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# Assessing the Evolving Russian Nuclear Threat

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## Executive Summary

- Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its nuclear rhetoric has become more permissive, more inconsistent, and more instrumental. Russia has also placed greater emphasis on military exercises involving nuclear-capable weapons, and it has altered policies and planning for its nuclear forces.
- Although it is too soon to draw definitive conclusions as the war in Ukraine is still ongoing and the lessons that Russia draws from it uncertain, the changes in Russia's approach to nuclear weapons since its invasion suggest that Russia is likely to adopt a more assertive nuclear force posture, especially with respect to its non-strategic nuclear weapons, in order to signal that the country will no longer be a status quo power and increase the credibility of its nuclear threats. Russia is also likely to increase its efforts to test NATO cohesion—potentially through greater nuclear provocations and/or by signaling an insincere willingness to engage in forms of arms control or cooperative threat reduction—and continue to look for opportunities to leverage nuclear weapons to signal great-power status.
- In a future war with NATO, Russia would likely perceive the need to use nuclear weapons earlier in the conflict, either to seek victory against superior NATO conventional forces through nuclear first use on the battlefield, or to prevent defeat by those NATO forces. Moreover, since 2022, it has become increasingly difficult for U.S. and Russian policymakers to discern each other's red lines, raising the risk of unintended escalation. Heightened Russian nuclear rhetoric at home could also alter the public's views of acceptable nuclear use, eroding a potential constraint on Kremlin decision-making. Finally, changes since Russia's invasion of Ukraine indicate both reduced Russian commitment to nonproliferation as its image increasingly becomes that of a rogue actor in international affairs, and diminished opportunities for nuclear arms control, for now.

## Introduction

**R**ussia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reignited concerns about Moscow's vast nuclear arsenal and the conditions under which the Kremlin might be willing to use these weapons. Moscow has gone to great lengths to stoke such



concerns. At the start of the war, the Russian president publicly asked military leadership to place nuclear forces on higher alert (although there was no evidence of changes in Russian force posture). Over the course of the war, various figures inside the Kremlin have engaged in threatening nuclear rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> Russia likely took these actions to coerce the United States and European countries to limit their support for Ukraine, divide the alliance by introducing concerns over escalation management, and prevent escalation to a direct conventional war with NATO, which the Kremlin continues to view as a superior military force.

Russia's nuclear posturing largely comports with expectations for how it might conduct itself during a period of inter-state conflict, tracking with assumptions by Western analysts that Moscow would leverage nuclear weapons to limit vertical and horizontal escalation, and to deter Western countries from greater involvement in the war. Russia's actions during the current conflict have in many ways been consistent with previous behavior, mirroring its history of using nuclear signaling to complicate Western thinking, raise concerns over the risk of escalation if certain weapon systems or capabilities were introduced, and generate alarm about what Russia might do if it were losing on the battlefield. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, for instance, Russian President Vladimir Putin made several statements threatening nuclear use, and Russia conducted two strategic nuclear exercises rather than the usual one annual exercise.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these continuities in Russian behavior, some aspects of the current situation are distinct. First, Russia's conventional military is being severely degraded in Ukraine. The Russian military has lost a significant

percentage of its ground forces and experienced troops, and it has employed much of its available stockpile of long-range precision guided weapons. For example, according to Oryx

Blog, which tracks Russian losses, as of August 2023 the Russian military has lost 11,638 pieces of equipment, including 2,218 tanks.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the Russian armed forces' conventional options have grown particularly constrained, especially vis-à-vis the United States, and NATO writ large. The significant degradation of Russia's

conventional forces in Ukraine combined with sanctions and export controls that will hinder the reconstitution of Russia's forces (foreseeably for the next 5–10 years) will likely mean that the Kremlin will rely more heavily on non-conventional instruments, including nuclear weapons. In the words of the U.S. intelligence community's 2022 annual assessment released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Moscow will become even more reliant on nuclear, cyber, and [counter-]space capabilities as it deals with the extensive damage to Russia's ground forces."<sup>4</sup>

Russia's economic challenges amplified by Western sanctions will contribute to this trend, because nuclear weapons will represent a relatively cost-effective option for deterrence. Senior officials in the Russian military have acknowledged this probability. In a 2023 article published in *Voennaya Mysl* (Military Thought), a leading military theory journal of the Russian Armed Forces, Commander of the Strategic Missile Forces Colonel General S. V. Karakaev noted that "nuclear weapons also make it possible to ensure the protection of Russia with a much smaller amount of allocations for defense, which is extremely important in the current economic situation of the country."<sup>5</sup>

The degradation of Russia's conventional forces is also likely to lead the Kremlin to perceive itself as militarily vulnerable. Russia is likely to remain weak for some time, but no less hostile or aggressive in its foreign policy. NATO's enlargement to include Finland and Sweden, along with the strengthening of its Eastern Flank, will contribute to Russian perceptions of vulnerability and widen the conventional military gap that Russia may attempt to offset with nuclear weapons. Finally, Putin may grow to feel less secure in his position as the chal-

lenges Russia faces begin to mount over time. These pressures include sanctions, export controls, outflow of labor, and the growing cost of the war. It is impossible to assess how the failed insurgency by Yevgeny Prigozhin

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in June 2023 has affected Putin's personal calculus on his hold on power. Putin's own sense of his security in power is an important determinant of Russia's future approach to nuclear weapons, given the centrality of his decision-making authority when it comes to nuclear weapons use.

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These changes in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine—a conventionally degraded Russia facing economic constraints, a stronger NATO, and a more vulnerable Putin—are likely to affect Russian attitudes toward the use of nuclear weapons. The new dynamics suggest that Russia may perceive nuclear weapons as increasingly more useful and therefore assign them a more important role in its security policy. It is therefore essential to carefully examine Russian statements, actions, and other indicators that Russian views on nuclear weapons may be changing. It is also critical to assess how any such changes might affect Russian actions moving forward, and to identify the implications of those changes for the United States and NATO.

This report addresses these issues. The first section documents changes in Russia's rhetoric, exercises, and nuclear forces posture. The second section identifies how those changes are likely to translate into nuclear-related actions that Russia might take in the coming months and years. The third section articulates the implications of those actions for the United States and NATO.

### **Changes Observed Since the February 2022 Invasion of Ukraine**

**R**ussia has not made any official changes to its doctrine governing the employment of nuclear weapons, and throughout the war, senior Russian officials have periodically emphasized Russia's continued observance of extant doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Formal documents such as the 2020 "Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence" are unlikely to change on such a short timeline, and they primarily address strategic nuclear deterrence, avoiding the issue of limited nuclear use.<sup>7</sup> Much the same can be said of the "Military Doctrine," and other official documents that constitute Russian declaratory policy on these subjects.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, external observers have limited insight into Russian defense planning; it is plausible that it, and Russian thinking on nuclear weapons more

specifically, may have evolved since the start of the conflict. This section identifies changes in Russia's nuclear-related activities—its rhetoric, exercises, and policies and planning for nuclear posture—since its invasion of Ukraine that might provide insights into potential changes in Russian thinking about the use of nuclear weapons.

#### **Rhetoric**

Since its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has directed its nuclear rhetoric at two main audiences: elite decision-makers and the general population. This pattern holds true for Europe, the United States, the international community more broadly, Ukraine, and the domestic audience inside Russia.

First, Russian rhetoric has been targeted at Western leadership with the intention on the one hand of keeping NATO from intervening in the war in Ukraine, and on the other of keeping the war localized. This approach appears consistent with established Russian writing within the Russian military on the utility of nuclear weapons in escalation management, deterring outside parties from becoming involved in an ongoing conflict, or restraining their actions via the coercive effect derived from the risk of escalation.<sup>9</sup> The goal is to achieve the desired political effect via deterrence by intimidation, which means inducing fear. Russian rhetoric, even if inconsistently applied, is intended to shape public attitudes by increasing the perceived risk of nuclear escalation, pushing the public to pressure their governments to force Ukraine to make concessions and end the war.

Even if the risk of escalation is manageable, given the policies of the states involved, the psychological component of nuclear threats intentionally leads to the perception of growing risk. This can stir disagreement within coalitions, and it can shift emphasis in policy from pursuing victory, or Western interests, to managing escalation.

Second, Russian nuclear rhetoric is targeted at Ukrainians with the goal of compelling them to back down and concede to Russian demands. This has proven ineffectual over the course of the war. Third, these statements have a broader international audience. Nuclear threats are designed to reassure Russian partners that despite Russian conventional weakness in the war, it remains a powerful actor. Nuclear weapons are an important component of Russian status in the international system and one of the principal reasons for which Moscow has historically claimed a "co-equal" role for managing international security in the absence of overall military parity. Highlighting its nuclear weapons allows

the Russian state to project great-power status and attempt to leverage it instrumentally.

Finally, Russian nuclear rhetoric has a domestic audience. The rhetoric often peaks at moments of Russian weakness to remind Russians of their standing as a great nuclear power. Arguably, the reason rhetoric has been inconsistent is that different actors within the Russian system are engaging in signaling aimed at divergent audiences during a time of crisis or political strain. Consequently, the West is receiving a host of signals that appear to be instrumentalized, but not necessarily in a coherent manner, and perhaps centrally encouraged rather than effectively organized within the Russian system. Despite this approach, several changes in nuclear rhetoric stand out since February 2022, in particular its increasing permissiveness, instrumentality, and inconsistency.

#### MORE PERMISSIVE

Since the invasion, Russian rhetoric has sought to enlarge the scope for permissible nuclear use under current doctrine, despite claims from the Russian Foreign Ministry that this doctrine does “not admit of expansive interpretation.”<sup>10</sup> Most notably, there has been an identifiable effort to exploit ambiguity surrounding the definition of an attack that poses a threat to Russia’s “very existence,” one of the four explicitly stated scenarios allowing for nuclear first use according to the most recent 2020 version of Russian doctrine.<sup>11</sup> Putin has signaled that he could interpret this to include threats to his own hold on power—he has previously noted that Russia is fighting for its very existence in Ukraine, even though a decisive Russian defeat (such as its loss of all Ukrainian territory) while possibly leading to a collapse of the Putin regime would not threaten the existence of the Russian state as such.<sup>12</sup>

Russian officials have also sought to portray threats to the country’s territorial integrity—including annexed territories in Ukraine—as potentially “existential.” The 2020 nuclear deterrence policy document includes a reference to Russia’s “sovereignty and territorial integrity,” which recalls a nuclear use threshold previously outlined in the 2010 Military Doctrine. The main definition of the nuclear trigger, however, is an attack that “puts the very existence of the Russian Federation under threat.”<sup>13</sup> This declaratory policy is purposefully ambiguous, and interpretation of its meaning is ultimately the decision of Russia’s leader. Nonetheless, Dmitri Medvedev stated in February 2023 that if the Ukrainian military attacks Crimea, Russia is “ready to use all types of weapons, in accordance with

[its] doctrinal documents, including the Fundamentals of Nuclear Deterrence.”<sup>14</sup> In the fall of 2022, Putin vowed to use “all available means” to defend the newly annexed territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia, while Dmitry Peskov claimed that “their security is provided for at the same level as the rest of Russia’s territory.”<sup>15</sup>

Russia’s approach to what constitutes an existential threat, then, may be summed up as: “We’ll know it when we see it.” In a February 2023 article for *Russia in Global Affairs*, Russian diplomat Alexander Kramarenko explicitly acknowledged this interpretive flexibility, stating: “Our doctrine of the use of nuclear weapons leaves us the right to interpret what constitutes a threat to the existence of our state.”<sup>16</sup> Taking this approach allows Russia to couch its threatened and potential actual use of nuclear weapons in supposed doctrinal legitimacy. One of the practical challenges in a personalist authoritarian system is that despite the trappings of institutions, it is ultimately one person’s interpretation that governs potential Russian nuclear use. The regime is not sepa-

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rable from the state, and Putin appears to perceive his fortunes as intertwined with those of the state. The documents that codify these positions are also not wartime planning documents. Their purpose is to lay out the state’s core tenets or approaches to security issues, but also to deter via ambiguity and to leave Russian options for nuclear employment as broadly open as possible. Hence narrow interpretations of what the documents say, or do not say, often err toward filling ambiguity with assumptions or preferences.

A similar rhetorical effort is evident in official framing of the war as “regional” rather than “local” within Russia’s system of classification for different types of conflicts.<sup>17</sup> Russian military thinkers have done extensive work on the Russian approach to escalation management and war termination.<sup>18</sup> In Russian military doctrine, classification of war ranges from local conflict

to large-scale war.<sup>19</sup> A regional war is considered one where several states from one region pursue important political-military goals. Russia sees this war-type construct as the minimum likely scenario for a Russia-NATO conflict, and one in which limited nuclear use would be applicable. Doctrinal military writing by prominent thinkers such as Andrei Kokoshin previously outlined a “ladder” of escalatory steps that Russia could take during a crisis. According to this line of thinking, while a local war excludes “formations equipped with dual-use launch platforms and strategic nuclear weapons,” a regional war is judged as being likely to “approach, if not cross, the nuclear threshold.”<sup>20</sup>

Doctrinally framing the Russian “special military operation” as a regional war has important implications in terms of what it reveals about Russian military thinking and the state’s approach to this conflict. Prior research suggests that the Russian state would see the war as sufficiently significant to merit the use of strategic conventional capabilities, such as long-range precision guided weapons, to target critically important infrastructure, and to consider the prospect of limited nuclear employment for the purpose of escalation management and war termination. The Russian military has already employed conventional capabilities of this type in the war when pursuing a strategic operation for the destruction of Ukrainian critical infrastructure in the fall-winter of 2022.<sup>21</sup> Russia’s force employment and overall approach to the war suggests that the Russian establishment sees this as a regional war, where NATO member states are becoming heavily involved to fight a proxy war—involve-ment that is the deciding factor in the conflict. Statements labeling the war in Ukraine as regional, therefore, seek to expand the scope for legitimate nuclear use and to possibly prepare domestic audiences for it.

#### MORE INCONSISTENT AND INSTRUMENTAL

Over the course of the conflict, Russia’s nuclear rhetoric has been extremely inconsistent. Putin has seemingly contradicted himself at various points. On the one hand, on several occasions he has expressed willingness to use all available means for Russia’s defense, threatening nuclear first use with unprecedented consequences. One notable statement came in late April 2022, when he warned that Russia had “all the tools” needed to respond in the case that “someone intends to intervene on what is happening from the outside,” likely referring to the possibility of intervention by the United States or other NATO allies.<sup>22</sup> Later, during a speech on September 21, 2022, in which he announced a partial mobilization and discussed the upcoming formal annexation of four Ukrainian regions,

Putin claimed that Russia “will certainly make use of all weapon systems available” in response to “a threat to the territorial integrity of our country.”<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, Putin has also made statements downplaying the possibility of potential Russian nuclear first use. In late October 2022, he claimed that Russia saw “no need” for using nuclear weapons in Ukraine, as “there is no point in that, neither political, nor military.”<sup>24</sup> He followed this with a statement in early December in which he attempted to reassure listeners that Russia has “not gone crazy” and is “not going to brandish [nuclear] weapons like a razor, running around the world.”<sup>25</sup> The change in Putin’s own rhetoric may stem from Russia’s changing performance on the battlefield. Both of Putin’s most prominent nuclear threats coincided with significant Russian military setbacks—after Russia’s withdrawal from various areas of northern Ukraine in April and following the Ukrainian military’s re seizure of much of the Kharkiv region in the late summer. By the time Putin started softening his rhetoric later in the autumn of 2022, the front had largely stabilized, reducing the perceived need for nuclear saber-rattling.

Another potential contributing factor to Putin’s inconsistent rhetoric was the negative reactions of valued international partners such as China and India to Moscow’s nuclear threats. In early November 2022, Xi Jinping publicly warned Putin not to use nuclear weapons, while Narendra Modi reportedly skipped a planned summit with Putin in early December in protestation of his nuclear threats.<sup>26</sup> However, it is important not to overstate the influence of outside actors on Putin’s decision-making, particularly on core national security issues. For one, the softening in Putin’s rhetoric was only temporary, as Putin again made an implicit nuclear threat after Germany decided to send Leopard tanks to Ukraine in early February 2023, warning that Russia has “a way to respond, and it will not just end with the use of armored vehicles.”<sup>27</sup> (This statement also illustrates the attempt to use rhetoric in a divisive manner by targeting Germany in particular.) Moreover, Putin’s announcement to store nuclear weapons in Belarus in early 2023 came in the immediate aftermath of a visit between Putin and Xi, where the two leaders agreed not to deploy nuclear weapons outside their national territories.

Throughout the conflict, various Russian officials have also alternately made escalatory and de-escalatory statements, lacking coordination with one another or with Putin. Just one day after Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov claimed on March 22, 2022, that Russia would “never escalate anything,” Deputy U.N. Ambassador Dmitry Polyanskiy directly contradicted



him by saying that Russia may use nuclear weapons “if provoked by NATO.”<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, only eight days after Putin’s nuclear threat in late April 2022, Foreign Ministry Deputy Spokesman Alexey Zaitsev stated on May 6 that “scenarios for Russia’s possible use of nuclear weapons . . . are not applicable to tasks set in the special military operation in Ukraine.”<sup>29</sup> In January 2023, before Putin had readopted a more aggressive tone in response to the Leopard deliveries, Dmitry Medvedev suggested that Russia could use nuclear weapons first if defeated conventionally in Ukraine.<sup>30</sup>

It is likely that inconsistency is an intended feature of Russian nuclear rhetoric, rather than just a consequence of changing circumstances on and off the battlefield. While none of these officials are part of Russia’s chain of nuclear command, their statements nonetheless create uncertainty about Moscow’s intentions, which Putin likely perceives as valuable in providing him with greater freedom in future decisions about nuclear use—otherwise, he likely would have reigned them in.

In addition to its inconsistency, Russian nuclear rhetoric has in several cases been false—Russian officials have made false claims to fabricate a pretext for potential nuclear use and thereby raise Western concerns. Moscow has taken this approach with respect to a different doctrinal trigger for nuclear first use: weapons of mass destruction used against Russia. On multiple occasions since the invasion, Russia has spread unsubstantiated claims of poten-

tial Ukrainian attacks on Russian forces using chemical and radiological weapons. In early

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April 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Ukraine was planning a “large-scale provocation” using chemical weapons.<sup>31</sup> Then, in late October, multiple Russian officials such as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Igor Kirillov (Head of Russia’s Radiation, Chemical and Biological Defense Forces), as well as Vladimir Putin, claimed that Ukraine was planning a false-flag dirty bomb attack on its own territory.<sup>32</sup> Western governments assessed that these claims may have been intended to create a false pretext for potential Russian escalation, illustrating Moscow’s willingness to disseminate unreliable information to fabricate the criteria it would need to claim legitimate first use according to its doctrine.<sup>33</sup>

The timing of these Russian messages coincided with several battlefield defeats in September–October 2022, and were possibly intended to influence Western

countries into slowing the Ukrainian advance for fear of Russian nuclear use. This ploy was unsuccessful, but there was a palpable increase in collective Western concern over potential Russian nuclear use during September–December 2022, including from key leaders in the United States and Europe.

## Exercises

There has been an uptick in the frequency of Russian strategic nuclear exercises since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine. Typically, Russia has opted to perform its “Grom” strategic nuclear exercises on an annual basis, but in 2022, it conducted the same exercise twice—in February and October.<sup>34</sup> Russia shifted the timing of the 2021 Grom exercise to February, five days in advance of its invasion of Ukraine. Notably, the only other year in recent memory that featured two Grom exercises was 2014, which coincided with Russia’s invasion of Crimea.<sup>35</sup>

Since early 2022, Russia has conducted regular exercises involving its strategic nuclear forces, along with strategic command-staff exercises that likely involve components of its nuclear forces in some of the phases. In April 2022, July 2022, and February 2023, Russia tested its Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile during exercises.<sup>36</sup> One month after the February Sarmat test, Russia conducted exercises of the Strategic Missile Forces for the Yars systems.<sup>37</sup> In April 2023, just

a few weeks after it suspended its participation in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)—which had been the lone

remaining nuclear arms control pact with the United States—Russia tested an unspecified “advanced” ICBM.<sup>38</sup> Although the Russian Ministry of Defense declined to specify the type of missile used in the test, it stated that the exercise’s purpose “was to test advanced combat equipment of intercontinental ballistic missiles.”<sup>39</sup>

These exercises testing nuclear weapons delivery systems are often conducted in conjunction with elements of Russia’s so-called “next-generation missiles” that Putin has described as “invincible.”<sup>40</sup> For example, in February 2022 and May 2022, Russia conducted exercises in the Barents Sea with long-range precision weapons that included the Yars, Kalibr, Tsirkon, and Kinzhal systems.<sup>41</sup> In early March 2022, Russia conducted an additional set of exercises involving maneuvers of both nuclear submarines in the Barents

Sea and mobile ICBMs in Siberia.<sup>42</sup> Maintaining the naval backdrop of the previous exercises, Russia simulated a launch of the Tsirkon hypersonic missile during a January 2023 voyage of the Admiral Gorshkov frigate to the West Atlantic.<sup>43</sup> During another set of exercises in May 2022, this time in Kaliningrad, Russia simulated electronic launches of dual-capable weapons in response to a hypothetical attack from NATO.<sup>44</sup> Both the Gorshkov and Kaliningrad simulations are significant to forming an understanding of Russia's nuclear narrative and Western-facing nuclear posture, as they shed light on the types of tactical and strategic matters being considered by the Kremlin. Overall, Russia's increased emphasis on military exercises involving nuclear-capable weapons indicates a more aggressive nuclear posture vis-à-vis NATO, including an intention intended to deter Western action and demonstrate Russian willingness to use force.

### Policies and Planning for Nuclear Forces

Changes to Russian policies since the invasion—namely Russia's decision to deploy non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) to Belarus and its suspension of participation in New START—represent additional steps to deter and coerce the United States and its NATO allies.

#### DEPLOYMENT OF NON-STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS TO BELARUS

One of the most significant changes to Russia's nuclear force posture plans is the decision to deploy NSNW on Belarusian territory. In an interview with a Russian journalist on March 25, 2023, Putin claimed that Russia would complete construction of a storage facility for non-strategic nuclear warheads in Belarus by July 1. Moscow had previously transferred to Belarus an unknown number of Iskander-M short-range ground-launched ballistic missiles, for which the warheads are intended, as well as upgraded 10 Belarusian aircraft to make them capable of carrying and delivering nuclear warheads. Putin also announced that Russia would start training Belarusian crews to operate the newly transferred nuclear systems, while making it clear that the warheads would remain in control of Russian rather than Belarusian troops.<sup>45</sup>

On March 28, Belarus confirmed these claims without offering further details.<sup>46</sup> On April 2, Russia doubled down on its "Russia vs. NATO" narrative when Russian Ambassador to Belarus Boris Gryzlov stated that the nuclear weapons would be deployed close to Belarus's Western border with NATO countries.<sup>47</sup> While the Kremlin has not confirmed this, it is likely that rather than building a new storage facility, Russia will

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refurbish one of the existing former Cold War facilities at Belarusian air and missile bases.<sup>48</sup> Reporting around the signing of a formal agreement between Russia and Belarus in May 2022 did not specify, beyond noting that the document detailed the procedure for "storing Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons in a specialized facility."<sup>49</sup> While Putin claimed in June 2023 that the weapons had arrived in Belarus, he did not provide further details, including about whether the deployment would be permanent or only temporary.<sup>50</sup>

This decision is not a complete surprise, given a series of statements and actions by Russian and Belarusian leaders regarding Russian nuclear warheads arriving in Belarus. In November 2021, Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko offered to host Russian NSNW in Belarus.<sup>51</sup> In February 2022, Lukashenko amended the Belarusian constitution to remove the country's designation as a "non-nuclear" state.<sup>52</sup> In June 2022, Putin announced that Russia was preparing to send Iskanders to Belarus and upgrade Belarusian Su-25 aircraft to become nuclear-capable.<sup>53</sup> Two months later, in August 2022, Lukashenko claimed that the aircraft upgrades were complete.<sup>54</sup> In December 2022, Putin announced that Russia would train Belarusian crews to operate the nuclear-capable planes.<sup>55</sup> This plotline directly contradicts a June 28, 2022, statement from Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov that Russia was only planning to transfer nuclear-capable systems to Belarus, rather than nuclear warheads.<sup>56</sup>

In conjunction with Russia's increasingly aggressive rhetoric and uptick in nuclear exercises, Russian Ambassador Gryzlov's announcement about the deployment of the nuclear weapons near Belarus's Western border is a clear attempt to deter and coerce the United States and its NATO allies. The Kremlin has sought to deny and deflect accusations about the deployment by claiming that the decision is a response to the UK providing Ukraine ammunition containing depleted uranium cores—a highly dubious assertion, given that the

shells provided to Ukraine are unable to produce a nuclear yield.<sup>57</sup> By announcing the move ahead of time, Moscow illustrated an intention to escalate and coerce the United States and NATO to change their course. In addition to the dubious attempted justification for this decision, existing doctrine allows for Russian nuclear weapons to defend “allies,” but there was no mention of deployment on the territory of these allies.<sup>58</sup>

Although Russia may not have formally changed its doctrine, the Kremlin’s move to station nuclear weapons in Belarus suggests an expansive interpretation that exploits the inherent ambiguity in the doctrine to justify policy changes necessitated by new circumstances. Indeed, Russian diplomats regularly point to the U.S.-deployed B-61 tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, while emphasizing the contrast with Russia (which does not have nuclear weapons deployed outside its territory) as a public messaging and negotiating tactic. In practice, stationing nuclear weapons in Belarus advances the integration of the Belarusian military into the Russian armed forces, as the processes and procedures entailed in this type of transfer would require an increased Russian military presence in Belarus, while subsuming Belarus’s missile units under Russian command within the joint regional grouping of forces. The military necessity for this Russian step is unclear, but it may have been driven by reduced conventional capacity to address a Belarus contingency. However, the Russian military maintains storage facilities near Belarus from which it could withdraw such warheads without the need for moving them further into the country, and Iskander-M missile brigades have sufficient range such that there is not an obvious need for pushing these capabilities geographically forward. Nonetheless, the Kremlin appears to see political value in the deployment, given extensive Russian publicity and messaging regarding this supposed transfer. Assuming non-strategic nuclear weapons are placed on Belarusian territory, it is fair to assess that Russian nuclear force posture is changing.

#### SUSPENSION OF PARTICIPATION IN NEW START

On February 21, 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would officially suspend its participation in the New START agreement with the United States. This move brought about the end of the last remaining arms control agreement between the two countries, marking a significant change in Russian nuclear weapons policy.<sup>59</sup> However, like the Belarus NSNW deployment announcement, this development did not come as a complete surprise. Signs of New START’s possible demise were evident in August 2022, when Russia

refused treaty-mandated U.S. inspections of its arsenal.<sup>60</sup> Then, in November 2022, Russia postponed a planned meeting of the Bilateral Consultative Commission, required by the treaty to meet twice per year.<sup>61</sup>

Since the February 2023 announcement to suspend the treaty, Putin has escalated the situation by declining to continue sharing data on Russia’s strategic nuclear forces with the United States.<sup>62</sup> Although the writing may have been on the wall for New START, and Putin may have never liked the treaty, it was useful to both Russia and the United States in providing predictability through verification of the parity of forces. Russian arms control expert Dmitry Stefanovich acknowledged this value in a February 27, 2023, article for Russia in Global Affairs, stating that “in the absence of a contractual framework in the medium and especially long-term . . . there will be an imbalance in the architecture of nuclear deterrence.” According to Stefanovich, this “will occur due to a gradual reduction in the volume of reliable and verifiable information about the adversary as well as due to the corresponding evolution of doctrinal foundations and nuclear potential based on the traditionally overestimated capabilities of the [adversary] and, most threatening, the interpretation of its [adversary’s] policy in the sphere of nuclear deterrence.”<sup>63</sup>

Unfortunately, Putin does not share Stefanovich’s views. The suspension of New START suggests that Putin no longer sees predictability as a priority in maintaining strategic stability. Russia’s approach to New START, which was already looking increasingly unlikely to be replaced by a new arms control treaty, is to turn the continued implementation of the treaty into a cost. Moreover, Putin is likely intentionally seeking to introduce greater uncertainty and risk into the relationship as a strategy to get the United States to self-restrain and avoid actions that could possibly set off an unintended escalation. The approach hurts both sides, and arguably is more damaging to Russia’s interests, given that the United States has better national technical means to surveil Russian nuclear forces—but in the interim, the approach serves Russian interests more if its goal is to induce caution in Washington. Putin will probably seek to leverage uncertainty about his views on nuclear use to encourage the United States to seek to wind down the war.

## Anticipating Russian Actions

**R**ussian behavior in the nuclear realm is likely to evolve over time, as Moscow draws conclusions about the efficacy of nuclear signaling. Because

the war is ongoing, this story is not yet written, and Russian views and attitudes will continue to be influenced by events. So far, official and academic discourse in Russia continues to debate the lessons that Russia should be learning. Although it is too early to draw definitive conclusions about any changes in the country's approach to nuclear weapons, the actions already observed can inform expectations of Russia's future behavior. Looking forward, the United States and NATO should expect a more assertive Russian nuclear force posture, stepped up Russian efforts to test NATO's cohesion, and the instrumental use of nuclear weapons in foreign policy.

### **A More Assertive Russian Nuclear Force Posture**

As Russia's security policy grows more dependent on nuclear weapons, Russian leadership is likely to look for opportunities to increase the credibility of its nuclear threats. To this end, the Kremlin could look to change its nuclear force posture and the structure of Russia's nuclear forces, especially with respect to its non-strategic nuclear weapons. The overall conclusion is that Russia is likely to seek revisions to the deployment and structure of its nuclear force.

This does not presage an arms race, but it does usher in a new period in which arsenals are not governed by verifiable forms of arms control, creating incentives

to increase uncertainty. As Russian leadership pursues revisions in its nuclear force, it will likely also signal that the country will no longer be a status quo power. But deep revisions are unlikely, given budgetary constraints and practical necessity. That said, Russia has announced a decision to deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus. If Russia continues occupying Ukrainian territory, it may further introduce NSNW there to imply permanency or make deterrence more credible in the case of extraterritorial claims.

Further force posture changes intended to increase the credibility of Russia's nuclear threats are conceivable. For example, Moscow could deploy additional NSNW near strategic areas such as the Kola Peninsula or the St. Petersburg region, the defense of which has become even more sensitive for Russia with the accession of Finland (and eventually Sweden) to NATO.<sup>64</sup> Russian military commentator Igor Korotchenko made a suggestion along these lines in an appearance on the television channel Rossiya 1 in April 2023, noting that “without betting on

deterrence, including by relying on Russian tactical nuclear weapons,” Russia would be unable to “neutralize threats” stemming from Finland's entry into the alliance.<sup>65</sup> In fact, satellite imaging from May 7, 2023, reveals that Russia deployed 16 dual-capable strategic bombers to the Olenya Air Base on the Kola Peninsula, which is located just over 100 miles from Russia's borders with Finland and Norway.<sup>66</sup>

The Russian Ministry of Defense announced the creation of two new military districts and the addition of a new army corps in Karelia near Finland, all of which implies an expansion of the force structure. This may be followed by deployment of additional missile brigades, which are typically allocated per military district in support of combined arms forces. This change to the organization of the Russian military has been positioned as a response to the accession of Finland and Sweden into NATO.<sup>67</sup> Rather than a reform, it is an expansion and an additional step along the trajectory that the Russian military has for some time already been on in revising current force structure. It is likely that over time, Russia will field more missile brigades in the Western strategic direction, and will expand supporting

infrastructure near Finnish borders, especially if the Leningrad and Moscow military districts are stood up in the coming decade. These plans are of course optimistic,

given the economic constraints under which Russia finds itself, but nonetheless the net trajectory of revisions to the Russian military points toward an attempt at expansion.

It is likely that Russia will increase the frequency of exercises involving both nuclear forces and dual-capable weapon systems to enhance the credibility of its nuclear threats. Exercises may continue out of sequence for the duration of the war, aimed at the United States and NATO, in what the Russian military considers to be the Western strategic direction. Moreover, Russia may shift to a greater overall reliance on long-range cruise missiles, given their higher production rate relative to ballistic missiles and greater payoff in versatility and deterrence effects when compared to quasi-ballistic systems such as Kinzhal.<sup>68</sup> Sanctions are unlikely to have a deterministic impact on Russian missile production, but they may force consolidation around fewer variants and a common architecture based on components that Moscow can readily attain abroad.

**As Russia's security policy grows more dependent on nuclear weapons, Russian leadership is likely to look for opportunities to increase the credibility of its nuclear threats.**



There are various force posture changes that Russia is not likely to make going forward. It is improbable that the country will choose to move warheads from central storage to base level facilities. This would increase risk, without providing clear benefits. Russia is also unlikely to deploy nuclear weapons directly to units, except during exercises or crises—as this would require a significant mobilization of the 12th Chief Directorate of the Ministry of Defense, which is responsible for managing and handling Russian nuclear weapons.<sup>69</sup> It is also unlikely to deploy tactical nuclear weapons at sea aboard either surface combatants or submarines. Finally, there are no signs that Moscow is considering the deployment of short-range tactical nuclear weapons such as nuclear artillery or nuclear mines.<sup>70</sup>

The Russian nuclear arsenal is likely to undergo a consolidation as pressure from lack of access to components will incentivize less diversification. This will likely result in the Russian military selecting several types of missiles as principal means of delivery, and it will emphasize their production. Doctrinally, Russian forces may still employ short-range ballistic missiles in support of combined arms armies at tactical-operational depths, but much of the non-strategic arsenal may transition to a few missile types for conventional and nuclear delivery.

### **Stepped Up Russian Efforts to Test NATO's Cohesion**

Russia's goal remains to divide NATO allies, and the country is likely to view nuclear rhetoric and related actions as increasingly effective tools to do so, especially as the efficacy of its traditional tools such as energy and economic coercion has weakened. To divide the alliance, Moscow could pursue high-altitude nuclear tests or deploy nuclear weapons closer to NATO's borders (following the recent deployment to Belarus).

Alternatively, Russia could signal a (ingenuine) willingness to engage in forms of arms control or cooperative threat reduction, which could also be divisive within the alliance, given varying views across the United States and Europe. In the past Moscow has advanced proposals, such as a “no basing” policy for U.S. intermediate-range missiles after the withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, designed to divide allies under the guise of pursuing greater strategic stability.

### **Instrumental Use of Nuclear Weapons in Foreign Policy**

The Kremlin has long viewed nuclear weapons as guarantors of Russia's great-power status in a multipolar world order.<sup>71</sup> Given that the war has diminished other

aspects of Russia's great-power status, including its conventional military strength, economic vitality, and diplomatic influence, the relative importance of nuclear weapons in the psychology of Russian leaders who wish to emphasize the country's enduring status has likely grown. Moscow may seek to demonstrate the continued

## **The relative importance of nuclear weapons in the psychology of Russian leaders who wish to emphasize the country's enduring status has likely grown.**

strength of its nuclear arsenal through actions such as more frequent and more elaborate “warning” exercises or weapon tests, with the goal of attracting attention and showing that Russia is a power to be feared. Russia is unlikely to resume live nuclear tests, abandoning the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), although Putin threatened to resume them in a speech on February 21, 2022.<sup>72</sup> This subject is worth tracking closely, as the CTBT has started to enter Russian official discourse and commentary with greater frequency.

Nuclear weapons may play a greater role as an instrument of Russian regional policy, which may have been a factor in Putin's decision to transfer non-strategic nuclear weapons to Belarus. Deploying nuclear weapons or building infrastructure for its storage requires greater integration with Moscow, including an increased Russian military presence. This deployment therefore facilitates Russia's goal of deepening the integration of Belarus into Russian politico-military structures, and it is possible that the Kremlin could make further changes to its nuclear policy to deepen this integration. These could include the permanent deployment of Russia's 12th Main Directorate to guard the nuclear weapons storage facility in Belarus, or joint nuclear exercises between Russian and Belarusian forces.<sup>73</sup>

## **Implications for the United States and NATO**

One of the key takeaways from Russia's war in Ukraine is that Russia's degraded conventional capabilities will lead Russia to increase reliance on its nuclear weapons. In a future war with NATO, Russia would be likely to perceive the need to use nuclear weapons earlier in the conflict, either to seek victory against superior NATO conventional forces through

nuclear first use on the battlefield, or to prevent defeat by those NATO forces.<sup>74</sup> Drawing out additional implications is challenging because Russian views on nuclear weapons will continue to evolve in part based on the trajectory of the war in Ukraine. Nonetheless, evolving dynamics in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine thus far suggest the following implications for the United States and its allies.

### Heightened Risk of Unintended Escalation

Since 2022, it has become increasingly difficult for U.S. and Russian policymakers to discern each other's red lines. So far, Russia has refrained from nuclear use in response to events that it could have considered to breach the "red lines" spelled out in Russian doctrine and rhetoric. While this does not mean that Russia has no thresholds for escalation, in practice the coercive effect and credibility of Russian statements has deteriorated over time. What previously was seen as escalatory has in the course of this war become routine. The likely lesson for Moscow is that nuclear threats were effective early on, leading to an abundance of caution in the West, but their coercive credibility has since diminished. Since the start of the war, high-end conventional capabilities have been provided to Ukraine, including long-range air-launched cruise missiles as well as land-based anti-ship missiles. Many of these systems were seen as escalatory, but their employment against Russian forces and critical infrastructure has not led to substantial crisis instability. However, it is worth adding that their employment has been constrained by attendant Western limits on where they can be used.

Throughout the war, Russia's response to Ukrainian strikes has not been markedly different from its general employment of long-range strike systems, while Western countries' initially cautious approach yielded to more emphatic support over time. Despite prevailing interpretations by Western analysts and officials in some circles that Russia might use nuclear weapons early to lock in gains or avoid defeat,

Russian leadership has eschewed nuclear employment, even though it has suffered more than 200,000 casualties to the armed forces and failed in achieving the main political objectives behind this war.<sup>75</sup> While Ukraine arguably does not pose an existential threat to Russia, the Russian response to defeats in Ukraine, and to Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory (including cross border raids), has so far involved neither escalation

against NATO nor nuclear escalation against Ukraine. Russia's response has often taken the form of retaliation, targeting Ukrainian intelligence services' headquarters, which Russia terms "centers of decisionmaking," but without significant impact. This observed response may be due to the specific context of this war, but it also may suggest that the risk of unintended escalation has been exaggerated from the outset.

For example, Russia did not escalate the war in a meaningful way in response to Ukraine's victories in Kherson and Kharkiv in 2022, despite its previous claims that annexed regions were covered by nuclear guarantees. No changes in Russian nuclear posture were reported at the time. Moscow also did not use nuclear weapons in response to Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian air bases hosting strategic bombers, despite its doctrine including a possible trigger for nuclear use in case of attacks on Russian strategic nuclear force and/or command and control facilities.<sup>76</sup>

This begs the question: Why has Moscow eschewed nuclear use in this war? Ukraine does not enjoy extended nuclear deterrence from other countries and has no nuclear weapons of its own. There are several possible answers. First, Russian leaders may believe nuclear use is unnecessary for achieving their objectives in the war. The conditions are therefore not sufficient to require drastic measures. Nuclear use also carries costs, risks, and attendant uncertainties, especially given the likelihood of a response from the United States and other countries. In this view, the benefits are outweighed by the potential costs, and Moscow may be deterred by Western threats. Another possibility is that nuclear weapons are simply not seen as providing significant benefits on the battlefield, although this view (espoused primarily in Western circles) seems overly optimistic, eliding much of the history of nuclear strategy and expectations of nuclear effects. The notion that several dozen nuclear weapons would not have a

decisive impact on a military operation seems technically dubious at best. Perhaps a better

**Since 2022, it has become increasingly difficult for U.S. and Russian policymakers to discern each other's red lines.**

reading of the factors involved is that to be effective, multiple nuclear weapons would have to be used, hence singular employment is unlikely to achieve a specific result. This may pose a higher threshold for use, even if the difference in political cost between using several dozen nuclear weapons and a single nuclear weapon may not be dramatic when it comes to external audiences and the reactions of other states.

There is also the question of the role of non-Western actors such as India and, especially, China. Although China has taken public positions in opposition to nuclear use in the Russo-Ukrainian war, this is cost-free public diplomacy and positioning that may have little to no effect on Russian thinking. It is unlikely that Moscow considered Chinese interests, or warned Beijing, ahead of its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and it is equally unlikely that it will prioritize Chinese concerns in any decision on nuclear use. Asymmetries or dependencies between states in their relationships rarely translate into leverage over primary interests. It is doubtful that Russian dependency on China is such that Moscow would accept defeat in deference to Chinese interests or reactions. Russian-Chinese relations suggest that Moscow would instead view Beijing's position as a tertiary consideration at best, just as Beijing often demonstrates that it does not prioritize Russian interests or policy preferences. Therefore, concerns over Chinese reactions are unlikely to be a first order deterrent to Russian nuclear use. Rather, they are likely a contributing factor to the overall uncertainty that would result from such a decision, and to the Russian perception of greater risk stemming from its assessment of the likely international response. That said, Moscow has often shown itself a bad judge of the risks and costs entailed in such actions, and it is overly optimistic to assume that the same flawed decision-making that led to the war will not extend to the question of nuclear escalation.

These factors may explain why Russia has not used nuclear weapons in response to the West's military aid deliveries to Ukraine, despite threatening statements from Putin and others such as Medvedev. This disconnect between Russian rhetoric and actions has contributed to a pattern of behavior according to which the United States has repeatedly ruled out providing certain weapon systems, only to provide them later. In this context, it has become increasingly hard to discern what actions might elicit a more significant Russian response, or why an escalatory response has not occurred. This lack of clarity suggests that prior assessments exaggerated the risk of escalation, but also that there is a need to hedge against the opposite extreme in decision-making, i.e. that there are no possible triggers for deliberate or unintended escalation. Both Russia and the United States are revising their understanding of the other's potential red lines and coercive credibility. This is a process fraught with risk, as the national security establishments are likely to learn things about each other that are true, and some that are untrue, depending on how they choose to interpret actions in this war and where they assign causality.

### **Changing Public Views on Acceptable Nuclear Use**

The impact of Russia's more permissive and inconsistent rhetoric is still uncertain. However, it is possible that over time the heightened rhetoric will alter the Russian public's view on the permissible use of nuclear weapons. A large body of academic research shows that citizens take cues from the political elite, leading to changes in public attitudes over time. In a poll conducted by the Levada Center in May 2023, 86 percent of respondents indicated that Russia should not use a nuclear weapon to achieve victory in Ukraine, while another poll published in July 2023 by the private survey agency Russian Field revealed that 74 percent of Russians opposed the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.<sup>77</sup> Public attitudes likely provide some constraint on Putin's decision to use nuclear weapons. However, sustained, heightened elite rhetoric could change public attitudes over time. As previously mentioned, Russian state-controlled media channels have frequently trotted out the prospect of nuclear escalation, with leading experts debating the subject in the press and via publications. These may serve to normalize the prospect of nuclear use over time and give the public the sense that some form of nuclear employment is inevitable. Prevailing media narratives could be interpreted as a form of preparing domestic audiences for potential nuclear escalation in the event that the state should opt for this course of action.

### **Few Opportunities for Nuclear Arms Control with Russia, for Now**

Russian linkage of arms control to the political fallout from its war in Ukraine has further diminished the state's apparent interest in stability and predictability. Moscow appears to view the existing arms control framework as reinforcing the status quo that it is intent to destroy. Moscow also appears to view the United States and the West as more risk-averse than itself, and therefore is intentionally introducing risk to compel Western capitals to self-restrain. Although Washington has announced its willingness to pursue negotiations in arms control dialogue with Russia (and China) without preconditions, it is unlikely that Russia will seriously engage in the near term. The Russian approach has instead been one of linkage, connecting arms control or strategic stability talks with the war in Ukraine, positioning the breakdown of the former as the price for Western involvement in the latter. This is likely due to low Russian expectations that benefits can be derived from further arms control negotiations, and the political environment overall makes such diplomacy nearly impossible. Hence, Russian leadership is trying to get the most it can out of the situation.

Tellingly, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov stated in January 2023 that Russia will only return to New START compliance if the United States accepts Russia's late 2021 demands for security guarantees.<sup>78</sup> Ryabkov subsequently broadened this position in June, stating that Moscow's "condition for the return to the full functioning of the treaty is the U.S. abandoning its fundamentally hostile policy towards Russia."<sup>79</sup> Moreover, in the new version of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept released in 2023, there were no references to Russia's implementation of New START, willingness to reduce its nuclear arsenal, or arms control in Europe—all of which were present in the previous 2016 version of the document.<sup>80</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia does appear to retain some interest in predictable nuclear relations with the United States and NATO for the time being. This is evident in Moscow's continued compliance with New START's quantitative limits on warheads and long-range delivery systems, as well as Russia's continuing notifications to the United States of its ballistic missile launches and strategic exercises.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, the Kremlin reacted positively to U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's June 2023 offer of bilateral arms control discussions, emphasizing its continued openness to

## **Russia's goal appears to be to destroy the existing arms control regime and then build it back.**

dialogue.<sup>82</sup> Russia's mere "suspension" of participation in New START, rather than full withdrawal from the agreement, is also notable in this respect, even if this decision may have been at least partially motivated by sensitivity to the potential negative public relations consequences of appearing to abandon arms control.

Over the longer term, however, Russia's goal appears to be to destroy the existing arms control regime and then build it back, starting from a blank slate and/or a position more advantageous to Moscow. It is possible that Russia may signal a willingness to engage in arms control, either as an effort to introduce friction among NATO members as stated above, or, alternatively, to bide its time while it attempts to rebuild its military forces.

Over the long term, however, Russia's suspension of verified arms control participation, along with indications that Moscow may suspend its observance or withdraw from other treaties, suggest that whether Russia will remain a status quo nuclear power merits

debate. The United States and NATO should prepare for a period of no arms control, with the attendant challenges and risks.

## **Reduced Russian Commitment to Nonproliferation**

In its heightened confrontation with the West, Russia has become more dependent on its relationship with China, and to a lesser extent, Iran. As Moscow prioritizes its relations with these countries going forward, it will not contribute to international efforts aimed at arms reduction or nonproliferation. Moscow's reduced commitment to nonproliferation in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine is evident in its 2022 decision to withdraw from the Proliferation Security Initiative, an international effort intended to prevent the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction and their components.<sup>83</sup>

The case of Iran may be particularly illustrative, given its significant provision of military aid to Russia in the war against Ukraine. It is likely that the more desperate Russia becomes in its war effort, the more willing it will be to make concessions in exchange for additional support. It is plausible, for instance, that Russia will provide expertise or components that Tehran needs for its nuclear program if Moscow's circumstances become dire enough. While the probability of such a scenario may remain relatively low, given Russia's long-standing commitment to nonproliferation, it has nonetheless risen since February 2022. Even if Moscow refrains from directly aiding the nuclear program of another country, it may indirectly assist its development simply by reducing diplomatic pressure.

The decision to deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus is also relevant, even if it does not constitute a violation of the nonproliferation regime since Moscow will retain control of the weapons. Previously, Moscow had attempted to make the case that NATO's nuclear sharing program contravened the spirit of nonproliferation by basing nuclear weapons in non-nuclear weapon states. By stationing its own weapons in Belarus, Russia has undercut its credibility in making that argument and lost the ability to claim moral superiority as a champion of nonproliferation. Moscow is now limited to deflecting criticism of its deployment to Belarus by making comparisons to NATO's nuclear sharing, as it did in response to a U.S. denouncement of the decision in May 2023.<sup>84</sup>

Overall, the constraints on Russia's behavior have evaporated as its image increasingly becomes that of a rogue actor in international affairs. Its previous commitment to nonproliferation, rather than being driven by fear that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by states



such as Iran and North Korea would directly threaten Russian national security interests, stemmed from perceived geopolitical advantages of advocating for nonproliferation, including a desire to avoid diluting its status as a great power. Now that the geopolitical conditions have changed, these advantages may no longer be seen as relevant. Nevertheless, Moscow is likely to maintain a rhetorical, if not a substantive, commitment to nonproliferation going forward. This is evident in the 2023 Russian Foreign Policy Concept, which professes an intention to strengthen and develop international nonproliferation and regimes.<sup>85</sup>

### **Proliferation of Russian Armed State Actors**

The one instrument of the Russian state that has significantly expanded from the war with Ukraine is the use of semi-state actors such as Wagner ChVK. The organization is a parastatal entity whose activities are typically coordinated by Russian military intelligence. Its activities abroad in Africa and the Middle East historically generated revenue and, in some cases, facilitated a degree of state capture. Wagner may have failed in its mutiny attempt in June 2023, but the Russian state will continue to work with such semi-state entities moving forward. While the future of Wagner is uncertain, it is plausible that it will continue in some form with its surviving fighters shipped abroad. Several other organizations have already proliferated. The Russian Ministry of Defense, for its part, is creating its own copycat organizations to compete with Wagner or supplant its recruitment capacity inside Russia. Russian state-run enterprises have created their own volunteer battalions styled as private military companies, for example Fakel, created by Gazprom. Consequently, it will become increasingly difficult to separate armed Russian entities over time and assess the degree to which Moscow is likely to escalate on their behalf and in which contexts. This will only further complicate Western considerations in interactions with these elements of the Russian state.

## **Conclusion**

One of the main questions resulting from Russia's war with Ukraine is not under which conditions Russia might use a nuclear weapon, but why it has not done so thus far. Despite losses, defeats, and strikes against Russian territory, Russia has eschewed nuclear use. This is arguably because Russian leaders still believe they can win, and that the risks of nuclear use outweigh the possible benefits, especially if they believe that in the long run they are the favored side in this war.

It is also possible that Moscow is deterred by the risk of escalation and U.S. signaling that it might retaliate conventionally. Russian nuclear use would also come with significant injury to the country's international status, and it could expand the coalition of states arrayed against Moscow in this war.

At the same time, with the suspension of arms control and ongoing revisions to the Russian military's force posture, Russia may be transitioning out of being a status quo nuclear power. This does not presage an arms race, but the U.S.-Russia strategic relationship is in a phase that differs fundamentally from that of the past 30 years. Stability has yielded to uncertainty, and current trends portend greater instability in the future, especially if Moscow sees instability as instrumentally useful for policy purposes.

The role of nuclear weapons in Russian defense policy, and as a tool in foreign policy, is therefore likely to grow. This is not to say that Russian nuclear weapons use is probable—according to a statement from the State Department in May 2023, the United States has not seen “any indications that Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon.”<sup>86</sup> But while its effects as a useful instrument in deterring Western action have diminished over the course of this war, in the past, nuclear threats enjoyed considerable success in delaying and structuring Western decisions, especially during the early phases of the war.

This implies that elements of the Russian approach to escalation management have worked without the need for limited nuclear use, demonstration employment, or similarly risky steps. Moscow is thus likely to walk away from the war with an appreciation that nuclear signaling costs nothing and achieves much, making it more willing to bet on the potential for similar outcomes in years to come.

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