

Leaked Russian military files reveal criteria for nuclear strike

Doctrine for tactical nuclear weapons outlined in training scenarios for an invasion by China

Max Seddon and Chris Cook in London FEBRUARY 28 2024



Vladimir Putin's forces have rehearsed using tactical nuclear weapons at an early stage of conflict with a major world power, according to leaked Russian military files that include training scenarios for an invasion by China.

The classified papers, seen by the Financial Times, describe a threshold for using tactical nuclear weapons that is lower than [Russia](#) has ever publicly admitted, according to experts who reviewed and verified the documents.

The cache consists of 29 secret Russian military files drawn up between 2008 and 2014, including scenarios for war-gaming and presentations for naval officers, which discuss operating principles for the use of nuclear weapons.

Criteria for a potential nuclear response range from an enemy incursion on Russian territory to more specific triggers, such as the destruction of 20 per cent of Russia's strategic ballistic missile submarines.

"This is the first time that we have seen documents like this reported in the public domain," said Alexander Gabuev, director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin. "They show that the operational threshold for using nuclear weapons is pretty low if the desired result can't be achieved through conventional means."

Russia's tactical nuclear weapons, which can be delivered by land or sea-launched missiles or from aircraft, are designed for limited battlefield use in Europe and Asia, as opposed to the larger "strategic" weapons intended to target the US. Modern tactical warheads can still release significantly more energy than the weapons dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945.

Although the files date back 10 years and more, experts claim they remain relevant to current Russian military doctrine. The documents were shown to the FT by western sources.

The defensive plans expose deeply held suspicions of China among Moscow's security elite even as Putin began forging an alliance with Beijing, which as early as 2001 included a nuclear no-first-strike agreement.

In the years since, Russia and China have deepened their partnership, particularly since Xi Jinping took power in Beijing in 2012. The [war in Ukraine](#) has cemented Russia's status as a junior partner in their relationship, with China throwing Moscow a vital economic lifeline to help stave off western sanctions.

Yet even as the countries became closer, the training materials show Russia's eastern military district was rehearsing multiple scenarios depicting a Chinese invasion.

The exercises offer a rare insight into how Russia views its nuclear arsenal as a cornerstone of its defence policy — and how it trains forces to be able to carry out a nuclear first strike in some battlefield conditions.



Chinese President Xi Jinping, left, with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin in March 2023 © Pavel Byrkin/Sputnik/Kremlin/Reuters

One exercise outlining a hypothetical attack by China notes that Russia, dubbed the “Northern Federation” for the purpose of the war game, could respond with a tactical nuclear strike in order to stop “the South” from advancing with a second wave of invading forces.

“The order has been given by the commander-in-chief . . . to use nuclear weapons . . . in the event the enemy deploys second-echelon units and the South threatens to attack further in the direction of the main strike,” the document said.

China’s foreign ministry denied there were any grounds for suspicion of Moscow. “The Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation between China and Russia has legally established the concept of eternal friendship and non-enmity between the two countries,” a spokesperson said. “The ‘threat theory’ has no market in China and Russia.”

Putin’s spokesperson said on Wednesday: “The main thing is that the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons is absolutely transparent and is spelled out in the doctrine. As for the documents mentioned, we strongly doubt their authenticity.”

A separate training presentation for naval officers, unrelated to the China war games, outlines broader criteria for a potential nuclear strike, including an enemy landing on Russian territory, the defeat of units responsible for securing border areas, or an imminent enemy attack using conventional weapons.

The slides summarise the threshold as a combination of factors where losses suffered by Russian forces “would irrevocably lead to their failure to stop major enemy aggression”, a “critical situation for the state security of Russia”.

Other potential conditions include the destruction of 20 per cent of Russia’s strategic ballistic missile submarines, 30 per cent of its nuclear-powered attack submarines, three or more cruisers, three airfields, or a simultaneous hit on main and reserve coastal command centres.

Russia’s military is also expected to be able to use tactical nuclear weapons for a broad array of goals, including “containing states from using aggression [...] or escalating military conflicts”, “stopping aggression”, preventing Russian forces from losing battles or territory, and making Russia’s navy “more effective”.

Putin said last June that he felt “negatively” about using tactical nuclear strikes, but then boasted that Russia had a larger non-strategic arsenal than Nato countries. “Screw them, you know, as people say,” Putin said. The US has estimated Russia has at least 2,000 such weapons.

Putin said last year that Russian nuclear doctrine allowed two possible thresholds for using nuclear weapons: retaliation against a first nuclear strike by an enemy, and if “the very existence of Russia as a state comes under threat even if conventional weapons are used”.

But Putin himself added that neither criteria was likely to be met, and dismissed public calls from hardliners to lower the threshold.

The materials are aimed at training Russian units for situations in which the country might want the ability to use nuclear weapons, said Jack Watling, a senior research fellow for land warfare at the Royal United Services Institute, rather than setting out a rule book for their use.

“At this level, the requirement is for units to maintain — over the course of a conflict — the credible option for policymakers to employ nuclear weapons,” Watling added. “This would be a political decision.”

While Moscow has drawn close to Beijing since the war games and moved forces from the east to Ukraine, it has continued to build up its eastern defences. “Russia is continuing to reinforce and exercise its nuclear-capable missiles in the Far East near its border with China,” said William Alberque, director of strategy, technology and arms control at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. “A lot of these systems only have the range to strike China.”



Russia was still behaving in accordance with the “theory of use” of nuclear weapons set out in the documents, Alberque said. “We have not seen a fundamental rethink,” he said, adding that Russia is probably concerned that China may seek to take advantage of Moscow being distracted “to push the Russians out of Central Asia”.

The documents reflect patterns seen in exercises the Russian military held regularly before and since Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Alberque, who worked for Nato and the US defence department on arms control, pointed to examples of Russian exercises held in June and November last year using nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in two regions bordering China.

While Russia’s president has the sole authority to launch a first nuclear strike, the low threshold for tactical nuclear use set out in the documents conforms with a doctrine some western observers refer to as “escalating to de-escalate”.

Under this strategy a tactical weapon could be used to try to prevent Russia from becoming embroiled in a sprawling war, particularly one in which the US might intervene. Using what it calls “fear inducement”, Moscow would seek to end the conflict on its own terms by shocking the country’s adversary with the early use of a small nuclear weapon — or securing a settlement through the threat to do so.

“They talk about ‘soberising’ their adversaries — knocking them out of the drunkenness of their early victories by introducing nuclear weapons,” said Alberque. “The best way that they think they can do that is to use what they call a lower ‘dosage’ of nuclear weapons at a much lower level of combat to prevent escalation.”

Ukrainian officials argued that Putin’s nuclear threats convinced US and other allies not to arm Kyiv more decisively early in the conflict, when advanced Nato weaponry could have turned the tide in Ukraine’s favour.

Alberque said Russia would probably have a higher threshold for using tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine, which does not have its own nuclear capability or the ability to launch a ground invasion on the same scale, than against China or the US.

Russian leaders believe that, whereas a nuclear strike against China or the US could be “soberising”, a nuclear strike on Ukraine would be likely to escalate the conflict and lead to direct intervention by the US or UK, Alberque said. “That is absolutely the last thing Putin wants.”

Additional reporting by Joe Leahy in Beijing