



Decoding Russian Nuclear Rhetoric – and How NATO Should Respond

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Executive Summary

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Administration talk about nuclear weapons to communicate with audiences – internal and external – with more frequency and confidence than any other world leader today. It is important for Western leaders to understand the audience, intention, and deeper meaning behind Putin's nuclear rhetoric, and, most importantly, to react properly to manage their security relationships with Russia. In this regard, under-reaction and over-reaction both pose risks. Ignoring such rhetoric can be as damaging as over-reacting. Western reactions can be interpreted as appropriate, an escalation, or acquiescence – whether intentional or not. Formulating effective responses to Russian nuclear rhetoric is a difficult business but is absolutely vital in the increasingly dangerous global security context.

Introduction

Russia has used nuclear threats consistently since 1999 to support achieving its foreign and security policy outcomes, including deterring direct attack against Russia and securing territorial gains, as well as changing the policies and practices of its neighbors and more distant adversaries, including the United States and NATO. After the end of the Cold War, Russian nuclear forces fell into disrepair, with an urgent need to both return Soviet deployed nuclear assets to its territory and downsize an unmanageably large arsenal. At the same time, its efforts to modernize its nuclear arsenal were undercapitalized and foundered as a result.

From 1991-1999, although Russia sought to influence outcomes in conflicts such as Iraq and Yugoslavia, it lacked military capability and credibility to directly or indirectly achieve its aims. With the advent of the Second Gulf War of 2003, the increased oil prices allowed President Putin to prioritize the rapid revitalization of Russia's nuclear arsenal, rebuilding the crumbling nuclear infrastructure, and introducing new short and theatre-range nuclear systems alongside a comprehensive modernization of its strategic nuclear forces. Russia also was able to increase the frequency and credibility of its nuclear threats against the West, capitalizing on the West's perceived weakness and susceptibility to threats of escalation or conflict. Russia's nuclear force posture and doctrine has provided a muscular backdrop for a robust and aggressive foreign policy.

Part 1: The Reconstitution of Russian Power and the Decline of the West, 1991-2014

President Putin's experience as President, and in particular his dealings with Western leaders since gaining office in 2000, have given him confidence in his own manipulation of risk and willingness to embrace escalation, including nuclear threats, to influence Western decision-making. Throughout the period from the end of the Cold War until Russia's seizure of Crimea, the US and NATO demonstrated that it remained relatively risk- and casualties-averse, whereas Russia had demonstrated its ability to use risk, threats of the use of force, and the actual use of force to achieve its foreign policy goals. In fact, Russia's self-image

includes its historic pride in its ability to absorb suffering and casualties at a far higher level, with a much higher appetite for risk than its adversaries.¹ Western distraction in lower-risk conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia absorbed its diplomatic and military power, and therefore NATO was willing to cede the initiative to Russia throughout the post-Cold War period up until Crimea, despite doubling its membership.

Western self-inhibition became pronounced in the aftermath of Russia's public nuclear signaling in 1999 with the ZAPAD exercise of that year. ZAPAD included simulated nuclear strikes on NATO, and the West responded by continuing to accommodate Russian interests, including modifying the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty to allow it a freer hand in concentrating its forces in the Caucasus while continuing to reduce NATO conventional and nuclear forces in Europe. Russia also – to this day – has never conducted a mandatory observation of its military activities West of the Urals, claiming – improbably – that it has never conducted an exercise of 13,000 or more “accountable” troops in that area. It would not have escaped the notice of President Putin (who, in 1999 was the chair of the Russian version of the National Security Council) that Russia's violation of arms control agreements was greeted with adaptation of the agreement rather than holding it to account.

Through this period and up until Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea, NATO Europe relentlessly pursued disarmament, distracted by notions of the end of global conflict as well as its disastrous and ultimately self-defeating Global War on Terror. As of April 2013,² the US had removed its final battle tank from Europe, after nearly 70 years of continuous presence, while reducing its nuclear forces in Europe from a peak of 7,100 nuclear weapons in 1971 to under 200. NATO defence spending excluding the United States plummeted throughout this period, with a growing number of Allied eliminating heavy land forces and air defence capabilities, among others – virtually eliminating the ability of NATO Europe to defend itself. At the same time, the West had excused Russia's brutal suppression of internal divisions in Chechnya in the 1990s, the ongoing occupation of Moldova over its governments demands that Russian forces leave, and the 2008 invasion and occupation of Georgia. The US instead prioritized a reset of relations with Russia – backed by Canada and the Western European Allies – over a recognition of Russia's territorial ambitions and willingness of force to achieve them.

Russia prioritized development and deployment of new non-strategic nuclear weapons to support its coercive nuclear doctrine in Europe, including development of the SS-26 Iskander short range ballistic and cruise missile system to deliver nuclear weapons on the battlefield, as well as longer-range air-launched and sea-launched missiles new air-dropped bombs, nuclear torpedoes and air- and space-defence missiles to strike air/space, sea, and land targets. The Kaliber Kh-102 and the 9M729 are but two of the hallmarks of Russian coercive nuclear doctrine, with a range of more than 2,000 kilometers to strike European targets across the European and Asian theatres, alongside a host of ground, sea, and land-launched dual-capable missiles.

1 Russia's tolerance for casualties – including civilian casualties – has under-studied implications for counter-force and counter-value calculations.

2 Alexander A. Burnett, '21st TSC assists movement of last main battle tanks out of Europe,' 21st TSC Public Affairs, US Army Europe, April 5, 2013.

At the same time, Russia's nuclear deployments remain consistent with using these systems to heighten Western panic and coerce outcomes. Russia has retained a significant nuclear storage capability – both central warehouse facilities and distributed base storage – across the west, south, and east of Russia. It has deployed dedicated nuclear and dual-capable systems across Western Russia as well, including air, sea, and land-based nuclear assets in places like Kaliningrad, the Kola Peninsula, near the borders of the Baltics, Nordics, Belarus, Ukraine, and southern Russia.

Part 2: Deciphering Russian Nuclear Threats in the Current Security Context

Russian nuclear threats in its war on Ukraine. Russian coercive nuclear threats and the fear of nuclear escalation have played a decisive role in shaping the timing and scope of Western military aid to Ukraine. Russia has successfully and strategically employed nuclear rhetoric and signals throughout its war against Ukraine to slow down the speed of weapon deliveries, to restrict the types of weapons delivered, and to prevent their use against specific types of targets. Western decisionmakers continue to struggle with deciphering Russian coercive nuclear threats. Consequently, they tend to overestimate the gravity and credibility of such threats.

At the outset of Russia's renewed war on Ukraine, President Putin in February 2022 announced an alert of his nuclear forces, and reinforced this message by releasing a photograph of his meeting with the Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and chief of the general staff Valery Gerasimov.³ The meaning of this message was aimed at expert audiences, referencing the concept within Soviet doctrine revived during President Boris Yeltsin's presidency that Russian nuclear weapons can only be launched by the unanimous assent of the President, the Minister, and the Chief simultaneously.⁴ Since this announcement, Putin and members of his government (especially Dmitry Medvedev) have made repeated nuclear threats, implying a 'red line' wherein if the United States and its allies supplied a particular type of support to Russia, Russia may respond with nuclear weapons.

Russia's primary challenge lies in making these nuclear threats credible. As we have seen throughout the conflict, Russia's nuclear signaling worked, but only in a time-limited way, with the West declaring it would take or keep 'options off the table', or delay supplying critical weapon systems to Ukraine, before eventually supplying them with little or no change in the conflict. This is because Russia's ability to send coercive messages in the nuclear domain is constrained by the potential political, economic, and military drawbacks that could result as a consequence. For instance, in the aftermath of a series of significant battlefield setbacks in September and October 2022, Russia escalated its nuclear threats against Ukraine, in part claiming that Ukraine was developing its own radiological weapons and stating that it would defend all of the territory in Ukraine that it claimed for its own with nuclear weapons.

Russia's nuclear threats in this context lacked credibility, not least because Russia claimed it would use nuclear weapons to defend territory it had not yet occupied. At the same time,

3 Caitlin Kennedy and Bradley Peniston, 'What just happened with Putin's nuclear forces,' Defense One, 27 February 2022.

4 David Hoffman, 'Cold-War doctrines refuse to die,' the Washington Post, 15 March 1998.

Western governments worked to raise the political costs of these threats by persuading Russia's own allies and partners to push back against Russia's threats. China⁵ and India⁶ publicly stated that disapproved of Russia's nuclear saber-rattling, implying a threat to their political and economic backing to Russia's war efforts, forcing Putin to modulate his threats. Russia also was faced with a subsequent reaction by Western and global partners to reinforce its support for Ukraine, rather than reducing it.

As a result, Russia's nuclear signaling abated for a time,⁷ but recently has returned from 2022 to the present day with increased frequency and strength. During the temporary abatement, nuclear threats were largely constrained to verbal statements by Moscow-based television pundits – however, these threats lack credibility and can largely be described as background noise. While this type of rhetoric cannot be fully ignored – as it is likely that little if any media content from Russia goes unsanctioned – it cannot be a driver of Western policy. However, the most recent debates in Russia on nuclear doctrine are of particular concern.

Sergei Karaganov, head of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, authored a widely-read piece in June 2023 in *Russia Global Affairs*, calling for radical steps to “restore deterrence” with the West.⁸ This includes limited doses of nuclear strikes on a US ally supporting Ukraine to soberise the West, referring to Poland. His article actually addresses how to increase the effectiveness of Russian nuclear coercion – how can Russia coerce the West to abandon Ukraine. His recommendations also include resuming nuclear testing. This article set off a debate within Russia's expert community, culminating with President Putin publicly debating Karaganov at Valdai in October 2023.⁹ While he rejected direct nuclear attacks on NATO, he conceded the main argument and in June announced Russia would revise its nuclear doctrine with Karaganov to supply analyses to support the process.¹⁰ Putin also withdrew ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, signaling a willingness to return to testing if desired.

*How to interpret nuclear threats*¹¹. Deterrence (whether nuclear or not) relies upon two factors: credibility and capability. Therefore, understanding a nuclear threat requires both understanding the credibility of the interlocutor and the capability available to carry out the threat. Understanding the credibility requires an understanding of the target audience of the nuclear messaging and an understanding of the underlying interests at stake, including contextualization of the threat within the security environment. Understanding credibility requires awareness of the military posture that underlies that threat, including the status of forces across domains (but especially nuclear forces).

In Russian nuclear signaling, understanding the audience of especially important. Some of the rhetoric is intended for internal consumption. Externally, Russian rhetoric is aimed at

5 Andreas Rinke and Eduardo Baptista, 'Xi, Scholz warn against 'irresponsible' nuclear threats over Ukraine,' Reuters, 4 November 2022.

6 'India's defence minister warns against nuclear weapons in call with Russian counterpart,' Reuters, 26 October 2022.

7 Liviu Horovitz and Anna Clara Arndt, 'One year of nuclear rhetoric and escalation management in Russia's war against Ukraine: An updated chronology,' SWP Working Paper, February 2023.

8 Sergei Karaganov, 'A Difficult but Necessary Decision,' *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 June 2023.

9 'Vladimir Putin Meets Members of the Valdai Discussion Club, Transcript,' Valdai Discussion Club, 5 October 2023.

10 Mark Trevelyan and Andrew Osborn, 'Putin says Russia may deliver nuclear weapons to North Korea,' Reuters, 20 June 2024.

11 Daryl Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats*, Cornell University Press, 2005.

either: the US, the UK and France, NATO, other US allies, and the global commons. Internally aimed Russian nuclear rhetoric can be quite revealing about what Russia thinks of itself, as well as the scope, scale, and direction of internal Russian political and military power dynamics. Interpreting this messaging appropriately would be quite useful, but would require consistent monitoring of the messaging, understanding the internal context surrounding the messaging (e.g., elections, economic conditions, or internal instability), and understanding the external conditions. External conditions are especially important in developing responses and employing those responses effectively, as Russian nuclear rhetoric often comes in response to slights or perceived slights, setbacks on the political or military battlefield, and significant international events.

On externally-directed Russian nuclear rhetoric, the United States plays a special role in responding, as many of Russia's nuclear signals intended for external audiences are aimed at Washington. The UK and France also play a special role as nuclear powers and NATO Allies, and some of Putin's nuclear rhetoric is aimed directly at them. Other external-facing nuclear rhetoric is aimed at European audiences, designed to divide the NATO Alliance and other global US allies away from the United States. The final category of Russian external nuclear rhetoric is intended for the rest of the global commons, intended to portray Russia in the best light possible, and merits a Western response.

Credible versus non-credible threats. The principal purpose of Russian coercive nuclear threats is to convince NATO decisionmakers that the potential costs of resisting Russia's political objectives could result in nuclear war, and therefore far outweigh the benefits of such resistance. This effect is achieved by systematically increasing pressure on decision-makers through manipulating the perceived risks of nuclear use without requiring any actual nuclear use. There is a difference in form and substance between non-credible coercive threats and credible threats of nuclear weapon use which are worth noting.

While it is possible that Russia might conduct a pure "bolt from the blue" surprise nuclear attack, Russia cannot be certain that it would go undetected (and avoid pre-emption), be successful (and not require follow-on strikes), or avoid retaliation (either limited or overwhelming conventional or nuclear strikes). Therefore, nuclear weapon use – even for a limited nuclear strike – requires a large-scale series of observable moves in the political and military sphere. The scale and scope of these moves to support a limited nuclear strike may seem counterintuitive. However, three factors inform this assessment:

1. First, any actual use would come in a specific political-military context for maximum effectiveness.
2. Second, the attacking side would take actions to deter retaliation through demonstrating further escalatory capability.
3. Third, the attacking side would prepare for retaliation in case these deterrence actions fail.

A limited Russian nuclear strike would highly likely come amid an extreme crisis, with clear Russian political demands to present any adversary with a path to capitulation. The 12th Main Directorate – a specialist command within the Russian military tasked with the safety and surety of its nuclear weapons deployments – would deploy on a large scale, both to prepare for and protect the movement of the nuclear warheads tasked for the strike, and to ensure that other strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons would be prepared for

contingencies, from small scale follow-up strikes if the immediate objectives are not met (due to interception or resistance to demands), up to a strategic response (if the other side retaliated with massed conventional, limited nuclear, or broad strategic nuclear retaliation). Russia also would likely disperse its political and military leadership, activate redundant command and control capabilities, move conventional, dual-capable, and nuclear strategic and non-strategic systems to the highest level of preparedness, and otherwise take all steps necessary to deter and prepare for any adversarial response.

If Putin decides it is in his interest to increase the credibility of Russia's nuclear threats, he has options to do so. Nuclear threats that are more credible can be grouped into four categories ranging from least to most credible, with two main variables: words and actions. In general, as the credibility of the nuclear threat increases, so does its intensity of the related rhetoric and actions. Intensity can be defined as an increase in the magnitude of signals that coincide with the nuclear threat indicating that nuclear use becomes more likely. This means that as the credibility of the threat increases, Western intelligence agencies and analysts will generally detect more signatures indicating preparation for nuclear use.

Category 1: Words without action

The first category relates to nuclear threats that are non-credible, either because of an obvious internal audience or non-credible messengers, an absence of clear military preparation, and a security environment non-conducive to war. For instance, nuclear threats delivered by television pundits on Russian talk shows are both directed internally and delivered by non-credible messengers. Pronouncements by Parliamentarians, while seemingly directed towards external audiences, also are primarily for internal consumption (political jockeying) and non-credible. Certain Russian Government officials also make statements seemingly directed towards the West, but more likely intended for an internal audience, such as those by Deputy Chair of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, which most likely are intended to demonstrate his utility despite his precipitous fall from power. These threats also come in the context of a conflict with the West, but often without any credible justification for nuclear war, but rather Western action that Russia would prefer not take place but not against its core interests. Finally, these statements come in a near total absence of preparations for a nuclear strike, and thus can be most usefully ignored by the West.

Category 2: Words and some action, but below the threshold for use

The second category relates to nuclear threats that are somewhat credible, given that they are delivered by official sources and accompanied by some level of related military activity, but in a strategic environment non-conducive to war. Statements in this regard are those delivered by official and credible government sources in their normal capacities, including one or more of the security triumvirate made up of the Minister of Defence, the Chief of Defence, and Putin himself. Relevant activities would include scheduled or announced nuclear-related exercises, such as the snap non-strategic nuclear exercise announced in May and conducted through May and June 2024. Putin's statements throughout May and June 2024 on nuclear threats in the context of the doctrinal debate headed by Sergei Karaganov (more on this below) on the upcoming revision of Russia's nuclear doctrine to account for changes in the threat environment also fall under this category. These threats are low in intensity because, despite suggesting a potential need for nuclear use, they do not involve the large-scale preparation by Russian forces for conventional and nuclear war, nor do they come in a security context that would suggest immanent war, such as the threat of direct combat with Western forces.

Category 3: Sharp words and significant preparations

The third category of nuclear threats relates to threats that are credible and more intense, delivered by the security triumvirate, coinciding with significant preparations for nuclear use. For example, a threat of possible nuclear use in the context of a larger scale alert of its nuclear forces including the deployment of live nuclear warheads would fall into this category. In this case, the threat would coincide with actions that are clear prerequisites to nuclear use, shortening the timespan between a potential decision taken and the warheads launched. Western intelligence and analysts would most likely pick up signatures of warhead movements as well as reinforced security parameters surrounding launcher capabilities (which were absent during the recent snap exercise).

Category 4: Direct threat and large-scale preparations for war

The fourth category relates to nuclear threats that are both highly credible and very high in intensity. This category includes direct threats issued by Putin of specific employment of nuclear weapons against the US or NATO in the context of a large-scale mobilization of its military assets, including nuclear weapons, signaling that Russia is preparing for potential retaliation or pre-emption of its nuclear first use – all in the context of a real or imminent clash of forces between NATO and Russia or an event that otherwise threatens the territorial integrity of the Russian state.

If Russian nuclear threats become more credible and preparations suggest a greater readiness to use nuclear weapons, Western intelligence and analysts would almost certainly detect these developments (see Part 3). As the threat intensity increases, so does the frequency and visibility of corresponding indicators. This also means that any nuclear use would most likely not come as a surprise. Additionally, Russian preparations for nuclear use would provide Western decisionmakers with opportunities to respond to the changing threat environment. Depending on the intensity of the nuclear threat, this might include diplomatic efforts, increasing military readiness, or even preemptive military actions under the NATO doctrine of counter-surprise.

But Allies retain agency and do not have to yield initiative or capitulate. It is important to highlight that the US and NATO Allies retain agency in the face of Russian nuclear rhetoric and have options to respond to threats of nuclear escalation. A nuclear surprise attack, while not completely impossible, remains highly unlikely. The more likely scenario will be that decisionmakers have time to reevaluate their security environment in light of increasingly credible Russian nuclear threats. This should provide us with confidence. Both in terms of not overreacting to non-credible threats and in our ability to ensure our security as Russia's threats become potentially more intense in the future and nuclear use appears more likely.

Part 3: Russian nuclear doctrine, forces, and preparations for strikes

Reading doctrine clearly. Russia's latest nuclear doctrine was published in 2020¹² – although President Putin has stated that Russia is revising its nuclear doctrine (as of June 2024¹³), most likely to reduce the threshold for nuclear use and increase public pressure on its

12 Putin, Vladimir, 'The President of the Russian Federation Executive Order: On Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation, on Nuclear Deterrence,' Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 June 2020.

13 'Russia is revising its nuclear doctrine, Kremlin says,' Reuters, 24 June 2024.

adversaries. The current doctrine states that nuclear weapons use is only contemplated in four specific use cases:

1. Launch on warning of a strategic nuclear strike on Russian territory or that of its allies.
2. Direct use of nuclear weapons against Russia or its allies.
3. Enemy attacks intended to destroy Russian nuclear weapons.
4. Aggression where the existence of the Russian state is at risk.

It is highly likely that this is not a complete or true version of their doctrine. In fact, leaked documents demonstrate that Russia's threshold for nuclear use has been and likely remains far lower than the 2020 Doctrine implies. In fact, Russian nuclear weapons most likely have three doctrinal main uses:

1. Deterring direct conflict with the US and China.
2. Coercing adversaries into doing what Russia wants.
3. Controlling escalation and winning in conflict.

The first of these doctrinal uses is consistent with the purpose of the published doctrine (consistent with Soviet thinking) and has been effective – as nuclear weapons have maintained the peace among the great powers. The second doctrinal use includes the employment of nuclear threats, exercises, and deployments to change the behavior of its adversaries, including to instill inhibition in the leadership of adversaries in acting against Russian interests. Nuclear messaging and signaling will be analyzed further in the next section of this report.

The third doctrinal purpose also is consistent with the overall purpose of Russia's published doctrine but implies a lower threshold than the four use cases of the published doctrine. Russia, over the past two decades, has developed a force posture consistent with escalation control and maintaining escalation dominance in a conflict with a non-nuclear and nuclear-armed foes alike. Actual Russian nuclear doctrine likely highly includes the use of warning strikes – a nuclear explosion over neutral or unpopulated enemy territory to coerce an adversary – as well as nuclear strikes early in a conflict. The published doctrine's claim that nuclear weapons would only be used in case of an existential threat to the Russian state is inaccurate, as the bar for Russian nuclear use is much lower. Instead, Russia uses nuclear weapons to keep the United States and NATO from intervening in local conflicts, and in the case of a theatre conflict in Europe or Asia – to threaten the United States homeland to prevent it from intervening.

In short, Russia would use or threaten to use small numbers of nuclear weapons on the battlefield or in theater to establish escalation dominance and win a local or regional conflict on its own terms, while de-coupling the United States from the conflict. To achieve this, the actual Russian doctrine includes the idea of using a limited “dosage” of nuclear strikes to “soberise” the West out of any idea it could change the regime in Moscow as it did in Iraq and Yugoslavia.¹⁴ These two conflicts were instrumental in accelerating Russian thinking on nuclear weapon use and adapting both its doctrine and force posture.

¹⁴ Y.V. Karyagin, “On the Question of Non-Nuclear ‘Soberation’ or something little known about medium-range missiles,” *Politics and Economics*, 2007.

Preparations for nuclear use. While it is possible that Russia might conduct a pure “bolt from the blue” surprise nuclear attack, Russia cannot be certain that it would: go undetected (and avoid pre-emption), be successful (and not require follow-on strikes), or avoid retaliation (either limited or overwhelming conventional or nuclear strikes). Therefore, nuclear weapon use – even for a limited nuclear strike – requires a large-scale series of observable moves in the political and military sphere. The scale and scope of these moves to support a limited nuclear strike may seem counterintuitive. However, three factors inform this assessment:

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A limited Russian nuclear strike would highly likely come amid an extreme crisis, with clear Russian political demands to present any adversary with a path to capitulation. The 12th Main Directorate – a specialist command within the Russian military tasked with the safety and surety of its nuclear weapons deployments – would deploy on a large scale, both to prepare for and protect the movement of the nuclear warheads tasked for the strike, and to ensure that other strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons would be prepared for contingencies, from small scale follow-up strikes if the immediate objectives are not met (due to interception or resistance to demands), up to a strategic response (if the other side retaliated with massed conventional, limited nuclear, or broad strategic nuclear retaliation). Russia also would likely disperse its political and military leadership, activate redundant command and control capabilities, move conventional, dual-capable, and nuclear strategic and non-strategic systems to the highest level of preparedness, and otherwise take all steps necessary to deter and prepare for any adversarial response.

Nuclear threats that are issued in the absence of these conditions are likely not connected to reality and are intended purely for nuclear coercive purposes. Direct action is not required, aside from working with partners to ensure international support for declaring such behavior as irresponsible and inadmissible among responsible nuclear powers.

Part 4: Recommendations

We live in an era where Russian nuclear threats will be a regular feature of international relations for the foreseeable future. Responding to these threats in a coherent and effective manner is and will continue to be difficult. However, in the absence of such responses, Russia will increase the use of nuclear threats to damage Western security interests. It is therefore necessary to improve NATO decision-makers’ ability to be ready and able to act and to react to Russian nuclear threats cogently, coherently, and in service of Western security. To be clear, the best way to deal with Russian nuclear rhetoric is to act decisively to strengthen NATO deterrent. However, aside from this, Allies should take the following steps to increase their confidence in understanding and responding to Russian nuclear threats, improve their internal and external communications on nuclear deterrence, and to stop ceding the initiative to Russia in employing nuclear threats without political (diplomatic) or military costs.

Recommendation 1: *Improve NATO deterrence analytic capabilities, including audience and context.* In this regard, the venue of the communication matters tremendously, as does the specific language used and the broader political context. Some rhetoric is meant for internal audiences, and can greatly aid in understanding Russian internal dynamics. Some is intended only for the US, and must be noted, but does not merit a NATO response. Other messages are intended for European audiences and should be processed accordingly. NATO Allies thus need to improve government, military, and public understanding of nuclear deterrence, credible and non-credible nuclear threats and risks, and escalatory pathways, all within the internal and external context under which Russian nuclear rhetoric is employed.

Recommendation 2: *Keep track of messaging over time.* Several think tanks are tracking Russian nuclear rhetoric. However, some of them have ulterior motives, such as supporting nuclear disarmament or large-scale nuclear build-ups, rather than providing empirical analysis. It would be useful for a public-facing database of independent and empirical tracking (and analysis) of Russian nuclear rhetoric.

Recommendation 3: *Develop a menu of pre-scripted response options.* While some of Russia's nuclear rhetoric is unpredictable, quite often it comes in predictable forms – thus, response options, including not reacting, public press and media reactions, diplomatic reactions, and military reactions, can be drawn up, agreed, and coordinated across all NATO Allies – and other US global allies – well in advance of any specific instance. It also is necessary to communicate and coordinate with non-aligned nations to improve the reach and effectiveness of NATO responses.

Recommendation 4: *Keep calm and carry on.* European NATO Allies must develop the confidence to receive, interpret, and respond to Russian nuclear rhetoric without being deterred from the most important NATO policies and actions. Panic is not policy, and removing the panic reaction from NATO Allies' response to Russian nuclear rhetoric eventually will diminish or eliminate such threats from Putin's playbook.

Conclusion

In short, deterring Russian nuclear threats includes a combination of military actions, and an improved government, military, and public understanding of the meaning of these threats and its effective response options. However, many NATO Allies are not yet in a position to perform this basic task. More work must be done to secure Europe against Russian nuclear threats and blackmail. Greater understanding is the first task.



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