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A Strategy for Deterring Russian Nuclear De-Escalation Strikes

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Cover photo: The Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine USS Pennsylvania (SSBN 735) returns to Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor following a routine strategic deterrent patrol. The new US Nuclear Posture Review of 2018 calls for placing low-yield nuclear warheads on US submarine-launched ballistic missiles. May 6, 2016. (US Navy/Lt. Cmdr. Michael Smith).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How can the United States and its NATO allies deter Russian nuclear “de-escalation” strikes? Russian nuclear strategy allows for the early use of nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict with NATO with the goal of forcing Western leaders to sue for peace or risk further, potentially catastrophic, nuclear escalation. Many Western scholars and analysts have recognized this threat but, to date, have not yet articulated a clear deterrence strategy for addressing it. This

report presents an analysis of possible approaches for deterring Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes and for negating Russian nuclear coercion. It argues that NATO must convince Russia that any nuclear strike will not lead to de-escalation, but will only result in unacceptable costs for Russia. In other words, the United States must threaten that Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes will be met with a tough and credible response, and that the response could include a limited nuclear reprisal.

INTRODUCTION

How can the United States and its NATO allies deter Russian nuclear “de-escalation” strikes? According to the US government, Russian nuclear strategy calls for the early use of nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict with NATO with the goal of forcing Western leaders to sue for peace or risk further, potentially catastrophic, nuclear escalation.¹ In other words, this strategy aims to place NATO on the horns of the dilemma of choosing between “suicide and surrender.”² This strategy presents problems for NATO, not only in the event of a major war in Europe, but also on a quotidian basis. Russia has and will continue to employ nuclear coercion in a bid to deter NATO efforts to counter Russian aggression in its near abroad, divide the Alliance, and achieve its goals short of conflict.³

Many Western scholars and analysts have recognized this threat.⁴ Some have begun to recommend solutions for dealing with this challenge, including options for strengthening US and NATO nuclear capabilities.⁵ To date, however, this debate has glossed over many of the important strategy and policy considerations that should come before recommendations for capabilities. After all, one must first decide on one’s strategy before one can know the capabilities required to fulfill the strategy’s requirements. That is the purpose of this report.

This report presents an analysis of possible approaches for deterring Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes and for negating Russian nuclear coercion. It argues that Russian strategy is premised on the notion that Russia has an advantage in three relevant areas: stakes, resolve, and capabilities. The key to NATO’s response, therefore, must be to seek to address these three asymmetries.

NATO must convince Russia that any use of nuclear weapons will not enable Moscow to achieve its goals, but instead will result only in unacceptable costs for Russia. In particular, the United States and NATO must be clear that nuclear de-escalation strikes will not lead to de-escalation and will not deter NATO from pursuing its war aims. They must threaten that Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes will be met with a tough and credible response, and that the response could include a limited nuclear reprisal. They must also convince Russia that they have the will and the capabilities to follow through on that threat. This will require that the United States and NATO adjust and enhance their declaratory policy, strategic communications, alliance management, war planning, and nuclear capabilities.

To arrive at this outcome, this report analyzes the full range of possible responses to Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes, including surrender, a conventional-only response, limited nuclear response, and massive nuclear retaliation. This report recommends that the threat of a limited nuclear reprisal must be emphasized in US and NATO strategy as it may be uniquely able to provide a sufficiently costly and credible deterrent to the Russian nuclear threat.

The recommended strategy does not seek to mimic Russian strategy and capabilities, but rather, in the words of Sun Tzu, to “defeat the enemy’s strategy.”⁶ Currently, Russian officials appear to believe that a limited Russian use of nuclear weapons would lead the Western alliance to back down; the approach recommended in this report aims to disabuse Moscow of that notion. Like with all US nuclear strategy, the purpose of

1 United States Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, February 2018), <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>; Nikolai N. Sokov, “Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike ‘De-escalation,’” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 13, 2014, <http://thebulletin.org/why-russia-calls-limited-nuclear-strike-deescalation>; Matthew Kroenig, “Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War,” *Survival* 57, no. 1 (2015): 49-70; Elbridge Colby, *Nuclear Weapons in the Third Offset Strategy: Avoiding a Nuclear Blind Spot in the Pentagon’s New Initiative* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, January 2015); Elbridge Colby, “Russia’s Evolving Nuclear Strategy and Its Implications,” *Fondation Pour la Recherche Stratégique*, January 12, 2016; Elbridge Colby, “Countering Russian Nuclear Strategy in Europe,” *Center for a New American Security*, November 11, 2015, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/countering-russian-nuclear-strategy-in-central-europe>.

2 Henry A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Strategy and Foreign Policy* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1957), <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/372531-mattis-defends-plans-for-new-nuclear-capabilities>.

3 Matthew Kroenig, *The Renewed Russian Nuclear Threat and NATO Nuclear Deterrence Posture* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 2016), 5; Matthew Kroenig and Jacek Durkalec, “NATO’s Nuclear Deterrence: Closing Credibility Gaps,” *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2016): 41-49.

4 Sokov, “Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike ‘De-escalation’”; Kroenig, “Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War”; Colby, *Nuclear Weapons in the Third Offset Strategy*; Colby, “Russia’s Evolving Nuclear Strategy and Its Implications”; Colby, “Countering Russian Nuclear Strategy in Europe.”

5 Kroenig, *The Renewed Russian Nuclear Threat and NATO Nuclear Deterrence Posture*; Colby, “Countering Russian Nuclear Strategy in Europe.”

6 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

threatening a potential nuclear reprisal is not because anyone is eager to fight a nuclear war. To the contrary, it is to deter nuclear war in the first place.

The rest of the report proceeds in six parts. First, it examines the challenge posed by Russia’s nuclear strategy and capabilities. Second, it discusses the gaps in US and NATO deterrence posture that Russia’s strategy aims to exploit. Third, the report weighs the possible

alternatives for the United States and NATO and concludes that the optimal strategy must include the possibility of a threat of limited nuclear reprisal. Fourth, the report recommends a strategic approach for addressing gaps in US and NATO deterrence posture, including implications for strategy, declaratory policy, alliance management, war planning, and capabilities. Fifth, it discusses possible counterarguments to these findings. Finally, the report offers a brief conclusion.

THE RENEWED RUSSIAN NUCLEAR THREAT

This section examines the renewed Russian nuclear threat. This challenge has been examined extensively elsewhere, so rather than repeat this analysis, this section will present a brief summary of Russian nuclear strategy and capabilities.⁷

During the Cold War, the West feared the possibility of a Russian attack on the West, including a massive nuclear first strike aimed to disarm or blunt the United States’ and NATO’s nuclear capabilities. For a quarter century following the end of the Cold War, the West did not perceive a pressing Russian nuclear threat and that challenge was described in official documents as “remote.”⁸ Unfortunately, today, the Russian nuclear challenge has returned, but it is different from the one NATO faced during the Cold War. The greatest risk of nuclear use today is the threat of limited nuclear escalation in the event of conventional conflict.

Russian Strategy

In the event of a major war with NATO, the US government reports that Russian strategy includes the possibility of nuclear de-escalation strikes.⁹ Russia could, for example, use a single nuclear weapon or a small number of nuclear weapons on NATO military targets, such as bases, ground forces, ships, or aircraft. It could also choose to strike population centers. Such an attack could be ordered in the late stages of a war to stave off imminent defeat. Alternatively, it could be conducted earlier in a conflict in a bid to prevent the West from flowing forces into conflict theaters in Eastern Europe.

This strategy follows the classic logic of limited nuclear war.¹⁰ By employing nuclear weapons, Moscow would demonstrate its resolve and signal the possibility of future nuclear escalation to even more catastrophic levels. By employing nuclear weapons in only a limited

fashion, however, it would also be leaving the West much to lose. Western Europe and the United States would remain intact. If Western leaders continued to prosecute the war, however, there is the danger of a broader nuclear exchange that could put Western population centers at risk. The strategy, therefore, aims to incentivize Western leaders to choose surrender over a potentially uncontrollable nuclear escalation.

This strategy presents a plausible pathway to nuclear war between Russia and the West. While still highly unlikely, the risk of nuclear exchange between Russia and the United States is greater today than at any time since the most dangerous periods of the Cold War.

Imagine the following scenario. Russia conducts a “hybrid warfare” style incursion into one of the Baltic States.¹¹ Unlike Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, this attack is against a NATO member and the United States would be compelled to respond. NATO, therefore, invokes Article 5 and begins a major conventional military campaign to expel Russian forces from the Baltics. Rather than potentially lose a war on its border to the conventionally superior NATO forces, however, Russian President Vladimir Putin decides to use a single nuclear weapon on a NATO air base in Poland. Put yourself in the shoes of the US president. How would you respond? Would you back down to avoid any further nuclear attacks, knowing that it would mean losing the war, ceding allied territory to Russia, and potentially resulting in the end of NATO and the credibility of the United States’ commitments globally? Or would you continue prosecuting the war or retaliate with a nuclear attack of your own, with the understanding that it could very well provoke a large-scale nuclear exchange? It is a difficult dilemma indeed and Russian strategy is premised on the notion that Western leaders would opt for submission over devastation.

⁷ Kroenig, *The Renewed Russian Nuclear Threat and NATO Nuclear Deterrence Posture*.
⁸ NATO, “The Alliance’s Strategic Concept,” NATO Press Release, April 24, 1999, https://www.nato.int/cps/on/natohq/official_texts_27433.htm; NATO, “Active Engagement, Modern Defense,” NATO Press Release, November 19, 2010, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_68580.htm; United States Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, April 2010), https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.
⁹ United States Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, 2018; Sokov, “Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike ‘De-escalation’”; Kroenig, “Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War”; Kroenig, *The Renewed Russian Nuclear Threat and NATO Nuclear Deterrence Posture*; Colby, “Countering Russian Nuclear Strategy in Europe.”
¹⁰ Klaus Knorr, *Limited Strategic War* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1962); Robert Powell, “Nuclear Deterrence and the Strategy of Limited Retaliation,” *The American Political Science Review* 83, no. 2 (1989): 503-519; Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kratchner, eds., *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).
¹¹ Dmitry Adamsky, “Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy,” *Proliferation Papers* no. 54 (2015).



Combat launching of the Iskander-M in the Kapustin Yar proving ground. The Iskander is a dual conventional and nuclear-capable missile that Russia could employ in a ‘de-escalatory’ nuclear strike. March 2, 2018. *Photo credit:* Mil.ru/Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.

A minority of Western analysts doubt that this “escalate-to-de-escalate” approach is truly part of Russia’s nuclear strategy, but Western leaders treat it as real.¹² Adversary intentions are always somewhat uncertain in international politics and the threat of Russian de-escalation strikes is no different.¹³ To make threat assessments, therefore, one must look to both capabilities and intent. As shown in the next section of this report, there is no doubt that Russia has the capabilities to back this strategy. There is also substantial evidence of Russian intent, including reasonable interpretations of official Russian military doctrine; writings and statements from Russian strategists and generals;

explicit nuclear threats from high-level Russian officials; military exercises that end with simulated nuclear strikes (some of which have involved President Putin himself); investments in new nuclear forces (like nuclear-capable cruise missiles) that appear to be tailor-made to support this strategy; and ostentatiously deploying these capabilities in Kaliningrad within range of European targets.¹⁴ In short, there is enough evidence for the threat that it would be imprudent for US and NATO leaders not to take it seriously.

Others argue that the threat of Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes was real, but the time has passed.

¹² Olga Oliker, *Russia’s Nuclear Doctrine: What We Know, What We Don’t, and What That Means* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2016).
¹³ Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
¹⁴ Dave Johnson, “Russia’s Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities, Regional Crises, and Nuclear Thresholds,” *Livermore Papers on Global Security* No. 3, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Center for Global Security Research, February 2018; “Russia Deploys Iskander Nuclear-Capable Missiles to Kaliningrad: RIA,” *Reuters*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-missiles/russia-deploys-iskander-nuclear-capable-missiles-to-kaliningrad-ria-idUSKBN1FP21Y>.

According to this argument, Russia’s reliance on nuclear weapons was due to conventional weakness, but now that its conventional modernization is proceeding apace, it is less reliant on nuclear weapons. In particular, the development of new conventional strike capabilities, such as the Kalibr cruise missile, means that Russia can achieve many of the same objectives without the costs of nuclear escalation by employing “pre-nuclear” strikes.¹⁵ But Russia is not there yet. It may envision eventually substituting conventional weapons for this purpose, but at present Russia still heavily depends on nuclear weapons. Finally, if the purpose of an escalate-to-de-escalate strategy is to shock an opponent into submission, conventional strikes may not suffice and nuclear weapons may be required to carry out the strategy.

Still other critics maintain that the West misunderstands Russian nuclear strategy, but in the opposite direction; it underestimates the situations in which Russia might employ nuclear weapons. Many have conceived of de-escalatory nuclear strikes as a last resort that Moscow would employ only on the brink of a devastating conventional defeat, but these critics ask: Why would Russia wait that long? Rather, they maintain, Russia would likely use nuclear weapons in the very early stages of a conflict to prevent NATO from flowing forces into the theater in the first place in a bid to preempt a major conventional battle. If this is the case, and Russia could envision limited nuclear strikes in an expansive set of scenarios, then there is even greater reason for the United States and NATO to develop an effective deterrent for this threat.

Russian Capabilities

Along with the United States, Russia is a foremost nuclear power and it has the nuclear capabilities to implement its nuclear strategy. At the strategic level, Russia maintains a triad of nuclear-armed submarines, bombers, and intercontinental ballistic missiles.¹⁶ It is completing a round of modernization and has fielded or is in the process of fielding new systems for each leg of its triad. According to the terms of the New START Treaty, Russia will deploy no more than 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads until February 2021.¹⁷

Perhaps more concerning for the subject at hand, however, is Russia’s large stockpile of nonstrategic nuclear weapons. This stockpile includes thousands of warheads with a wide variety of yields on a vast array of delivery platforms. Russia possesses many warheads with yields in the sub-kiloton range. Delivery systems include sea-launched cruise missiles, ground-launched cruise missiles, air-launched cruise missiles, torpedoes, depth charges, air-to-surface missiles, gravity bombs, and others.¹⁸ This variety of yields and means of delivery makes Russia’s tactical nuclear forces well-suited for employment in de-escalatory nuclear strikes. Moreover, Russia is developing brand new nuclear systems, such as an underwater nuclear drone, and is reportedly modernizing its tactical nuclear forces.¹⁹ For a country that is struggling economically, these outlays indicate that nuclear weapons are a priority and provide further evidence that they occupy an important place in Russian strategy.

¹⁵ Sebastien Roblin, “Why Russia’s Enemies Fear the Kalibr Cruise Missile,” *The National Interest*, January 22, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-russias-enemies-fear-the-kalibr-cruise-missile-19129>; Paul Bernstein, *Putin’s Russia and US Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Security Research, National Defense University, 2015), <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/RussiaWorkshopReport.pdf>, 6.
¹⁶ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, “Russian Nuclear Forces, 2017,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72, no. 2 (2017): 115-126, DOI: 10.1080/00963402.2017.1290375.
¹⁷ United States Department of State, “The Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms,” *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements*. TIAS no. 11-205, April 8, 2010, 3.
¹⁸ *Russia’s Nuclear Posture* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2015); Kristensen and Norris, “Russian Nuclear Forces, 2017.”
¹⁹ United States Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, 2018, 9.

THE GAPS IN US AND NATO NUCLEAR STRATEGY

Russian strategy is premised on the assumption that Moscow is more willing to run the risks of a limited nuclear war in Eastern Europe than are Washington and other Western capitals. Classic theories of nuclear escalation, brinkmanship, and deterrence maintain that a state's willingness to engage in a "competition in risk taking" depends on the balance of stakes, resolve, and capabilities.²⁰ President Putin appears to believe that he has an advantage in each of these areas.

Stakes

President Putin may believe that he has a greater stake in the issues in dispute in Eastern Europe than do the leaders of the United States, NATO, and other Western powers. There is no doubt that Russia's stake is significant. Russia views much of Eastern Europe as its rightful sphere of influence. The Baltic States and Ukraine had been part of the Soviet Union and Russian empires and large swathes of Eastern Europe were dominated by Moscow during the Cold War and prior. President Putin has stated that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twenty-first century" and has envisioned the recreation of a greater Russia.²¹ Further, Russia perceives a potential existential security threat posed by states on its borders participating in security alliances with potentially hostile powers and adopting domestic models of politics and economics that may threaten to undermine the Russian system.²² In addition, Russian-speaking minority populations exist in many nations bordering Russia, and Putin has articulated an interest in protecting these populations from alleged discrimination.²³

On the other hand, from a Russian perspective, the US stake in Eastern Europe is much less clear. The United States is geographically distant from Eastern Europe and does not have strong ethnolinguistic or nationalist ties to the peoples of Eastern Europe. Prior to NATO expansion, there was no precedent of the states of Eastern Europe and the United States enjoying close and formal political or economic ties.

It is easy to see how Putin could conclude that he simply cares more about outcomes in Eastern Europe than does the United States and will be willing to risk more to secure his interests. Indeed, many Western analysts concur with this assessment. From the 1990s to the present, analysts have vigorously debated whether NATO expansion was in the US interest.²⁴ And, in specific foreign policy crises, Western analysts have themselves pointed to a supposed Russian stakes advantage in this region. For example, as Washington debated sending lethal aid to the Ukrainian government following the Russian invasion in 2014, many American experts argued that such a course of action was foolish due to Moscow's greater stake in the conflict.²⁵

Resolve

Russian strategy also appears to rest on the assumption that Moscow is more resolved to use nuclear weapons if necessary in the event of war. This assumption from Russia's perspective is understandable. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has aimed to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy.²⁶ It has also greatly reduced its number of nuclear weapons. Scholars have written about how Western leaders



Russian President Vladimir Putin delivers his Presidential Address to the Russian Federal Assembly on March 1, 2018. In the speech Putin unveiled a new generation of nuclear weapons including a nuclear-armed submarine drone. *Photo credit:* Office of the President of Russian Federation.

are constrained by a "nuclear taboo" and how the use of nuclear weapons among US decision makers has become "unthinkable."²⁷ These trends may have reached their peak under President Barack Obama, who declared that he aimed for "a world without nuclear weapons" and took several concrete steps in this direction.²⁸

In addition to a preference at the strategic level to avoid nuclear use, the West faces the additional issue of NATO alliance management and the domestic politics of Western Europe. By tradition, major decisions within NATO are taken by consensus, but getting twenty-nine countries to agree on anything is difficult. And

controversial issues surrounding nuclear weapons are even more so. These difficulties arise in part due to domestic politics. Within some Western democracies, there are strong anti-nuclear sentiments. NATO's decision to deploy Pershing missiles in Europe in the 1980s, for example, provoked massive protests in Germany and some worried that the controversy would lead to the severing of the Alliance.²⁹ At present, the traditional Alliance leader, the United States, and vulnerable front-line states in the East see a need to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defense, but some states in Western Europe are reluctant to do so, in no small part for domestic political reasons. The major cleavage on these

20 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 166; James D. Fearon, "Domestic Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (1994): 578; Robert Powell, "Nuclear Deterrence and the Strategy of Limited Retaliation," *American Political Science Review* 3, no. 2 (1989): 505; Matthew Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 142.

21 "Putin: Soviet Collapse a 'Genuine Tragedy,'" *NBC News*, April 25, 2005, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/7632057/ns/world_news/t/putin-soviet-collapse-genuine-tragedy/#.WpRlrPnwaUk.

22 Darya Korsunskaya, "Putin Says Russia Must Prevent 'Color Revolution,'" *Reuters*, November 20, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-security/putin-says-russia-must-prevent-color-revolution-idUSKCN0J41J620141120>.

23 "Transcript: Putin Says Russia Will Protect the Rights of Russians Abroad," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/transcript-putin-says-russia-will-protect-the-rights-of-russians-abroad/2014/03/18/432a1e60-ae99-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19_story.html?utm_term=.0c2f3c95a681.

24 Eugene Rumer, "NATO Expansion: Strategic Genius or Historic Mistake?" *The National Interest*, August 21, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/nato-expansion-strategic-genius-or-historic-mistake-11114>.

25 John J. Mearshimer, "Don't Arm Ukraine," *New York Times*, February 8, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/09/opinion/dont-arm-ukraine.html>.

26 United States Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, 2010.

27 Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

28 President Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague," *Speech in Prague, Czech Republic, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, April 5, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

29 William Drozdiak, "More Than a Million Protest Missiles in Western Europe," *Washington Post*, October 23, 1983, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/10/23/more-than-a-million-protest-missiles-in-western-europe/>; Peter E. Quint, *Civil Disobedience and the German Courts: The Pershing Missile Protests in Comparative Perspective* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge – Cavendish, 2008), 13-24.

issues in NATO then pits the United States and Eastern European members against some major Western European states. Indeed, in recent years, getting NATO consensus on something as simple as statements condemning Russian aggression has been difficult. It is likely then that any decision to strengthen nuclear capabilities or to use nuclear weapons would be highly controversial and actions, one way or the other, could lead to dissension or even a splitting of the Alliance.

Russia understands these dynamics quite well and its strategy aims to exploit them.

Russia does not have similar inhibitions about nuclear use. Rather, Russia is a highly centralized authoritarian state and President Putin could order nuclear strikes without political resistance. In addition, unlike in the West, for Russia, nuclear use is quite thinkable. It is now known that Russian war plans during the Cold War called for immediate and large-scale nuclear use, in contrast to the gradual escalation theories that took hold in the West.³⁰ And this relevant comfort with nuclear weapons continues to the present. As noted above: President Putin and other Russian officials have made overt nuclear threats, major Russian military exercises have routinely ended with Russian nuclear strikes, and President Putin himself has participated in some of these exercises.³¹ Further, Russia’s nuclear prowess is celebrated in Russian media in a way that it is simply not in the West.³²

These factors have led Russian strategists to conclude that they could employ nuclear weapons in a limited fashion and the West might be too paralyzed to respond.

Capabilities

In addition to stakes and resolve, Russia has an undeniable advantage in capabilities for limited nuclear use.

As discussed above, Moscow possesses a wide range of nuclear capabilities of varying yields and delivery mechanisms. In the event of war with NATO, Russia could effectively employ tactical nuclear weapons with significant battlefield effect. It could, for example, use sea-, air-, or ground-launched nuclear-armed cruise missiles to attack a NATO air base or a European city. Putin could order the use of a nuclear torpedo against NATO ships in the Baltic. Or Russia could use nuclear-armed surface-to-air missiles against NATO aircraft, among many other possibilities.

In contrast, NATO has few credible options for responding to these kinds of attacks or engaging in a theater nuclear war. I have written about this capabilities gap extensively elsewhere.³³ NATO’s only tactical nuclear weapons are roughly two hundred gravity bombs stored at bases in several European countries. This is an important capability for many purposes, but, in the most-likely conflict zones in Eastern Europe, it might not be possible for the aircraft that carry these gravity bombs to penetrate Russia’s sophisticated air defenses. Alternatively, the United States, and the other nuclear weapons states in NATO, Britain, and France, have strategic nuclear weapons, but launching a large-yield warhead on a strategic delivery vehicle from outside the theater carries a risk of escalation to a larger nuclear exchange that would put Western population centers at great risk for retaliation. The United States could also deliver nuclear-armed cruise missiles (which reportedly contain a low-yield option) on the B52 bomber. This option is appropriate for a wide range of contingencies, but, as I have written elsewhere, it also has possible drawbacks for some scenarios in regards to promptness, survivability, and escalation control.³⁴

In short, unlike Russia, NATO does not have a flexible arsenal of lower-yield weapons that can be positioned in or near the theater of conflict and that can reliably penetrate Russian air defenses.

30 Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 24.
31 “Putin Takes Part in Russian Military Drills, Fires Missiles,” *Fox News*, October 27, 2017, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/10/27/putin-takes-part-in-russian-military-drills-fires-missiles.html>.
32 “Putin Laces Up Russia’s Bootstraps,” *Russia Today*, February 12, 2012, <https://www.rt.com/politics/russia-military-putin-article-709/>.
33 Matthew Kroenig, *Toward a More Flexible NATO Nuclear Posture* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, November 2016).
34 Ibid.

WEIGHING POSSIBLE STRATEGIC RESPONSE OPTIONS

This section weighs NATO’s possible strategic responses to a Russian nuclear de-escalation strike. It argues that NATO at present does not have a clear strategy for dealing with this challenge. It then weighs the possible options and argues that, to be effective, NATO strategy must include a credible threat of a limited nuclear response.

Deterrence is achieved when one convinces an adversary that the costs the adversary would suffer for launching an attack vastly outweigh any benefits the adversary may hope to achieve. In practice in the nuclear age, deterrence has centered on threats of retaliation. During the Cold War, for example, the United States and NATO developed a number of strategies that depended on the threat of costly nuclear retaliation to deter Russian invasion of Western Europe.

At present, however, NATO lacks a clear strategy for deterring Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes. If Russia were to conduct such an attack, how would NATO respond? Discussing this issue with experts and current and former officials over the past several years, I have received an array of answers, from surrender to massive nuclear retaliation. If NATO cannot agree on the likely range of responses to this threat, then this means it lacks an agreed-upon strategy, and Putin has good reason not to be deterred.

This is not to deny that the United States and NATO currently have a wide range of response options available. Nor should they pre-commit to a single, telegraphed threatened response to a Russian attack regardless of the scenario. Rather, this section argues that there should be some broad consensus within the Alliance about a narrowed range of retaliatory options that are likely sufficiently costly and credible in Moscow’s eyes to reliably deter Russian aggression.

Of course, the precise response would be scenario dependent and vary according to a number of factors. A low-yield Russian nuclear strike on a military target would demand a different response than a nuclear attack on a European city. The United States and NATO might respond differently if they were on the verge of winning a war than if they were in a protracted stalemate, and so forth. Still, it is possible and useful to

consider the broad types of response options and their advantages and disadvantages for deterring a limited Russian nuclear attack.

That is the purpose of this section—it analyzes the major strategic options, including surrender, conventional-only retaliation, limited nuclear response, and massive nuclear retaliation.

Surrender

Some argue that the United States and NATO should surrender to any Russian nuclear strike. They argue that it is simply not worth fighting a nuclear war over the Baltic States. They maintain that Putin would use nuclear weapons only if his back were truly against the wall and, at that point, it would be dangerous to continue to prosecute a war against him. They acknowledge that there would be a cost to losing a war and failing to defend a NATO member, but they maintain that this cost would be less than suffering a major nuclear exchange. Moreover, they point out, NATO’s Article 5 provision obliges the United States to assist allies under attack, but does not specify what precise form that assistance will take.³⁵ There is certainly no clause in the NATO charter that guarantees NATO will win every war that it fights.

There is a logic to this line of argumentation, but the promise to surrender is an ineffective deterrence strategy to say the least. Indeed, it is the hunch that NATO might just back down in such a scenario that is incentivizing Russia’s strategy and its recent nuclear coercion and aggression. Those who advocate this response would essentially be giving a green light to Russia to do whatever it wishes, so long as it is willing to pop off a nuclear weapon or two. If this is NATO strategy, then why would Moscow stop with the Baltic States?

Moreover, this response could very well lead to the end of the NATO alliance and undermine the credibility of US commitments globally. If NATO failed to defend a formal ally from invasion, then other states in Europe and around the world may assess that they can no longer count on NATO and/or the United States for their defense and begin to take matters into their own hands in a way that would be detrimental to US

35 North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “North Atlantic Treaty,” April 4, 1949, UNTS 245.

security interests. For example, if NATO proved itself to be ineffective, other major states in Europe, such as Poland or Germany, may build independent nuclear arsenals. One can have an interesting theoretical debate about whether the eastward expansion of NATO at the end of the Cold War was in the US national interest, but the fact is that NATO is there now and it would be irresponsible not to have a serious plan to defend member states.

While the choice between “suicide or surrender” is undoubtedly a difficult one, an effective deterrence strategy would aim to convince the adversary not to attack in the first place and thus head off this anguished decision.³⁶

Conventional Only

Others argue that the United States and NATO should fight through any limited Russian nuclear attack with conventional power only. They maintain that Washington and its allies have an aggregate conventional military superiority over Russia and would eventually be able to win the war without resorting to using nuclear weapons. In addition, they rightly point out that there are a broad range of nonnuclear but strategic weapons that may be useful in a major conflict with Russia, including cyber, space, missile defense, and other emerging technologies. Furthermore, they aver that the West has an interest in continuing long-standing policies of de-emphasizing nuclear weapons in its security policy. Using, or threatening to use, nuclear weapons, therefore, would undermine this longtime objective. Finally, they maintain that the West is morally superior to Russia and it would be a mistake to stoop to Russia’s level and mimic Russian nuclear threats, capabilities, or limited Russian nuclear use.³⁷

This is a logically coherent position and a conventional-only response should certainly remain on the table. But there are also serious downsides to pre-committing to a conventional-only response and removing the possibility of a nuclear response from the table. First, it is by no means clear that NATO can win a war with conventional forces alone against a Russia that is willing to escalate to the nuclear level. Nuclear weapons are not merely symbolic weapons. They can have devastating battlefield effect. If Russia employs tactical nuclear weapons against NATO aerial ports of debarkation, sea ports of

debarkation, tanks, ships, and aircraft, NATO may not be able to get sufficient conventional military force to the fight and expel dug-in Russian forces.

Moreover, the purpose of NATO strategy must not be to fight a devastating war with Russia but to deter it in the first place, and deterrence is in the eye of the beholder. The key question, therefore, is what is required to deter Vladimir Putin from attacking a NATO ally. The threat of a conventional-only response may not be sufficiently terrifying to Putin to serve as an effective deterrent. Indeed, given his brandishing of nuclear weapons in Russian strategy, he has to some degree revealed his beliefs about the utility of nuclear threats. It is likely that he would take greater caution in challenging a NATO that emphasizes the salience of nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, the best precedent for US interests may be to use nuclear weapons in response to a Russian nuclear attack. If NATO refrains from a nuclear reprisal to an initial Russian nuclear attack, what is the lesson that others will draw?³⁸ To be sure, one lesson might be that the West is morally pure and that it wants to de-emphasize nuclear weapons in its security, but onlookers would draw other lessons as well. Vladimir Putin would learn that he need not fear nuclear reprisals for employing nuclear weapons and he might perceive an incentive to continue to use nuclear weapons in the conflict at hand and in his security policy more broadly. Leaders of other countries would learn that, in the event of a conflict with the United States and its allies, they can use nuclear weapons with little fear of suffering a nuclear response. This could incentivize them to rely more, not less, on nuclear weapons in their strategy. Non-nuclear states would have a greater incentive to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. And the thirty-plus US treaty allies around the world that depend on the US nuclear umbrella for their security may reconsider their defense needs. If Washington is unwilling to use nuclear weapons, even in the face of an enemy nuclear attack on an ally, then what good is the US nuclear umbrella as a source of reassurance? US allies would have a greater incentive to acquire independent nuclear arsenals.

None of this is to argue that a nuclear response must be the immediate and automatic response to any enemy nuclear attack. Of course, the appropriate response will depend on the circumstances and details of the



The Ohio-class ballistic-missile submarine USS Pennsylvania (SSBN 735) returns to its homeport of Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor following sea trials. The new US Nuclear Posture Review of 2018 calls for placing low-yield nuclear warheads on US submarine-launched ballistic missiles. September 19, 2012. Photo credit: U.S. Navy/Chief Mass Communication Specialist Ahron Arendes..

contingency, not all of which can be known with precision in advance. But, this is also a reason why the United States and its allies cannot, as a matter of strategy, commit to relying exclusively on a conventional response to a Russian nuclear strike. This section shows that there are good reasons why the United States and its allies might require a nuclear response: to deter Russian aggression, to win the war if deterrence fails, and to strengthen deterrence and assurance globally. In short, NATO requires a credible nuclear option for this challenge.

Massive Nuclear Retaliation

Others argue that NATO strategy for deterring a Russian nuclear attack should rely on the threat of massive nuclear retaliation. They argue that an effective deterrent must threaten to hold at risk that which the adversaries hold most dear—and for Putin, that is his own life and leadership and the continued functioning of Russia as a viable state. The threat of a conventional reprisal or even a small number of battlefield nuclear strikes would be

insufficiently frightening to Putin. Therefore, they argue, NATO’s deterrence policy should be one of massive nuclear retaliation. And, in the event that Russia miscalculates and uses nuclear weapons, then NATO and the United States must be prepared to launch a full-scale strategic nuclear attack on the Russian homeland, including on leadership targets in Moscow.

Those who make this argument are certainly correct that a massive US and NATO nuclear attack on Moscow and the rest of Russia would entail the prospect of unacceptable costs. If Putin believed that this were a likely consequence for attacking a NATO ally, or using nuclear weapons, then it is highly likely that he would be deterred. But would this really be a likely consequence? Would NATO leaders likely follow through on this threat? And, if not, then why should Putin be deterred by it?

A massive NATO nuclear response to a limited Russian nuclear strike does not make much strategic sense.

36 Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1957).
37 For some of these arguments, see Adam Mount, “The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Restraint,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 57, no. 4 (July 22, 2015): 53-76.
38 Matthew Kroenig, “Remarks at the 2017 United States Strategic Command Deterrence Symposium,” Speech in Omaha, Nebraska, July 26, 2017.

Such an attack would expose the rest of Europe and the United States to the prospect of massive nuclear retaliation. Russia's escalate-to-de-escalate strategy relies on the threat of limited attack. So even after a Russian nuclear use, say on an air base in Eastern Europe, Western Europe and the United States would emerge unscathed. If, however, NATO proceeded to launch a massive nuclear attack on Russia, then Putin could use his surviving nuclear forces to respond in kind, laying waste to Europe and the United States, resulting in tens of millions of deaths and untold destruction. Such an approach would not be in the US national interest. If at all possible, the United States would prefer to defeat Russia and defend its allies without suffering a massive nuclear attack.

Western leaders, therefore, would be unlikely to order a massive nuclear attack for strategic reasons, but they would also be cautious for sound legal and moral reasons as well. It is not consistent with the laws of war and the principles of distinction and proportionality to order the murder of millions of Russians in response to, for example, a single Russian attack with a tactical nuclear weapon on a military target. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to imagine a Western leader ordering a nuclear response in this scenario.

Finally, this threat ultimately fails even as a deterrent. If it is almost unimaginable that a Western leader would order a massive nuclear attack for valid strategic, legal, and moral reasons, then the threat lacks credibility. Russia's leaders will understand full well that they will not suffer this fate and they can, therefore, feel free to conduct nuclear de-escalation strikes without fear of nuclear retribution.

Limited Nuclear Reprisal

A final response option is limited nuclear retaliation. The United States and NATO could respond to a Russian limited nuclear use with a limited nuclear use of their own. Scholars have written about the logic of limited nuclear war and why it is a rational response for states in a situation of mutually assured destruction.³⁹ It demonstrates to the adversary that one is willing to employ nuclear weapons and that continued aggression risks possible escalation to ever-more-costly and potentially catastrophic levels. At the same time, it leaves the adversary something left to lose. Since the vast majority of the adversary's territory and forces have not yet been destroyed, the adversary has an incentive to seek off-ramps to avoid further destruction.

In the case of Russia, this approach seeks to demonstrate that Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes would not lead to de-escalation and not deter the United States and NATO from continuing to pursue their war aims. In this way, it seeks to negate Russia's strategy by convincing Moscow that using a nuclear weapon or two is not a path to easy victory. Rather, if Russia uses one or two nuclear weapons, it will merely receive one, two, or several nuclear weapons in return. It would allow NATO to fight fire with fire to roll back Russian aggression. This threat is also credible. It has a clear strategic, legal, and moral rationale and it is conceivable that Western leaders would order a limited nuclear strike, especially on Russian military or leadership targets. And, unlike a massive nuclear response, it does not open up North America and the rest of Europe to the immediate threat of massive nuclear retaliation.

A limited nuclear reprisal need not be symmetrical. Washington could vary the number and types of warheads used or the targets selected in an effort to signal an intended escalation or de-escalation of the conflict. But this category of response is distinctive from the others in that it looks for options in the space between nonnuclear reprisals and a massive nuclear attack.

The greatest and most obvious risk of a strategy that relies on the threat of limited nuclear reprisal is that there is no guarantee that the war would remain limited, but one at least has to try. It is of course possible that a limited NATO nuclear response would result in a further round of Russian nuclear attacks, which would then provoke a NATO counter-response, and so on, until Armageddon. This is a serious risk. Moreover, leadership decisions would be occurring under the fog of war and the possibility of miscalculation is real. But a limited nuclear war approach is the only one that holds out a real possibility of deterring further Russian nuclear attacks while preventing a massive nuclear exchange. This approach is certainly preferable to choosing between immediate suicide or surrender. And limited nuclear strikes are almost certainly a more potent deterrent in Putin's mind than the threat of a conventional-only response.

Another possible cost of a limited nuclear response is that this approach would undermine NATO's longstanding efforts to de-emphasize nuclear weapons in its defense strategy. But, in actuality and on balance, this approach would strengthen US objectives in this regard. The measure of interest is not whether the

39 Klaus Knorr, *Limited Strategic War*; Robert Powell, "Nuclear Deterrence and the Strategy of Limited Retaliation"; Larsen and Kratchner, eds., *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*.

United States itself is emphasizing nuclear weapons, but rather whether nuclear weapons are taking on increased salience around the world. Since the end of the Cold War, Washington largely assumed that if the United States reduced reliance on nuclear weapons, then other countries would follow its lead. We have seen, however, that this approach has not worked.⁴⁰ As the United States and NATO reduced reliance on nuclear weapons, other countries, including Russia, went in the opposite direction. They saw an opportunity to exploit the United States' allergy to nuclear forces. Indeed, this approach may have contributed to the current predicament. The United States wants to convince both its allies and adversaries that they do not stand to gain by building nuclear weapons or increasing the role of nuclear weapons in their strategies.

40 Matthew Kroenig, "Think Again: American Nuclear Disarmament," *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2013, [http://www.matthewkroenig.com/Kroenig_American %20Nuclear%20Disarmament.pdf](http://www.matthewkroenig.com/Kroenig_American%20Nuclear%20Disarmament.pdf), 46-49.

Perhaps paradoxically, the best way to do this is for the United States to strengthen its nuclear deterrence policy and posture.

In sum, the threat of a limited nuclear response can serve as an effective deterrent to the threat of Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes and comes with acceptable costs. This does not mean, of course, that a limited nuclear reprisal would be the immediate or automatic response to any Russian nuclear attack. As always, the precise response would depend on the conditions at hand. But, there is no reason to assure Putin that he can get away with a de-escalatory strike and not worry about suffering a similar fate. To be credible, NATO's nuclear deterrent must at least include a serious possibility of limited nuclear reprisal.

TOWARD A BETTER NATO DETERRENCE STRATEGY

US and NATO strategy must threaten that Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes would not lead to de-escalation but to a forceful response, and that this includes the possibility of limited nuclear reprisals. In other words, the United States and NATO should aim to establish a type of intra-war nuclear deterrence in which they can continue to prosecute their war aims to roll back any Russian aggression while deterring Russian nuclear escalation. Moreover, by deterring limited Russian nuclear strikes, the United States and NATO can deter the threat of Russian conventional attack and nuclear coercion more broadly by denying Moscow its theory of victory, which relies in part on threats of limited nuclear escalation.⁴¹ To operationalize this approach and make it credible, NATO must begin to address the three gaps in its deterrence policy that are currently being exploited by Russian strategy: stakes, resolve, and capabilities.

“US and NATO strategy must threaten that Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes would not lead to de-escalation but to a forceful response, and that this includes the possibility of limited nuclear reprisals.”

Stakes

Contrary to the prevailing view in Moscow, the United States must demonstrate that its stake in an Eastern European conflict with Russia, especially one involving Russian nuclear use, is at least as great if not greater than Russia's. Russia's escalate-to-de-escalate strategy rests on the notion that Moscow enjoys an advantage in the balance of stakes in its near abroad. This conclusion is understandable, but it is also contestable. US stakes in a conflict with Russia in Eastern Europe are also substantial. For Washington, the Baltic States are

not just about the Baltic States, but about the foundations of the US-led international system.

If the United States failed in a bid to defend a NATO member from Russian aggression, it could lead to the end of NATO and the shattering of the United States' worldwide defense commitments. Should Washington prove itself unable to defend Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania from a Russian attack, it is unlikely that Poland would still retain full confidence in the US security guarantee. Would Japan continue to count on the United States for protection from China? South Korea from North Korea? Israel from Iran? If Washington loses Tallinn, it risks losing Warsaw, Tokyo, Seoul, and Tel Aviv as well. Washington's stake in Estonia, therefore, is nothing less than global peace and security and its continued leadership of a global, rules-based international order. The stakes could not be higher. The United States must, therefore, continually emphasize this message through public and private channels to revisionist regional powers that question US resolve to defend regional allies.

Moreover, Russian use of nuclear weapons in such a conflict would only raise the US stake even further. The United States is the leader of the global nonproliferation regime. It works to dissuade potentially hostile nonnuclear states from building nuclear weapons, to assure friendly states that they are safe without building independent nuclear capabilities, and to deter and dissuade nuclear coercion and arms competitions with other nuclear powers. If the United States backed down after suffering a nuclear de-escalation strike, however, all of these objectives could be undermined. US adversaries would learn that the key to defeating the United States' overwhelming conventional military power is to pop off a nuke. The United States' nuclear-armed adversaries would rely more heavily on nuclear weapons in their military strategies and be attracted to threats of early nuclear use. Nonnuclear states would be further incentivized to build nuclear weapons as the great equalizer to American military power. And US allies would learn that a single nuclear strike by an adversary is enough to puncture a hole in the United States' nuclear umbrella, leaving them all wet. They would be forced to reconsider the wisdom of relying on the US nuclear security guarantee and

need to consider alternative arrangements, including indigenous nuclear programs.

Perhaps paradoxically, therefore, the United States has a strong incentive to use nuclear weapons in response to a Russian nuclear de-escalation strike if it wishes to continue to be a normative leader on nuclear proliferation, arms control, and disarmament. This is another message that the United States must consistently convey to adversaries: if they believe the United States would back down after suffering a nuclear strike, they are mistaken. Rather, Washington's interests dictate that it responds in kind.

In sum, the United States must clearly convey to Russia that its stake in a conflict in Eastern Europe, especially one involving nuclear weapons, is at least as great if not greater than Moscow's. For Russia, it is a matter of local spheres of influence. For the United States, it is about the very survival of its global defense commitments, the health of the worldwide nonproliferation regime, and US leadership of a rules-based international order.

Resolve

The United States and NATO must also communicate that they are sufficiently resolved to engage in a competition in risk taking with Russia through limited nuclear use to defend its interests in Europe. They must communicate clearly in public and private messages that any Russian nuclear de-escalatory strike will not lead to de-escalation and that a forceful US response may very well include limited nuclear strikes.⁴² Lest Moscow be emboldened by the notion that Russia itself could not become the subject of limited nuclear strikes, Washington and its European allies must make clear that Russian territory, including Kaliningrad and the Russian homeland, will not be a sanctuary from NATO retaliation.

To make these statements credible, the United States and its allies can take a number of steps. NATO should more fully integrate conventional and nuclear operations in its war plans and exercises. For example, future NATO exercises in Eastern Europe could include limited nuclear strikes in response to Russian nuclear de-escalatory attacks.

In addition, the United States can develop new capabilities designed to address this precise scenario. Capabilities

will be discussed more fully below, but they are included here in recognition that the development of new capabilities also strengthens resolve and adversary perceptions of resolve. International relations theorists explain that a state can demonstrate credibility through “costly signals” that “sink costs” and “tie hands,” and the development of new weapons systems is a costly signal that shows the United States takes the problem seriously.⁴³

Finally, Washington must engage in a diplomatic campaign to maintain domestic and Alliance cohesion. As a coauthor and I have argued elsewhere, there is much that NATO can do to strengthen the “software” of nuclear deterrence in Europe.⁴⁴ And Western critics of US and NATO deterrence policy should understand that they may unintentionally be playing into Putin's hands. Russia's strategy seeks to exploit cleavages among NATO countries and within their societies in the hope that certain segments of society will prevent NATO from taking necessary preparatory measures and from responding in the event of an attack. Washington and like-minded allies and partners must explain to their publics the threat posed by Russian nuclear aggression and the wisdom and necessity of the above steps for countering the threat and defending the West. And, as discussed next, they must be careful to choose supplements to their nuclear capabilities in a way that minimizes the risks of intersocietal division.

Capabilities

As I have written at length elsewhere, the United States and NATO must enhance their capabilities to make these threats credible.⁴⁵ First, and foremost, the Alliance must strengthen its conventional military force posture in Eastern Europe beyond the mere trip wire forces that exist at present. If NATO can successfully deter lower-level Russian military challenges to member states, then it can prevent the larger conflicts that might entail a risk of nuclear escalation.

Second, NATO should deploy a limited regional missile defense in Europe. A broad area defense is not possible, but a point defense could provide protection to critical infrastructure and key military nodes.⁴⁶ Further, a regional missile defense system would contribute to deterrence by inducing doubt in Moscow about the ability of limited pre-nuclear or nuclear strikes to

41 Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, (Stanford, California: Stanford Security Studies, 2015).

42 United States Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, 2018, vii.

43 Branislav L. Slantchev, “Military Coercion in Interstate Crises,” *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 4 (2005): 540.

44 Kroenig and Durkalec, “NATO's Nuclear Deterrence: Closing Credibility Gaps.”

45 Kroenig, “Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War”; Kroenig, *Toward a More Flexible NATO Nuclear Posture*.

46 Robert Einhorn and Steven Pifer, *Meeting US Deterrence Requirements* (Washington, DC: Brookings Press, 2017).

succeed. It would also raise the threshold for the size and scale of a Russian onslaught that would be required to ensure success, reducing the perceived utility of a limited strike.

“The United States and NATO should take steps to increase the flexibility of their nuclear forces to deter limited nuclear strikes in Europe.”

Finally, and most importantly, the United States and NATO should take steps to increase the flexibility of their nuclear forces to deter limited nuclear strikes in Europe. In particular, the Alliance must ensure that it has low-yield capabilities that can penetrate Russia’s increasingly sophisticated air defenses. Combined, these attributes contribute to deterrence by providing an effective military capability while minimizing the risks that NATO nuclear use would escalate into a broader nuclear exchange.

Unfortunately, US and NATO nuclear posture at present does not obviously possess these attributes. A US nuclear reprisal from strategic bombers, missiles, or submarines risks escalation to a broad nuclear exchange. And tactical nuclear weapons based in Europe need to be delivered by fighter aircraft that cannot reliably penetrate Russian air defenses.

The 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) calls for the development of two supplemental capabilities to address these gaps: a low-yield option on US submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs); and the return of a nuclear-capable sea-launched cruise missile.⁴⁷ In addition, the Pentagon has announced plans to conduct research and development into an intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile.⁴⁸ These programs should

be vigorously pursued. These capabilities would provide the kind of flexible nuclear options required to support the above strategy.

The United States and NATO must make these changes, while minimizing the risks of causing major political cleavages within Western societies. European officials have stressed that the keys to skirting controversy in Europe are to avoid deploying supplemental nuclear capabilities on European soil and to provide broader arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation hooks on which to hang any supplemental capabilities. The 2018 NPR does just that by recommending supplemental capabilities that can be deployed on US ships, not European territory. It also provides strong support for the United States’ traditional arms control and nonproliferation goals and explains the rationale for supplemental capabilities as a response to Russia’s Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty violation that may be reconsidered if Russia returns to compliance with the treaty.

In the longer term, however, there is a downside to an approach that excludes Europe from hard decisions about NATO’s nuclear mission, in terms of decoupling and Alliance burden sharing. For decades, NATO leaders believed it was important for NATO as an alliance to have a nuclear capability. This function has been served by the B61 gravity bombs in Europe delivered by dual capable aircraft. But given improvements to Russia’s air defenses, as discussed above, this force has become less useful for the most plausible military missions. If upgrades to NATO’s deterrent to deal with these new challenges are undertaken solely by the United States in the future in an effort to avoid controversial deployments on European soil, then the traditional Alliance burden-sharing goals will be undermined. NATO leaders should seriously consider, therefore, a NATO nuclear force designed for the twenty-first century. As I have written elsewhere, the best approach would be supplementing the B61 gravity bombs in Europe with tactical, air-launched cruise missiles, such as a nuclear-armed variant of a Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile. This would be similar to the tactical air-delivered NATO nuclear force that exists at present, but would have the virtue of being able to penetrate Russian air defenses.

47 United States Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, 2018.

48 Marcus Weisgerber, “Pentagon Confirms It’s Developing Nuclear Cruise Missile to Counter a Similar Russian One,” *Defense One*, February 2, 2018, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2018/02/pentagon-nuclear-cruise-missile-russia/145689/>.

POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

Critics will raise predictable objections to the above recommendations, but none of them are persuasive. Some will argue that the above strategy will lower the threshold for nuclear use, but the opposite is the case.⁴⁹ Russia has already lowered the threshold for nuclear use through its doctrine of de-escalatory nuclear strikes. Failing to respond, therefore, will keep the nuclear threshold at its current, frighteningly low level. Putting in place a credible NATO strategy to deter Russia’s strategy thus defeats Russia’s strategy and re-elevates the nuclear threshold.

Others will argue that developing nuclear capabilities will merely provoke Russia to respond in kind and lead to a new nuclear arms race, but this claim is inconsistent with the facts.⁵⁰ Russia already possesses a large stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons, including sea-based capabilities similar to what the United States is considering, and much more to boot. Moreover, NATO is not looking to match Russia’s tactical nuclear arsenal system for system and warhead for warhead. Rather, the approach outlined above seeks to defeat Russia’s strategy. Therefore, even if the United States and NATO adopt the above approach, Russia will maintain a tactical nuclear advantage. But that advantage will be less useful to Moscow than it appears today.

Some will charge that making changes to NATO nuclear posture will be too expensive, but it has long been recognized that nuclear weapons provide security on the cheap.⁵¹ Throughout the nuclear age, nuclear deterrence has proven cheaper than conventional deterrence.⁵² The cost of modernizing the entire US nuclear arsenal over the next thirty years never rises above 7 percent of the US defense budget.⁵³ The supplemental capabilities discussed above would not greatly alter these calculations. Placing lower-yield warheads on an SLBM would mean making minor adjustments to an existing system and the costs involved would be trivial.

Developing new sea- or air-launched cruise missiles would be costlier, but the price tag could be kept down by piggybacking on the already-planned Long-Range Standoff air-launched cruise missile (often referred to as an LRSO) and developing a tactical air-launched, sea-launched, or ground-launched variant of the same missile.

Other critics will argue that the United States cannot or should not build “new” nuclear weapons, but the capabilities envisioned are hardly new and, even if they were, that would not be a problem. Again, a low-yield SLBM requires a minor change to an existing system to render it less lethal. The United States possessed a nuclear submarine-launched cruise missile as recently as 2010 when it was retired by President Obama. And the United States and NATO possessed air-launched cruise missiles and ground-based intermediate-range missiles during the Cold War. To be sure, Russia is dreaming up truly new nuclear weapons, like a nuclear-armed drone submarine, but this report recommends nothing of the sort.

Moreover, the United States and NATO should not rule out the possibility of developing new nuclear weapons, if necessary, in the future. Since the end of the Cold War, the West has had the luxury of being able to shed capabilities and has not been faced with requirements for new nuclear weapons. But international security conditions change and US defense policy and capabilities must be able to adapt with the times.

A final objection holds that the recommended steps, especially the construction of new nuclear weapons, will be politically controversial and risk splitting the NATO alliance and upsetting domestic political consensus within the United States.⁵⁴ Indeed, NATO unity is a key center of gravity in the competition with Russia and it would certainly be foolish to attempt to strengthen the Alliance in a way that ultimately leaves

49 Julian Borger, “US to Loosen Nuclear Weapons Constraints and Develop More ‘Usable’ Warheads,” *Guardian*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/09/us-to-loosen-nuclear-weapons-policy-and-develop-more-usable-warheads>.

50 David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “To Counter Russia, US Signals Nuclear Arms Are Back in a Big Way,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/us/politics/trump-nuclear-russia.html>.

51 Tom Z. Collina, *The Unaffordable Arsenal: Reducing the Costs of the Bloated US Nuclear Stockpile* (Washington, DC: Arms Control Association, October 2014).

52 Matthew Kroenig, “The Defense Budget,” in *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 178-187.

53 Matthew R. Costlow, “The Cost of the US Nuclear Arsenal: Not Scary,” *RealClearDefense.com*, November 1, 2017, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/11/01/the_cost_of_the_us_nuclear_arsenal_not_scary_112569.html.

54 Roberts, *The Case for Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*.



USS Florida launches a Tomahawk cruise missile during Giant Shadow in the waters off the coast of the Bahamas. The new US Nuclear Posture Review of 2018 calls for developing a nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile. January 14, 2003. *Photo credit:* US Navy.

it weaker. Moreover, US nuclear policy depends on bipartisan support. US nuclear modernization plans will require congressional funding to be sustained over decades and, therefore, support from both Republicans and Democrats.

Will the above steps truly have such dire political consequences? The supplemental capabilities recommended above were carefully selected with an eye toward avoiding upsetting European allies. Defense experts on both sides of the aisle, including several senior Obama administration officials, have endorsed the development of supplemental capabilities.⁵⁵ Proponents

of the above approach have behaved responsibly to address a serious problem.

If at this point political controversy causes a rupture of the NATO alliance or of the United States’ domestic consensus on nuclear issues, then the fault lies with the critics. It is not responsible to threaten the specter of a shattered consensus and then work overtime oneself to produce that result when world events do not go according to one’s wishes. If critics are concerned that steps to strengthen NATO deterrence will cause political dissension, then they can help resolve this problem by supporting the above proposals.

⁵⁵ Jim Miller and Sandy Winnefeld, “Bring Back the Nuclear Tomahawk,” *Proceedings* 143 (2017), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017-05/bring-back-nuclear-tomahawks>; John R. Harvey, Franklin C. Miller, Keith B. Payne, and Bradley H. Roberts, “Continuity and Change in US Nuclear Policy,” *RealClearDefense.com*, February 7, 2018, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/02/07/continuity_and_change_in_us_nuclear_policy_113025.html.

CONCLUSION

This report argued that the United States and NATO need to work together to develop a new doctrine to deter the threat of Russian nuclear de-escalation strikes. It reviewed the threat posed by Russia’s nuclear capabilities and its escalate-to-de-escalate doctrine and how this approach aims to exploit perceived gaps in Russia’s favor in terms of stakes, resolve, and capabilities. The report then explained why, to deter this threat, NATO needs to develop the capacity to threaten limited nuclear reprisals of its own. Next, it described the steps NATO can take to close the perceived stakes, resolve, and capabilities gap. Finally, the report considered and rebutted the most common objections to the recommended strategy.

To be sure, it is disappointing that Moscow is forcing NATO to move in this direction. For a quarter

century after the end of the Cold War, the West made good-faith efforts to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons and to cut nuclear arsenals worldwide. It would be preferable if international conditions permitted further progress toward disarmament. But, unfortunately, that is not the reality of today. Despite the West’s best efforts, Moscow has decided to thrust nuclear weapons back to the top of the international security policy agenda. Russia is once again threatening the West with its nuclear weapons and seems prepared to use them in imaginable contingencies. If NATO wishes to continue to reduce worldwide nuclear risks, then it must, paradoxically, reemphasize nuclear weapons in its own security policy to defeat Russia’s nuclear-centric strategy. This report aims to provide concrete recommendations to do just that.

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