

Russia's Nuclear Brinkmanship

NATO's response must consider both military and political dimensions of Russia's renewed nuclear assertiveness

July 26, 2016

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and subsequent deterioration in Russia's relations with the EU and NATO, nuclear deterrence returned to the forefront of debates on European security. NATO leaders are under pressure to re-open NATO's own nuclear deterrence posture. The communiqué [adopted](#) at the recent NATO summit in Warsaw pointed to Russia's "irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric", and explicitly affirmed the role of strategic nuclear forces in NATO's revamped policy of deterrence.

For Russia, a robust nuclear posture is a key element in addressing its strategic problem of NATO's superior conventional capabilities, as it had been for the Soviet Union. Though Russian military concerns have obviously changed over time, some tenets of Soviet military thinking persist, especially when it comes to the role of nuclear deterrence, as evident from Russia's General Staff's alarm over US plans for a missile defence system. In fact, Russia's stringent criticism of the plan as a [violation](#) of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) should also be read as a thinly-veiled threat of Russia's own move to withdraw from the INF.

This comes amidst Russia's on-going restructuring of its overall military doctrine, marked by relative de-prioritization of security concerns such as North Caucasus, Central Asia, or border disputes with China. Besides the 15,000 troops stationed in Crimea, Russia has deployed another 10,000-40,000 on the border with Ukraine. When looking purely at numbers, the Russian contingent counts 845,000 troops with 2.5 million in reserve, while NATO allies sum a total contingent of [3.3 million—mostly American troops](#), which are dispersed around the world, notwithstanding NATO's efforts in Warsaw to boost its forward presence along the Alliance Eastern flank. In addition to re-prioritizing conventional forces, the Kremlin has invested heavily in upgrading its nuclear arsenal, including deployment of new types of ICBM, submarines, bombers, and state-of-the-art mobile delivery systems.

Analysis: A qualitatively new threat

Russia's attachment to and public display of nuclear forces is not new, but when combined with the possibility of a hybrid attack scenario and volatility in the Baltic sea theatre - and against the backdrop of breakdown in Russia-NATO communication - it makes for a qualitatively new challenge, and one for which the Cold-War paradigm of Mutually Assured Destruction may no longer suffice.

Russia's more assertive nuclear doctrine is reflected in two official documents: (1) the 2000 National Security Concept and (2) the 2000 Military Doctrine. Both documents are very similar, but differ on the conditions that would allow Russia to use nuclear weapons. The National Security Concept allows for the use of nuclear weapons "to repel armed aggression if all other crisis management measures have been exhausted or turned out to be inefficient." While acknowledging on the use of nuclear weapons when the survival of the Russian state is threatened, [the Military Doctrine seems](#) to narrow down Russia's nuclear threshold, strictly: "in response to the use of nuclear weapons or other WMD

against Russia or its allies, as well as in response to large-scale conventional aggression in situations critical to Russian national security.”

Therefore, Russia’s nuclear arsenal has taken a new dimension besides the classic deterrence of an attack (e.g. large-scale conventional attack by NATO that threatens the essence of Russia’s survival). Its nuclear arsenal aims at the de-escalation of a conflict in case deterrence fails. In other words, it would be [calculated strategic \(tactical\) nuclear strikes](#) to repel the enemy as well as to guarantee the survival of the Russian state and its vital national interests. Against the background of Russia’s INF violations and the modernization of its nuclear forces, its revamped nuclear policy raises the threats of an escalation to the point of a potential tactical nuclear strike in the event of a skirmish or hybrid warfare scenario in the one of Eastern flank countries.

Outlook: Deterrence and beyond?

While Russia’s rhetoric and sable-rattling has (intentionally) given the impression of its preparedness for early use of nuclear weapons. However, given that [it makes little strategic sense](#) for Russia to engage in an open armed conflict with NATO, such tactics should be read a way of putting pressure on the Alliance and EU leaders to accede to President Putin’s political demands, such as halting EU and NATO expansion or the non-deployment of conventional forces closer to the Russian borders. To a certain extent, Russia’s nuclear brinkmanship as a form of psychological warfare appears to be succeeding.

Through the Warsaw summit communiqué, NATO heeded calls to [re-calibrate its nuclear deterrence messaging](#), making it abundantly clear it is prepared to respond to any act of aggression against a Member State. Yet some experts, such as [Matthew Kroenig](#), argue that NATO should do more and follow the same nuclear brinkmanship strategy to counter Russia’s game. This would include an update in the nuclear elements of NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, amending the 2012 document, which still envisaged Russia as a partner. Still [bolder suggestions](#) call for a serious update of NATO’s – mainly the US – nuclear capabilities in Europe, ranging from more realistic nuclear exercises through modernization of its dual-capable aircraft force to moving nuclear installations closer to NATO’s Eastern borders.

However, it must be remembered that, as Russia’s nuclear brinkmanship is conducted for political ends in Ukraine and elsewhere in the region, any strategic response by the transatlantic community must also be embedded in a wider political strategy, which goes beyond deterrence. That entails, above all, close cooperation between the EU and US in support of conflict resolution and EU integration of Ukraine and other Eastern partners, as well as openness to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Russia on restoring stable security relations in Eastern neighbourhood and on the future of the European security order.

Recommendations:

- ◆ NATO should readdress its current policy marked by poor analysis of Russian intents and strategy in Ukraine and acquiesce to Russia’s demands, to **develop a more robust nuclear deterrence strategy**.
- ◆ The EU must **redouble efforts to support Ukraine in its European path**, but also work to allay Russia’s fears of NATO expansion and of being excluded from discussions on the future political and security order in the Eastern neighbourhood.
- ◆ The US should **deepen its involvement in regional security and conflict resolution in Ukraine** on the basis of the Minsk process, from which it has hitherto remained largely absent

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