Tactical Nuclear Weapons are Uniquely Dangerous—Let's Not Forget That

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Nuclear weapons are back in the headlines in ways which they haven't been since the Cold War. Amid this trend, the increasingly consistent inclusion of just one extra word—*tactical* nuclear weapons—stands out. It reflects an overdue public recognition that there is something different about these nukes, and something uniquely dangerous.

A run of strong reporting is painting this picture. On February 29th, the front-page headline of *Financial Times* read starkly: "Leaked files reveal Russia's low bar for use of tactical nuclear weapons." In March, both CNN and *The New York Times* reported that the US government was deeply concerned about the potential Russian use of a tactical nuclear weapon in the fall of 2022. President Biden reportedly warned a private gathering in New York that he couldn't imagine the use of "a tactical nuclear weapon and not end up with Armageddon."

The rising risk of nuclear weapons being used in conflict —and the potential for broader catastrophes resulting—is reviving attention to these weapons. Before this, the term had largely dropped out of use. The success of arms control kept the world's focus mostly on the tools of higher level nuclear deterrence, rather than on nuclear options for fighting wars.

In the earliest years of the atomic age, a vast majority of nuclear weapons were created with tactical uses in mind for looming conflicts, from demolishing infrastructure, to slowing adversary advances, to sinking enemy ships. Some decades saw the label *theater* nuclear weapons commonly used for certain systems, reflecting the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union both deployed thousands of these weapons to places where they thought their deterrent and warfighting potential was most needed.

By the 1970s, the world was waking up to the extreme dangers that dependence on tactical nuclear weapons posed for everyone, from opposing sides escalating a nuclear conflict to the potential for their use to affect one's own forces or allies. The United States, United Kingdom, and France got rid of many types of these weapons on their own initiative. China, it seems, has so far avoided developing stocks of them altogether.

Through a succession of arms control agreements, Soviet and US leaders (and in some cases other countries) also dramatically reduced stockpiles of the most powerful nuclear weapons and those that could travel the furthest distances for mass-scale attacks. Such treaties covered only these "strategic" capabilities, leaving many shorter-range and relatively less powerful—tactical—nuclear weapons to be addressed in the future (if

nations didn't unilaterally get rid of them first). Because of this, officials largely began defaulting to terms such as "non-strategic," or euphemistic descriptions such as "low yield" to describe the nuclear weapons not covered in the strategic arms treaties.

Those terms were dangerously misleading. Only in relation to the horrific power of larger nuclear weapons can any be considered "low yield."

The term non-strategic is equally a misnomer. Just as smaller-scale conflicts regularly shape broader strategy, nuclear use anywhere, at any level, could only represent a drastic shift in both strategy and risk—a point that world leaders regularly and consistently reiterate. In the nearly eight decades since the world has had multiple nuclear-armed countries, this barrier has never been broken in conflict. With nuclear weapons on hand that leaders may view as acceptable to use in situations short of the most extreme crises, there is no way to truly predict how escalation would occur, potentially to catastrophic levels, once the nuclear threshold is crossed.

That's why we need to continue calling tactical nuclear weapons what they are. Terms that downplay the massive damage they can do risk building a false confidence that these weapons can be used with predictable local, limited, or controlled consequences. From that baseline, the world can press forward on significantly lessening the risks these weapons pose.

The United States, NATO, and China already have policies and doctrine that call out the unique dangers of tactical nuclear weapons, including in lowering the threshold for use (even if other wording is used at times). These nations should publicly and strongly reiterate and recommit to these tenets, whether together or separately.

While breakthroughs in formal arms control deals may be unlikely in the near term, nuclear-armed nations should recognize the political benefits and reduced risk that can be gained through restraint. Proactive decisions to avoid a new arms race involving tactical nuclear weapons would be in the interest of all nations, even if those commitments are not enshrined in formal treaties.

Finally, tactical nuclear weapons should be a specific agenda item at all relevant international talks in the coming years, from conferences to advance the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty to this fall's UN Summit of the Future.

Just over one year ago, United Nations Secretary General António Guterres tweeted about tactical nuclear weapons, stating that "Nuclear-armed countries must renounce the use of these unconscionable weapons – anytime, anywhere."

Nuclear-armed countries progressed toward this vision of a world free of tactical nuclear weapons for decades. Now, we are at a dangerous turning point that could reverse the security benefits that this progress has brought to all countries. At this critical time, it's important for world leaders to stay the course: keep calling out tactical nuclear weapons for what they are, acknowledge the damage and potentially-catastrophic escalation that their use could trigger, and build clear paths toward their elimination.

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