to take "decisive action". To rebalance the situation, they recommend (conventional) strikes against the intelligence and information infrastructure of the United States and NATO countries in areas where they directly support Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory.

The first deputy commander of the RVSN, General Fazletdinov, argues that the potential threat (albeit considered unlikely) of a sudden Western aerospace attack on Russia demands an urgent organizational, technical, and technological upgrade of the strategic nuclear forces and the RVSN in particular, which is the main component of these forces.[172] He also notes

168. I. A. Kolesnikov and V. V. Kruglov, "O novyh voennyh opasnostâh i ugrozah dlâ Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., pp. 14-15.
169. S. V. Afanas'ev, "Itogi ûbilejnogo Vašingtonskogo sammita NATO v 2024 godu v novyh geopolitičeskih realiâh", op. cit., p. 61.
170. I. A. Kolesnikov and V. V. Kruglov, "O novyh voennyh opasnostâh i ugrozah dlâ Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., pp. 9, 12.
171. A. D. Gavrilov, I. V. Grudinin, D. G. Majburov and V. A. Novikov, "Dva goda special'noj voennoj operacii: nekotorye itogi, veroâtnye perspektivy", *VAVN*, Vol. 87, No. 2, 2024, pp. 55, 62. Refer to pages 62-63 for the following passages.
172. I. R. Fazletdinov and V. I. Lumpov, "Osobennosti realizacii principa programmno-celevogo planirovaniâ pri obosnovanii perspektiv razvitiâ organizacionno-tehničeskogo oblika RVSN", op. cit., pp. 110-111.

that a promising mode of employing the armed forces at the strategic level is taking shape: an "operation of strategic deterrent forces", involving modern nuclear and non-nuclear strategic weapons,[173] designed to prevent the outbreak of a large-scale nuclear or conventional war against Russia and its allies.[174] Theorists also proposed that tactical nuclear weapons should be deployed in Kaliningrad, where Russia had already stationed MiG-31s armed with dual-capable Kinzhals in August 2022, four years after sending dual-capable Iskander-M missiles to the exclave, though it is unclear whether nuclear warheads were included in this.[175] They also propose that medium-range weapons should be deployed along the border with Finland in response to NATO's enlargement. Some proposals go even further.

To "deter" (i.e., intimidate, restrain, and coerce) Washington and underscore the "seriousness of the intentions of Russia's political-military leadership regarding strategic deterrence", the deputy head of the RVSN Military Academy, General Nogin, advised as early as July 2022 a reprise of the 1962 Cuban scenario; namely, a demonstration of the capabilities of the nuclear potential executed with "surprise" and "determination".[176] Noting the failure of the 2020 nuclear doctrine—whose he cites the list of the "principal military dangers" that could turn into "military threats" and against which nuclear deterrence is conducted—in the face of the West's "impudent and irresponsible" attitude in Ukraine, Nogin advises implementing the concept of "integrated strategic nuclear deterrence," consisting of a myriad of coordinated military and nonmilitary measures taken according to a single plan and relying on the forces and means of nuclear deterrence, in order to prevent any aggression against Russia or its allies. In the event of an "escalation of aggressive actions" against Russia, the core of this deterrence would consist of "demonstrative and real" actions that, in a "controlled" manner, showcase the strengthening of the combat readiness of the nuclear deterrent forces, as well as a "real demonstration" of use, with the aim of creating a "nuclear-threat model" in the enemy to make him "aware" of the unacceptability of any use. To compel hostile political-military leaders to yield, Nogin contends, the "most effective" course is to "demonstrate the combat capabilities" of the RVSN.

173. I. R. Fazletdinov and V. I. Lumpov, "Rol' Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v protivodejstvii strategičeskoj mnogosfernoj operacii NATO", op. cit., pp. 59-61.
174. I. R. Fazletdinov and V. I. Lumpov, "Osobennosti realizacii principa programmno-celevogo planirovaniâ pri obosnovanii perspektiv razvitiâ organizacionno-tehničeskogo oblika RVSN", op. cit., p. 116.
175. V. V. Selivanov and Û. D. Il'in, "Tendencii razvitiâ sredstv vooružennoj bor'by v sovremennyh voennyh konfliktah, ih vliânie na razvitie i smenu pokolenij vooruženiâ, voennoj i special'noj tehniki", *VM*, No. 9, 2022, p. 32.
176. R. O. Nogin, "O roli i meste Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ v perspektivnoj sisteme kompleksnogo strategičeskogo âdernogo sderživaniâ vozmožnoj agressii protiv Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., pp. 42- 43, 47. Refer to pages 43-47 for the following passages.

Ahead of the doctrinal revision, General Nogin argued that the significant expansion of operational and strategic threats, including those potentially affecting the RVSN—such as military activity on the borders; the proxy conflict in Ukraine; the organization of terrorist acts,[177] subversion, and sabotage in Russia; *the massive use of all types of cruise missiles, guided aerial bombs, and drones* (a wording similar to that used in the new 2024 doctrine); and heightened psychological-informational, and cyber capabilities[178] targeting personnel and infrastructure—requires ensuring the RVSN's capability ("combat stability") to inflict a specified level of damage on the enemy under all situational conditions (including conventional war) in the event of a threat to Russia's *national security* and *sovereignty*. (This wording is a blend of the threshold formula defined in the 2000 VD and a secondary potential trigger present in the 2020 nuclear doctrine.)[179]

Colonel Tikhonov, deputy head of the operational art department at the Peter the Great Military Academy of the Strategic Missile Forces (VARVSN), argues that the "current politico-military and strategic situation" requires "revising" and "clarifying" the planning and employment of the RVSN during "deterrent and combat actions".[180] He stresses the importance of the RVSN's "deterrence actions" (*sderživaûŝie dejstviâ*) (regardless of whether the aggression is nuclear or non-nuclear, it goes without saying), such as raising units to the "highest degree of combat readiness" and "overtly" preparing to carry out nuclear strikes. To "prevent aggression", dissuasive measures must showcase the RVSN's combat capabilities and signal the "willingness" and "determination" of political-military leaders to employ nuclear weapons "if necessary". To secure the "cessation of escalation", Tikhonov envisions "preemptive" (RVSN) strikes, both through a "demonstrative use" against enemy forces ("without causing significant damage to the population and the environment") and through the "destruction" of key enemy military infrastructure. The questioning of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and the INF Treaty will make it possible to create a "separate ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] and/or IRBM [intermediate-range ballistic missile] group" within

177. On this specific point, see S. Naryshkin: "Naryškin: Ukraina i Zapad razvernuli terrorističeskuû vojnu protiv Rossii", October 7, 2024, available at: www.pnp.ru; and I. A. Kolesnikov and V. V. Kruglov, "O novyh voennyh opasnostâh i ugrozah dlâ Rossijskoj Federacii", op. cit., pp. 15-16.

178. See also: R. O. Nogin, D. A. Palačëv and S. V. Kornev, "Vozmožnye podhody k razrabotke kompleksa meropriâtij po soveršenstvovaniû boevogo dežurstva v RVSN v sovremennoj voenno-političeskoj obstanovke", *VM*, No. 3, 2024, pp. 35-37.

179. R. O. Nogin, "K voprosu o dal'nejšem razvitii operativnogo iskusstva Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ", op. cit., pp. 8-9; R. O. Nogin, V. E. Kazarin and V. D. Roldugin, "Metodičeskij podhod k issledovaniû boevoj ustojčivosti gruppirovki RVSN", *VM*, No. 9 2024, pp. 124-125.

180. M. L. Tihonov, "Osnovnye napravleniâ soveršenstvovaniâ teorii operativnogo iskusstva Raketnyh vojsk strategičeskogo naznačeniâ na rubeže 2030-h godov", op. cit., p. 28. For the following passages, refer to pages 30-31.

the RVSN designed to "carry out single and collective missile firings and/or nuclear missile strikes", as well as to "reinforce nuclear first-strike groupings". Ahead of the doctrinal revision—and in a thinly veiled allusion to Ukraine, with an eye to similar scenarios—Tikhonov contends that this "group" and "approach" could be used against a "state that is part of military alliances and possesses nuclear weapons but lacks modern delivery systems" once "reliable information" is received that it has decided to prepare "military actions" against "Russia and its allies". This, he argues, "could convince" a Washington's partner state to "refuse" to host foreign forces on its territory.

Noting the failure of Russian deterrence in the context of the war in Ukraine, Colonel Sukhorutchenko (a researcher at the 27th CNII and a prolific writer on deterrence) argues that NATO's enlargement and military strengthening require Russia to adopt a "more offensive" declaratory policy in the field of military security.[181] This would entail a revision of the nuclear doctrine, which is the heart of declaratory policy. This declaratory policy would involve communicating to foreign elites, experts, and populations ("to a reasonable extent") Russia's official position on the following issues: the consequences of a new accumulation of external military dangers and threats; the role of the Russian Armed Forces in carrying out the tasks of nuclear and non-nuclear military (*silovoj*) strategic deterrence; and the principal aims of preventing aggression against the state, protecting Russia's *sovereignty* and *territorial integrity* (Sukhorutchenko refers here to the two secondary potential triggers of the 2020 nuclear doctrine), and achieving the de-escalation of military conflicts under conditions acceptable to Russia.[182] In line with theory and doctrine, Colonel Sukhorutchenko does not limit deterrence to its nuclear component; in fact, he argues that it is "urgent" to develop a doctrine on the role of non-nuclear strategic weapons (briefly mentioned in the 2014 VD).

He adds that declaratory policy must observe several principles, three of which are especially salient in light of Russia's experience with deterrence in Ukraine. The first is the principle of "combining military determination and peaceful prudence". This involves, on the one hand, issuing ultimatums (i.e., threats to use nuclear and strategic non-nuclear weapons) if *conditions* deemed *critical* to Russia's *military security* emerge; and, on the other, clearly tying any use of nuclear and strategic non-nuclear weapons to a response to the use of WMDs or to conventional aggression that threatens the state's very existence. This principle of maximizing the effects of deterrence while avoiding uncontrolled escalation

181. V. V. Suhorutčenko, A. S. Borisenko and E. A. Šlotov, "Politika Rossijskoj Federacii v oblasti obespečeniâ voennoj bezopasnosti v usloviâh stagnacii meždunarodnopravovoj sistemy kontrolâ nad vooruženiâmi i voennoj deâtel'nost'û", *VM*, 2023, No. 5, pp. 35-37, 39-41, 43. Refer to the same pages for the following passages.

182. They mention the "protection of its sovereignty and territorial integrity" three times, pp. 35-40.

is characteristic of Russian deterrence, but it comes with the risk, as we have seen, of eroding credibility. The second principle is that of "the alignment of declarations with the military-political and strategic situation and with the actual threats to military security". This adaptive approach to deterrence holds that declarations of intent should harden as threats increase (to deter them), but that they must also strike a "rational compromise" between their escalatory (risking further escalation if poorly calibrated) and de-escalatory (credibility of declared capabilities) aspects. The third principle, of the "military feasibility of declarations", serves to preclude any perception on the part of the adversary that such declarations are not backed by the political-military leadership's resolve and by available capabilities.

In this view, doctrinal revisions should instill the conviction among Western audiences, particularly US allies within NATO, that retaliation is inevitable for any country involved in aggression against Russia, including non-nuclear states, in order to protect Russia's *sovereignty* and *territorial integrity*. According to Sukhoruchenko, who participated in the theoretical debates on lowering the threshold (1993–2003), such a revision should:

- Incite the elites of states near the borders of Russia and its allies (including via public pressure) to prohibit or reduce the deployment of foreign weapons, troops, and military facilities on their territory.
- Convey to elites and populations the possible consequences (including environmental) of Russia's use of nuclear and/or strategic non-nuclear weapons against critical facilities on the territory of any state involved in aggression.
- Make clear the inevitability of retaliation to the leaders who make decisions "to please Washington"—such as making their territory available for an act of aggression against Russia—that create real threats.
- Make clear that Russia's use of strategic non-nuclear weapons—and, *in a situation in which the very existence of Russia is threatened*, the use of nuclear weapons—could lead to a large-scale war with catastrophic consequences.
- Make clear that Russia's use of nuclear or non-nuclear strategic weapons in the event of one or more declared key conditions for use is inevitable.

Finally, Sukhorutchenko underscores the importance of *practical* measures to increase the effectiveness of declaratory policy (and thus of official documents) and to *concretely* demonstrate Russia's determination and ability to use these weapons effectively. These measures include military exercises and experiments and the deployment of delivery

platforms (i.e., aircraft and ships capable of carrying nuclear or strategic non-nuclear weapons) outside Russia and within range of critical enemy installations.

A year later, in mid-2024, Sukhorutchenko and other officers of the 27th CNII stated that strategic deterrence (nuclear and strategic non-nuclear) is conducted by the state to protect its *sovereignty* and *territorial integrity* and that it serves to prevent aggression against Russia and its allies, enable the de-escalation of a military conflict under conditions acceptable to Russia, and, as a last resort, inflict decisive defeat on the enemy.[183] With the 2014 VD to support them, the officers reiterated that nuclear weapons remain an important factor in preventing a conventional military conflict (large-scale or regional), and that in their view, Western behavior (i.e., aid that enables strikes deep inside Russian territory, NATO enlargement, the deployment of military infrastructure and troops in non-aligned states on Russia's borders, and a willingness to start proxy wars between Moscow and its non-nuclear neighbors to avoid a direct confrontation with Russia) raises the risk that the SVO will escalate into a full-scale war.[184]

By 2022, Russian military elites specializing in and/or practicing deterrence had thus drawn several lessons that illuminate Russia's practical and doctrinal adaptations attempts: Russia's geopolitical weakening; the intensification of the Western threat, notably via conventional proxy wars with Moscow's non-nuclear and/or non-aligned neighbors; the misalignment of rhetorical and practical measures of strategic deterrence (nuclear and conventional); and the obsolescence of nuclear doctrine. The insistence of these elites on the strategic nuclear arsenal—particularly by members of the RVSN (Fazletdinov, Lumpov, Nogin, Tikhonov, and Karakaev)—and the near-absence of developments regarding nonstrategic nuclear weapons, including with respect to the theory of limited and demonstrative use, likely reflects long-standing fears confirmed by the Ukraine experience: the vulnerability of platforms, especially for nonstrategic nuclear weapons (which are mainly airborne and naval[185]), and the robustness of Western integrated air and missile defense (IAMD), which could incentivize the massive use of nuclear missiles.

The emphasis on nuclear deterrence (including for strike) and on associating strategic non-nuclear with strategic nuclear—up to and including the development of a new form of deterrent operation (see Fazletdinov)—may also reflect a recognition of the limits of modern conventional weapons. Russian military elites, however, are far from

183. D. S. Belen'kov, A. S. Borisenko and V. V. Suhorutčenko, "Aktual'nye voprosy avtomatizacii ocenki strategičeskoj obstanovki pri rešenii zadač strategičeskogo sderživaniâ", op. cit., pp. 67-69.
184. Ibid., pp. 66-69.
185. S. Kaushal and D. Dolzikova, "The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine", op. cit., p. 25.

dismissive about the role of strategic non-nuclear weapons in deterrence (including for strike); they instead advocate better doctrinal theory and planning (see Sukhorutchenko, Gavrilov, Grudinin, Borisenko, and Shlotov). These elites also point to the need to better integrate different components, including by strengthening the nonmilitary and subversive dimensions of deterrence, notably information warfare (see Nogin).

Russian military elites have explicitly called for revising Russia's approach and doctrine to restore the credibility of deterrence, in two ways: first, by pairing Russian threats with *practical* deterrent measures and answering Western escalatory steps with *concrete* actions; and second, by lowering the doctrinal threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. Russia's adaptations in 2023–2024 partly reflect these proposals.

Revision of approach and doctrine (2023–2025)

The gradual rollout of concrete measures has not replaced the Kremlin's threatening nuclear rhetoric. Rather, it has accompanied and reinforced it, as Russia's military elites had urged. Once again, the Kremlin has shown itself capable of adapting.[186]

Stages in the change of approach (2023–2024)

In practice, Moscow has adjusted its approach to pursue its chief objective: to dissuade the West from continuing, and certainly from increasing, its support for Ukraine, and to push it to rein in Kyiv. The Kremlin has thus taken several significant *practical* measures:

- Suspension of New START (February 21, 2023). After warning signs as early as August 2022, when Russia refused US inspections of its arsenal, Putin suspended Russia's participation in New START, citing Western-assisted Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian strategic air bases in December 2022.[187] The move came one month after the West agreed to deliver battle tanks to Ukraine.
- Decision to transfer tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus (March 25, 2023). Foreshadowed since late 2021,[188] this decision was made in response to rising Western military aid to Ukraine and, officially, to British statements about supplying Kyiv with depleted-uranium rounds.[189]
- Revocation of CTBT ratification (November 2023). Moscow withdrew its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) following the US decision to provide F-16s (August) as well as rumors (later borne out) of possible ATACMS deliveries (September),[190] which Ukraine received in small numbers and

186. D. Minic, "Que pense l'armée russe de sa guerre en Ukraine ?", op. cit.
187. V. Putin, "Poslanie Prezidenta Federal'nomu Sobraniû", Kremlin, February 21, 2023, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
188. C. Mills, "Russia's Use of Nuclear Threats During the Ukraine Conflict", op. cit.
189. "Putin: Rossiâ razmestit taktičeskoe âdernoe oružie na territorii Belarusi", *Meduza*, March 25, 2023, available at: https://meduza.io.
190. M. Seyler, "US Likely to Send Long-Range ATACMS Missiles to Ukraine for the First Time: Officials", ABC News, September 9, 2023, available at: https://abcnews.go.com.

began firing in October.[191] At the same time, Washington barred Kyiv from using long-range missiles with US components against Russian territory. The UK and France had already supplied SCALP-EG/Storm Shadow long-range missiles in previous months. In March 2024, Putin said he would not rule out actual tests of nuclear weapons.[192]

- Space and ASAT signaling (April 2024). Moscow vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution sponsored by Washington and Tokyo that would have reaffirmed the ban on deploying nuclear weapons in orbit under the Outer Space Treaty, to which Russia is a party.[193] This continued a pattern visible not only in the successful November 15, 2021 anti-satellite missile test (after several attempts beginning August 12, 2014)[194] against a Russian satellite in orbit, which created significant orbital debris that threatened on-orbit operations, but also in the February 5, 2022 launch of Kosmos-2553, identified by Washington in February 2024 as part of a Russian nuclear anti-satellite program.[195] Russian military elites have long viewed anti-satellite weapon (ASAT) capabilities as an asymmetric tool to rebalance against the United States,[196] which fields more than six thousand satellites in low Earth orbit. (Russia fields roughly 140.) The war in Ukraine has likely reinforced this need, as NATO countries' ISR capabilities have demonstrated its ability to degrade Russia's strategic deterrence capabilities.

- Tactical nuclear exercises (May 2024). The Kremlin conducted exercises simulating the use of tactical nuclear weapons, the first official exercises of this type since the collapse of the USSR, in response to Emmanuel Macron's remarks about possibly sending "ground troops" to Ukraine, and likely also to the US decision in April to deliver additional ATACMS missiles.[197]

191. M. Gordon, "Ukraine Fires ATACMS Missiles at Russian Forces for the First Time", *The Wall Street Journal*, October 17, 2023, available at: www.wsj.com.
192. V. Putin, "Interv'û Dmitriû Kiselëvu", op. cit.
193. R. Loss, "Moscow's Mind Games: Ambiguity around Russia's Nukes Aims to Rattle Europe", ECFR, January 20, 2025, available at: https://ecfr.eu.
194. F. Hoffmann, "Russia Conducts Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite Test", IISS, November 25, 2021, available at: www.iiss.org.
195. W. Strobel et al., "Russia Launched Research Spacecraft for Antisatellite Nuclear Weapon Two Years Ago, U.S. Officials Say", *The Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2024, available at: www.wsj.com.
196. See for ex.: Vorob'ëv and Kiselëv, "Strategiâ neprâmyh dejstvij v novom oblike", *VM*, No. 9, 2006, para 1-17, 19; Požarov, "K voprosu o voenno-èkonomičeskih osnovah voennoj doktriny Rossijskoj Federacii", *VAVN*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2007, para. 13; Syčëv, "Primenenie irregulârnyh formirovanij v rešenii boevyh zadač", *VAVN*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2009, para. 47; Seržantov, Martofalâk, "Modern Military Conflicts: Analysis of Major Features", *Military Thought*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2011, p. 91.
197. C. Pietralunga and P. Smolar, "Les États-Unis incluent des missiles ATACMS de longue portée dans leurs livraisons d'armes à l'Ukraine", *Le Monde*, April 25, 2024, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

- Doctrinal revision (June–November 2024). In response to an increase in Western support for Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory, Putin announced the potential revision of the nuclear doctrine on June 7[198] and June 20,[199] 2024, shortly after the US authorized Ukraine to use American-made weapons (though still not long-range ones) against targets in Russia, first in the Kharkiv area (May 30)[200] and later along the entire border (June 20).[201] Putin described the revision more precisely on September 25, 2024.[202] The new doctrine did not formally enter into force, however, until November 19, after Washington authorized Ukraine to use long-range ATACMS missiles against targets anywhere on Russian territory (November 17).
- IRBM launch (November 21, 2024). Russia test-fired the Oreshnik, a land-based IRBM derived from the Rubezh (an ICBM similar to an IRBM). The Oreshnik is a dual-capable system equipped, in this case, with a non-nuclear warhead. This response, which is consistent with the recommendations of Russian military elites, came on the heels of Ukraine's first ATACMS strikes into Russia, which began on November 19, two days after Russia published its new nuclear doctrine.

Although many of the missiles Russia has used against Ukraine have dual capabilities, the Oreshnik—a missile of significantly greater size and range, estimated between 3,000 and 5,500 km—allowed the Kremlin to send a much stronger signal. Its technical features could potentially make the Oreshnik an effective instrument of strategic deterrence for the Kremlin, supporting the credibility of regional nuclear deterrence and the strategy of limited, demonstrative use with a non-strategic nuclear weapon. Unlike the single-warhead missiles employed in Ukraine, such as the Iskander and Kh-101, which have proved vulnerable to air defenses, the Oreshnik could carry up to six conventional or nuclear warheads, making it potentially far more destructive—compensating for lower accuracy compared to the aforementioned missiles—and highly resilient to missile defenses. European missile defenses would likely struggle to intercept the Oreshnik, which could be used against compact, dense targets such as air bases, logistics zones, and command-and-control

198. V. Putin, "Plenarnoe zasedanie Peterburgskogo meždunarodnogo èkonomičeskogo foruma", op. cit.
199. V. Putin, "Otvety na voprosy rossijskih žurnalistov", op. cit.
200. M. Lee et al., "Biden Partially Lifts Ban on Ukraine Using US Arms in Strikes on Russian Territory, US Officials Say", *AP News*, May 31, 2024, available at: https://apnews.com.
201. "Ukraine's Use of US-Supplied Weapons in Russia not Limited to near Kharkiv, Pentagon Says", Reuters, June 20, 2024, available at: www.reuters.com.
202. V. Putin, "Zasedanie Postoânnogo soveŝaniâ Sovbeza po âdernomu sderživaniû", Kremlin, September 25, 2024, available at: http://kremlin.ru.

centers in Europe.[203] While the missile's dual capabilities could enhance the deterrence spectrum, it is telling that Vladimir Putin—continuing the tendency to overestimate conventional weapons—publicly praised the fact that sufficient production of the Oreshnik would allow Russia to "almost" do without nuclear weapons.[204]

Putin's speech[205] announcing the Oreshnik's launch is revealing on two counts. On the one hand, Putin feared that Washington's authorization for the Ukrainian use of ATACMSs against Russian territory, which was followed by their use, could embolden the West in its use of force; in response, he warned Western leaders "considering using their military contingents against Russia" to "think seriously" about such a course of action. On the other hand, he took care to stress that—consistent with Russia's efforts since 2023 to adapt its nuclear deterrence strategy—it would be "pointless" to harbor any "doubt" about Russia's resolve: "there will always be a response".

The development of a ground-launched IRBM like the Oreshnik is, however, prohibited by the INF, regardless of whether it carries a conventional or a nuclear warhead.[206] Moscow has reportedly already violated this treaty by developing a ground-launched, intermediate-range cruise missile, the 9M729, with a range of 1,500–2,500 km, which prompted the American withdrawal from the INF in 2019. Unlike the Kinzhal, which requires more visible and vulnerable air platforms, the 9M729, launched from a land-based TEL (like the Iskander and Oreshnik), is harder to detect before launch and enjoys better survivability. Although the 9M729 was likely conceived as an exclusively *nuclear* weapon for regional deterrence, its development—and the Oreshnik's perhaps even more so—aligns with the thinking of the Russian military-strategic community since the late 1990s.

At the time, NATO's enlargement and fear of Western military threats led Russian strategists to consider how the West might respond should Russia seek to "protect its legitimate interests" more actively in its "traditional geopolitical space", including "Ukraine".[207] Only "regional" *land-based* nuclear weapons (not sea- or air-launched systems, which were viewed as complements) with ranges of 2,000–5,000 km—ballistic or cruise missiles capable of "reaching Gibraltar"—were deemed effective.

203. D. Eveleth, "The Latest Russian Missile Is Bad News for NATO", *Foreign Policy*, March 17, 2025, available at: https://foreignpolicy.com.
204. V. Putin, "Zasedanie Soveta po razvitiû graždanskogo obŝestva i pravam čeloveka", Kremlin, December 10, 2024, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
205. V. Putin, "Zaâvlenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii", Kremlin, November 21, 2024, available at: http://kremlin.ru.
206. The INF Treaty prohibited the United States and Russia from testing and deploying ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 km.
207. S. T. Brezkun, "Perspektivy 'regional'nogo' âdernogo oružiâ", op. cit., para. 16, 30, 38, 42, 57-59, 60, 64, 68-69, 72-75.

Conceived as a "continental analog of strategic nuclear forces", they were expected to "radically change the psychology of NATO countries", to dissuade the West from "encroaching" on Russia's "national interests", and to counter the "hostile policy of a series of Eastern European states". In other words, the purpose of developing land-based intermediate-range nuclear missiles, especially ballistic ones (IRBMs), was to paralyze Europeans, disconnect the United States from Europe, and allow Russia to pursue an expansionist policy in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe with impunity.

Revealingly, these calls to violate or renegotiate the INF were based not only on NATO's alleged aggressiveness (that is, enlargement) but also on Russia's "greatly weakened non-nuclear military potential".[208] In 2021, two years after Russia's withdrawal from the INF, General Salyukov, commander in chief of the Russian Ground Forces, who was then praising the ongoing development of a land-based version of the Kalibr and an "intermediate-range hypersonic land-based missile"—likely a reference to a land-based (TEL-adapted) variant of the dual-capable Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile, sea-launched and with a range of 1,000 km,—which the INF would have prohibited, referred to the need to "restore the disrupted balance" of conventional forces and to "compensate for the superiority of a potential enemy".[209]

Salyukov recalled that the main tasks of non-nuclear strategic deterrence were to dissuade third countries from making their territories and resources available for the deployment and support of the aggressor's forces, or to conduct strikes against the aggressor state's critical installations.[210] As we have seen, however, these weapons proved to be less effective than anticipated, even in a limited armed conflict—where the Russian general, like most theorists, still judged it "impossible", in 2021, to achieve "de-escalation" solely through the threat of nuclear use.[211] The revision of the nuclear doctrine likely exposed these illusions as well.

208. Ibid., para. 70.
209. O. L. Salûkov and A. V. Šigin, "Mesto i rol′ Suhoputnyh vojsk v strategičeskom sderživanii", op. cit., pp. 24-25.
210. Ibid., pp. 26-27
211. Ibid., p. 22.

Content and implications of the new nuclear doctrine

It is difficult to regard this doctrinal update as "insignificant".[212] Its impact is threefold. First, it constitutes a new concrete measure of deterrence in the context of the war in Ukraine, a response to what Moscow perceives as a logic of continual escalation: Emmanuel Macron's statements about the possible dispatch of ground troops, Washington's lifting of restrictions on Kyiv's use of US-made weapons in Russia, and the Ukrainian army's invasion of Kursk, which likely confirmed and even accelerated the process of doctrinal revision. Second, it is a timely deterrent measure since the doctrine—already prepared—was published two days after the United States authorized Ukraine to strike Russian territory with US long-range weapons. At the same time, the new doctrine comes against the backdrop of the election of a new American president, one who is both eager to make peace and apparently susceptible to the Kremlin's apocalyptic rhetoric.

Third, the revision must be understood within a longer-term perspective, one that goes beyond the war in Ukraine and considers the overall balance of power with the West. The doctrinal formula establishing a higher threshold ("threat to the very existence of the State"), which was adopted in 2010, became obsolete in the new context created by the SVO and its initial failure. The weakening of Russia's conventional forces, the limited effectiveness of modern conventional weapons, the loss of nonmilitary levers of influence in the West, and the decline in Russia's economic and technological potential all pushed Moscow to lower its declared threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. The shift in threat perception—the fear of a regional or large-scale conventional war with NATO[213]—was equally central to the revision, which should be understood in light of the contours of the Russian politico-strategic culture described above. In a trend that stretches back thirty years,[214] Russia's ruling military and political elites see Western support for Ukraine as the intensification of an indirect war aimed at Russia's collapse and subjugation. Either this indirect war will enable the West to achieve its

212. W. Alberque, "An Unreal Pain: Russia's New Nuclear Doctrine Delivers Headlines, But Not Change", Stimson, February 3, 2025, available at: www.stimson.org. For a more nuanced analysis, see: I. Facon, "Officialisation de la nouvelle doctrine nucléaire russe", *Bulletin*, No. 125, FRS, November 2024, available at: www.frstrategie.org.

213. In addition to the military elites already mentioned, see V. Putin: "Putin: konflikt Rossii i NATO priblizit veroâtnost' tret'ej mirovoj vojny", *Vedomosti*, March 18, 2024, available at: www.vedomosti.ru; "Putin zaâvil o gotovnosti k bor'be s NATO do pobedy", *Vedomosti*, October 18, 2024, available at: www.vedomosti.ru. See also: "V NATO otrabatyvaût varianty boevyh dejstvij protiv Rossii, zaâvili v MID", RIA Novosti, October 8, 2024, available at: https://ria.ru; "Belousov nazval zadačej voennyh podgotovku k vozmožnomu konfliktu s NATO", *RBK*, December 16, 2024, available at: www.rbc.ru.

214. D. Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes*, op. cit.

objectives, or it will serve as the prolonged initial phase of a short, brutal, "disarming", and "decapitating" military operation by NATO against Russia. At the same time, as explained above, Russia perceives this increase in the NATO "threat" (and particularly the enlargement of the Alliance since 2022) as a new obstacle to its aggressive, imperialist policy in Eastern Europe—one that Moscow has no intention of renouncing and which could involve NATO states. In this context, lowering the threshold serves Russia's present and future imperialist and coercive actions.

The doctrinal revision is a predictable consequence of Russia's form of "backward march" toward the 1990s.[215] The formula defining the threshold for use, which since 2010 had stipulated that Russia reserved the right to employ nuclear weapons in the event of aggression with conventional weapons "when the very existence of the state is threatened" (III.17, 2020), has been replaced. The new doctrine now refers to conventional aggression constituting a "critical threat to the sovereignty and/or territorial integrity" of Russia *and* of Belarus. The *explicit* mention of Belarus is new (III.18, III. 19(d), 2024). While the 2020 doctrine already stated in the "General Provisions" (I.4) that nuclear deterrence should "guarantee the protection of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country", the new doctrine reinforces this principle by embedding it into the formula defining the threshold for use.

Numerous changes (relative to the 2020 doctrine) confirm the lowering of the threshold for use. Some, while relatively minor, are not insignificant, such as the removal of the adverb "exclusively" in the description of nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence (I.5, 2024), or the elimination of all references to compliance with international arms control and defense treaties as the basis of Russian nuclear deterrence policy (I.6 and II.16, 2024).

More significant changes appear in Part 2, entitled "Essence of Nuclear Deterrence". It begins with an introductory section containing four provisions that clearly reveal the drafters' fears and objectives. These provisions, which align with the recommendations of Russia's military elites, stress the broadening of potential targets. Two older provisions, the second of which has been modified, have been moved to the top of the section:

- On the one hand, Russia exercises nuclear deterrence against states or military coalitions that regard Russia as a potential adversary and possess nuclear weapons, other WMDs, or a "significant combat potential of conventional forces" (ex-II.13, 2020, now II.9, 2024)

215. *Ob utverždenii Osnov gosudarstvennoj politiki Rossijskoj Federacii v oblasti âdernogo sderživaniâ*, November 19, 2024, oukase No. 991, available at: www.kremlin.ru; *Ob osnovah gosudarstvennoj politiki Rossijskoj Federacii v oblasti âdernogo sderživaniâ*, June 2, 2020, op. cit.

- On the other hand, nuclear deterrence is also exercised against states that make territory, airspace, and/or maritime space and resources under their control available for the preparation and implementation of aggression against the Russian Federation (ex-II.14, 2020, now II.9, 2024).

These two provisions are immediately followed by two *new* provisions:

- The first states that an act of aggression by any state in a military coalition against Russia and/or its allies is considered aggression by that coalition "as a whole" (II.10, 2024).
- The second states that an act of aggression against Russia and its allies by a non-nuclear-armed state with the "participation" or "support" of a nuclear-armed state is considered a "joint" attack (II.11, 2024).

Four new military dangers (relative to 2020) that could evolve into military threats, and against which Russian nuclear deterrence is exercised, are mentioned (II.15, 2024):

- The creation of new military coalitions (blocs and alliances) or the enlargement of existing ones that brings their military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders.
- Actions by a potential enemy aimed at isolating part of Russia's territory, including by blocking access to vital communications (a reference to Kaliningrad and perhaps to Kursk as well).
- The planning and conducting of large-scale military exercises near Russia's borders by a potential enemy.
- Actions by a potential enemy aimed at striking (destroying) Russian facilities that are dangerous to the environment.

A new "condition" for possible use has also been added: the receipt of reliable information that a "massive" launch of aerospace strike systems —such as strategic and tactical aviation aircraft, cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), hypersonic missiles, and other types of aircraft—has occurred and that they have crossed Russia's border (III.19(a), 2024). This condition is a combination of a (retained) criterion—"the receipt of reliable information about the launch of ballistic missiles against the territories of Russia and/or its allies" (III.19(a), 2020 and 2024)—and one of the hallmarks of contemporary military conflicts noted in the 2010 and 2014 VDs: the "massive use [...] of high-precision hypersonic weapons, [...] weapons based on new physical principles [...] as well as UAVs" (II.15(b), 2014). One condition for use has been modified: The use of nuclear weapons or any other WMD against the territories of Russia and its allies has been modified to include any use against Russian military formations and/or installations located outside its territory (III.19(b), 2024).

There are striking similarities between the ideas and phraseology in the new doctrine and those advanced by the theory and doctrines of the threshold-lowering era (1993–2003), when Russia felt vulnerable. The 2000 VD stated that use was possible in the event of conventional aggression "in situations critical for national security" (I.8, 2000). First, the notions of "critical situations" (2000) and "critical threat" (2024) are akin. Second, in the 1993–2003 period, Russian military theory understood "critical situations" for "national security" as including "an imminent threat of loss of independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity" (Dvorkin 1998, op. cit., paras. 11–13). This was part of an ongoing dialogue between theory and doctrine: As early as 1993, military elites, who were calling for the doctrine to be clarified, argued that use should be possible in the event either of conventional aggression against Russia that "threatens its existence as an independent state" (Klimenko 1993, op. cit., para. 36) or of a "direct military threat created by large-scale aggression against Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Klimenko, op. cit., 1997, para. 32). The National Security Concept (KNB) published in 1997 echoed these ideas, postulating that Russia could use nuclear weapons "if the outbreak of armed aggression threatened the very existence of the Russian Federation as an independent sovereign state" (see Part I of this study). The reference, in the 2024 doctrine, to a "critical threat to the sovereignty and/or territorial integrity" of Russia represents a return to the theory and doctrine of the 1990s that took shape in the 2000 VD, which the new doctrine resembles.

Third, the VD of 1993 (II.1) and 2000 (I.8) did not rule out use in the event of an attack against Russia and its allies carried out or supported by a non-nuclear-armed state "jointly" or "in the presence of allied obligations" with a nuclear-armed state. The new doctrine partly revives this possibility, but it goes further by stating that aggression against Russia and its allies by a non-nuclear-armed state with the "participation" or "support" of a nuclear-armed state is considered a "joint" attack (II.11, 2024).

It is also revealing that, in the doctrines from the period during which the threshold was being lowered, "protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity" was explicitly mentioned as a potential trigger for the use of armed forces (1993 VD, 2.1) in the case of "large-scale (regional) war", as the 2000 VD (II.14) neatly specified, associating that scale elsewhere in the document only with possible nuclear use. Conversely, in the doctrine from the period of the raised threshold, this mission was relegated to a "peacetime task of the armed forces" (2010 VD, III.27(a); 2014 VD, III.32(a)). From this perspective, the new doctrine goes even further than the 2000 VD as it placed the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity at the very heart of the formula defining the threshold, rather than an indirect element of support for the main potential trigger ("situation critical to national security").

Russian military elites were not alone in recognizing that the 2020 nuclear doctrine was ill-suited to the conditions created by the failures of the SVO. Putin himself indirectly acknowledged its limitations: In public remarks, he repeatedly referred to secondary elements of the doctrine (such as "sovereignty and territorial integrity") in order to compensate for the fact—recognized in both Russia and the West—that the doctrine's declared threshold for use (a "threat to the very existence of the state") was very high. In his September 21, 2022, speech on partial mobilization, he asserted that Russia would use "all the weapons at its disposal" in the event of a "threat to territorial integrity".[216] At the Valdai Club on October 27, 2022, while Russia was suffering severe military setbacks in Ukraine, he replied to a question about the possibility of nuclear use by noting that the doctrine provides for such use in order to "protect its sovereignty, its territorial integrity".[217] The comparison with what Gerasimov is reported to have told Milley in a private conversation during the same period is telling (see II/3).[218] On June 16, 2023, in the midst of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, Putin went so far as to invert the order of potential triggers, stating that atomic weapons could be used "if there is a threat to our territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty, or to the existence of the Russian state".[219] Finally, on June 5, 2024, shortly after Washington authorized Kyiv to strike Russian territory with American-made weapons, initially in the Kharkiv area and then along the entire border, Putin indirectly acknowledged that deterrence had failed: "For some reason, the West thinks that Russia will never use [atomic weapons]. We have a nuclear doctrine. Look at what it says. If anyone's actions threaten our sovereignty and territorial integrity, we consider it possible to use all the means at our disposal".[220] Yet, just a few months earlier, on October 5, 2023 at the Valdai Club, Putin had told Karaganov that there were only two grounds for nuclear use: a nuclear attack against Russia and a "threat to the very existence of the state". He had concluded that he saw "no need" to change the doctrine.[221]

The revision of Russia's doctrine was likely accelerated by Emmanuel Macron's statements regarding the potential deployment of ground troops to Ukraine, by the Ukrainian occupation of Russian territory in the Kursk Oblast, and, above all, by Washington's decision to increase support for Ukraine. The modifications that were made to the doctrine reflect not only

216. V. Putin, "Obraŝenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii", September 21, 2022, op. cit.
217. V. Putin, "Zasedanie Meždunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdaj'", October 27, 2022, op. cit.
218. A. Uvarov, "The Art of Containing Escalation", op. cit.
219. V. Putin, "Plenarnoe zasedanie Peterburgskogo meždunarodnogo èkonomičeskogo foruma", June 16, 2023, op. cit.
220. V. Putin, "Vstreča s rukovoditelâmi meždunarodnyh informagentstv", June 5, 2024, op. cit. He repeats this statement on June 7, 2024: V. Putin, "Plenarnoe zasedanie Peterburgskogo meždunarodnogo èkonomičeskogo foruma", June 7, 2024, op. cit.
221. V. Putin, "Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba 'Valdaj'", October 5, 2023, op. cit.

proposals that were advocated by Russia's military elites (Tikhonov, Nogin, Sukhorutchenko, Borisenko, Shlotov, and Belen'kov), but also threat perceptions that are widely shared within the Russian military. These include the enlargement of NATO, the deployment of military forces and infrastructure on the territories of non-nuclear-armed and/or non-aligned states, the "proxy war" in Ukraine, and the West's instrumentalization of Russia's neighbors, which could potentially degenerate into a direct confrontation.

The expansion of potential targets (II.9-11) and the modification of the conditions for use (III) serve a clear purpose in the context of the war in Ukraine: to dissuade the West from continuing to provide aid to Ukraine, and even to push it to abandon Kyiv entirely; to dissuade Ukrainians from intensifying their resistance and especially from striking deep into Russian territory; and to link the escalatory actions of states to the fate of other states—nuclear-armed or not—in order to neutralize them. In the longer term, the new doctrine, which draws the dual lesson of the country's weakening and growing Western hostility (or, more precisely, the underestimation of the West's capacity to resist), aims to secure Russia's imperialist policy (politico-military expansion) toward its non-nuclear-armed and/or non-aligned neighbors (the Baltic states, Finland, Moldova, and Poland). It seeks, on the one hand, to turn the elites and public opinion of neighboring states, including NATO members, against any Western military presence on their territory, and, on the other hand, to direct the elites and public opinion in the main NATO powers toward abandoning the Alliance's enlargement and even its collective defense.

Russian military elites welcomed this doctrinal revision, describing it as "radical" and "aligned" with the "new conditions" created by the West's aspirations to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia, constituting "a serious warning to the advocates of starting proxy wars".[222]

For Sukhorutchenko, who provides an assessment, the use of strategic offensive forces has indeed helped to deter (*uderzhivat*) the West from openly intervening in the conflict in Ukraine, but Russia's military (*silovoj*) and nonmilitary (*nesilovoj*) deterrent mechanisms have proven "insufficient" in the face of the West's indirect strategy—which involves applying economic pressure, generating internal tensions in Russia, and pushing non-aligned, non-nuclear-armed neighbors toward worse relations with Moscow—leading to the need to "clarify" its nuclear doctrine.[223] He notes, however, that effective deterrence requires the implementation of a

222. E. A. Šlotov, A. S. Borisenko and V. V. Suhorutčenko, "Vyâvlenie osnovnyh ugroz voennoj bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii s učetom sovremennoj voenno-političeskoj i strategičeskoj obstanovki", *VM*, No. 2, 2025, p. 72; A. A. Bartoš and G. A. Nikonorov, "Kriterii i stupeni pobedy v gibridnoj vojne", *VM*, No. 6, 2025, p. 82.
223. V. V. Suhorutčenko et al., "O nekotoryh aspektah sderživaniâ na ètape smeny sistemy miropolitičeskogo ustrojstva", op. cit., pp. 43-44.

set of interdependent military (*silovoj*) and nonmilitary (*nesilovoj*) measures.[224] While the military (*silovoj*) aspects of deterrence have proven the most "fluid", requiring doctrinal adaptation, the effectiveness of the nonmilitary (*nesilovoj*) dimensions—toward which priority is "increasingly being given"—depends heavily on the state's economic and military status and level of development.[225] Consequently, he argues that any negotiations over Ukraine must lead to the "complete lifting" of economic sanctions.[226] The concern about Russia's economic decline, which weakens the country and grants it less room to maneuver with respect to deterrence, is widely shared: Colonel Bartosh, for example, has argued that in the "hybrid war" between Russia and the West, the role of the economy and technological sovereignty is "decisive". Bartosh has called for radical economic reform so that Russia can win the war and "take a dignified place in world civilization".[227]

In June 2025, Colonel Mazhuga, head of the Military Institute of National Defense Management at the General Staff Military Academy (VAGSh), which trains specialists for the NCUO who are partly responsible for planning and coordinating strategic deterrence measures, argued that while strategic nuclear weapons remain the cornerstone of international security, the role of the limited use of tactical nuclear weapons will grow.[228] In his view, "limited nuclear deterrence"—that is, the use of small nuclear warheads—makes it possible to move away from the concept of "total annihilation" toward a more versatile, complex, and flexible deterrence that is adaptable to a wide range of potential threats and conflicts. This kind of deterrence will involve a combination of tactical nuclear weapons, cyber capabilities, hypersonic weapons, and space-based weapons.[229] Mazhuga's proposal is all the more noteworthy in that, one, it is a rare instance (since the start of the SVO) of an explicit reference to tactical nuclear weapons, and two, it may suggest a desire to adapt Moscow's strategy of limited, demonstrative use to the experience in Ukraine and to the new nuclear doctrine.

If this revision of the doctrine implies a lowering of the threshold for use, does it increase the risk of use under current conditions and in the foreseeable future? Could the election of Donald Trump, Europe's continued solidarity with Ukraine, and Russia's persistent inability to defeat Ukraine on the battlefield lead Moscow to consider the use of nuclear weapons?

224. Ibid., p. 53.
225. Ibid., pp. 47-53.
226. Ibid., pp. 47, 53-54.
227. A. A. Bartoš and G. A. Nikonorov, "Kriterii i stupeni pobedy v gibridnoj vojne", op. cit., p. 86.
228. S. N. Mažuga, "Geostrategičeskie aspekty voennoj politiki Rossijskoj Federacii v sovremennyh usloviâh", op. cit., pp. 70-71.
229. Ibid.

Russian nuclear deterrence going forward

Russian military elites, who have said little about the election of Donald Trump,[230] remain skeptical about the prospect of a US–Russia rapprochement that could hasten the end of the war on terms favorable to Russia. As expected,[231] Moscow regarded the new American president as an opportunity, though without illusions, and did not hesitate to adopt more threatening rhetoric—through allusions to a Third World War and a nuclear apocalypse, deterrence measures that likely weighed on Donald Trump's elections—when he appeared obstinate or even hostile, notably by suggesting the continuation of aid to Ukraine and the tightening of economic sanctions. In line with earlier forecasts,[232] the Kremlin adopted a harsh and domineering stance in this "balance of power," one to which Donald Trump, fundamentally indifferent to the fate of Ukraine and Europe, was likely unprepared to respond. This became clear as the American president, initially conciliatory and open to Russia's maximalist political objectives, proved unwilling and/or unable to genuinely compel Ukraine and the Europeans to yield.

Trump's election has not inhibited the aggressiveness of Russia's deterrence—quite the contrary. The first European discussions, in February–March 2025, about a "coalition of the willing" to provide security guarantees for Ukraine provoked strong reactions from Russian officials. Led by Dmitry Peskov and Sergey Lavrov, these officials called the move "dangerous for Europe" and claimed that it would inevitably lead to "direct" conflict with Russia,[233] a warning Putin recently reiterated.[234] A few days after Poland and the Baltic states announced their withdrawal from the Ottawa Treaty in the beginning of April[235] (motivated by a desire to protect their eastern borders with anti-personnel mines), Moscow, which has not signed the treaty, responded, on April 15, 2025, through Sergey Naryshkin, the director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), that in the event of NATO aggression against Russia and/or Belarus, the "first to suffer"

230. A. D. Gavrilov, I. V. Grudinin, D. G. Majburov and V. A. Novikov, "Dva goda special'noj voennoj operacii: nekotorye itogi, veroâtnye perspektivy", op. cit.; V. V. Suhorutčenko et al., "O nekotoryh aspektah sderživaniâ na ètape smeny sistemy miropolitičeskogo ustrojstva", op. cit., pp. 43-44.
231. D. Minic, "Trump-Poutine : logiques et perspectives d'une négociation sur l'Ukraine", *Briefing de l'Ifri*, Ifri, February 13, 2025, available at: www.ifri.org.
232. Ibid.
233. "Peskov: konflikt NATO i RF neizbežen v slučae otpravki zapadnyh vojsk na Ukrainu", TASS, February 27, 2024, available at: https://tass.ru; "Lavrov: otpravka zapadnyh vojsk na Ukrainu budet označat' vovlečenie NATO", *RIA Novosti*, March 6, 2025, available at: https://ria.ru.
234. P. Ivanova, "Foreign Troops in Ukraine would be "Legitimate Targets" for Russia, Vladimir Putin Warns", *Financial Times*, September 5, 2025, available at: www.ft.com
235. This convention provides for the prohibition of acquiring, producing, stockpiling, and using anti-personnel mines.

would be Poland and the Baltic states.[236] This reaction also followed remarks by President Andrzej Duda of Poland on March 13, 2025, urging the United States to place nuclear weapons in Poland,[237] as well as remarks on April 14 by future German Chancellor Friedrich Merz indicating that Germany was open to delivering Taurus missiles to Ukraine.[238] On April 24, 2025, Security Council Secretary and former Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu reiterated the new doctrine's stated primary potential trigger for nuclear use—any threat to sovereignty and territorial integrity—and outlined the types of potential targets.[239] On May 4, 2025, Putin reinforced these warnings, telling Kremlin journalist Pavel Zarubin that he "hoped" it would "not be necessary" to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine.[240]

During "Operation Spider's Web", which Ukraine launched on June 1, 2025, and involved Ukrainian drones targeting facilities linked to Russia's strategic nuclear forces, the Kremlin issued an explicit warning to the Trump administration. Moscow stated that it would be forced to respond to such strikes and evoked the risk of a "nuclear confrontation". This sowed panic among US officials, who made a point of distancing themselves from the attacks.[241] In mid-July 2025, after revelations that Trump was planning to supply Ukraine with long-range missiles capable of reaching Moscow (financed by Europeans) in order to push Putin to negotiate, Russian propaganda went into motion. "This will all end in a nuclear ultimatum[...], it cannot end any other way", predicted Margarita Simonyan.[242] Several days later, on July 29, 2025, Trump issued another ultimatum to Moscow, in which he demanded an end to the war and threatened to impose 100 percent tariffs on Russia and its main oil customers, notably India. Security Council Vice President and former Russian President Medvedev called this a "step closer" toward war between Moscow and Washington and alluded to Russia's second-strike capabilities.[243]

236. "Naryškin prigrozil otvetit' NATO v slučae agressii protiv Soûznogo gosudarstva", *Vedomosti*, April 15, 2025, available at: www.vedomosti.ru. Medvedev recently traveled to the border: "Medvedev: Finlândiâ, Norvegiâ i Pol'ša usilivaût voennuû aktivnost' vblizi RF", TASS, September 5, 2025, available at: https://tass.ru.
237. R. Minder, "Poland's President Urges US to Move Nuclear Warheads to Polish Territory", *Financial Times*, March 13, 2025, available at: www.ft.com.
238. J. Urbancik, "Germany is Open to Sending Taurus Missiles to Ukraine, Says Merz", *Euronews*, April 14, 2025, available at: www.euronews.com.
239. "Šojgu: RF ostavlâet pravo primenit' âdernoe oružie v slučae agressii Zapada", TASS, April 24, 2025, available at: https://tass.ru.
240. "Putin: u Rossii ne bylo neobhodimosti primenât' âdernoe oružie v hode SVO", *RIA Novosti*, May 4, 2025, available at: https://ria.ru.
241. A. Roth, "Kremlin and Trump Aides Raise Nuclear War FEars after Ukraine Drone Strike", *The Guardian*, June 4, 2025, available at: www.theguardian.com.
242. Y. Kopiika, "A Timeline of Russia's Nuclear Threats Against the West", op. cit.
243. A. Osborn, "Medvedev Reminds Trump of Russia's Doomsday Nuclear Strike Capabilities as War of Words Escalates", Reuters, July 31, 2025, available at: www.reuters.com. See Medvedev's reference to the "dead hand" on July 31, 2025: https://t.me/medvedev_telegram.

Following the failure of negotiations between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in Alaska, in the absence of American retaliatory measures and amid hesitant US–European debates over military security guarantees for Ukraine (Washington, on August 19, then floated US air support for security guarantee forces),[244] the Russian military struck an American factory in Ukraine on the night of August 20–21.[245] Confident of Putin's "respect" for him, Donald Trump had publicly assured V. Zelenskyy on February 27, 2025, that an American economic presence in Ukraine would be a security guarantee in itself.[246] While the strike was a warning meant to dissuade Washington from reinvesting in Ukraine's defense, it was also intended to show Ukrainians and Europeans the weakness of American resolve. Trump responded the next morning by again evoking a possible reinforcement of Ukraine's offensive capabilities.[247] That same day, the director general of the State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom, Alexey Likhachev, publicly described Russia's "nuclear shield" as a "sword" and a guarantee of the country's "sovereignty".[248] The following day, August 22, 2025, Putin visited the All-Russian Scientific Research Institute of Experimental Physics (VNIIEF) in Sarov, the historic Soviet and Russian nuclear weapons research center that was the birthplace of the A- and H-bombs and which remains central to the maintenance and development of Russia's arsenal. In response to these demonstrations of strength using both rhetoric and action, the Trump administration merely hinted that the president might not invite Putin to the 2026 World Cup, where he would be hosted by the United States, if there was no progress made toward peace. This weak reaction revealed just how differently the two leaders view the stakes of the conflict.

The weakness of American resolve—masked by the ambiguity of Trump's rhetoric—fuels the aggressiveness of Russian strategic deterrence, which seeks to expose that weakness in an attempt to sow division within NATO. Consider one recent example: After floating the possibility, on September 3,[249] 2025, of reinforcing the US military presence in Poland, the White House did an about-face two days later[250] and announced, on September 5, a reduction in military aid to countries near Russia—notably

244. A. Shalal et al., "Trump Says US May Provide Air Support to Back a Ukraine Peace Deal", Reuters, August 20, 2025, available at: www.reuters.com.
245. P. Sauer, "Russia Rules out European Troops in Ukraine as Trump Makes Veiled Threats", *The Guardian*, August 21, 2025, available at: www.theguardian.com.
246. A. Rathi and C. Lu, "Read Trump and Zelensky's Fiery Oval Office Exchange", February 28, 2025, available at: https://foreignpolicy.com.
247. Posted on the Truth Social network at 9:35 a.m. on August 21, 2025: https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump.
248. "Lihačev prizval soveršenstvovat' âdernyj šit Rossii", *RIA Novosti*, August 21, 2025, available at: https://ria.ru.
249. "Trump Signals Poland Could Get More US Troops During Nawrocki White House Visit", Reuters, September 5, 2025, available at: www.reuters.com.
250. E. Burrows et al., "European Countries Near Russia Puzzled by US Plans to Cut Defense Funding", *AP News*, September 6, 2025, available at: https://apnews.com.

the Baltic states and Poland—despite these countries being among NATO's "top performers" with respect to defense spending. Five days later, on September 10, Moscow used a large aerospace strike on Ukraine to divert roughly twenty Geran drones toward Poland. (This operation had likely been planned for weeks,[251] as suggested by the explosion of a Geran in Poland on August 20, 2025.) This was not a "test" foreshadowing a Russian invasion of Poland; at the time of writing, Russia is not capable of carrying out such an invasion. Rather, this latest concrete, conventional deterrent measure was intended above all to:

- Force the West to abandon the idea of supplying additional military aid to Ukraine and certainly of any overt military intervention by NATO members.
- Remind Poland that it would be on the front line in the case of any escalation. (Poland is the logistic epicenter of Western aid to Ukraine; it has advocated an expansion of the US military presence in Eastern Europe, including nuclear weapons; and it is the region's most "militarized" NATO state and the "spearhead" of resistance against Russia.)
- Highlight NATO's vulnerabilities by testing both political solidarity (Warsaw limited its response to invoking Article 4; Washington once again appeared skittish) and the limits of air defenses, which remain ill-suited to this kind of attack.
- Signal Moscow's readiness to pursue a strategy of limited escalation if necessary.
- Foster a sense of impunity, at home and abroad.
- Sow fear and uncertainty among elites and the public in Western countries.

Moscow's deterrent measures clearly serve its main objective vis-à-vis Trump: to cultivate in him the idea of abandoning Ukraine, and to foster his inclination to distance himself from Europeans deemed dependent and bellicose, and to disengage from Eastern and Central Europe. If this dynamic persists, the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be used in the war, which has already been very low since February 24, 2022, will continue to decline, even with Russia's new doctrine in place. On the other hand, Russia's concrete conventional deterrence measures—without mentioning its numerous nonmilitary and subversive actions deployed against the West—tend to become increasingly aggressive and audacious, encouraged by American ambiguity and European hesitations.

251. "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment", Institute for the Study of War, September 10, 2025, available at: https://understandingwar.org.

One question remains: If Europeans decided to impose the security guarantees offered to Kyiv without waiting for an illusory peace negotiation that Putin refuses and for which Trump is not truly prepared, could the Kremlin go so far as to contemplate using nuclear weapons? Under what concrete circumstances might it do so? And what does the new doctrine change in this regard?

As we have seen, Russia's inherently aggressive and coercive approach to deterrence rests on a twofold conviction that is deeply held by its political-military elite: The West is ready to go to any length to "destroy" Russia, but it is also weak and divided. This view helps explain Moscow's distinctive style of escalation: bellicose rhetoric paired with actions that are often more measured or even cautious. (Consider the alert sent to the American *National and Nuclear Reduction Center* thirty minutes before the Oreshnik was fired.)[252] This style of deterrence, which seeks to maximize deterrent effect while avoiding uncontrolled escalation, has tarnished the credibility of Russia's already inadequate nuclear deterrence, even if such threats do sway certain important audiences, such as Trump and some of his supporters. Moscow misjudged the consequences of its SVO against Ukraine and failed to anticipate that Europe and the US would mobilize and present a united front. In other words, the anti-Western cultural biases (the perceived weakness and hedonism of a decadent West) on which the Russia deterrence style partially relies proved mistaken, rendering deterrence partially ineffective. Russian deterrence has slowed but not prevented or ended Western aid to Ukraine; indeed, Western support has only grown, and its leaders have begun to consider options that were unthinkable in 2022, such as deploying ground troops to the front or establishing a no-fly zone. If Europeans chose to take such steps under minimal American cover, despite Russia's attempts to restore credibility and its new nuclear doctrine, could Russia's frustration cause its nuclear deterrence to spiral out of control?

Russia's record of nuclear deterrence practice, along with the fact that the balance of power in Ukraine currently favors Moscow, suggests that this risk should be kept in perspective—even in light of the new nuclear doctrine, which aims to explicitly cover this type of scenario (limited, defensive Western military intervention in Ukraine) through nuclear deterrence intended to paralyze the West. The absence of a tangible demonstration or presence of nuclear military force as theory would prescribe (in other words, the absence of strong deterrent measures) in spite of Russian military setbacks suggests that the threshold for use remains relatively high. Threats of conventional retaliation from the United States, Great Britain, and France against Russian forces in Ukraine, along

252. "Kremlin Clarifies Notification Process for Oreshnik Missile Launch", TASS, November 22, 2024, available at: https://tass.com.

with the fear of losing Chinese support if nuclear weapons were used, have almost certainly played a role.[253] Ukraine's seizure of territory in Russia's Kursk Oblast confirmed this point: Despite a clear breach of Russian territorial integrity, Moscow neither considers itself weak enough nor Kyiv strong enough to contemplate using nuclear weapons. Such a determination is made on the basis not of a principle or a mathematical equation, but of context and perception. In response to the arrival of a limited, defensive NATO contingent in Ukraine, it is far more likely that Moscow would carry out a conventional strike (initially demonstrative) with a Kinzhal, Tsirkon, or Oreshnik against either the groups of troops in question or a related strategic target (such as an air base or critical logistics infrastructure) in either the Ukrainian theater, Poland (such as NATO's new missile defense base at Redzikowo), or the Baltic states. If that contingent were to grow or achieve a major breakthrough on the battlefield despite Russian deterrent measures and more significant conventional strikes, a conventional "countervalue" strike on a civilian installation in Western Europe (e.g., France, Germany, or Great Britain) could not be ruled out. A general mobilization could also be declared.

Highly unlikely circumstances (at this stage) would need to converge for Moscow to take truly strong deterrence measures demonstrating a real willingness to use nuclear weapons: Ukraine, backed by a united, proactive West, would have to be on the verge of recovering symbolically vital territory such as Crimea; Ukrainian incursions into Russia would have to have escaped Moscow's control; Ukrainian deep-strike capabilities would have to paralyze Russia on several levels; Meanwhile, and most importantly, the Kremlin would have to come to the conclusion that its conventional means, its nonmilitary/subversive tools, and its non-nuclear unconventional options (such as chemical weapons) are insufficient to regain the strategic initiative in the short to medium term. In other words, Moscow would have the imminent and irreversible loss of a local or regional conventional war against a superior adversary (nuclear-armed or not) whose ambitions would be to seize Russian territories (or territory the Kremlin considers Russian) and/or provoke regime change in Russia. This scenario will almost certainly not materialize in the context of the war in Ukraine. Regardless, what could happen in such a situation?

Russia could opt for several strong deterrent measures indicating a real determination to employ atomic weapons. Options include, among others, an actual nuclear test, a demonstrative transfer of nonstrategic nuclear warheads from central warehouses, a demonstrative increase in the combat readiness of strategic nuclear forces, or a sharp increase in patrols by nuclear triad forces. These measures, which would involve both strategic

253. P. Sinovets and A. Vicente, "'Nuclear Spring Is Coming': Examining French Nuclear Deterrence in Response to Russia's Actions in Ukraine", Note de la FRS, No. 8, FRS, March 11, 2024, available at: www.frstrategie.org.

and nonstrategic nuclear forces and weapons, would be publicized and would increase the likelihood of limited use of nuclear weapons if Russia's adversaries did not cease hostilities. This phase would be crucial: Were Russia to show any sign of retreat, Moscow's credibility would suffer enormously. If Moscow deemed the response from its adversaries to be unsatisfactory, this period could lead to one or more limited, demonstrative nuclear strikes intended to return the strategic initiative to Russia and end the conflict on terms favorable to it.

Conclusion

When the USSR collapsed, the question of deterrence and its mechanisms was still relatively underdeveloped in the Russian military. Russian elites, who had inherited a no-first-use doctrine, gradually revised their position and took a deeper interest in deterrence and in the centrality of nuclear weapons within it, for at least three main reasons: the weakening of the country's conventional forces, the significant power ascribed to modern conventional weapons, and the observation of Western doctrines and strategies. Between 1993 and 2003, Russian military theory—followed by doctrine—advocated an extension of nuclear deterrence to conventional wars of any scale and embraced the possibility of first use of atomic weapons in that context to prevent such a war or to deter the adversary from continuing it (*deèskalaciâ*), including from the very outset of the conflict.

Since the 2000s, nuclear deterrence has been integrated into the broader concept of "strategic deterrence", which combines nuclear, conventional, and nonmilitary/subversive components. Within this framework, strategic deterrence, which was a manifestation of higher-order strategic thinking (that is, the theorization of bypassing armed struggle), is considered preemptive, offensive, and coercive, and it is employed flexibly in both peacetime and wartime. It prioritizes nonmilitary means and methods, with support from military components (conventional and nuclear), to pursue political objectives in largely indirect ways. That said, it does not exclude the direct, overt use of armed force when necessary. While such force is intended to be decisive, it should also be limited and primarily demonstrative.

The failure of the SVO owes much to Russian strategic thought and culture, especially the way these have overestimated bypassing as a means of achieving decisive political objectives. Despite some successes, the failure appeared to call into question the relevance of Russian strategic deterrence, both as a bypassing concept and as a system. Several factors explain this: the weakening of Russia's conventional forces and its nonmilitary, subversive capabilities; the overestimation of the effectiveness of modern conventional weapons and nonmilitary (particularly psychological-informational) means; the loss of deterrence credibility caused by the gap between aggressive rhetoric (especially nuclear) and more moderate concrete actions, characteristic of a style of deterrence that seeks to maximize deterrent effects while avoiding uncontrolled escalation; and, finally, a dual questioning of the strategy of limited and demonstrative strikes—partially compromised by the vulnerability of delivery systems and

the effectiveness of Western IAMD—and of the relevance of nuclear doctrine, which has been undermined by Russia's weakened geopolitical position and the reorientation of threat perceptions toward the prospect of a local, regional, or general war near Russia that would directly or indirectly involve NATO.

In essence, Russian deterrence in Ukraine has suffered from problematic trends, anticipated vulnerabilities, and a new, unforeseen, strategic context, which pushed the Russian military to advocate a return to the centrality of nuclear weapons in deterrence. While Russia is experiencing a form of "backward march" toward the 1990s, this may well be only temporary. Over the past three years, Moscow has already demonstrated its ability to adapt in nonmilitary/subversive domains, though the break with the West remains a major obstacle in this regard. This ability to adapt is also visible in its strategy of limited and demonstrative strikes: solutions already exist to mitigate the shortcomings observed in Ukraine, both in terms of hardware (i.e., TELs, hypersonic and highly maneuverable weapons, S-500, anti-satellite weapons) and concept (such as better integrating deterrent forces and means).

Moscow has adapted its approach and doctrine, both by matching its rhetoric with concrete measures and by lowering its declared threshold for nuclear use. As early as 2022, military elites began expressing concern about Russia's strategic deterrence, especially nuclear deterrence, advocating urgent theoretical and practical adaptation—something the Kremlin began to undertake at the start of 2023. This phase of rebuilding deterrence credibility culminated with the launch of the Oreshnik, after many months of Western actions deemed escalatory by Moscow. Evaluating the effectiveness of Russia's new approach is not an easy task. The first two years of its application (and likely experimentation), 2023–2024, don't appear to have forced the West to reduce its aid to Ukraine—let alone cut it off entirely—nor to support it more broadly, as evidenced by the 2024 discussion on sending ground troops. Moreover, Ukraine's increasingly sophisticated and effective attacks on Russian territory continued unabated.

The third year, 2025, has seen greater success. American aid to Ukraine has fallen sharply, and Europe has proven reluctant to act without American cover, including with respect to *imposing* security guarantees that the Kremlin will probably never agree to *negotiate* given the current balance of power. Yet this success stems mainly from President Trump's indifference to Europe and Ukraine and from his desire for a closer relationship with Moscow, which Russia is attempting to exploit. Russian strategic deterrence, however, has not remained inactive. While the Kremlin has sought to "manage" Trump as best it could, including through flattery and maneuvering, it has not ceased to evoke the specter of nuclear apocalypse. This was particularly evident during European discussions on security guarantees and, above all, in response to Trump's hints suggesting

possible deliveries of long-range missiles to Ukraine. This culminated—in August 2025, at the time of writing—after the meeting between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump in Alaska and the failure of negotiations. On this occasion, Moscow demonstrated its ability to adapt, not only by diversifying nonmilitary deterrence measures—such as the statement by Rosatom's head reminding the doctrine's potential triggers for nuclear use and Putin's visit to VNIIEF in Sarov—but also by accompanying them with concrete demonstrative military deterrence measures—namely, the bombing of a US factory in Ukraine. Moscow also displayed a real capacity to integrate concrete conventional and nuclear deterrence measures, as well as to diversify concrete conventional deterrence measures—as evidenced by the drone attack on Polish territory.

If it continues, Washington's new policy tends to further diminish the already very low prospect of Moscow resorting to limited, demonstrative nuclear use in the context of the war in Ukraine, and could even shorten the rebuilding period of Russia's conventional forces and thus, perhaps, the lifespan of the new nuclear doctrine. Even if the United States were to embrace the previous administrations' policies toward Russia—policies the Kremlin regards as hostile—, Moscow would still dispose of instruments of escalation that it could use before resorting to nuclear weapons. These instruments include both conventional measures and, should the situation seriously deteriorate for Russia, non-nuclear unconventional options.

The new nuclear doctrine, drafted and released in what now seems a very distant context, serves first and foremost the Kremlin's imperial ambitions throughout the post-Soviet sphere and Eastern Europe. Indeed, for more than three years, Russia's nuclear deterrence has attempted to adapt to conventional confrontations with non-nuclear-armed states, potentially supported by nuclear powers, that might escalate into regional or large-scale war—scenarios wherein the Russian military and political elites have chronically overestimated the efficacy of conventional deterrence capabilities and forces. Moscow had undoubtedly miscalculated both the determination of its neighbors to withstand coercive actions and the cohesion and solidarity of the West in the context of the war in Ukraine, both of which rendered Russia's deterrent approach—predicated partly upon disdain for what it perceived as a weak and declining West—partially obsolete. Recognizing that threatening rhetoric alone was insufficient, Russia has adapted by taking concrete, demonstrative measures to restore the credibility of its deterrent. Far from being constrained by Trump's reelection, this dynamic has been reinforced: Encouraged by American reluctance and European hesitation, Moscow has intensified its concrete (conventional) deterrent measures, which have become more aggressive and bolder, with the primary objective of isolating Ukraine from the West and Europe from the United States.

Without minimizing the importance of Russia's new nuclear doctrine, the West should fear not so much the use of nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine, or a full-scale war launched by Russia against NATO, as continued attempts to bypass direct armed struggle through increased nonmilitary and indirect military actions by Moscow within the territories of Western states, not to mention the Baltic states, Finland, and Moldova where such actions could culminate, if necessary and if the West shows significant weakness, in a new SVO. The strategic lessons from the heterotelic war waged against Ukraine have, for the most part, already been learned at the highest levels of the Russian military. In the midst of the war of attrition, in November 2023, General Zarudnitsky, head of the VAGSh, described traditional military conflicts as "anachronistic".[254] He argued that victory in modern conflicts consists neither in completely defeating the enemy nor destroying its infrastructure, but in subduing it through indirect confrontation to weaken it as much as possible—at minimum cost while avoiding nuclear war—and limiting one's own losses before directly employing armed force, if necessary.

254. V. B. Zarudnickij, "Sovremennye voennye konflikty v kontekste formirovaniâ novoj geopolitičeskoj kartiny mira", *VM*, No. 11, 2023, pp. 9-10, 14-15.

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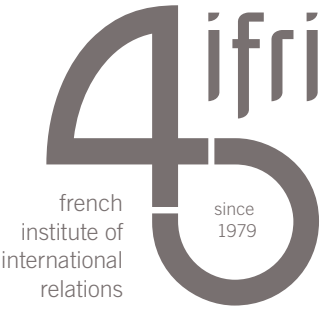

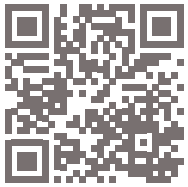

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