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ESCALATION AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN RUSSIA’S MILITARY STRATEGY

KATARZYNA ZYSK

The assessment that Russia envisages limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield nuclear weapons, as a coercive advantage over a symmetrical adversary has contributed to justify additional capabilities in the US nuclear arsenal. Contrary to the critics’ claims, Katarzyna Zysk shows that the Russian military strategy has been corroborated in strategic documents and official statements, defence acquisition programmes and deployments, and operational pattern.

There has been intense controversy surrounding the US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), published in February 2018, and in particular its assessment of Russia’s military strategy. According to the document, ‘Russia’s belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons’ can provide an advantage over the US and its allies is based, in part, ‘on Moscow’s perception that its greater number and variety of non-strategic nuclear systems provide a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict.’

This assessment has been consequential and contributed to justify the introduction of additional capabilities to the US nuclear arsenal: a modification of some of the existing submarine-launched ballistic missiles and a nuclear sea-launched cruise missile, aimed to ‘enhance deterrence by denying potential adversaries any mistaken confidence’ they might have in the event of limited nuclear first use.

The symmetric response the NPR proposes and the assessment it is based on have generated a heated debate in Western academic and policy circles. Irrespective of the choice of solution, the NPR’s reading of the Russian military strategy is mostly right. Critics have inaccurately asserted that there is no evidence of the Russian strategy either in doctrinal documents or in exercises, and that a limited nuclear first use (also referred to as the ‘escalate to de-escalate’ concept) cannot be a part of a rational strategy given the risk of a rapid escalation to global nuclear war. They also see Russia’s increasing emphasis on non-nuclear deterrence as supposedly incompatible with relying on a limited nuclear first strike, in line with the fact that Russia’s military doctrine is supposedly ‘defensive’. Some have taken Russia’s nuclear sabre-rattling for military strategy, seeing it merely as an attempt to project uncertainty about Russia’s intentions and capabilities as a deterrent. Still others argue that Russia is neither building new theatre-nuclear systems nor practising their use, and that the problem with its nuclear policy is political more than it is military.

However, some key facts and nuances have been either lost or misunderstood in the discussion. As this article argues, Russia’s emphasis on ‘defensive’ doctrine and an increasing role of non-nuclear deterrence, including strategic conventional weapons, not only does not exclude the limited use of nuclear weapons at some point in an armed conflict; it actually foresees it. The growing importance of non-nuclear deterrence is indeed making Russia less dependent on nuclear weapons, providing a broader spectrum of options in escalation control. However, nuclear weapons remain part of an integrated system, where nuclear and conventional capabilities are mutually reinforcing in supporting defence and deterrence. While Moscow does not necessarily seek to start an operation against a symmetrical adversary, there are, nonetheless, circumstances under which the distinction between ‘offence’ and ‘defence’ in contemporary Russian strategic thinking is not clear-cut, especially in light of the emphasis placed on the initial period of war as key to the overall outcome of war.

There is a longstanding concern shared by the Russian political and military
leadership regarding the possibility of a disarming conventional strike inflicted at an early stage of a conflict by a superior military-technological adversary. As Russian President Vladimir Putin put it, Russia must take such a possibility into account in the development of its armed forces, and prepare for various options, including the worst-case scenario with the use of nuclear weapons. Given Russia’s still-limited ability to defend against such an attack, notwithstanding successes of the sweeping military modernisation over the past ten years, Russia reserves an option of a limited nuclear use at a scale that would aim to avoid escalation in order to compel the adversary to refrain from further action and back off. As authoritative Russian experts acknowledge, this basic logic is widely accepted in Russia.

Whether Russia will use nuclear weapons is anybody’s guess. However, there should be no doubt that in theory and practice, Russia has been developing the key elements needed for an effective employment should it be needed. This article demonstrates that, contrary to the critics’ claims, the Russian approach can be seen in: strategic thinking, concepts and doctrinal documents; state armament programmes and deployments; and operational pattern demonstrated systematically in military exercises and training. Based on many original Russian sources, the article presents a theoretical analysis of the doctrinal views on nuclear weapons use and their interaction with strategic conventional and general-purpose forces. It contains crucial, but often overlooked, references to Russian doctrinal documents, thus verifying otherwise speculative statements for, or against, the existence of the frequently misinterpreted Russian ‘escalate-to-de-escalate’ strategy and limited nuclear first use. While the concept, obviously, does not describe the full spectrum of the intended use of nuclear weapons, it does shed light on a key aspect of the Russian military doctrine and strategy in a selected spectrum of conflict scenarios.

**Russian Strategic Concepts and Doctrines**

Those discussing Russia’s ‘escalate to de-escalate’ strategy often refer to its original version of 1999, demonstrated the same year in the Zapad-99 military exercise. The Russian Ministry of Defence described the concept in its 2003 white paper as ‘forcing the adversary to cease hostilities by threatening or actually delivering strikes of various sizes with use of conventional and/or nuclear weapons’. In other words, should deterrence fail and the aggression exceed Russia’s defensive capacity, the country might respond by demonstrating readiness to threaten to use or actually deliver selected nuclear strikes to force a de-escalation of hostilities. The underlying assumption is that fear of further escalation to a massive nuclear exchange would dissuade adversaries from deploying their own nuclear forces and therefore force them to back off.

The Russian approach bears a striking resemblance to NATO’s flexible response strategy in play from the 1960s to the end of the Cold War. NATO contended that if its deterrence and conventional defences were to fail, and aggression exceeded the alliance’s defensive capacity, it would respond by demonstrating readiness to threaten or deliver a limited nuclear strike. It would aim to make clear to the
adversary the stakes involved and NATO’s resolve, hoping the Soviets would back down and end their aggression.12

Notably, the definition of escalation provided in the Military Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the Russian Ministry of Defence actually refers to the US definition and Herman Kahn’s 1965 book On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios.13 The same dictionary describes the concept as an expansion of military conflict through an aggravation of military–political confrontation, its progressive evolution into a crisis situation and then into a conflict, with a subsequent scaling up to the level of global nuclear war. It distinguishes a ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ escalation: the former indicating an increase in the use of forces and weapons within the conflict zone, such as moving from conventional weapons to non-strategic, or strategic, nuclear weapons; the latter signifying strikes beyond the immediate conflict zone and geographical expansion of the boundaries of the conflict.14

The Russian military doctrines have traditionally differentiated between three main stages or levels in the progression of a conflict: local war – with ‘limited’ military–political objectives and operations taking place within the borders of the warring states, affecting mainly their own interests (such as in Georgia, Crimea or Donbass); regional war – involving several states or coalition armed forces of the same region, pursuing ‘important’ military–political objectives; and a large-scale (global) war – involving a significant number of major states and coalitions from different regions of the world, pursuing ‘radical’ military–political objectives, requiring mobilisation of ‘all available physical resources and spiritual strength’ of the participating states.15 Russia does not envisage use of nuclear weapons in local conflicts, although the threat they represent for outsiders may be used to prevent escalation from local to regional war;16 they are intended primarily for regional war scenarios involving a confrontation with a sophisticated, nuclear-armed military adversary, such as the US, NATO or China, exceeding Russia’s defensive capability and having the potential to escalate into a large-scale war. While the concept focused originally on an application of force in situations in which Russia was under conventional attack but unable to mount an adequate defence (‘escalate to de-escalate’), the development in the Russian military strategy and capabilities over the past decade makes it a viable option in a broader range of scenarios, such as Russia’s aggression against another state, when it would find itself in a disadvantageous strategic situation, or would choose to coerce other actors to inaction (‘escalate to win’).

The Russian approach to the use of nuclear weapons, including the concept of limited use, has evolved since the end of the 1990s due to changes in the strategic environment and the development in Western warfare, including military–technological advances and use of precision munitions, in addition to the effects of the comprehensive military modernisation of the Russian armed forces.17 In line with recommendations by prominent Russian military experts and strategists, including Andrei Kokoshin, the development has led to a considerable strengthening of non-nuclear forces, easing Russia’s reliance on nuclear capabilities.18 The threat to use long-range conventional precision weapons plays a central role in the Russian ambition to strengthen non-nuclear deterrence, which involves all military and non-military resources available to the state.19

Since 2010, Russia accelerated the deployment of air-, sea- and ground-launched long-range precision weapons on cruise and ballistic missiles, highlighting their increasing importance in doctrinal documents.20 Senior Russian officers underline their value as a particularly suitable and flexible tool given that they can be applied in a variety of ways – in a massive attack or to selectively hit individual targets, using minimum force and without the platforms having to enter the actual area of active conflict.21 Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu believes that Russia can reach many strategic objectives by using long-range conventional precision weapons, which in the future may move the centre of gravity from nuclear to non-nuclear deterrence.22

The relationship between nuclear and conventional weapons in Russia’s strategic thinking, however, is not governed by a ‘zero-sum game’ logic: the increasingly capable conventional forces have not undermined the central role of nuclear weapons; rather, they have been integrated into a complementary system, where nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities amplify each other’s effect in supporting deterrence, defence and coercion.23 The Russian term ‘strategic deterrence’ (strategicheskoe sderzhivanie) incorporates both strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW)24 and conventional capabilities, supplemented by a spectrum of non-military methods and means that Russia has increasingly emphasised in recent years.25 Consequently, the Russian authorities declare to increasingly rely on conventional capabilities and promise to provide a ‘full non-nuclear deterrence’ through expanding the number of non-nuclear strategic weapons four-fold by 2021.26 At the same time, however, they emphasise that the development of nuclear forces remains ‘a top priority’,27 as also corroborated in the defence procurement, including the newly adopted State Armament Programme 2018–2027.28

**NSNW in Escalation Control**

Contrary to popular belief, there are references to ‘de-escalation’ and the role of the NSNW in escalation control in Russia’s doctrinal documents. Apart from the 2003 white paper, official statements and an extensive discussion among senior Russian officers and military experts, including those close to the Russian Ministry of Defence,29 Russia has referred to escalation and the role of NSNW in its 2012 and 2017 naval doctrines. They provide more details about military strategy and the intended nuclear use than the overarching and more general military doctrine to which they are subordinated.

The 2012 document stated that ‘under conditions of a deepening crisis situation turning into an armed conflict, Russia envisages a limited use of weapons, including high precision weapons, in order to de-escalate sources of tension and resolve the conflict situation
on conditions favourable to Russia’s interests. At the time, the document did not differentiate between conventional or nuclear high-precision weapons. However, the updated version of the naval doctrine, signed by Putin in July 2017, does: ‘under conditions of escalation of a military conflict, demonstration of readiness and determination to use force, including the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons, constitutes an effective deterrent factor’.

The 2017 naval doctrine highlights further the role of NSNW in coercing the adversary to cease hostilities against Russia. With the development of high-precision weapons, it adds, the navy has ‘a qualitatively new task’, which is the destruction of the adversary’s military-economic potential by striking at its ‘vital’ objects from the sea. Chief of the General Staff Valerii Gerasimov argues that the destruction of economic targets will be given priority, along with the adversary’s system of state governance. This is likely to be supported by numerous non-military methods and means, increasingly highlighted by Russia and demonstrated during operations in Ukraine and Syria. The Russian authorities stress the importance of the navy’s ability to damage an adversary’s fleet ‘at a level not lower than critical’, namely with the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons. In conflict, the Russian Navy’s role is to inflict ‘unacceptable’ (nepriemlennya) damage on the enemy, with the objective to coerce it to cease hostilities and back off ‘on terms favourable to Russia’s national interests’ – a formulation strikingly similar to the original description of the ‘escalate-to-de-escalate’ concept.

The primary objective of limited nuclear use would be political: to coerce the adversary to cease aggression through a demonstration of Russia’s determination and readiness to bring hostilities to a halt. That would include retributive strikes against enemy forces, also with NSNW, in a bid to change the balance of power and demonstrate readiness to inflict ‘unacceptable’ damage on the enemy, but not ‘unbearable’ or ‘irreversible’ damage, intended for a situation when state survival would be at risk, most likely in a large-scale or global conflict. It would be based not as much on the assumption that the adversary would be unable to respond to Russian limited first use due to the unavailability of military options, but rather on a political calculation and persuasion that Russia has a greater stake in the conflict than the adversary, which therefore would be unwilling to run the risk of escalation. The concept aims therefore to highlight ‘the asymmetry of interests’ and manipulate the enemy’s perception of risk and cost to the point where it is no longer willing to bear them and would accept the political terms of capitulation ending the conflict. It also aims to stress the asymmetry of capability, assuming the adversary would be unable to answer in a similar way (with NSNW) and therefore risk escalation with use of strategic nuclear weapons, which is precisely the strategic dilemma that the 2018 NPR aims to address.

Senior Russian officers argue that after signalling readiness and determination, as well as launching demonstration strikes, Russia would deliver selective strikes at the enemy’s ‘critically important facilities’ on land and at sea, such as major military and economic targets, along with infrastructure, using long-range precision weapons. At this stage, Russia would likely avoid targeting large numbers of people and thus excessive damage so as not to give the opponent reason to launch a retaliatory response. Given the developments in Russian warfare in the 2010s, such an operation would likely be combined with use of non-military tools, supported by space and cyber capabilities, along with operations waged in the cognitive domain. They would aim to undermine the effective functioning of the state government, sow confusion, generate fear in the population and thus strengthen the pressure on the enemy’s decision-makers to thwart or slow down a response.

It is hardly accidental that Russia highlights the navy’s role in such scenarios. Among Russia’s armed forces, the navy has the largest inventory of NSNW, with an estimated 760 warheads for use on cruise missiles, anti-submarine rockets, anti-aircraft missiles, torpedoes and depth charges on submarines, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes and naval aircraft.

The logic of the broadened and more flexible approach to escalation and de-escalation is compatible with the emphasis placed by Russian military theorists and senior General Staff officers on the high value of the initial period of war as key to its overall outcome, aimed to prevent the conflict from moving over to attrition, which Russia would be more likely to lose. This concerns especially conflict scenarios involving a superior military adversary, expected to aim to achieve military–political objectives with ‘lightning speed’, facilitated by technological advances and developments in modern warfare. They include an increase in the pace of collection and processing of information in real or near-real time, cyber and anti-space capabilities, as well as strategic conventional weapons to be used in seizing the strategic initiative at the start of the war. It recalls a longstanding feature in Russia’s strategic culture with its focus on – and perceived vulnerability to – pre-emption and escalation dominance, seizing strategic initiative through surprise or counter-surprise, deception, superiority in military force and firepower, and decisiveness of action among central means to gain an advantage over an adversary.

Pre-emptive action constitutes a key element in Russian military strategy, where there is no contradiction between a pre-emptive countering of an anticipated attack, counter-offensive and being defensive. Such an approach is far more likely in the event of an unintended escalation, in which case each side would view itself as acting solely defensively, even if it would imply offensive operations. Russian official assurances that the military doctrine is ‘defensive’ are therefore no evidence that Moscow would not envisage a selective, even a pre-emptive, nuclear strike under a set of circumstances.

**Defence Procurement and Deployments**

Russia’s approach to escalation and de-escalation, including use of strategic conventional and non-strategic nuclear weapons, appears compatible with the priorities of the state armament programmes and deployments, especially
since 2007. These have focused on modernisation of strategic and non-strategic nuclear and conventional weapons moving ahead in parallel.\(^\text{47}\)

Of critical importance in this context is Russia’s focus on the development of dual-capable delivery systems, such as cruise and ballistic missiles that can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads. Despite claims by some Western experts that Russia has never acknowledged it officially,\(^\text{48}\) Moscow has highlighted the fact on numerous occasions, further echoed by the official Russian media controlled by the government.\(^\text{49}\) The use of dual-capable weapons systems in a crisis and conflict significantly increases the discrimination challenge for Russia’s adversaries as it will be hard to assess what kind of warhead the delivery systems carry until the impact.

Russian capabilities include the air-launched cruise missile (ALCM) Kh-555/Kh-55SM (range approximately 2,000–5,000 km)\(^\text{50}\) and Kh-101/Kh-102 delivered by long-range strategic bombers (range approximately 3,000–5,000 km); the sea-launched cruise missile Kalibr for submarines and surface warships (range approximately 2,500 km), and the ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCM) Iskander-K and the ballistic missile Iskander-M (range approximately 500 km). Moreover, according to official US sources, Russia flight-tested in 2008 and since December 2016 has deployed GLCM SSC-8/9M729 with a range between 500 and 5,500 km – prohibited under the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.\(^\text{51}\) In addition to hypersonic cruise missiles, Russia is also developing hypersonic boost-glide vehicles that are likely intended to be nuclear-capable, too, given that their purpose will be to strike high-value targets with high reliability.\(^\text{52}\)

Russia’s extensive modernisation programme has encompassed non-strategic nuclear weapons. According to various estimates, in 2016, Russia had 156–200 operationally assigned warheads for ship-launched cruise missiles, 140–370 warheads for the Tochka-U and Iskander-M, and 300–570 operationally assigned warheads for the Air Force.\(^\text{53}\) Even with the lower estimates, the number of operationally assigned warheads is significant.

Official Russian documents, priorities in the state armament programmes,\(^\text{54}\) and patterns of behaviour in military exercises discussed below demonstrate that the Russian Navy is considered to be one of the most effective instruments of strategic deterrence and key in supporting both vertical and horizontal escalation. As the Russian naval doctrines argue, this is due to its ability to display power and act in virtually any area of the world. The naval task force groups can rapidly achieve operational deployment in a region where conflict is unfolding (provided they are unopposed) and stand by on high alert for extended periods of time, threatening to attack or deliver strikes to critically important ground-based enemy targets, yet without violating the national sovereignty of other states until the moment of the attack.\(^\text{55}\)

The fundamental mission of the Russian Navy remains to contribute to nuclear deterrence by providing a reliable cover and stable deployment for the sea-based nuclear forces.\(^\text{56}\) However, in line with the evolution of the Russian military strategy, the navy’s contribution to non-nuclear deterrence has grown rapidly, with the strengthening of its firepower and range extension by the deployment of long-range conventional cruise missiles, in addition to powerful anti-ship and air-defence weapons on small, medium and large surface ships and submarines.

Russia’s long-term naval development programme envisions long-range precision weapons as the fundamental armament of the navy until 2025,\(^\text{37}\) motivated also by another important purpose: as Western sanctions began to hit in 2015 in particular, they contributed to a further slowdown in surface shipbuilding that was already dogged by delays caused by the limitations of the national military– industrial complex.\(^\text{58}\) Russia has therefore had to adjust its naval development plan and prioritise smaller, lighter and more manoeuvrable ship classes, such as multipurpose corvettes and frigates, that are cheaper and faster to build, as the core ships of the navy. The standoff weapons and strong defences the vessels are being armed with are to partly mitigate the enduring problem of replacing Soviet-era, blue-water surface platforms and the need to approach targets as the long-range precision weapons allow Russia to engage targets across Europe and large parts of Asia from international waters or from its airspace. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin, who oversees the defence industry and serves as a deputy of the governmental Military-Industrial Commission, has also underlined another advantage of prioritising smaller warships with strategic conventional (and dual-use) weapons in the current state armament programme: the frigates and corvettes do not constitute large and attractive targets for the adversary, while being capable to respond as large ships due to their armament.\(^\text{59}\)

Progress in deployment of the dual-capability cruise and ballistic missiles may expand the range of circumstances in which their use would be conceivable.\(^\text{60}\) Importantly, the weapons systems blur the traditionally well-defined division between conventional and nuclear weapons, which raises a significant discrimination challenge for Russia’s adversaries, further supported by the various types and geographic dispersal of NSNWs across a large number of basing areas. By increasing the uncertainty about the actual capability until impact, it amplifies deterrence and provides Russia with more options in escalation control. The Russian General Staff puts a premium on flexibility and creative use of all available resources, to be employed depending on the opportunities that arise and subject to what is judged to be the most suitable, effective and affordable option in any given situation.\(^\text{61}\)

**Escalation Control in Operational Pattern**

The Russian armed forces have systematically exercised scenarios that indicated vertical and horizontal escalation, also involving in some cases simulating the use of strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons, which complemented conventional forces in joint operations.

For instance, during Zapad-2009, Russia rehearsed repelling a NATO attack on Belarus, a conflict that escalated into the use of limited nuclear strikes when conventional weapons failed.\(^\text{62}\) Crucially, Russia conducted in parallel...
Exercise *Ladoga* in northwest Russia, stretching the front of confrontation over 1,500 km with a depth of 300 km between Belarus and the Barents Sea. It demonstrated a horizontal and likely vertical escalation with use of the Northern Fleet and the bastion defence. Developed during the Cold War, the bastion defence concept remains in place albeit in a modified form. It aims to ensure the survival and freedom of action of strategic submarines through several layers of defences with a range of capabilities, including long-range precision weapons. They would aim to prevent access for enemy naval forces to areas in the immediate neighbourhood to Russian naval bases on the Kola Peninsula, while seeking to deny control for potential adversaries in the areas further south, where Russia would be unlikely to establish control.

Similar logic could be observed during *Zapad-2013*, which also focused on a major joint inter-service and inter-agency operation in a confrontation on Russia’s ‘western strategic direction’, likely a regional war with NATO. In parallel, Russia activated the bastion defence, including the Northern Fleet with most of its strategic submarines and coastal defence formations, reflecting preparation for an escalation with conventional and nuclear weapons. A defence against aggression by a militarily sophisticated enemy was practised also during the *Vostok-2010* and *Vostok-2014* drills, likely envisaging a conflict with China. Some Russian media reported a simulated use of NSNW at the end of the 2010 exercise, while the active phase of the 2014 drills indicated operations aimed to limit the geographical spread of the conflict. In parallel, the Russian Strategic Missile Forces in the Central Military District exercised an escalation from conventional to nuclear war.

Similarly, after the end of the *Kavkaz-2012* strategic exercise, Russia started a joint inter-service exercise on the Kola Peninsula with the Northern Fleet. It is likely that the two exercises were connected in a wider scenario that simulated a conflict on Russia’s southern border, escalating into a regional war scenario, in which Russia activated the bastion defence. The Northern Fleet’s strategic nuclear submarines were deployed, with the air, surface, and underwater cover to sea, while conducting land-based defence of the naval bases, simulating a horizontal escalation by enemy forces. Correspondingly, the *Kavkaz-2016* exercise in the Southern Military District appeared to simulate repelling a NATO attack on Crimea. The military operations included support by the Northern Fleet, the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Sea Flotilla in large amphibious operations and in addition to the launch of Kalibr and Iskander cruise missiles, including a simulated attack with NSNW.

Scenarios involving strikes with strategic and non-strategic nuclear and strategic conventional weapons following a failure of defence with general purpose forces have also featured in an exceptionally high number of snap inspections — a Soviet military tradition reintroduced by Shoigu in 2013. They aim to test and enhance reaction time, as well as mitigate a vulnerability to surprise, highlighting the potential for escalation, and the need to move and respond quickly to avoid losing the strategic initiative during a war’s initial period.

For instance, in February 2013, Russia conducted a snap exercise that involved the 12th Main Directorate (Glavnoe Upravlenie) of the Ministry of Defence (12th GUMO). Its involvement in military exercises signals a potential nuclear use since the 12th GUMO is responsible for storage, maintenance and transfer of nuclear warheads from national-level to base-level storage facilities and combat units. A subsequent exercise in October the same year focused on a response to a missile attack on Russia, with the launch of ICBMs and SLBMs by the Northern and Pacific Fleets from underwater positions, in addition to the firing of cruise missiles from Tu-95SM strategic bombers, Iskander-M and Tochka-U. During a large-scale snap exercise in March 2015, Russia deployed Iskander-M to the Kaliningrad Oblast and Tu-22M3 bombers to Crimea, while Tu-22M3, Tu-160 and Tu-95MS bombers performed missions in the Arctic. During a snap inspection in October 2015, in addition to launches of SLBMs, Topol ICBMs and ALCMs from Tu-160 strategic bombers, Russia fired Kalibr and Iskander cruise missiles.

It is worth keeping in mind that large-scale annual exercises and snap inspections are only a part of Russia’s comprehensive preparation for potential military confrontations, which include troop engagements that are not widely publicised in the media. Some of the exercises were carried out in a way that makes it hard to explicitly identify the exact scenarios. Such blurred messaging about the intended use of military force creates and deepens divisions in the transatlantic structures regarding the assessment of the challenge, the threat it poses and the response it requires. Introducing cleavages between Western countries, especially ‘Old Europe’ and the US, is one of the basic goals of Russia’s activities.

**Conclusions**

During most of the post-Cold War period, the prospect of a war between the great powers and a risk of nuclear escalation seemed a distant possibility. Nuclear weapons were considered for ‘deterrence’ rather than for ‘war-fighting’. In recent years, however, their use has again become more realistic due to the progressive deterioration of political relations and heightened military tensions among key players including NATO, the US, Russia, North Korea, India and Pakistan, in addition to Moscow’s bold use of its re-armed military in and beyond its immediate neighbourhood. The possibility of a confrontation with a potential for nuclear escalation has increased also due to the deployment of technologies that dramatically shorten reaction time and take the discrimination challenge to new heights.

It is not certain that Russia would indeed use nuclear weapons and what would be the exact circumstances leading it to cross the nuclear threshold. What is certain, however, is that Russia has developed a credible capability and capacity for the effective deployment of such an option, should the political leadership decide to do so. Russia’s doctrinal documents, defence acquisition priorities, war games and training considered together indicate that the country has been planning and training...
for a variety of war scenarios, which also include the option to use nuclear weapons selectively in a confrontation with a sophisticated military–technological adversary. In such a scenario, the division between ‘offence’ and ‘defence’ would not be obvious and maintaining the strategic initiative in the initial period of war would be of paramount importance. Many prominent experts, both in Russia and the West, rightly point out that any use of nuclear weapons involves a risk of a rapid escalation to a massive nuclear exchange with predictable disastrous consequences. The NPR’s symmetrical response to Russia’s strategy, mirroring it, among other features, in eroding the traditional division between nuclear and non-nuclear arms, might increase the risk of misunderstanding, misperception and unintended escalation. That said, it also aims to strengthen the credibility of imposing an increased cost on Russia and making the implementation of its military strategy less attractive by improving a capability to answer symmetrically, lowering at the same time the risk of escalation with use of strategic nuclear weapons. Having said that, whether the NPR’s response is right or wrong is another discussion. Western states should take Russian military strategy for what it is — rather than what they wish it should be — and act accordingly.

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The article is partly based on the author’s research project ‘Russia’s Evolving Military Strategy’, conducted in 2016–17 at the Center for International and Strategic Studies, Stanford University, and The Changing Character of War Centre, University of Oxford, where parts of the projects were presented at several seminars.

Notes


2 Ibid.


6 See, for example, Vzglyad, ‘Putin: Rossii nelynya isklyuchat’ opasnost’ nanenienia obezoruzhivayushhego udara’ [‘Putin: Russia cannot rule out the danger of a disarming strike’], 19 June 2013.

7 Interview with Deputy Commander of the Russian Aerospace Defence Forces General Major Kirill Makarov, ‘Moskva prikryta ot udarov vozduzhnogo protvnika s veroaynost’yu 99%’ [‘Moscow covered from enemy’s air strikes with probability of 99%’], Nacional’naya oborona (No. 1, 2018); Sergei Sukhanov, ‘VKO eto zadacha, a ne sistema’ [‘Aerospace defence is a task, not a system’], Vozduzhu-no-kosmicheskii tupik — chast’ 1’ [‘Aerospace dead-end, part 1’], VPK. Voennomproshshennyi kurer, 8 September 2014; Interview with Pavel Sazonov in ‘Genkonstruktor “Almaz – Anteya”: Rossiya sletda za perevozuhzheeniem armii SShA’ [‘The general constructor at the “Almaz-Antey”: Russia is following the rearmament of the US army’], Ria novosti, 24 April 2014.

8 Arbatov, Dvorkin and Topychkanov, ‘Entanglement as a New Security Threat’.


10 Aktual’nye zadachi razvitiya vozduzhu-no-kosmicheskikh sil Rossiiakh Federatsii [Important tasks of the development of the Russian Armed Forces] (Moscow: Russian Ministry of Defence, 2 October 2003).


Zysk, ‘Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons in Russia’s Evolving Military Doctrine’.


See for instance Rear Admiral O V Aleshin, Captain 1st Rank A N Popov, Captain 1st Rank V V Puchnin, ‘Voennomorskaya moshch Rossii v sovremennyykh geopoliticheskikh usloviyakh’ ['Russia’s naval power in contemporary geopolitical conditions'], *Voennaya mys’*, No. 7, July 2016.


There is no universally accepted definition of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW), which can be based on delivery systems, range, yield or significance of the opponent’s targets to be hit. The Russian definitions vary as much as those in the Western literature, but they are usually consistent insofar as ‘tactical’ is only one type of what we usually define as NSNW. Russian official military sources divide nuclear weapons into strategic, operational-strategic, operational-tactical and tactical, depending on delivery system and assigned purpose. This article uses the frequently applied definition by exclusion, that is, nuclear weapons that are not covered by existing nuclear arms control treaties. See ‘Yadernoe oruzhie’ ['Nuclear weapons'] and ‘Raketno-yadernoe oruzhie’ ['Nuclear-missile weapons'], *Military Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, Russian Ministry of Defence, <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/list.htm>, accessed 19 April 2018; Paul Schulte et al., *The Warsaw Workshop: Prospects for Information...*
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27 ‘Ministr oborony Rossii provel ustavovnochnuyu lektsiyu kursa “Armiya i obshchestvo”’ ['Russia’s Minister of Defence held an overview lecture at the course “Army and Society”'].

28 Sergei Sychev, ‘Yadernoe oruzhe, PRO i VDV – na chto budet trudit’sya voennyi byudzhet Rossii’ ['Nuclear weapons, missile defence and airborne forces – on what will be spent Russia’s defence budget?'], Novye izvestiya, 18 December 2017; VPK novosti, ‘Podpisali’ na 10 let’ ['Signed up for 10 years’], 1 March 2018.


30 ‘V uslovakh estralatsii voennogo konflikta demonstratsiya gotovnosti i reshimosti primeneniya sily i ispol’zovaniem nezestrategicheskogo yadernogo oruzhiya yavlyaetsya deistvennym sderzhivayushchim faktorom’. President of Russia, ‘Osnovy’ ['Basic Principles of State Naval Policy'], 2012. Author’s emphasis.

31 ‘U uslovijakh estralatsii voennogo konfliktka demonastratska gotovnosti i reshimosti primeneniya sily i ispol’zovaniem nezestrategicheskogo yadernogo oruzhiya yavlyaetsa deistvennym sderzhivayushchim faktorom’. President of Russia, ‘Osnovy’ ['Basic Principles of State Naval Policy'], 2012. Author’s emphasis.

32 Lecture by General Gerashimov at the conference of the Academy of Military Sciences, Moscow, 24 March 2018.


34 ‘U uslovijakh eskalatsii voennogo konfliktka demonstratsiya gotovnosti i reshimosti primeneniya sily i ispol’zovaniem nezestrategicheskogo yadernogo oruzhiya yavlyaetsa deistvennym sderzhivayushchim faktorom’. President of Russia, ‘Osnovy’ ['Basic Principles of State Naval Policy'], 2012. Author’s emphasis.

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For references, see endnote 4.


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68 Oleg Falichev, ‘“Vostok-2010”: Nachalo, kulminatsiya, epilog’ [‘“Vostok-2010”: the beginning, culmination, epilogue’], VPK. *Voenna-promyshlenny kurer*, 14 July 2010; Ekström, *Rysk operativ–strategisk övningsverksamhet* [Russian Operational-Strategic Exercises], pp. 61, 63.


74 Such logic accompanied also the Kavkaz-2016 exercise, which tested, among other elements, procedures to put the national economy on a war footing. See Russian Ministry of Defence, ‘Bolee 120 tys. chelovek po vsei Rossii zadeistovany v SKShU Kavkaz-2016’ [‘More than 120 thousand people in all of Russia involved in the strategic command-staff exercise Kavkaz-2016’], 9 September 2016, <http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12095266@egNews>, accessed 20 April 2018.


76 Nuclear weapons are transferred to another agency only when they are mounted on delivery systems that assumes combat duty. See Pavel Podvig and Javier Serrat, ‘Lock them Up: Zero-Deployed Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe’, UN Institute for Disarmament Research, 2017, pp. 18–19.

77 Russian Ministry of Defence, ‘Nachal’na Genshtaba general armii Valerii Gerasimov provel selektorne soveshchaniie s rukovodyashchim sostavom Vooruzhannykh Sil’ [‘The Chief of the General Staff and General of the Army Valerii Gerasimov held a conference call with the senior leadership of the Armed Forces’], 31 October 2013, <http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11863474@egNews>, accessed 20 April 2018; Norberg,
Training to Fight, p. 43; Jacek Durkalec, Nuclear-Backed ‘Little Green Men’: Nuclear Messaging in the Ukraine Crisis (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2015).


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