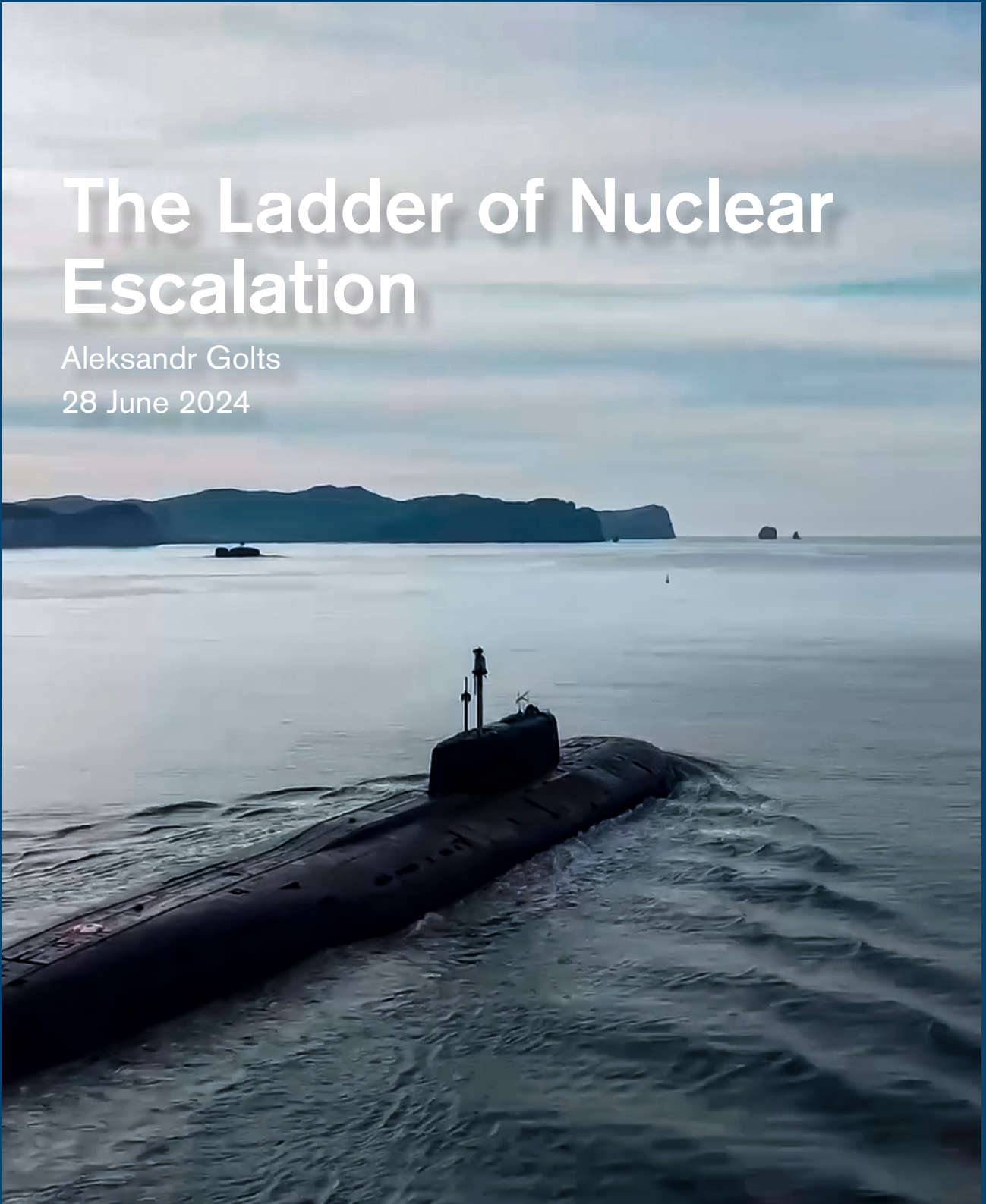


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# The Ladder of Nuclear Escalation

Aleksandr Golts  
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## Executive Summary

Two and a half years of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have led to the degradation of the Kremlin's "extended" nuclear deterrence strategy. NATO leaders are increasingly unimpressed by Moscow's attempts to establish "red lines" that threaten nuclear conflict if the West crosses them in support of Ukraine. However, the Kremlin cannot relinquish nuclear blackmail, its main, if not only, argument in its relations with the West today. Russia's leadership is intensifying its nuclear rhetoric and discussing specific scenarios of nuclear war in Europe. At the same time, it feels the need to back up its verbal threats with some practical actions. Attempts to highlight exercises of its non-strategic nuclear forces represent the first step in this direction. Speaking at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Vladimir Putin effectively outlined a ladder of nuclear escalation. We can expect that the nuclear doctrine will be changed to lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons as part of a strengthened signalling to the United States and NATO. Nuclear tests under the pretext that the United States is also "preparing" such tests cannot be ruled out. In the future, attempts to deploy nuclear weapons near the territories of states declared "hostile" to Russia, as well as the introduction of "combat duty" for strategic aviation, are likely. All this significantly increases the likelihood of the direct use of nuclear weapons.

Attempts to simply ignore the Kremlin's nuclear demonstrations provoke the Russian leadership to raise the stakes in this escalation. It may be that the only response is a buildup of NATO's nuclear and conventional deterrence potential.

## "Red Lines" Are Turning into "Paper Tigers"

From the very beginning of the war against Ukraine, Putin has tried to implement the Kremlin's version of the concept of "extended deterrence." By threatening the possible use of nuclear weapons, he has tried to force Western states to withdraw support for the aggressor's victim. Thus, when announcing the beginning of the invasion, Putin made a significant statement: "I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside. No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history. No matter how the events unfold, we are ready. All the necessary decisions in this regard have been taken. I hope that my words will be heard."<sup>1</sup> And, three days after the invasion began, the Russian leader wanted to make the threat more concrete. He ordered the defence minister and the chief of the general staff to "transfer the deterrent forces of the Russian army to a special combat duty mode."<sup>2</sup> Six months later, however, it became apparent that the threatening words only masked a decision to increase the number of military personnel in the combat crews of the Strategic Rocket Forces.

Over the past two-plus years, the Kremlin has repeatedly resorted to such intimidation

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1 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

2 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/02/2022/621b77959a79477dcca4c36f?ysclid=I6jfxbcioio521734789>.

tactics. A few days before Russia annexed several regions of Ukraine, Putin announced a partial mobilisation and stated that Russia would use all methods, including nuclear weapons, whenever its territorial integrity was threatened.<sup>3</sup> Thus, he hinted that Moscow could use nuclear weapons to “defend” the territories that Russia had newly incorporated.

As soon as the West was confronted with the need to take actions that could have a significant impact on the course of hostilities, such as supplying long-range artillery, modern tanks, air-defence systems, and tactical missiles, the Kremlin immediately announced that these supplies would be perceived as crossing its own “red lines.”<sup>4</sup> Moscow was careful to insinuate that this violation could serve as a pretext for the use of nuclear weapons. Admittedly, this tactic worked, albeit partially. On the one hand, back in the fall of 2022, Washington reacted quite sharply and definitely to Putin’s threats. Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns had warned Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia’s SVR foreign-intelligence service, about the consequences of any use of nuclear weapons: “He is conveying a message on the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons by Russia, and the risks of escalation to strategic stability.”<sup>5</sup> But, on the other hand, after the next Russian threats, Western countries, as a rule, the United States and Germany, engaged in lengthy consultations and discussions. Ultimately, Ukraine was sent the equipment and weapons it needed, but with a significant delay. As a result, using these weapons did not produce the expected outcome.

However, the more often the Kremlin resorted to such tactics, the less NATO countries paid attention to its threats. At the same time, Moscow’s behaviour partially contradicted its threats. Thus, at the end of May 2024, Russia received a very real *casus belli*: a pretext for nuclear war. On May 23 and 26, Ukraine struck two missile-attack warning-system radars in Armavir and Orsk, claiming that Moscow was using them in hostilities. Meanwhile, the Russian president’s executive order, “Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence,”<sup>6</sup> issued in 2020, provides for the possibility of Russia’s using nuclear weapons in case of “attack by an adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions.” Washington instantly recognised the danger. As early as 29 May, an unnamed administration official told the *Washington Post* that the United States was concerned about Kiev’s actions.<sup>7</sup> Moscow, on the other hand, was clearly unprepared to react. It remained confusingly silent until June 3, after which Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov made a very vague statement: “This is not the first time that the Kiev regime has attempted to disrupt the normal functioning of important parts of our military system, including those relating to the strategic sphere. We will thwart all these attempts... Responses may be asymmetric... But for the United States, there will surely be a price to pay. It will feel the consequences.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, during the two and a half years of war, Russia’s “extended nuclear deterrence” began to turn into a “paper tiger.” It is no coincidence that the United States, together with other NATO countries, authorised, albeit with reservations, Western weapons strikes on Russian territory.

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3 <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/09/21/yadder/?ysclid=lf8eje7qx3570275479>.

4 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73648>; <https://www.tbsnews.net/world/putin-ponders-should-russia-try-take-kyiv-again-649442>; <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/arming-ukraine-without-crossing-russias-red-lines/>.

5 <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-us-officials-holding-talks-turkey-kommersant-2022-11-14/>.

6 [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/disarmament/1434131/?lang=en](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/1434131/?lang=en).

7 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/05/29/us-ukraine-nuclear-warning-strikes/>.

8 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6745135?ysclid=ix5yftxoyi292762837>.

## New Intimidation Plans

At the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, the Kremlin decided to make the threats more specific. Despite Putin's relentlessly repeated assertions that he did not want to engage in nuclear rhetoric or even think about the use of nuclear weapons, his speech marked the first serious discussion of the prospect of a limited nuclear war on the European continent. The goal was to scare European countries and convince them that the American nuclear umbrella would not be so effective. He noted that, unlike Russia and the United States, European states do not have their own early-warning systems. At the same time, he did not mention the US missile-defence system facilities in Poland and Romania. According to Putin, after the extinction of the Europeans (obviously as a result of a limited nuclear war), the US might not want to use its strategic nuclear forces. That is, Putin was scaring the Europeans with the prospect of the continent's disappearance in a limited nuclear war (with the Russian chief finally admitting that Moscow possesses "many times" more tactical nuclear munitions than the US), even if the planet were to remain. At the same time, he somehow appears to harbour a sense of confidence that a limited nuclear war would not harm Russia.

At the St. Petersburg forum, Putin announced the introduction of a new topic: blackmail. Thus, speaking to representatives of world news agencies, the Russian boss had a threat for those who supply Ukraine with weapons, "...why can we not supply our weapons of the same class to those regions around the world where they will target sensitive facilities of the countries that are doing this to Russia?"<sup>9</sup> However, when it comes to conventional weapons, this threat looks limited and rather speculative. Russian politicians and experts immediately started discussing which countries the Kremlin could provide its weapons to.<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, the list turned out to be rather modest and significantly detached from reality. In particular, it named Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba, and the Yemeni Houthis. However, Iran and North Korea produce tactical missiles of their own. As for the Latin American countries, they are currently busy building relations with the United States. It is possible that the Kremlin will want to provide long-range missile systems to the Houthis in Yemen and pro-Iranian formations in Syria. However, given the hostilities in Ukraine, Moscow's options in this ambition are limited. In addition, such supplies are unlikely to go unnoticed. Most probably, these weapons systems will be destroyed as soon as they pose any serious threat to global shipping or US forces. It is no coincidence that Putin immediately stipulated, "I am not ready to say that we will do it [supply weapons] tomorrow, either. Because, in any case, any such supply involves a whole range of circumstances that in one way or another affect certain regions of the world, and we must, of course, think about it."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, just two weeks after Putin directly pointed to Pyongyang, which has made unpredictability its main trump card in relations with other countries, as a possible recipient of Russian weapons, "As I have already said, including in Pyongyang, we reserve the right to supply our weapons to other regions of the world. I would not rule out this possibility in terms of our agreements with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK]."<sup>12</sup> It is significant that this threat has led to results that are directly opposite to what the Kremlin expected. Senior South Korean officials immediately threatened that in the case of Russian military technology supplies to the DPRK, Seoul would reconsider its position on arms supplies to Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

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9 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74223>.

10 <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2024/06/07/19212775.shtml?ysclid=lxaa643t3w602144776>.

11 <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74234>.

12 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74357>.

13 <https://tass.com/world/1807005>.

## Nuclear Doctrine Changes

However, it is clear that the strategy of verbal deterrence towards the West is exhausting itself. Putin's threats are becoming less and less frightening. Responding to this challenge, analysts loyal to the Kremlin are significantly expanding the boundaries of "classical nuclear deterrence," which used to mean that a nuclear attack on Russia or its allies would be prevented if the potential aggressor realised that it would suffer unacceptable damage as a result of a retaliatory strike. Now, according to Dmitri Trenin, the goal of deterrence is also to force the West to abandon attempts to win a "conventional proxy war in Ukraine;" to prove to NATO countries that "it is impossible to win a conventional war affecting the vital interests of a nuclear power; and an attempt to do so would lead to their own destruction."<sup>14</sup> Such reasoning inevitably leads down the path of nuclear escalation. Putin said in St Petersburg that his decisions are guided by the nuclear doctrine and that he believes there is no need to use nuclear weapons. But he felt that it was necessary to add that the doctrine is a "living instrument" and did not rule out changes to it. He also said that there was no need to resume nuclear testing yet. The key word here is "yet." In essence, Putin was describing the first steps of a nuclear escalation that Russia is ready to embark on.

The first stage of escalation can be a demonstrative change in nuclear doctrine. A few days after Putin's speech, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said, "The situation tends to further complicate, and the challenges that are multiplying as a result of the unacceptable and escalating actions of the United States and its NATO allies undoubtedly raise the question of how the basic documents in the sphere of nuclear deterrence can be brought more in line with the current needs."<sup>15</sup> Currently, Russia cites only four conditions under which it would be ready to use nuclear weapons: a) arrival of reliable data on a launch of ballistic missiles attacking the territory of the Russian Federation and/or its allies; b) use of nuclear weapons or other types of weapons of mass destruction by an adversary against the Russian Federation and/or its allies; c) attack by an adversary against critical governmental or military sites of the Russian Federation, disruption of which would undermine nuclear forces response actions; d) aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, any changes to the doctrine should lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. For example, Dmitry Trenin insists that instead of "a threat to the very existence of the state," one of the conditions for the use of nuclear weapons should be "a threat to the vital interests of the country."<sup>17</sup> It is possible that the changes could be more radical. The doctrine can include a clause on the possibility of a preventive nuclear strike in the course of a local conflict, as proposed by the then Secretary of the Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, back in 2009.<sup>18</sup>

Later, concluding his visit to North Korea and Vietnam, Putin offered a relatively innocent explanation for his desire to revise the nuclear doctrine, "We are still thinking about what can be changed in this doctrine and how. This is because new elements are arriving (at least

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14 <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/964175>.

15 <https://tass.ru/politika/21067077?ysclid=lxakwiny8q722439279>.

16 [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/disarmament/1434131/?lang=en](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/disarmament/1434131/?lang=en).

17 <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/964175>.

18 <https://lenta.ru/news/2009/10/14/prevent/?ysclid=lx8xf4omnz140506353>.

we know that the potential adversary is working on it) related to lowering the threshold for using nuclear weapons. In particular, ultra-low-power nuclear-explosive devices are being developed, and we know that expert circles in the West are entertaining the idea that such weapons could be used, and there is nothing particularly terrible about it.”<sup>19</sup> Putin expressed a reservation, however, “We do not need a preventive strike yet, because the enemy will be guaranteed to be destroyed in a retaliatory strike.” It should nevertheless be borne in mind that two weeks before, Putin had stated at the St. Petersburg forum that the Kremlin had no plans to alter the doctrine.

It must be recalled that Russian doctrinal documents are not only declarative in nature. They are also the basis for the development of specific documents on the use of armed forces. Suffice it to say that the previous executive order, “Foundations of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Nuclear Deterrence: Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence,” was secret. Thus, changes in doctrine are more than verbal threats.

## Resuming Nuclear Tests

“Preventive” nuclear tests could be the next stage of escalation, conducted under the guise of similar intentions by the United States. It is relevant to recall that in 2023, in his Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin stated, “Given these circumstances, the Defence Ministry and Rosatom must make everything ready for Russia to conduct nuclear tests.”<sup>20</sup> A year later, on Putin’s initiative, the Russian parliament cancelled its decision to ratify the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The resumption of nuclear testing will inevitably open Pandora’s box in an immediate nuclear confrontation, during which Russia may resort to various kinds of demonstrations to show how great the threat of nuclear war is. The first steps have already been taken in this regard. Moscow is assumed to have deployed nuclear weapons in Belarus.

## Nuclear Forces Exercises

The Kremlin is likely to conduct exercises that steadily strengthen the nuclear component. It has already taken the first steps in this direction. Thus, wanting to respond to NATO discussions about allowing Ukraine to attack Russian territory with Western weapons, as well as to French President Emmanuel Macron’s statement that he did not rule out sending troops to Ukraine, Moscow decided to hold exercises of non-strategic nuclear forces in the Southern Military District, which is close to the area of military operations. Later, the exercises involved the armed forces of Belarus, troops from the Leningrad Military District, and the Russian Navy. However, the organisers of the exercises faced a problem: how to make the nuclear threat tangible to the West. The fact is that the carriers of non-strategic nuclear weapons — Iskander tactical missiles, MiG-31 and Tu-22 M combat aircraft — are at the same time carriers of conventional weapons. They are already being widely used in this capacity in the war against Ukraine. Manoeuvres involving them are a trivial matter and, in this case, it is difficult to achieve an intimidating effect.

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19 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74357>.

20 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>.

The actual nuclear specifics of such exercises consist of removing a nuclear warhead from a storage base and mating it to a specific carrier with careful observance of all special procedures. Completely playing out such a scenario is extremely risky. US satellite reconnaissance would have detected any activity around the storage bases, likely necessitating US nuclear preparations. This could have increased the danger of nuclear confrontation. Apparently, the organisers of the Russian exercises did not take the risk of using real nuclear warheads. In his statement, General Kolesnikov, the chief of the Defence Ministry's 12th Main Directorate (12 GU MO), which guards, maintains, transports, and delivers nuclear weapons, said that exercises "ensured the delivery of nuclear training munitions to the field storage points of the missile brigade's positional area and the operational airfield of assault aviation."<sup>21</sup> It can be assumed that he was referring to dummy warheads. The general also meaningfully stated that "further improvement of the training of non-strategic nuclear forces will be determined in order to ensure the fulfilment of tasks in various scenarios for development of the military-political situation."<sup>22</sup> But despite Russian propaganda's extensive coverage of these exercises, this did not provoke any particular reaction from the West.

Russian propaganda is already paying much attention to the announced naval exercises off Cuba's coast. The exercises will involve the frigate, *Admiral Gorshkov*, and the nuclear-powered attack submarine, *Kazan*, both capable of carrying Kalibr and Zirkon cruise missiles. Finally, it cannot be ruled out that Moscow will risk repeating the Soviet experience, when strategic aviation was switched to "combat duty." Long-range aviation goes on combat duty only in the so-called "threatened period," that is, on the eve of war. When combat readiness is increased, nuclear warheads are hung on aircraft and cruise missiles are refuelled.<sup>23</sup> Such combat duty was conducted only once in the history of the USSR, from January 1985 to April 1987.<sup>24</sup> In that episode, it became clear after 26 months that there were no resources to continue such combat duty. In 2007, Vladimir Putin announced the resumption of "combat duty" for strategic bombers.<sup>25</sup> At the time, Air Force leaders were quick to declare that the bombers would fly only with training munitions. If the Kremlin seeks to raise the stakes in a confrontation, uncertainty will increase, and with it the risks.

Unfortunately, there are no other ways to prevent such an escalation except for the return of traditional "hard" nuclear deterrence by NATO and, above all, the United States. Some American experts have already written about this. Thus, Rebecca Heinrichs, a senior fellow and director of the Keystone Defence Initiative, insists, "The US should bolster the credibility of conventional and nuclear weapons around the region to deter Russian escalation, whether that escalation would take the form of hitting a NATO country with conventional weapons or crossing the nuclear threshold."<sup>26</sup> Apparently, the White House is already considering such a strategy. Recently, Pranay Vaddi, a senior director of the National Security Council, bluntly pointed out that the United States does not rule out a serious buildup of its nuclear

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21 <http://redstar.ru/v-tselyah-bezuslovnogo-obespecheniya-suvereniteta-i-territorialnoj-tselostnosti-soyuznogo-gosudarstva/>.

22 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-practiced-electronic-missile-launches-during-tactical-nuclear-drills-2024-06-13/>.

23 [Strategicheskoe yadernoe vooruzhenie Rossii. M. Izdat, 1998 pp 310-311.](#)

24 [https://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2005-06-03/4\\_bezo.html?ysclid=lxadmbawrx727216038](https://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2005-06-03/4_bezo.html?ysclid=lxadmbawrx727216038).

25 <https://www.finmarket.ru/news/649588>.

26 <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/respond-putins-escalation-threats-confidence-not-cowardice-rebecca-heinrichs>.

arsenals because the actions of China and Russia are “forcing the United States and our close allies and partners to prepare for a world where nuclear competition occurs without numerical constraints.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the nuclear arms race is already a reality. In light of the Kremlin’s nuclear threats, this is not the worst-case scenario.

The leadership of the Alliance is already aware of the need for an adequate response to the Kremlin’s blackmail. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that the bloc must show its nuclear arsenal to the world while calling for the use of transparency as a deterrent. In clear reference to Russia’s nuclear exercises, Stoltenberg reported that there were live consultations between members on taking missiles out of storage and placing them on standby. “I will not go into operational details about how many nuclear warheads should be operational and which should be stored, but we need to consult on these issues.”<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusions

“Extended nuclear deterrence,” as interpreted by the Kremlin, has taken the form of nuclear blackmail against the West. This blackmail is one of Moscow’s main instruments of influence on NATO states. Since it is not yielding the expected results, the Russian leadership will seek to raise the stakes of nuclear deterrence. It can be assumed that the new version of the nuclear doctrine could lower the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. In addition, it will strengthen the nuclear component of military exercises. Moscow will persistently demonstrate its readiness to deploy its nuclear forces close to the territories of states it declares “hostile.” The demonstrative introduction of a higher level of readiness for certain elements of the strategic nuclear forces cannot be ruled out.

An attempt to simply ignore nuclear blackmail is unlikely to be effective. In this case, Moscow will find it necessary to raise the stakes. The West will have no choice but to start strengthening its nuclear capabilities.

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27 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/07/us/politics/us-nuclear-russia-china.html>.

28 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/06/16/nato-jens-stoltenberg-nuclear-weapons-deploy-russia-china/>.





**Aleksandr Golts**

Analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS).

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